While playing a game of truth or dare, Okuyasu prompts Josuke to recall the nearly-forgotten summer of ’89, when Jotaro Kujo came to Morioh to hunt for a serial killer. Eager to latch onto any excuse to spend time with Okuyasu (whom he sorta-maybe-definitely has a crush on), Josuke agrees to meet up regularly so Okuyasu can pick his brain about the events of that summer. But when news begins to circulate of a recent series of murders that resemble those of the killer Josuke supposedly helped his nephew track down ten years ago, remembering what transpired in 1989 suddenly becomes a matter of life or death.

(A fan-made part 4 prequel/sequel featuring Mother 1, forensic scrapbooking, local history, and a chorus of sarcastic ghosts.)

Despite the tag, there's not all that much by way of canon divergence in this one. The only major change is that, in this, Joseph knew about Josuke at the time the events of SDC were
going down, and decided to send Jotaro to check on Josuke after the fact (At the time I planned the story the anime hadn't aired yet and the manga was ambiguous on how long Joseph had known about Josuke). Other than that, I wanted to focus more on the supernatural elements of part 4. I was partially inspired by Twin Peaks -- if you've ever seen Twin Peaks, or any Lynch films (especially Blue Velvet) you can probably figure out where this one's going tone-wise.

Check out the lovely art leadlatte on tumblr did for this fic!: http://leadlatte.tumblr.com/post/149138709344/yall-should-read-mori-hoes-sheherazade-its

More fantastic art by broletskiss!: http://broletskiss.tumblr.com/post/150759079516/the-silence-that-wound-its-way-between-them-just

A super cute comic by leoneabbaeccchio <3: http://leoneabbaeccchio.tumblr.com/post/155654474360/i-was-reading-mori-hoes-fanfic-scheherazade-and


Spotify playlist: https://open.spotify.com/user/pixelaced/playlist/2hLQ7d6yjusNP6xQyPv475

Playlist cover art: http://honey-nut-doppios.tumblr.com/post/167181639981/i-figured-i-should-probably-finish-putting

My JoJo tumblr: honey-nut-doppios.tumblr.com
By the time the four teens climbed over the boardwalk railing and slid down the dune, the other beach-goers had either packed-in their Marine Day celebrations or made the trek north, on foot or by car, to the cape to watch the fireworks. All that remained behind of the crowds were the chaotic, overlapping impressions of human activity written in the sand: footprints and crumbling sandcastles and indiscernible names carved into the ground with sticks or fingers, all waiting for the tide to come and erase them and return the beach to a state of newness.

But for now, the newcomers laid their towels over the hollows left by others’ heels and stacked the logs they’d dragged down from the woods in a pit left behind by bored children who’d spent the afternoon wrestling the effects of gravity and granular physics with their trowels. The hole was high enough up on the beach that the bottom stayed dry – other pits further down near the ocean had filled with a slushy mix of sand and water.

Josuke struck a match. He held it to the dry wood and pulled his fingers back in a hurry when the fire took. The flame guttered a moment before sinking beneath the bark and extinguishing. Koichi suggested they use some sort of kindling, just to get the fire started. There was a whoosh of space folding in upon itself, and then Okuyasu, grinning, held up a handful of grass, the long and reedy kind that grew atop the dunes. Yukako took the matches from Josuke; when she struck the light she didn’t flinch away, holding the match within the nest of sun-parched grass and letting the flame lap shyly at her fingers before it spread to the reeds and began to smoulder.

Within the hour, the bonfire had grown into the surrounding pit. The logs cracked and popped, releasing bursts of sparks into blue-velvet night whenever the flames found a vein in the wood, a pocket of built-up gas created by the chemical act of burning.

A charming sight, we’re sure. Nonetheless, we would like to take the opportunity to remind everyone that having a bonfire on any one of Morioh’s public beaches is, in fact, a violation of municipal law.

All throughout the evening, a tension wound tight around the group: a semester’s worth of assignments, examinations, and deadlines left behind a mechanical need to do. With everything that had gone on – not just school but Kira, and Angelo and Akira and all the rest of them – it had been a long time since any of them had been allowed to relax. That same tension was just beginning to unravel when Koichi checked his watch.

“I should probably be going,” he remarked.

At the time, Josuke and Okuyasu were engaged in a private, inane conversation about an upcoming baseball match. As soon as Koichi spoke they snapped to attention. They peered at him from across the bonfire where they sat, huddled obnoxiously close together on one towel.

“What gives?” Josuke asked. “It’s not even midnight, dude.”

“We just got here,” Okuyasu whined.

“I have to get up in the morning.”

“He has cram school,” Yukako added, with the kind of authority usually reserved for speaking about people who are not present.

Her words hovered in the air for a minute, seemingly caught up in the drifts of smoke that wafted off
the fire. The two boys stared at her with stuporous looks on their faces.

“Already?” Okuyasu said at last. “We ain’t even second years yet, dude.”

Josuke leveled a look at Yukako, who had her arms looped around Koichi’s shoulders. “You didn’t have anything to do with it, did you?”

“Koichi is perfectly capable of making his own decisions,” she retorted. The hair around her temples began to stir, writhing loosely in an unfelt breeze. “Just because the two of you haven’t thought about your futures doesn’t mean – .”

“Guys, it’s fine!” Koichi blurted out.

At once, the imaginary breeze brewing around Yukako’s shoulders went still. Sniffing, she unwound an arm from around Koichi to brush a stray lock of hair out of her eyes.

“Yukako had nothing to do with it,” Koichi continued. “I just wanted to feel more confident about my chances of getting into my top university pick, that’s all.” He smiled at them, face round and amiable in the firelight. “It’s the same with assignments. I always feel better when I get it done and over with – if I leave my homework until Sunday, I can’t relax all week.”

“If you say so,” mumbled Josuke, who was more of a Monday morning homework type of guy.

“I’ll catch you guys later.”

“See ya around,” Okuyasu said.

When Koichi stood, Yukako copied the gesture, pausing only to gather up her towel and bag.

“What’s the matter, Yukako? Not gonna stick around with me and Okuyasu for a bit?” Josuke asked, slinging an arm around Okuyasu’s shoulder in what he hoped looked like an emphatic gesture of comradesy.

Yukako gazed at the boys, and at the narrow space between them, and her eyelids settled heavy over her eyes. “I’d rather not,” she said, flatly.

And then, when she was just at the edge of the bonfire’s circle, her face in shadow but the backs of her calves lit in firelight, Yukako glanced one more time over her shoulder and added, “Have fun, you two.” There was no sing-song hint of teasing to her voice – the words were delivered the same way one would dispatch an order.

From the bonfire Josuke and Okuyasu watched Yukako and Koichi make their way back toward the dune and the rickety old wooden steps leading up it, the couple’s voices hushed in the privacy of darkness until their conversation was lost completely in the sound of the steps creaking underfoot. The pair ascended, twin-cut negatives of shadow against the moon-bathed expanse of dune behind them, distinguishable only by height. At the top of the steps their bodies merged into the black stretch of treeline and disappeared.

“You wanna head back soon too?”

In the course of watching Yukako and Koichi depart, Okuyasu had forgotten the physical proximity between Josuke and himself. He jumped at hearing his friend’s voice come from so close by, the warm imprint of Josuke’s breath scorching where it grazed his cheek.

“I don’t mind hangin’ around a lil’ while longer if you wanna,” he mumbled, scooting away a from
Josuke’s curious gaze. In the dim firelight the other boy’s eyes were black pits, showing only pinpricks of red where the fire caught the domes of his eyes – reflections that shifted back and forth appraisingly.

“Same.”

“Cool. Hey, I’m kinda cold. You cold?”

Okuyasu Nijimura was not actually cold. This was late July, when the heat of day lingered well into night; he could feel it in the sand beneath his feet, lukewarm more than an hour after sunset.

“A little, I guess.”

“Hang on.”

Unzipping his knapsack, Okuyasu pulled out the blanket he’d packed. An optimistic addition to his swim trunks and towel, thrown in on the off chance he got to have a moment like this. The blanket was grey with stripes of faded colour. Fleece gone mangy and soft with age. A childhood comfort that he couldn’t help but associate with Josuke: both were measures of warmth and safety.

His arms felt too light as he wrapped the blanket around his and Josuke’s shoulders; weightless, his hands trembled at the slightest movement.

Josuke shifted closer once more – of course he did, Okuyasu’s baby blanket wasn’t that big after all – and he could feel the other boy’s heat and weight lean against his arm. Pressing his lips firmly together, Okuyasu willed his buoyant body to be still. After all, there was nothing unusual or significant about the two of them, alone on the beach, sharing a blanket in front of the bonfire. Josuke was just a touchy guy – by now, he should have been used to all the casual little gestures of affections that passed between them: an arm around his shoulder when they were walking down the street together, Josuke leaning up against him as they waited for the bus, the way he’d tow Okuyasu by the hand whenever something caught his eye. Even now, however – even after all that – Josuke had a way of making him feel seasick.

When he was younger he used to get motion sickness from riding in the car. Focus on the horizon, Keicho would tell him. Pick a point of reference, and your brain will make sense of the rest. He wasn’t sure if the same held true when the cause of his churning stomach was another person, but at the very least, finding some common ground to focus on gave him something to distract himself from just how sweaty his palms were getting.

Don’t think. Just look ahead.

“Got any plans for the summer?” he asked.

“Not really. Mom wants me to pick up some part-time work or something, but it’s like…” Josuke smoothed a hand over the blanket in his lap, running his thumb along a faded pink line, “…I’ll have plenty of time for work and shit later, you know?”

“I feel ya.”

He didn’t tell Josuke that he’d been planning on finding work himself that summer. That since spring, letters had been arriving in the mail addressed to his father’s name, from the utility companies and the bank. The past few months Okuyasu had kept the letters in a neat, untouched pile in the drawer beside the stove, but while the letters were easy to ignore, the constant phone calls were not.

“Besides,” Josuke contined, “Jotaro’s coming back to visit with his daughter sometime in August, so
I might score some babysitting cash.”

“Jotaro’s got a daughter? Doesn’t that make you, like…” Okuyasu paused, searching his vocabulary for unfamiliar words of kin that were only ever spoken by the families of others. “…A grand-uncle or something?”

“You mean great uncle? Shit, no. Great uncles are old, man. I’m more like a second uncle or something.”

“Second uncle.”

“You know, like how people have second cousins and third cousins and shit. Second uncle.”

Okuyasu was pretty sure there was no such thing as a second uncle, but then, Josuke had a way about him, in how he spoke, that always made him sound like he knew exactly what he was talking about. He believed every word that came out of his own mouth. That kind of certainty was infectious.

“Sure, makes sense to me.”

“What about you? Got any plans?”

“I was thinking I’d just hang around, spend some time with the old man”

Okuyasu, on the other hand, never quite sounded like he was certain of a single word he said. Everything he spoke concealed a question, less in the connotation or denotation of the words he used and more so in the way he held himself, like he did just then when he looked to Josuke like he was waiting for affirmation.

Josuke grinned at him. “We’re both kinda lame, hunh?”

“Nah dude, s’just you.”

He waited for Josuke to hit him with a comeback, but instead he was met by silence. Just when he was starting to wonder if he should retract the insult, beside him Josuke shifted.

“Nice night out,” Josuke remarked. The pinpricks of firelight in his eyes turned toward the ocean, where the moon cast a silver flight of steps over the water, narrow at the shoreline and widening out where it led up to the sky.

Watching Josuke, the realization finally settled in that come Monday, there’d be no classes. There wouldn’t be any classes for another six weeks. That meant no dragging his ass out of bed at the crack of dawn, but that also meant no more mornings at the Higashikata’s house either. No greeting from Tomoko, who always knew how to make him feel like he was a member of the family instead of a nuisance houseguest; no smell of coffee to wrap him up like a warm blanket while he waited for Josuke to come downstairs; no being the first person to see Josuke in the mornings, when his hair was freshly made up and his eyes were still hazy with sleep; no walking to school together, sharing the narrow width of the sidewalk and easy mundane conversation.

The silence that wound its way between them just then didn’t feel intimate, at least not to Okuyasu – it felt like the first step toward a more permanent absence. He was not comfortable with silence the way Josuke was. For Okuyasu, silence was a portent, synonymous with the empty bottles he’d sometimes find on the kitchen table when he went downstairs for breakfast, years and years ago. Back then he’d tiptoed around his father’s silence, made himself small out of fear of wakening the sound and fury that silence masked, and when his father changed and Keicho’s own brand of silence
took over, stifling and heavy and masking nothing, Okuyasu learned to fill the emptiness of the house with his own voice, to announce his presence in every room as if to chase the ghosts away.

He wanted to do something, say something. The bonfire was waning and night was snaking in between and around them, and the darkness made him silly with the thoughts of things he could never bring himself to do during daylight.

We, of course, had seen this all before. But being sixteen and in love has an obnoxious way of convincing people that they are the only ones to have ever felt the way they do, when really they are partaking of sentiment as old and tired-out as the tides. Okuyasu was far from the first person to have fallen in love with his best friend, nor would he be the last, but from how obstinate he was being about the whole process you’d hardly know it.

Instead of acting on any number of the countless unimaginative scenarios he had running through his head, he blurted: “You wanna play truth or dare?”

“Kinda hard with just two people. What could you even do for a dare?”

Okuyasu hadn’t considered this – he’d only been thinking of the truth portion of the game. “Dunno. What if I dared you to go jump in the ocean?”

“I would, but I gotta walk home. I’m not gonna freeze my ass off, dude.”

“I’ll think of somethin’.”

“Alright, you first then.” Josuke folded his arms in front of his chest. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

He hoped Josuke would ask him the question he was too afraid to ask himself, but instead he got:

“Have you ever done anything, like, illegal?”

“The hell kinda question is that?”

“C’mon man. Humour me.”

Just then, Okuyasu almost wished he’d lived a more nefarious life. Maybe not killed anybody or anything like that – just done something that didn’t make him seem completely lame. “Before I moved here, I was, uh. Some kids in my class invited me to a party an’ someone offered me a beer. I had one, just to try it.”

Beside him, Josuke gave a short, close-mouthed laugh. “That’s it?”

“Yeah, whaddabout it?” A thought occurred to Okuyasu. “Have you done anything illegal before?”

“When I was in lower-secondary, yeah. Sometimes I’d go to a store and see something I wanted, and Crazy D would just kinda… grab it for me. I didn’t even think about it, I’d just let it put it in my pocket and walk out.”

By then the fire had settled low into the logs. All Okuyasu could make out of Josuke was his outline, sketched in a faint red glow. He saw the other boy’s shoulders rise and fall in a shrug.

“It never felt like I was the one doing it, y’know? But anyway – I don’t do shit like that anymore.”

In the dark Josuke’s voice, though no more than a whisper, sounded loud and close without the
visuals to distract Okuyasu. He thought about Josuke growing up with his stand. About how natural it all must have felt to him, without the experience of having that power ripped out of his soul by force with an arrowhead.

“That doesn’t count as your turn,” Okuyasu interjected.

“Come on!”

“Nah. You gotta pick truth or dare first.”

“Alright. Truth, then.”

All Okuyasu had to do was ask Josuke then and there: “Do you like anyone?” or better yet, “Do you like me?” But in the course of learning about Josuke’s history of delinquency, he’d gotten distracted. And so, Okuyasu did as Okuyasu did best – he blurted the first thing that came to mind:

“Who was your first crush?”

“Just some girl from class, probably.”

“Really? Who?” Okuyasu asked, trying his best to conceal his disappointment.

“You wouldn’t know her, dude. I don’t even remember the name. It was a long time ago, back around when I first met Jotaro.”

“That was three months ago, dude.”

“No, I mean the time before that. When I was a kid.”

This clarification bough Okuyasu some measure of relief – at the very least, it meant there was still a chance that Josuke wasn’t taken up with anyone else.

“Man, I never knew the two of you’d met before,” he complained. “How come ya never told me?”

When Josuke answered, there was a heat to his voice that hadn’t been there moments ago. “Musta slipped my mind.”

“What happened?”

“You can’t ask me two questions in a row – it’s your turn.”

Okuyasu hadn’t expected the game to take a turn for the serious. He’d seen characters play truth or dare in movies before – on celluloid, it was always the buildup to a romantic revelation. Not… whatever this was.

“Forget about the game a minute. I wanna know what Jotaro was doing in Morioh.”

“You know, the usual. Stand user stuff. He was only around a couple weeks. I was six at the time so it’s not like I remember much.”

Keicho had never mentioned anything about other stand users living in Morioh before he’d made himself the vessel of the arrow’s judgement. He’d always just assumed Josuke had been the first.

“Come onnnn dude. What kinda stand stuff we talkin’ bout here?”

The blackened timbers gave a pop, throwing motes of ember into the air, and in the brief burst of
light Okuyasu saw Josuke lean in, one corner of his lips quirked up. He was biting into the smile, teeth sunk into his lower lip. *Fuck*, Okuyasu thought. *He doesn’t know he’s being cute.*

“You really wanna know?”

“Just spill it already!”

“Alright. Guess I hafta tell you. So there was this stand user…”

Josuke paused just then. With his features receded back into darkness, Okuyasu couldn’t tell what the other boy was thinking. Maybe he was trying to build up dramatic effect, the way they did in movies – the music cutting out, sound effects fading to white noise just before the monster of the week burst into the frame from off screen.

“They were using their stand – .”

“They?” Okuyasu asked.

“He. He was using his stand to kill people.”

“Holy shit, dude. Like *Kira*?”

“Yeah. Only he was killing kids. Like, you’d hear about it all the time, right? These parents would be out in the yard with their kid and they’d have their backs turned for just a minute…”

“Shit.”

“He must have stayed hiding in the bushes. Hours, days, who the fuck knows. And all that time he’d just be waiting for the moment when whoever he was watching felt safe enough to turn their back.

“And you wanna know the scariest bit? People started telling stories that the guy, whoever he was, was luring kids with just his voice. Like he’d pretend to be a parent or a friend. You’d be minding your own business one day and you’d hear your mom’s voice calling to you from under your bed or something…”

Just then the wind picked up. Up atop the dunes the grass gave a rustle; the boys turned just in time to see it rise and fall in a long, slow wave. From where they sat the entire ridge above was flattened into one black mass, leaving no gaps that might betray the presence of an onlooker.

Okuyasu drew a shallow breath. “Hey, dude? D’you think we could pick this up some other time – like during the day?”

“Yeah, alright. I’ve gotta head home anyway.”

“Walk you back?”

“We’re both going the same direction, genius.”

Nonetheless, Josuke pressed himself close to Okuyasu’s back as the other boy kicked sand over the fire, smothering the last dying embers. With the immediate light extinguished, the background came slowly back into focus: the half moon and the grey cotton clouds above, the beach stretching empty and featureless around them, the silver ripples of moonlight snagged on the waves.

The wind wicked the late July humidity from their skin. In the darkness, Okuyasu felt brave once more – he fumbled, and felt for Josuke’s hand, and with the other’s skin burning holes in his palm he pulled him toward the steps.
They were quiet as they walked along the edge of the woods on their way back to the main road, the sand-laid trail soft and spongey underfoot. The world around them seemed animated by a sinister force, causing the trees to toss and quiver and the clouds to fly like ragged spirits overhead. Both boys kept glancing over their shoulders, imagining the same thing: that the waist-tall grass on either side of the trail concealed eyes that were watching them, waiting for the moment they felt safest, for their backs to turn. Not a human thing but an irrational phantom, a chimeric horror of murderer and victim that crawled belly-low on the grass. Fear of the frightful – how depressingly mortal!

Funny, how the living can walk through an empty field and still worry they’ll run into ghosts. Ghosts are the products of human society, and much prefer the haunting grounds of civilization. The wilderness is a slippery place; not much there for a spirit to take hold of, unless they were a particularly vindictive hiker in life. No, the only ghosts watching from the bushes were us, but that’s hardly a surprise. We have eyes everywhere, after all.
Josuke Higashikata’s plan to have the wildest summer of his adolescent life began on a high note with the bonfire on the beach on Monday night. By the end of the week, said plans had all but rolled over and died.

Tuesday – Tuesday was understandable. He’d walked two hours from the beach to his house in the dead of night, so if the next day all he did was lay around in bed until Tomoko called him downstairs for supper, he was well within the bounds of reason doing so.

On Wednesday, he was distracted by the impulse to pick up and play *Mother* for nostalgia’s sake. One of his older games, the cartridge label blurred by water stains. He’d beaten it once before, but with the whole summer ahead of him he felt no rush to accomplish anything of importance anytime soon. On that protracted list of things which Josuke did not accomplish that day: getting very far in the game. By nightfall his character had died four times before reaching the cemetery – he’d forgotten what a nuisance all those murders of crows could be.

On Thursday, Josuke successfully navigated the hardships and trials of getting out of the house. His endeavours, however, only took him so far as the air-conditioned minimart down the road. Between the change in his pocket and what he could scrounge from beneath the store’s vending machines, he bought himself an iced coffee. The rest of the day he spent at home, sprawled out on the lawn in just his short sleeves and boxers, listening to the shrill of cicadas. Red light danced on the undersides of his eyelids. He curled his hands into the grass, feeling the soft blades bend under his fingers and the dirt press its way under his fingernails.

Friday, rain. Another day inside playing video games. He bested the cemetery and got himself lost on the way to the zoo.

On Saturday morning, Josuke awoke to the realization that the week was nearly over, though for the life of him he couldn’t remember what he’d spent all that time doing. Sure, he could recall playing *Mother* and walking to the minimart and lying on the lawn, but none of that seemed like it could possibly be enough to fill the space of three – no, *four* – days.

All week long he’d been thinking about popping by to visit Okuyasu, or hell, just calling the other boy. But every time he resolved himself to doing so, he managed to latch onto a distraction at the last possible second. Guilt lay heavy like a stone in his gut, to the weight of which was added the frustration of being unable to spur himself to do anything about it. Oh, he tried alright – pep talks and
sessions of self-castigation at each newfangled excuse. It wasn’t as if he was avoiding Okuyasu. Well, he was – but not because he didn’t like the other boy or anything. Quite the opposite, really.

He was sure at some point he and Okuyasu had crossed over the line from two best friends, doing as best friends do, to something a little more. But there wasn’t one particular landmark – one singular point of demarcation – that he could point to as signalling this change. For him there had been a completely organic growth, from fist bumps to the occasional hugs and holding hands to practically cuddling, as they pretty much were by this point. Josuke had always thought that you were supposed to have a moment of personal crisis when you realized that you were attracted to your best friend, especially when that friend wore the same slacks as you, by way of speaking. But there had been no moment of revelation, no inner crisis: just him, over time, gradually giving up to himself the pretense of being a one-hundred percent straight guy with one-hundred percent platonic feelings for his bro.

Of course, there was a huge gap between realization and acknowledgement. Josuke happened to like things just fine the way they were. His and Okuyasu’s relationship was comfortable and familiar; words like sexual-orientation, dating, and boyfriends, not so much. Acknowledging whatever the hell was going on between them would mean no going back, no more sheltering under the feigned ignorance they’d so carefully built around themselves. And Josuke – Josuke wasn’t in any rush. He had all summer, after all.

But that night on the beach had been different. There’d been a palpable tension between them he’d never felt before. Maybe because before, there had always been someone else around, the gang or his mother or whatever random strangers they found themselves in the company of, to diffuse it. Alone by the bonfire together there had been no one to pretend for and the way Okuyasu looked at him had made Josuke’s head feel like it was full of helium. For a moment he’d thought for sure Okuyasu was going to kiss him. And alright, maybe Josuke had invited it, letting the conversation lapse into comfortable silence and scooting just an inch or two closer to give Okuyasu the opening they both needed. But instead, Okuyasu had brought up the whole truth or dare game. Josuke had been left with a buzzing in his head and adrenaline prickling his skin, relief and disappointment washing over him all at once.

In the revealing light of day, that Monday night seemed in retrospect like something from a dream. He’d felt drunk in the firelight, Okuyasu’s face floating before his eyes and his own voice, detached and unfamiliar as he wandered down lanes of memory long abandoned to the weeds.

He hadn’t necessarily forgotten about Jotaro’s first visit to Morioh. At least not completely. On an abstract level he’d always known the incident for a fact. Dates and place assigned an arbitrary significance, filed away in the same part of his brain he stored the facts he was compelled to remember about the rise and fall of long-broken dynasties and dead emperors. The memory of that summer in itself, the narrative attached to those dates and places, was like a childhood toy he thought he’d only imagined owning until stumbling upon it. Buried somewhere under dust and silverfish tracks. Holding that memory in his hands again felt strange. For all that he felt certain of his recollection, he might as well have been rehashing something he’d watched on television or read in a book long ago that had somehow worked its way into the fabric of his childhood with the passage of time.

Saturday morning, however, left Josuke with little time to dwell on the events of that night. As he ambled downstairs he could hear voices coming from the kitchen: Okuyasu’s and his mother’s. The two of them were the loudest people he knew. He could catch every word from midway down the stairs and so he did so, stopping to listen out of vanity when he heard his own name spoken.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Tomoko was saying. “Josuke’s done nothing but lie around the house lately.”
“I’d be doing the same if our place weren’t a real mess. It don’t bother my old man but I’ve been wanting to fix it up, make it more homey n’ stuff.”

“Well aren’t you just a little handy-man! Maybe when you’re done fixing up your place you can come around and do something with mine – I’ve been thinking about repainting the living room but whenever I do it I always just end up missing a bunch of spots. What I need’s a tall young man to do the job.”

Josuke heard Okuyasu laugh. He pictured the way the other boy always looked whenever anyone said anything nice about him: his skin pink and shiny and pulled taught over his forehead and the apples of his cheeks.

“Don’tcha already got one of those?” Okuyasu asked.

“Not that you’d ever know it.”

Descending the rest of the steps, Josuke rounded the corner, hands in his pockets, trying to look as casual as he could manage. “Oi. I can hear you.”

When he walked into the kitchen Tomoko’s eyes were already on him. Around the rim of her coffee mug, her lips curled. “I know, kiddo. I could see your shadow on the staircase. Try turning the upstairs lights off next time.”

Okuyasu, on the other hand, hadn’t noticed. He dipped his head, the colour of his cheeks spreading all the way to his ears. “Um, hey.”

“What’s up?” Josuke asked, pulling up a chair. “You wanted to see me or are you just here for the grub?” Balefully, he looked over the disheveled remains of breakfast. Waffles, by the looks of it, with berries and cream and the whole nine yards.

His mother never made him waffles.

Tomoko sniffed. “He can come over for breakfast whenever he wants.”

Mouth falling open in a grin, Okuyasu slipped a hand under the collar of his shirt, rubbing at his shoulder like he had a knot there, a bundle of tension he just had to get out. “Actually,” he began, “I wanted to talk to you about the other night.”

“Yeah?” Josuke choked out, on the verge of having a heart attack because holy shit (his words, not ours) there was no way Okuyasu was about to have this conversation with him in front of his mother, when Okuyasu added:

“Yeah! I never did get to hear the end to that story you were tellin’ me about.”

Oh.

Around her mug, Tomoko’s fingers curled, knuckles flushing white. “What story?” she asked, in a tone that implied all adolescent shenanigans were by nature suspect.

“Mom! Mind your own business!” Josuke snapped.

Both Tomoko and Okuyasu affixed him with blank looks of surprise. If there was one thing Josuke Highashikata never, ever did, it was snap at his own mother. Tomoko wasn’t the type of person who allowed others to walk all over her; sixteen years as a single mother had learned her in wringing respect out of people the hard way.
Tomoko hummed, manicured nails drumming against porcelain. “You know, Okuyasu. Josuke hasn’t been getting out much lately.”

“R-right! You wouldn’t wanna go for a walk woudya, Josuke?”

“Sure.”

If it weren’t for the company, Tomoko might’ve been more direct. Josuke appreciated her for sparing him the embarrassment of getting his ass beaten in front of his crush.

“What the fuck was that about?” Okuyasu asked when they were outside and out of Tomoko’s (remarkably wide) hearing range.

“I don’t know. I woke up in some kinda mood, I guess,” said Josuke.

“Soooo?”

“So what?”

Okuyasu let out a growl and turned, sidewalk scraping under the soles of his shoes. “C’mon, dude. Aren’t you going to tell me about that stand user already?”

“What about him?”

“Like – what’d Jotaro do about it?”

What did he do about it?

“I dunno. Look, I was a kid alright? I didn’t know shit about what was going on. Jotaro must’ve taken care of him.” That wasn’t quite an answer, but it was the most truthful thing he could come up with.

“Did he tell ya about it?”

Josuke thought about it – Jotaro didn’t seem like the kind of guy who’d go around blabbing about defeating a serial killer, much less to a six year old. “Nah.”

It was still early, for a Saturday. Most of the world was still tucked away in bed. In the empty streets Josuke and Okuyasu’s voices carried long, ringing out over the asphalt; so it was to Josuke’s surprise when Okuyasu leaned in and whispered, breathy with awe: “Dude, were you there?”

“I – .”

When he threw back his head and looked up, the trees stretched tall and long above him, disappearing where the shadow-shapes of leaves choked out the sky. As he moved he kept his head tilted back, and the trees moved with him, turning slowly above like the spokes of a wheel. The wind rose and fell through the canopy above, leaves rustling against one another with a sound like cascading water.

“I guess so?” he responded. “I mean, I think I was. I must have been there.”

“What happened?”

All he could remember was the forest, and even then, he wasn’t sure whether it had any connection to the stand user. For all he knew, the two memories could be separate instances in his childhood, moments paired together by an unconscious association. Maybe something Okuyasu had said
triggered it; maybe it was just the sound of the wind through the leaves as they passed under the dappled shadows that lay across the sidewalk. But Okuyasu was looking at him with expectation, head cocked, those goofy spaniel eyes of his bulging out from his head. And so Josuke, without even thinking, went on to say:

“We were in the woods, I remember. It was a windy night.”

“Is that where Jotaro fought the guy?”

“I guess so.”

“Maaaan, that must have been so intense to watch. What was it like?”

He thought back, closing his eyes this time. In the velvet darkness under his eyelids, the scene from before rendered in sharper detail.

*Pale birch trunks like long white fingers emerged and vanished in the beam of his flashlight. The beam that trembled and swung wide, like a living thing thrashing through the underbrush. Beneath his feet the soil felt too soft, decades of decaying leaf giving way beneath the soles of his shoes and walking through it his legs felt heavy and boneless. All around him rose up the viperous rattle of cicadas, near and visceral in the thick summer air.*

What had Jotaro been doing at the time? He tried to recall his nephew’s face, to place him in the flashlight’s watery yellow beam, but try as he might he could not visualize it. Of course he couldn’t – Jotaro would have been walking alongside him, just within his peripheral vision. With his eyes closed he imagined turning his head and seeing the neatly pleated cuffs of Jotaro’s white jacket, the raised knuckles of his hands and the faint, pale lines of old scars.

The fight. He tried to remember how the fight had gone down and the scene shifted. This time there was little by way of visuals attached to the memory. Just the feeling of menace heavy in his chest. A gulping fear that lodged in his lungs. The whip crack of a gun going off, the throbbing of his eardrums, the sulfurous, intoxicating spell of gunpowder cottoning around his head.

“Josuke? You alright?”

When Josuke opened his eyes, his eyelids seemed thick and heavy. He felt like he was just coming out of a darkened movie theatre and into the sunlight.

“Yeah, sorry. I kinda spaced out there for a minute.”

Looking around, he saw they had ended up at Morioh’s town square – a good thirty minute walk from his house. He’d *really* been out of it.

“You sure?” Okuyasu asked.

“Yeah, I think the sun’s just getting to my head. Let met sit down a minute.”

“Sure, dude.”

Okuyasu followed him, hands in his pockets, as Josuke made his way over to the fountain. After making a quick check for any turtles that might be lurking nearby (turtles being known for their exceptional lurking), he sat down at the fountain’s edge, slipping off his jacket to feel the cool mist on the back of his neck. Even with his head down he could sense Okuyasu hovering over him, the other boy’s shadow falling diagonally across his lap. It was starting to piss Josuke off. He hated when people didn’t know how to relax; it made it hard for him to do the same.
“C’mon,” he said, patting the space beside him. “You wanted me to tell you about the fight in the woods and stuff, right?”

As Okuyasu eased into a squat beside him, Josuke continued: “So anyway, we were in the woods, right? I had the flashlight. Jotaro must have given it to me to hold. Anyway, we eventually cornered the guy, or maybe he cornered us, I don’t remember – I was scared shitless, I know that. He must have caught us off guard.”

“Did Tomoko know what you were up to?”

“I can’t imagine. Mom woulda killed me. Like I was saying – we found the guy, and things got tense. There was a scuffle and I’m pretty sure Jotaro shot him.”

Okuyasu had sat a respectable distance from Josuke, out of curiosity now he leaned in, closing up those few inches between them “No way? As in with a gun?”

“Well, yeah, that’s usually what you shoot people with, you know?”

“It’s just I ain’t ever seen Mr. Jotaro use a gun.”

Josuke shrugged. “Maybe Star Plat didn’t have an effect on the enemy stand. It’s not like I really understood how stands worked back then.”

“Jotaro actually killed someone?”

“Hey, the dude’s pretty intense, I wouldn’t put it past him. Pops told me how he beat the shit out of all those stand users working for Dio back in Egypt.”

Just then, Josuke caught a flicker of something across Okuyasu’s face. Shit.

“…The bad ones anyway,” he offered, mentally backpedaling all the way.

“Dude, it’s fine. My old man woulda had it coming.”

For a long moment they were silent, baking in the heat as the water fountain piddled steadily at their backs.

Okuyasu balled his fists around his knees. “Shit,” he said. “A gun. Shit. That’s pretty fuckin’ cool.”

“A little,” Josuke admitted, feeling the heat creep up his neck.

“Must’ve been pretty intimidating meetin’ the guy for the first time.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is if I met that brick-wall looking fucker when I was six, I woulda been pissing myself.”

“He would’ve been seventeen, eighteen at the time,” Josuke began, and shit, it was weird trying to picture Jotaro as only a year or two older than himself. “I’d gotten over being sick not that long ago. Mom woke me up one morning, all excited. Said we were going out to meet someone. She’s pretty damn lousy at keeping secrets, though, so she let it slip she’d gotten a call from someone working for my dad. They’d told her someone was going to be arriving to check up on us. She was totally convinced my pops was coming back for her to sweep her off her feet or something.”

“No shit, you got to meet your old man too?”
“Nah. We got down to the docks and Jotaro was the only one there waiting for us. Dad must’ve sent him. Too chicken shit to come himself, I guess.”

“Were you sore about it?”

Josuke pressed his palms into the concrete ledge of the water fountain, feeling the grit push indents in his skin. He tried to remember that day when he’d spent waiting on the pier. How he’d sat with his legs swinging over the edge of the dock, looking for any sign of the boat on the horizon.

“I was just a kid, y’know? I didn’t spend too much time thinking about that kinda thing.”

Okuyasu gave a forced little laugh. “Yeah, of course.”

Just then the station clock sounded. Nine A.M. To his feet Okuyasu leapt, slinging his jacket over his shoulder.

“Can we pick things up tomorrow?” he asked. “There’s a new ice cream place down by the water we could check out. I gotta thing to do.”

“What kind of thing?” Josuke asked, because it was the one detail he could jump on without getting the jitters.

“Nothing, just. You know. A thing.”

Josuke wasn’t in the mood to pick Okuyasu’s brain. “Alright. Ice cream and spooky stories. Hope you’ve got the money ‘cause I ain’t paying for you.”

“I’m good for it. How’s your head – you gonna be okay walking back?”

Once again, Okuyasu was hovering over him, on the verge of being neither here nor there.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m just going to hang around for a bit,” Josuke said. “Catch you later.”

When he was alone again, Josuke shucked off his jacket and laid it neatly to one side. Rolling up his shirt sleeves, he plunged one hand beneath the chlorinated water. People sometimes threw coins in: for wishes, prayers. That sort of thing. Mostly the elderly who did it. Josuke didn’t believe in wishes, and he wasn’t exactly a religious guy, but even if the superstitions were true he didn’t think scrounging up some extra change to buy Okuyasu a sundae was going to sabotage any old lady prayers anytime soon.

The water was tepid against his skin and the bottom of the fountain scraped his knuckles, and Josuke couldn’t stop thinking about the harbour and the boat and that first meeting he’d almost-but-not-entirely forgotten. He was starting to feel like at the center of his summer with Jotaro there was something of an optical illusion: the closer he tried to examine the memory, the more obscure it became. Like newspaper photographs when you saw them up close – all those detailed images reduced down to black dots on white paper, form that only had meaning when looked at from afar.

His fingers closed around a coin. He dragged it to the surface and lay it on the fountain’s ledge to dry. Soon he had a pile of coins: scratched up one and fifty yen pieces, copper ten yen pieces eaten through by verdigris. He found other things in the fountain too, buttons and pin and forgotten trinkets that he threw back in for someone else to discover.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The narrators introduce themselves and provide a brief background on Morioh.

Chapter Notes

AKA exposition: the chapter.

Since I'm a few chapters ahead in my first draft I've been trying to hold off editing and posting new chapters until I finish writing whatever chapter I'm working on, but since this is a really short chapter I thought I'd make an exception.

We suppose an introduction is in order. But first, allow us to explain a thing or two concerning Morioh.

The living often talk about the physical world and the spiritual world as if they are two separate entities; as if crossing from one to the other necessitates breaking a barrier or making a journey. However, a more accurate thing to say would be that the two worlds overlap. Consider a building – a home, perhaps. In the average home there are spaces that go unused. Gaps between the walls. Attics and extra rooms, corridors and crawl spaces and empty closet corners. The spiritual world and the physical world are like two buildings that have been folded into one, so that each occupies the other’s unused spaces. The two are, in their own way, still separate domains. The dead and the living seldom take notice of one another’s presence, for they don’t know how to look. Imagine if one day an additional door or hallway appeared in your home. Everyone has their own mental map of the place they live; this new addition, this space without counterpart in the homeowner’s imaginary blueprints, would be deemed so absurd by the conscious that its existence would be discarded, the image deleted before it could pass from eyes to brain.

There are places in this shared world of ours, however, where the distinction between the spaces of the living and the spaces of the dead are not so well-defined. Where mental blueprints are constantly in flux. Where, if you look close enough, you can spot those doors and passageways that belong to a space not your own, and where, sometimes, stepping between one space and another really is as easy as moving between two rooms.

Doing so, of course, is easier for spirits than it is for the living, for which reasons places of such kind hold a certain attraction for the denizens of the spirit world.

The living seldom pass through other spaces as spirits do, but that does not mean they do not sometimes catch glimpses of that other world. Physical spaces hold onto memories, like afterimages. The living assume that the reason haunted houses tend to be old is because they were the scenes of trauma and horror in a bygone, barbaric age. While this sometimes holds true (as we will explain shortly), it is worth remembering that the longer a house has been around, the more memories it will hold: they accumulate steadily over time, all those still-life snapshots of emotion. Gather enough
memories in one space and sometimes those transparent layers of the past will overlap long enough to hold a translucent image.

Left-behind memories account for most ghost sightings, but there is a second, less common cause. Sometimes, a deceased person is able to remain in the spaces of the living, or halfway through the threshold, as it were. Like memories, these spirits are tied to an emotion and a space, but unlike memories, they have a sentience of their own. In most places, to linger after death requires an unusually strong emotion: love or hatred, desire for revenge or remorse for things left undone or unsaid. In other places, where the spirit and physical world are not so distinct – a place like Morioh, for instance – staying on past one’s expiry date allows for more leeway. The emotion could be something as simple as fear of moving on to the afterlife; the place could be something as broad as an entire town. Don’t get us wrong – Morioh’s had its share of your more traditional ghosts. We’re sure you must be familiar with Reimi Sugimoto, whose desire to be avenged kept her in Morioh long after her demise.

And then there’s the rest of us.

Ghosts hold their shape longer when they are born of a powerful emotion. They have more influence and power in the physical world; some may even take form before the living. Holding onto one’s individuality after death is not as easy as you might think. Time, after all, erodes more than just the physical body – completely forgetting one’s identity is a very real danger when one elects to become a ghost. For we spirits who remained in Morioh simply out of lack of desire to move on, the mortal world no sooner forgot us than we forgot ourselves.

At some point, every last one of us was drawn to one another in our anonymity, and to this day we continue to grow – we proud collective of spirits who call Morioh home. We do not mind our loss of individuality; on the contrary, we have found being in the society of like-minded individuals extremely conducive to getting things done. Individually we are all of us weak spirits, without the ability to influence the physical world, but by our size and numbers we have a power all our own. We are the eyes and ears of Morioh: not a deed is done, not a word spoken, nor a thought conceived that escapes our attention. We know everything that goes on in this town, past and present.

So of course it should come as no surprise when we tell you that we are familiar with Josuke Higashikata. He is a stand user, after all. We mentioned before that places like Morioh have an ability to draw spirits; this is not just the case with ghosts, but with other spirits also, as well as the living beings who commune with them. Higashikata’s father was not the first stand user to be pulled into Morioh, nor was he the last. Over the years we’ve had plenty of opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the boy. We are, to be perfectly honest, not in high opinion of Mr. Higashikata. Aside from possessing a stand, he is no different to us than the rest of Morioh’s miasmic population of delinquent youths. We do not care for his attitude; we care even less for his hair. That a collective of 979 ghosts can share one verdict concerning a person’s fashion choices ought to speak volumes for that person’s tastes, but that is rather beside the point.

The point being:

On August 13th 1989, two-year-old Yuki Imai disappeared from the front lawn of her parents’ house on Jouzenji road just after ten A.M.


Under normal circumstances, one of these events would hold no interest for us. But through the same proclivity for miraculous and improbable happenstance by which Morioh operates, Okuyasu
Nijimura, through his own roundabout means, prompted Higashikata to remember the summer of 1989.

What happened during that summer is of interest to us, for reasons only symptomatically related to the disappearance of a toddler. From what we heard of during the bonfire and the encounter that followed some days after, we came to the conclusion that we and Higashikata held different opinions on what occurred during that crystallized period of time. The difference, mainly, being that Higashikata’s opinion was wrong, and ours, right.

We serve a great many roles in Morioh, one of which is providing a completely unbiased record of things as they happened, free from the fallacies of memory distortion that are so rampant among the living. Therefore, we are bound by duty to correct any inaccurate information that may have been disseminated over the course of our dictating the words and actions of one Josuke Higashikata. To begin, allow us to revise Josuke’s version of events from the 23rd of July, 1989.

***

The small vessel growing larger and larger on the horizon was slow and heavy with promise. Josuke sprinted up and down the docks, pausing only to grasp impatiently at his mother’s skirt and ask, for the fifth time since waking up that morning (we counted), how long until the boat reached them? The sunlight sparkled off the concrete, and off the water – hard and bright and too much for his eyes to take in.

By the time the boat docked, Josuke was drowsy with heat. He dozed off leaning up against his mother, his legs swung over the peer. Only when he heard the whirring of hydraulics as the boat’s ramp lowered, did he perk back up again.

One by one he watched the passengers disembark, scrutinizing each face in secret hope of finding some mark or sign, anything that might denote belonging. He mentally rejected the dull faces and meek bodies, the mean scowls and the unflattering bald spots. He paid particular mind the statuesque frames, the gentle smiles and the arms laden heavy with presents – but all those men were Japanese like him, and the man he was looking for was not.

As the stream of passengers thinned to the last stragglers, an ache settled in Josuke’s throat. Then from atop the boat’s deck he heard the rattle of luggage wheels, and for just a moment, he forgot how to breathe. From behind the bulwark a man stepped out onto the ramp and into sight, sombre in his long black gakuran. Japanese, and too young to be the person Josuke was waiting for.

Nonetheless, he couldn’t draw his eyes away.

The man moved like a black hole through the pale morning sunlight, sucking in everything around him: light and sound and conversation, and above all else, Josuke’s curiosity. A chain hung from the man’s collar, thick and golden, and with every step it jangled. Josuke wondered if the chain was heavy.

He expected the stranger to walk right on by them, but instead, he stopped to speak with Josuke’s mother, bowing his head to make up for the difference in height. Josuke, who hadn’t yet surpassed the height of his mother’s hip, couldn’t hear what the stranger was saying, but he picked up just enough of his pronunciation to tell the man was not from Morioh. He had an east-coast accent, pronouncing in full syllables that had long dropped from Josuke’s vocabulary.

When the man turned his eyes on Josuke, there was a weight to his stare. The ground beneath his feet suddenly felt like it was pushing up against him. His knees softened, something like electricity fell like a bolt through his stomach.
Tomoko’s voice was thin and brittle when she said, with a tight smile, “Josuke, this is your…” she paused, a crinkle worrying her brow, “…nephew. Jotaro Kujo.”

Josuke felt a flash of anger toward the stranger that, were he a little older, he might have deemed unfair. Turning to his mother, he asked, “Where’s dad?”

Tomoko didn’t respond. At first, he thought she hadn’t heard him, but then Josuke followed her gaze and found himself looking up at Jotaro Kujo.

Into his pocket Jotaro reached, making as if to pull something out, but then he gave Tomoko a second glance and his hands fell, palms open against his thighs.

“He couldn’t make it,” Jotaro replied, looking more at Tomoko than at Josuke.

On his shoulder, Josuke felt Tomoko’s hand. She had small fingers, thin and tapered, but when she got her hands on you, you really felt it — those fine bones that dug in and got under your skin like needles.

“Josuke, sweetie, let’s give Mr. Kujo a chance to get the rest of his luggage, alright?”

Josuke nodded. With Tomoko’s claws in him he had about as much choice as a fish on a line. As she dragged him back to the parkade, he kept his head turned, watching the strangers shrinking figure. Other passengers flowed around Jotaro in chaotic streams while he remained rooted in place, a steady rock. He pulled something out of his pocket and, bending his head, cupped his hand in front of his mouth. When he pulled his hand away there was a cigarette between his lips, throwing oil slicks of smoke into the pale late-afternoon sky.

When they reached the car, Josuke expected Tomoko to wait for Jotaro to return with his luggage. Instead she threw the car into reverse, and then into drive, and sped out from the parkade with her foot jammed down on the gas, chassis bouncing as the car’s wheels went up and over a curb.

At times like these, Josuke used to think his mother was angry; it was not until he was much, much older that he knew better.

Chapter End Notes

979 ghosts and every last one of them is an asshole.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Okuyasu's ice cream plans do not quite turn out as anticipated.

In the thrill of asking Josuke to go along to the ice cream parlour with him, Okuyasu had forgotten that hanging out necessitates the communication of certain logistics. Like times. And addresses. This critical bit of data was recalled abruptly by Okuyasu’s brain at one in the morning.

Josuke’s voice on the phone was breathless with sleep. “What the fuck, man,” he rasped.

“Two P.M. tomorrow,” Okuyasu said. “Take a left before the lighthouse, it’s about a minute down the road – Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Shoppe. Can’t miss it.”

“What the fuck,” Josuke repeated.

“You know. Where we’re gonna get ice cream tomorrow.”

There was a bout of silence. Josuke heavy breathing. And then: “Okuyasu.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m hanging up now.”

Two P.M. That’s what he’d told Josuke.

Play it cool, Okuyasu thought. It’s not a date. Show just in the nick of time – or even a few minutes late. Work it like there’s other places you could be.

By one P.M., Okuyasu was already hovering outside the door of Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Shoppe. By five after two, Josuke was nowhere to be seen.

Trouble was, Okuyasu just couldn’t let things slide. Not like Josuke could. Not like most people could. There was the unfamiliar route, the trouble of finding the place, the potential traffic delays and the improbable chance of his bike breaking down – but in the end, all these worst-case scenarios were nothing but the same fear in different hats: the irrational, unshakeable anxiety that constantly hung over Okuyasu’s head that he was only ever one fuck-up away from everything going to shit.

At ten after two, just when Okuyasu was starting to worry that he dreamed-up the whole phone call with Josuke (it wouldn’t have been the first time), he felt a hand clap down on his shoulder.

“Yo. Were you waiting long?” Josuke asked.

“Nah,” Okuyasu lied – never mind that hearing Josuke’s voice so suddenly and so close had caused his skin, from his head down to his toes, to feel like it’d shifted a few centimeters.

And then he turned and got a good look at Josuke. He wasn’t in his school uniform; he wasn’t even in his short sleeves and capris. Josuke Higashikata, in thirty-plus degree weather, was rocking black leather and blue denim like it was nobody’s business. There was a touch of flush to Josuke’s lips.
Tinted cherry cola lip balm – he’d seen the stuff on Josuke’s dresser before. He tried it once, when Josuke was in the shower; the lip balm smelt like candy and went on like wax.

And now, staring at Josuke’s lips, Okuyasu’s brain was unhelpfully relaying the memory of artificial cherry-cola flavoring. In the sweltering July heat, his hands felt cold and clammy.

“So what’s the difference between an American-style ice cream parlour and a regular ice cream shop anyway?” Josuke asked.

“I dunno. I guess you probably can’t get things like red bean ice cream and stuff there.”

Josuke chewed his lip, considering this for a moment. “I guess that’s fine. I’m not crazy about red bean ice cream anyway.”

Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Shoppe actually belong to one Ishimaru Watanabe, but Ishimaru’s American-Style Ice Cream Shoppe just didn’t have the same ring to it. Mr. Watanabe had never been to America before, but he owned a picture book of Norman Rockwell paintings and several bootlegged VHS recordings of Happy Days, and that, in Mr. Watanabe’s opinion, was all the research needed for what he considered a Very Sensible business plan. After all – there were already ice cream parlors by the dozen in Morioh, but only one American-Style Ice Cream Shoppe.

It was exactly the sort of seasonal novelty business that could only thrive in a place like Morioh.

The interior of Johnny’s was done up after the stylistic precedence Mr. Watanabe’s limited source material, with a few creative extrapolations to fill in the rest. Checkboard floor, chrome-plated stools, bubblegum pink walls. A juke-box in one corner that hadn’t worked in well over a decade. Even the waitress – a miserable-looking woman only a few years older than either of them – was stuffed into a short, collared dress and matching white apron. When the door bell rang she reluctantly raised her eyes from her half-finished Sudoku puzzle.

“You the new guy?” she asked Josuke.

His expression went blank for a moment – and then he laughed. “I’m just here for the ice cream.”

For a long moment, the waitress looked him up and down – lingering especially on his hair and jacket – before her eyes drifted back down to the unfurled newspaper on the counter. “Yeah, sure,” she mumbled.

“Got any recommendations? Me and my friend haven’t been to an American ice cream place before.”

Bending her head over the Sudoku puzzle, the waitress motioned over her shoulder with her pen. “Menu’s on the board.”

Before leaving his house that afternoon, Okuyasu had made a promise to himself: he would not, under any circumstances, be weird around Josuke. But when Josuke rested an elbow on Okuyasu’s shoulder and leaned in to study the menu, Okuyasu’s stomach gave a violent stir. He thought it had to be the air conditioning. Or he was having a heat stroke – after all, he was nauseous and flushed and sweating, and if that wasn’t an open-closed case of heat stroke, then he didn’t know what was. Except it was neither of those things and pretending otherwise wasn’t going to help.

“Half these flavours have the word ‘pie’ in them,” Josuke mumbled. “Doesn’t look like they have choco-strawberry though, sorry dude. Bet if you asked for a scoop of the strawberry pie swirl and a scoop of the choco-pie dream it’d taste about the same.”
“Nah, I’m good.”

Josuke pulled back, the warm weight of his arm leaving Okuyasu’s shoulder. “Dude. I know I said I wasn’t going to spot you, but if you’re that fucking cheap I don’t mind treating you just this once.”

“My stomach just ain’t feeling up to it today.”

“Yeah? Maybe you should get Tonio to fix you up something.”

“I don’t figure it’s the kind of thing Tonio can fix,” Okuyasu muttered. Without thinking about it he reached back to dig his fingers into his shoulder, trying to soothe the phantom tension-pain that never quite seemed to go away in situations like these.

“Hey, if you’re not feeling up to hanging out today, that’s cool.”

“Nah, I think I just need to sit down for a minute. You go ahead and order.”

While Josuke continued to ponder the menu board, Okuyasu slipped away to the back of the parlor, easing into a booth by the window. Right now, he needed that extra space between himself and Josuke to think, because he sure didn’t seem to get a lot of thinking done whenever Josuke was around.

The way Okuyasu saw it, he had two options.

One: he could tell Josuke he was wild about him, to the probable effect of Josuke deciding never to speak to him again.

Two: he could keep his damn mouth shut.

There was no contest, really. Okuyasu hadn’t grown up with much. He’d learned to be mean and jealous of every little scrap of happiness life let him keep intact: candy bars, new shirts that hadn’t first been worn to rags by his older brother, new pants that he could wear without having to put notches into his belt. A bird with a broken wing he’d kept as a pet once, hidden under his bed until Keicho found it and made him set it free.

Josuke – Josuke was even better than all that, and Okuyasu couldn’t for one second imagine going back to a life without him. Before Josuke, he had learned to fill up the empty space in his home with talk and he’d learned to raise his voice, but some part of him was still five years old and tip-toeing around the unpredictable whims of another. For years and years he’d padded softly around Keicho’s plans and Keicho’s crimes, offering no fuss, no protest.

Josuke made him want to be the person he’d muted.

From his seat at the back, Okuyasu watched as Josuke stepped up to the cash register to order. That was Josuke: all poise and movie-star smiles, even as he dug handful after handful of change out of his pockets to pay, much to the waitress’s annoyance (Okuyasu, not quite being in the state of mind to question where the hell Josuke had gotten all those one and ten yen coins).

No, thought Okuyasu, keeping his mouth shut was easy. Well, not easy – but there were sacrifices in life he was willing to make. The trouble was: he couldn’t shake off the feeling that even without confessing anything, he ran the danger of losing Josuke anyway. Five whole days after the bonfire, he’d waiting and worried over whether Josuke would want to see him again – until he’d broken down and visited the Higashikata household himself.

“Hey. Feeling better?”
Josuke was standing over him, ice cream cone in hand.

“Getting there. What’s that, vanilla?”

“Sorta. Apple pie a la mode, hold the apple pie.”

Bending his head, Josuke bit into his ice cream with his incisors. Thank God, Okuyasu thought sardonically. Josuke Higashikata may be irresistible in literally every other situation, but at least I don’t gotta worry about getting turned on by him eating ice cream.

“You wanna head outside?” Okuyasu asked. “We could sit down by the dock.”

“No way. I’m not going anywhere that’s not air conditioned any time soon.”

As Josuke squeezed into the opposite bench, their knees knocked together. While Okuyasu was sure it was just his imagination, he could have sworn Josuke lingered a moment, letting his knees rest against Okuyasu’s before tucking his legs under the seat.

They lapsed into silence. Josuke continued to worry at his ice cream with his front teeth while Okuyasu, with growing humiliation, reflected on how he thought that day would play out. Ice creams and sitting together on the wharf and pantomiming on platonic terms scenes that Okuyasu wanted wanted wanted in earnest.

Shit, he’d been dumb.

Yeah, maybe he and Josuke had gotten cozy in the past. But that was back when Kira was still around. Nothing drew people together quite like the mutual threat of death and dismemberment. But that danger was past now, and summer was just getting started, and already Okuyasu was fighting the feeling that Josuke was slipping away on him. So in desperation he floundered and stammered and grasped for the first thing that fell into his hands.

“Hey – ,” Josuke began.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“You said Jotaro came to Morioh to investigate some dude who was usin’ his stand to kill people, right?”

Josuke blinked. “Uh. Yeah?”

“But yesterday you said he visited ‘cause yer old man wanted someone to check up on you.”

Up until then, Josuke had been picking at a stain on the resin tabletop with his nail; he paused, hand folding up into a fist. “I mean. Yeah. He was just there to check up on me at first, and then all that stuff with the stand user happened.”

One muscle at a time, Okuyasu felt himself relax. It was easiest being around Josuke like this – when he wasn’t the one doing the talking.

“How’d Jotaro find out ‘bout the stand user?” he asked.

By late August, everything came to a standstill. Down in the basement the air stagnated. The ceiling fan spun on, blades whooshing busily, accomplishing nothing: the air was too thick to budge. With the blinds drawn, the only light in the basement came from the drawstring lamps on the fan itself. As
the blades moved round and round they cast shadows on the ceiling, breaking up the light. Even with his back turned to the ceiling fan Josuke could sense the flicker of light to dark and dark to light out of the corners of his eyes.

The coolant fans on his NES whirred in complaint.

He’d been stuck at the same point in the game for the past couple hours – trying to attain the summit of Mt. Itoi. He’d been doing well, up until he’d been forced to leave Teddy behind. He’d gotten to rely on all that brute strength; it just wasn’t the same having Lloyd back. He kept getting knocked out, or losing party members, and those few times he successfully made it to the summit, he’d only end up getting stomped by R7038XX. In Josuke’s six year old mind, it was completely unfair of the game to expect him to be able to beat R7038XX when version 1.0 had been impossible. He liked it when he could win at things. Sure, beating a hard game felt better than being an easy one – but it was knowing he could win that was important.

Eventually, Josuke gave up and shut down the console. The heat was made him sluggish, made the blood grow thick in his veins, and so he lay down on the floor, pressing his cheek to the cool, muggy tile. For a moment he let his eyes close, allowing the chill that seeped through the foundation to sink into his pink, balmy skin.

From atop the stairs, voices carried down to him. Hushed, private tones of adult conversation. Lifting his cheek from the floor, Josuke tilted his head, straining to listen, but the voices were too quiet, too far away. Sun-sapped arms trembling beneath him, he peeled the rest of his body from the clammy tile floor and padded over to the staircase on sock feet, taking care to switch off the ceiling fan light before setting foot on the stairs. The old wooden steps were creaky, but by now Josuke had learned his way around them. He stuck close to the wall, where the steps didn’t squeak so much, and where the beam of light that cascaded down the steps from the cracked-open door wouldn’t catch him. He moved slow, gradually sinking his weight into each step.

“Poor Kumiko,” he heard his mother say when he neared the top of the steps. Kumiko – Josuke recognized the name. It belonged to the lady next door, the one with a little girl a few years younger than himself and a husband who worked in the city.

Then his grandfather’s voice: “We’re doing everything we can.”

“Has she got someone to stay with her?”

“Her husband drove back from S-City a couple hours ago. She’s got family flying in tomorrow. She’ll be as alright as she can be.”

There was a lull in the conversation. That was when Josuke smelt it: the metallic odour of tobacco. His grandfather never smoked. His mother only ever smoked when she was stressed, and Josuke wasn’t supposed to know about it. She’d sneak out to the backyard to light up, but on some nights he could see her from his bedroom window, her wiry frame tucked into the tire swing his grandfather had made for him, her legs twined tight together. She always used a cigarette holder, the kind you saw in movies: ebony with a gold cap at one end. When Josuke was older, he wondered if she used the cigarette holder to keep the nicotine stains off her fingers and the ash off her clothes.

His mother had never smoked in the house before.

“You think she could have just wandered off?” his mother asked. “Kids do that all the time.”

“She could have,” his grandfather answered, voice strained under false optimism. “That’s what we’re hoping – but if that were the case, you’d think we’d have found her by now. A two year old
can’t exactly move too fast, you know. But the whole thing—disappearing from a secure location while under close supervision—it fits the other cases we’ve seen.”

“I think,” Josuke said, “I might’ve been the one to tell him.”

Okuyasu tilted his head. “How’d you find out about it?”

“You weren’t around Morioh back then, yeah? You wouldn’t have known anything about it, but at the time there’d been kids going missing. Some of them would’ve been my age. I used to hear things at school, but it was hard to know what was just rumour. The adults sure weren’t telling us anything.”

At some point, Josuke had stopped paying attention to his ice cream cone. Melted vanilla drizzled over Josuke’s hand, pooling on the table below. An unease had slipped in between them and settled, thickly, on the mottled cheap resin. Okuyasu thought this was probably one of those scenarios where a more reasonable person would have backed off. Here was this community tragedy he had no party of, and he was sticking his nose into the midst of it. But then, Okuyasu had never been too good at knowing when to step down.

“What made you decide to tell Jotaro?” he asked.

“Desperation. Or something.” Josuke’s eyes wandered over to the window and remained there, unable to meek Okuyasu’s gaze. “I overheard my mom and grandpa talking one night. My neighbour’s daughter went missing.”

“Shit. Is that when Jotaro went lookin’ for the guy?”

A frown settled over Josuke’s expression. “That’s not—,” he began, before falling silent.

Okuyasu waited a moment for Josuke to finish his thought, but when there was still no response, he nudged the other boy’s leg with his foot. Slowly, Josuke’s gaze drifted back from the window. There was a glazed look in his eyes, like he’d just woken up after a long dream.

“Hey, you alright dude?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m…” Josuke trailed off, eyes dropping to the melted ice cream cone in his hand. He gave the ice cream half-hearted lick, doing nothing to stem the trickle of liquefied confection. “I think I’ve got things mixed up.”

“What d’ya mean?”

“I don’t think I told Jotaro about the killer just then. Or maybe I did, but we didn’t do anything about it. There was something else.”

Josuke could feel his pulse thrum hot and quick through his palms as he picked up the telephone receiver. The plastic handpiece felt too warm against his sweat-slicked skin. As he punched in the first number nausea hit him: not the kind that hit you in your stomach but the kind that sits high in your throat, making it hard to breath.

He and Jotaro were supposed to play Mother together that afternoon. Now that they had Teddy on their party, Jotaro was going to help him beat the dragon. Instead, Josuke was standing on his tiptoes in a payphone outside the minimart down the road, more nervous than he’d been at any point in his brief five years of existence.

The phone rang, one long dial tone followed by dead silence. And then another. He found himself
wishing the person on the other end wouldn’t pick up, but sure enough there was the click of a telephone being lifted off its receiver, and then a voice spoke, hazy and thick and faintly slurred on the vowels.

“Hello?”

“Jotaro.”

A pause. “Josuke? What do you want?”

“He wants you to meet him on the cliffs at noon.”

Another delay. Josuke’s heart lurched against his chest.

“Wh – ,” Jotaro began, but Josuke slammed the receiver back down on the switch hook before he could get the rest out.

“The stand user. I think he got to me.”

Okuyasu looked up from the spot on the table he’d been intent on studying. “What d’you mean, it go to you?”

“I don’t know, exactly – the guy must’ve realized Jotaro was in town and he wanted to make quick work of him, same as Akira. So he used me as bait.”

“Holy shit, dude. Did he like… kidnap you?”

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure he just made me call Jotaro. It’s like one of those hostage movies, you know – the bad guy always gets the good guy to meet him somewhere, like a parking lot or a field or someplace like that. He wanted Jotaro to meet him at the cliffs, up by the cape.”

“You said he got you to call Jotaro, right? Didn’t you say the guy’s stand ability was to imitate voices – why would he need you to make the phone call?”

“Maybe he couldn’t use his powers over the phone or something – shit, I don’t know.”

“Why’d the guy want Jotaro to meet him at the cliffs? I thought you an’ Jotaro went looking for him in the woods.”

Pitching over, Josuke groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Man, I told you: I really don’t know. Shit, it’s too hot in here – s’giving me a damn headache.”

It was at that moment that Josuke noticed the huge puddle of melted ice cream on the table. Cursing, he shoved the remainder of his ice cream cone in his mouth, tip jutting out from his lips like a beak as he ripped a handful of napkins from the dispenser.

“Thhhht,” Josuke mumbled through a mouthful wafer.

Stifling a laugh, Okuyasu grabbed another stack of napkins and added them to the already soaked-through pile on the table. Try as they might, the two of them could only do so much to fix the disaster; in the end, they were left with a very sticky table and a very, very large stack of soiled napkins.

“Man, we must have killed like a hundred trees just now or something,” Josuke mumbled. He lifted his eyes, staring past Okuyasu’s shoulder. “Damn, the waitress is looking at us. We better scramble.”
Whenever they went anywhere together, Josuke had a habit of leading the way. He did so now, making his way out of the ice cream parlour without looking back to make sure Okuyasu was following him. He’d seen Jotaro do the same; he wondered if it was a family thing, some genetic predisposition of assuming that others would follow wherever they lead. Not that Okuyasu minded: he liked Josuke’s confidence, the way it always rubbed off on him. Having someone else do the thinking for him was nice.

But there was a difference in the way Josuke and Jotaro lead, and even for Okuyasu that difference was hard to ignore. Though Jotaro never looked back he always seemed aware that there were people who relied on him – you could tell by the way he acted, taking charge and giving orders, and in the way he carried himself. By the way the strain and pressure told on his body, tension that left marks at the corners of his eyes and in the crease of his brow.

On the other hand, Okuyasu wouldn’t have been surprised if one day Josuke looked back over his shoulder and wondered aloud why everyone was lining up behind him.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Koichi invites Josuke to lunch in order to share a new discovery.

Chapter Notes

*History of Japan voice* Knock knock, it's ~the plot~!

It's late and I need to sleep so I only had time for one round of editing, so sorry if I missed any typos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Josuke didn’t have much time to reflect on his day at the ice cream parlor with Okuyasu – he wasn’t a minute through his own front door when he heard the phone go off downstairs, and his mother’s voice shouting for him.

“Josuke! It's for you!”

His sun-sapped body just wanted to stay put in bed, luxuriating under the ministrations of his oscillating fan as it turns slowly, back and forth, caressing him in cool air from the backs of his calves to the nape of his neck. But Tomoko hollered for him again, and so, after a great show of reluctance, Josuke peeled himself from the covers and ambled downstairs.

Koichi was waiting for him on the line. He had something he wanted to show him, he said – could Josuke maybe meet him at the Café Deux Magots tomorrow?

Hearing Koichi’s voice over the phone always took him guard. Something about the translation from sound waves to electricity made him sound a lot older, or maybe it was something about having the receiver in his hand and being in control of it, or not having to look up at someone while having a conversation with them, that gave Koichi a confidence he lacked in person. After they’d decided on a time to meet, that grown-up voice asked Josuke what he was getting up to, if he’d seen any of their classmates around, and so on and so forth, and before Josuke knew it he’d been on the phone a full two hours.

After making his goodbyes, Josuke set the telephone back down on the receiver and crept, quiet as he could, toward the stairs. He had very definite ideas about spending the rest of the night playing Mother, if only so he could teach that goddamn starman a lesson.

Unfortunately, the path to gaming greatness was blocked by one Tomoko Higashikata, who had parked herself on the staircase.

“Mom, please,” Josuke whined, attempting to step over her – but she just lifted a leg to bar his way. “I gotta do something important.”
“You’ve got that right,” she said. “The lawn’s not going to mow itself.”

“Do I have to?”

“I don’t know, Josuke. Do I have to make dinner for you tonight?”

He knew there was just no winning against an argument like that.

By the time he sank down into bed he smelt of fresh-cut grass. There were grass stains on his feet, and grass stains on his knees from when he’d knelt to top off the mower’s gas tank. He’d completely lost his drive – the starman was just going to have to wait another day to get his ass kicked. Sleep was calling him and his room was pleasant and comfortable in the cool mid-evening air, the sunset lighting up the slats of his blinds peachy pink and gold.

And it was then, with the day’s energy slowly draining off his body and pooling into the surrounding sheets, that he finally replayed his conversation with Okuyasu.

The voices and the woods. The phone call and the cliffs. They couldn’t have both happened, could they? There’d been only one stand user, yet he could recall two separate showdowns. He might have thought one of the memories was fake, a fiction planted in his brain by something he’d seen in a movie, if his memories were only sight and sound – but they were more than either of those. He remembered being in those scenes. The damp, heavy night air under the claustrophobic cover of trees, the taste of gunpowder in his mouth and the trembling aftershocks that pulsed against his eardrums. The smell of windblown dust at the top of the cliffs near the cape, the chill at the back of his neck where, a few steps back, the vertical drop lay open to him, a shout’s fall from a fingernail strip of beach and scree when the tide was low and a turbulent chase of waves when the tide was high. Both scenes he could make sense of, but only separately. Like there were two versions of events, alternative snapshots of how that summer could have played out.

Yeah, right.

He was thinking too hard about it, that’s all. The whole thing he had going on with Okuyasu, it was just for fun. Swapping ghost stories to pass the time. Whatever had really happened that summer, it was as good as dead and buried.

Wound up from an excess of socialization and physical activity, Josuke tossed and turned into the early hours of the morning. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could think about was Okuyasu. Okuyasu watching him with rapt attention, Okuyasu making him feel like he could say anything, like he could go on talking for hours. Hell, maybe he didn’t mind digging around through old memories so much if it meant having Okuyasu’s full and undivided attention all over him. It could even be fun. They could shoot the shit together, with Okuyasu as his willing guide through the labyrinth of his past. Like that one chick – whatever her name was. Sleep took him before he could remember.

Ariadne, Josuke. Her name was Ariadne.

In the process of fantasizing this great shared adventure – and all the hanky-panky his single-minded little teenage brain assumed would naturally follow – Josuke Higashikata conveniently forgot the reason labyrinths were built in the first place.

***

The next morning, Josuke awoke to the feeling he’d forgotten something – but it was a common enough occurrence those days that he thought nothing better of it. Only when he was standing in the bathroom, the corners of his lips spackled with toothpaste, did he remembered.
Ten minutes later, dressed and preened, Josuke flew out the front door, the soles of his sandals slapping loudly against the sidewalk. He had just about reached the end of the road when he stopped, turned abruptly, and jogged all the way back, turning this time down the Nijimuras’ driveway. He hopped over the gate, in too much of a hurry to bother with the latch, before bounding up the rotten wooden front porch steps two at a time. They groaned under his weight, loose nails squealing in protest.

After knocking on the door, he waited a minute. Nothing. He was just about to knock again when from within the house he heard a crash. Moments later the door cracked open, revealing nothing but the unlit foyer behind it. Josuke stared dumbly at the space ahead, before a gurgling sound drew his gaze downward.

“Oh. Uh. Hi.”

Okuyasu’s dad blinked at him, one eye at a time, as if one side of his face was just a smidge out of sync with the other.

“Is Okuyasu there?”

Another gurgle. It was Josuke’s turn to blink.

“Sorry?”

When Oku’s dad stretched out his mangled, paw-like hand, Josuke took a step back out of instinct. But the man only patted him on the elbow, looked deep into his eyes… and let out a meaningful gurgle.

Asking again would be rude – and Josuke didn’t figure it’d do much good anyway – so he forced a smile and said, “Alright, I’ll pop by some other time,” before hurrying off down the porch steps.

It was weird, he thought, that Okuyasu would be up and about so early. The two of them were practically on the same wavelength, after all, and Josuke was anything but a keener.

He was just around the corner from the Café Deux Magots when he spotted Okuyasu walking toward him on the opposite side of the road. The other boy had his head down, hands tucked into his pockets. There was a slight drag to his gait, his legs lifting only so much off the ground, as if he were dragging a heavy weight behind him.

“Hey! Okuyasu!” Josuke called.

Okuyasu jolted, head snapping up like he’d been caught sleeping sitting up, but when he saw Josuke waving to him from across the street, a huge grin spread to his face. “Yo, Josuke!”

Only when they were close enough to share the same square of sidewalk did Josuke have the chance to take in Okuyasu’s current state. He smelt like chemicals – industrial soap with a whiff of ammonia. The folds around his eyes were billowy and thick, the skin above his cheekbones bruised and receded.

“Where were you this morning, man?” Josuke asked. “I went by your house and your dad came to the door.”

“Sorry ‘bout that. I needed to get some air.”

“Couldn’t sleep?”
Okuyasu bowed his head, eyes lowering to the ground. There was already a slight, permanent bend to his neck. Poor posture had given him a protective curl to his spine – the appearance of always flinching.


If Okuyasu was acting nervous, Josuke couldn’t tell. That was just the type of guy he was. He’d told Josuke once that whenever he went into stores, the clerks would always follow him around, asking if he needed anything. Okuyasu thought they were trying to be nice. Josuke didn’t have the heart to tell him otherwise.

“I’m headed over to the café to catch up with Koichi. He said he had something he wanted to show me. You wanna come?”

Okuyasu probably hadn’t slept a wink since yesterday. Letting him go home and rest would be the best thing Josuke could do; but having laid up half the night thinking about him, Josuke was selfish for Okuyasu’s company.

Okuyasu’s grin got a little wider, the heavy bags under his eyes crinkling. And Josuke realized, not for the first time, just how cute he was when he smiled. “S’pose I could.”

As they rounded the corner, Okuyasu asked, “So what’s Koichi gotta show you anyway?”

“He didn’t say. There they are now!”

_They_, referring to the collective person of Koichi and Yukako, who were already seated at a table on the terrace. Nowadays, Koichi was spending more and more time as one part of a two-person _they_.

“Hey guys!” Koichi called out to them, waving.

Yukako gave them both a nod. She was shy around people, Koichi would tell them, but Josuke had a sneaking suspicion that Yukako was just too busy silently judging Okuyasu and him whenever they were around to contribute much by way of conversation. This was not entirely true either.

Yukako Yamagishi was shy _and_ partial to judging the words and actions of Koichi’s friends. She just happened to be an excellent multitasker.

“Yo, Koichi, whatchu been up to?” Okuyasu asked, dropping down into the table’s one extra chair.

“Not much, I’ve been busy with cram school… oh, Josuke, sorry! I didn’t know Okuyasu was coming or I would have asked the waitress to bring out an extra chair.”

“That’s alright,” said Josuke. “I’ll just steal one from another table.”

Looking about, he noticed that the terrace was packed with salarymen on their lunch breaks. Served him right, he supposed, for dawdling until noon.

At his side, he heard a _tch_! When Josuke glanced down, Okuyasu was in the process of scooting over to the edge of his seat. He gave the free space beside him a pat. “C’mon. We’ll share.”

“You sure?”

“You callin’ me a fatass or somethin’?”

Truth be told – Okuyasu wasn’t exactly on the scrawny side, and for that matter, Josuke’s weight had a tendency to run to his hips. Regardless, he did as he was asked. His ass was hanging halfway
off the seat and he was pretty sure he was going to end up with a cramp in his left leg from supporting all that extra weight, but on the upshot sharing the seat gave him the perfect opportunity to fling an arm around Okuyasu’s shoulder under the pretense of keeping his balance. When it came down to it, Josuke thought he could be pretty damn smooth (he wasn’t).

If he was in a good mood just then, it shriveled up and died when he glanced up and noticed the way Yukako’s eyes were drilling holes in the two of them. Swallowing back what felt like a lump of wet sand, Josuke asked:

“What about you, Yukako? What’ve you been up to?”

As usual, Yukako wasn’t in any rush to answer him. She took a sip of tea, pushing the cup and saucer aside before replying, “I’ve decided to pick up a new hobby.”

“Oh yeah?”

Bending over the side of her chair, Yukako picked up a canvas shopping bag and set it on her lap. From the bag she pulled out a large hardcover book, longer than it was tall, with thick pages. To Josuke it looked like a photo album.

Okuyasu must have thought the same thing, because he asked, “You a photographer now?”

“It’s a scrapbook,” Yukako muttered, tapping one fingernail against the cover.

Sure enough, upon closer inspection Josuke noticed that the book’s front cover was decorated with jeweled stickers and little paper stars. In gold glitter pen someone had written out in cursive ‘MORIOH 1999’. He had to admit – he was a little taken aback. While he’d never given much thought to the type of things Yukako Yamagishi enjoyed doing in her spare time, having formed the impression that she was just perpetually attached to Koichi by the hip, he wouldn’t have suspected her hobbies would include something quite so… mundane.

Koichi nodded in the direction of the scrapbook. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to show you – you too, Okuyasu.”

“A scrapbook?” Josuke asked in disbelief.

“Is it a scrapbook of us?” Okuyasu probed. Beside him, Josuke could feel Okuyasu’s leg bounce up and down with excitement – he was so unabashedly physical in the way he showed his feelings. “I always wanted to be in an album or somethin’.”

This seemed like a strange desire to Josuke – until he remebered the one dog-eared old photograph with creases through the middle and little fragments missing that Crazy Diamond had assembled from tatters. Come to think of it, it was the only photograph he’d ever seen in all that big lonely house.

“Sorry, Okuyasu,” Koichi said, “but it’s nothing like that – Yukako?”

Easing open the scrapbook’s cover, Yukako began to flick through the pages one by one. Though he saw each page only in passing – disjointed still frames shown for a fraction of a second, like images along a zoetrope – Josuke was struck by the fact that the scrapbook’s contents were… different than what he’d expected. For one, there weren’t as many photographs as he’d been lead to believe scrapbooks were supposed to have. On the other hand: there sure were a lot of newspaper articles.

“Look, but don’t touch anything,” Yukako said by way of warning before sliding the scrapbook across the table to Josuke and Okuyasu.
Both he and Okuyasu bent over the table to peer at the open page, shoulders brushing together. The page’s base was done in what looked like imitation wallpaper: porcelain-pink damask roses on antique ivory bordered by mint-green vertical stripes, airy and Edwardian all at once. Black headline newsprint, each letter individually cut out and set on white cardstock, spelt out at the top of the page ‘23 JULY 1999’. Below, a newspaper clipping with the headline ‘Missing Teen Found Dead’, set on tasteful black cardstock to offset it from the pale background. Beside the article, various little die-cut black cardstock decals: a magnifying glass, a telephone receiver, an old-fashioned revolver. Some mechanical part of Josuke’s brain was aware that Koichi was talking rattling off an explanation of sorts, but all he could focus on were the two small photographs at the bottom right hand corner of the page, each individually labeled with craft tags and set in decorative acetate frames: one of a nondescript suburban home, the other, of a naked woman lying in a gulch, her arms twisted back behind her and –.

Josuke slammed the scrapbook cover shut. Beside him, Okuyasu’s face was paper-white.

“Koichi! What the hell, man?”

“S-sorry!” Koichi stammered, quickly gathering up the scrapbook in his arms and hugging it close to his chest as if the act of physical removal would make any difference. “I forgot about the pictures, otherwise I would have warned you…”

“What kinda fuckin’ scrapbook are you working on?” Josuke hissed, jabbing a finger at Yukako.

“It’s a record,” Yukako informed him, folding her hands in front of her. She had fingers just like his mother’s, fine-boned, only unlike Tomoko she kept her nails long and filed, fragile and just the right shape to gouge a man’s eyes out. “Of all the suspicious and unusual activity that has gone on in Morioh in the past few months.”

To which Koichi added: “I’ve been keeping in touch with the Speedwagon Foundation. They want somebody to be on alert for anything strange going on in Morioh, so I’ve been looking into the news and police reports, and Yukako’s been helping me.”

“So, uh, why the stickers n’ shit?” Okuyasu asked.

“Because colours, shapes, the way things are arranged – they all have meaning,” Yukako explained. “If you saw red and white paired together, you wouldn’t associate them with mourning, would you?”

“I guess not – .”

“Then you would agree that you can learn about the significance of something by studying the aesthetics of it?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Josuke caught Okuyasu shooting him a helpless look, but Josuke was too busy doing the same to Koichi to do much about it.

Without waiting for an answer, Yukako continued: “I’ve always had a strong sense of intuition. Even if I’m not consciously aware of it, I may have knowledge of a person or event. When I make one of my scrapbook pages, I’m not just arranging the elements in a way that looks nice. I’m subconsciously acting on my intuition. So, for instance, when I make a page about a murder, my layout might tell me something about what the murderer is like as a person.”

From Koichi’s unresisting hands, Yukako plucked the scrapbook.

Seeing the picture of the girl the second time around wasn’t so bad for Josuke. By then, the shock of it had worn out and he could see the photograph for the object it was – just chemical impressions of
Pointing out each element on the page as she went, Yukako explained: “The wallpaper and the die cuts make me think that the killer is from another time – they’re old, maybe, or they have an old-fashioned mindset. But at the same time: the green and the flowers suggest newness, or rebirth. Perhaps this is a first kill. Or the first in a long time.”

“So what you’re trying to say,” Josuke began, “is that you’re psychic.”

Yukako’s nose wrinkled. “I told you – it’s intuition.”

“C’mon, Koichi – you don’t believe any of this do you?”

“Josuuuuuke I called you up because I wanted to show you the newspaper article!” Koichi answered – a deflection if Josuke ever saw one, and a pretty damn good at that. “Didn’t you read it?”

No, Josuke thought, I was too busy trying to figure out why your girlfriend has a murderscrapbook.

“Yes, I skimmed the first couple lines.”

“That’s not the same thing!”

Sighing, Koichi sank down in his chair. From across the table all Josuke could see was a tuft of blonde hair.

“Mako Okawa disappeared from her home on July 17th, just over a week ago. Her family didn’t notice until the next morning. The analysis done on the body found a few days ago suggests that she was killed the evening before anyone noticed she was gone. The strange thing is what happened the night of her disappearance.”

“What’s that?” Okuyasu asked.

There was a flush across Koichi’s face now. Josuke knew that look – Koichi was caught up in the mystery, intoxicated with the puzzle it presented. “According to the article,” he said, “the night she disappeared, at one in the morning, her younger brother woke to the sound of Mako’s voice calling to him from the front yard. He told the police he knew it was her, but something made him too afraid to go down and open the door for her. According to the coroner’s report, she would have been dead since six that evening.”

“Maybe the coroner got the time wrong,” Josuke suggested.

“It’s possible – but the thing is, it rained the day before. Hard. The Okawas’ front yard would have been muddy. But when Mako was found, her shoes were perfectly clean – whoever had abducted her had probably picked her up as she was coming out of school. Offered her a ride, maybe. It’s unlikely she ever made it home.”

“Maybe the killer coulda took a recording of her voice or somethin’,” Okuyasu suggested.

Yukako pulled a face. “People can generally tell real human voices apart from recordings. Especially loved ones.”
Silence.

Josuke cleared his throat. “Are you suggesting a stand user did this?”

“Maybe.” Koichi wasn’t looking at him. He wasn’t looking at any of them, for that matter – he was drawing lines in the precipitation that had formed around his glass of iced tea, pupils unfocused and receded, searching inward. “Their stand could be something like my Echoes. Maybe it captures and stores voices.”

In his peripheral vision he saw Okuyasu’s head turn. “Josuke, doesn’t that sound like that guy you were tellin’ me about?”

Suddenly, Josuke found himself subjected to the inquisitive look of three sets of eyes.

“You know someone with a stand like that?” Koichi asked. “Here? In Morioh?”

“I… There might’ve been a guy like that around here once, but it doesn’t matter. Jotaro cleaned the floor with him.”

“But Josuke,” Okuyasu’s voice ran over his name like sandpaper, smoothing over the rounded vowels and snagging on the harsh consonants. “Are ya sure you saw Jotaro actually kill the guy?”

“Well, someone shot somebody else that’s for sure.”

“But did ya, like, see the body?”

“I told you – I don’t remember!”

Koichi was glancing back and forth between the two of them, alarm written clearly on his face. “What are you guys talking about?!”

Into Josuke’s ribcage, Okuyasu dug an elbow. “C’mon, Josuke, tell ‘em.”

Back on the beach, and by the fountain and alone in the corner at the ice cream parlour, it had been so much easier, when it was just him and Okuyasu. Okuyasu, who knew how to make him feel listened to, who asked all the right question. Whenever they were together Josuke felt a little like he was drunk: inhibitions throw away, lips loose. With Okuyasu he could throw himself blindly into a memory, speak boldly of things he barely remembered, and knit disparate snapshots into one bigger picture. There were things that he could only recall when he tried them out on his tongue, tasting the familiar certainty and the rightness of them.

Time and time again Okuyasu would assert that he was not a very good story teller. He had no gift for words, he’d say. Nonetheless, stories had a tendency to happen in and around Okuyasu – or, more accurately, he had a way of drawing stories out of others. All that curiosity of his, all that willingness to ask the dumb questions. He could hen-peck away at a good story until the details came out all on their own.

But with Yukako and Koichi it was different. They shared in kind a discriminating ear, a tendency for intellectual stubbornness. As Josuke attempted to explain piece-by-piece the details of his story – Jotaro’s visit, the killer, the neighbour’s abducted daughter, the contradictory incidents of the showdown in the woods and the showdown on the cliffs – he found his certainty waning and, gradually, became embarrassed. With Okuyasu, at least, he could pretend to have the silk ribbon of a narrative. On his own, without prompting, it was clear to him that what he had amounted to little more than a bunch of smashed-up bits. He sounded like a child trying to make up a story, the way he jumped erratically from scene to scene.
At the end of it, Koichi asked: “The girl who was abducted – what was her name?”

“Yuki. Imai Yuki.”

A bright light flashed before Josuke’s eyes, accompanied by a loud click. He blinked, pinpricks of light swimming across the underside of his eyelids, and swore. When he opened his eyes again, there was a camera on the table in front of Yukako, and a Polaroid in her hand.

“Ow! What the fuck?”

“You’re a witness now,” she explained, shaking out the photograph with deft flicks of her wrist. “I have to document you.”

Before Josuke could ask what she meant by that, Yukako had pulled out a scotch gun and a stack of cardstock in various colours, and he stopped wanting to know.

Reaching for the scrapbook, Koichi turned over to another page. This layout was plainer than the others Josuke had seen: just a pouch from which hung hundreds of craft tags attached by ribbons, and a title at the top, stenciled in red. ‘DISAPPEARANCES AND HOMICIDES: 1950 – PRESENT’.

Koichi pulled on one of the tags. Out from the pouch slid a neatly folded newspaper clipping in a plastic baggy.

“I thought the name sounded familiar,” Koichi said as he gingerly unfolded the clipping and flattened it against the table with the back of his hand before handing it face-down to Josuke.

For a moment, Josuke stared at the back of the clipping. He felt like he’d stepped back in time. There was half a poster-ad for *Majo no Takkyūbin*. An excerpt from an article about the construction of a train line that would run between Morioh and S City. A few cut-off bylines about quirky local business: a woman who’d befriended a merlin that hung around her back yard, a hiker turned up dead, some idiot overdosing on Ativan and falling off a cliff.

Josuke turned the page over as Koichi continued:

“Yuki Imai: disappeared from her front lawn of her parents’ house on the 13th of August, 1989, and reappeared at S City Regional Hospital less than twenty-four hours later with only minor injuries. Believed to be the last in a string of abductions and murders that had been ongoing for half a decade. Nothing about the case struck me as unusual – I filed it and forgot about it.”

Josuke handed the article back. Folding up the paper, Koichi slipped it back into its plastic bag before returning it to the pouch. Josuke found himself wondering how many human tragedies were neatly tucked away in that one little pouch.

“But if what you’re saying is true – if the kidnapper was able to use his stand to imitate peoples’ voices – then we might be able to use that to catch him. Josuke, are you sure to can’t remember how you and Jotaro defeated the stand user?” Koichi asked, throwing Josuke a small, tentative smile of encouragement.

“I’ve thought this thing through backwards and forwards a hundred times by now – I just don’t know.”

“Maybe we could ask Jotaro?” Okuyasu suggested. “Josuke said he was supposed to be dropping by Morioh soon.”

A wave of nausea rolled through Josuke’s stomach. “No way!” he yelped, almost by reflex. “Jotaro
– Jotaro’s coming back to do some follow-up work on this thesis. And he’ll have his kid with him. He won’t have time; plus, he won’t be here for another week or two.” Recovering his composure, he gave the others what he hoped was a reassuring look. “C’mon – it’s just one stand user, tops. Nothing we can’t handle, right?”


“There are ways of getting back lost memories, you know.”

The boys all turned their heads to look at Yukako. She was in the process of neatly creasing a legal-sized sheet of brown cardstock into thirds, feigning disinterest in the conversation.

“It’ll take me a few days to make preparations. If you’re willing.” This last remark came punctuated with the sound of a staple gun. Seriously, how the fuck had she fit all that crafting supplies into one little canvas bag?

Off the bat, Josuke could list at least a hundred reasons why this was a terrible idea. Reason number one being: this was Yukako he was dealing with. But he’d already made a vow to protect Morioh, and if there was one thing Josuke was not (besides interesting, fashionable, charming – we could go on really), Josuke Higashikata was not a hypocrite.

Besides: whatever Yukako was planning to do to him couldn’t possibly be worse than the humiliation of having to ask his nephew for help.

“Alright. Let’s do it.”

He held out his hand to shake on it, but Yukako only raised an eyebrow at him, and just like that his open palm wilted and retracted.

***

“You sure about this?” Okuyasu asked later, when they were walking home together. Then: “Sorry for puttin’ ya on the spot. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s fine.” A lie. “It’ll be fun. Just like old times.” Another lie, and a half-truth.

He didn’t think he’d ever be nostalgic for living under the pressure of constant near-death experiences. Maybe Yukako had the right idea taking up a hobby after all.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to make a joke about Yukako being the log lady, but lets be real: if anyone in DIU were to be the log lady, it would be Hazamada. He’s got a wood friend and everything.

Jokes aside -- I’ll be going away for two weeks and I’m not taking my computer, so I won’t be able to work on this until I get back. But!!! I am going to try to get the next chapter edited (the next two chaps are already written) and schedule it to post sometime
next week. I'm pretty excited to share the next chapter because of reasons ;)
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The gang dabbles in forensic hypnotherapy.

Chapter Notes

I gave up writing chapter summaries five billion years ago my friends.

I know I said I was going to time this chapter to come out sometime next week while I'm away, but I couldn't figure out how backdating works so y'all are getting a new chapter early :D It'll just be a while before the next one is out, that's all. I might try to work on some of the flashback sequences for upcoming chapters on my phone while I'm away -- most of the flashbacks are pretty short so they shouldn't be too much of a hassle, even with the tiny keyboard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yukako's preparations, whatever they were, were apparently more involved than Josuke took for granted – a full week came and went before she called a meeting.

Once again, Josuke showed up on the Nijimura’s porch bright and early in the morning, and once again, Okuyasu’s dad answered the door. Once again, Mr. Nijimura gibbered at him with enough clear-eyed exuberance to suggest some kind of meaning, and once again Josuke smiled and nodded, comprehending nothing.

The four of them arrived at disparate times by disparate means at the appointed location: the summer house overlooking the cape, where only months prior Koichi Hirose had been held hostage. Yukako and Koichi went ahead of the rest of them, to get set up – or so they said. Either way, Josuke wasn’t about to stick his nose in the lovebirds’ alone-time. Sure, maybe part of him kinda wondered if the little guy was seeing any action, but he sure wasn’t ready to commit to finding out. As for himself: he couldn’t afford a taxi so he took the four o’clock bus that went up along the coast. Okuyasu was the last to arrive. When Josuke met him at the door, he was wearing that same raw, ragged look he’d seen on him the week prior – but before Josuke could ask about it, Yukako was whisking them inside.

“You sure it’s alright for us to be here?” Josuke asked as they followed Yukako through room after room. The summer home was one of those houses where everything was compartmentalized, every room its own space separate from the rest. Corridor after corridor of nothing but identical doors. “I thought this was supposed to be the summer pad of some company president from Tokyo?”

“It is,” Yukako answered, not bothering to turn her head to look at him. She kept her gaze fixed ahead, long hair swishing along the small of her back in a way that reminded Josuke of the agitated flicker of a cat’s tail. A messenger bag hung from her shoulder; it swayed and knocked against her thigh as she walked. “But I don’t think he’ll mind.”
She saw no need to elaborate; it was Koichi who smiled reassuringly at Josuke and added, “He’s Yukako’s father.”

Josuke hid his reaction by turning away and pretended to examine the décor. In a matter of time, he stopped pretending. There was something curious, seeing this place where Yukako supposedly spent her childhood summers. The house did not align with what Josuke always picture a vacation home ought to look like: open, breezy, trading conspicuous luxury for rusticated hominess. He expected panoramic windows and a spacious deck, not oak paneling and velour drapes. All that window trim and crown molding, all that dark shag carpet and those decorative cornices around the doors – it all felt heavy, oppressive. In a home like that sound didn’t carry far. He tried to picture vacationing there, shoved away somewhere behind one of the home’s many identical walnut doors.

Must have been lonely.

Ahead, Yukako strode from one room to the next without pause. There was an air of familiarity in the way she moved through the house, alright – but not much in the way of nostalgia.

She led all three of them to a sitting room. Though the space was generously proportioned, it felt cramped on account of the furniture: a rolltop desk, a leather oxblood chesterfield and matching armchair, a monstrous china cabinet that dominated the west wall. The room and its furnishings were reminders of a bygone time – not the English 1800s, after which they had been styled, but the Japanese 1980s, before the collapse, when the house had been built. Not one cut of cloth in all the house was newer than 1989, though for having weathered the better part of ten years the home and its contents bore their age well. After all – there was not much use to show when the place was little used.

“On the couch, Josuke,” Yukako ordered.

Against one arm of the chesterfield he curled up, tucking his legs beneath his body. Out of habit Okuyasu followed him, parking himself beside Josuke on the next cushion over. Yukako glowered, tapping the toe of her patent leather shoe against the plush carpet.

“Just Josuke.”

Bowing his head, Okuyasu slid over, attempting to crab-walk his way to the perpendicular armchair – but Yukako pinned him down with a hard, level look.

“Not there either.”

“Where the hell do ya want me to sit then?!”

“Okuyasu,” Koichi said, “maybe we should just stand by the wall.”

Don’t go, Josuke wanted to say. He didn’t like the idea of being alone with Yukako, who at present had made herself at home on the armchair. He liked Yukako, she was easy to get along with in a group, but they weren’t that well acquainted and besides which, there was something awkward in principle about spending one-on-one time with a best friend’s significant other. Maybe Koichi had told her all kinds of embarrassing details about him – who knew what kind of impression she might have formed of him then?

(He had, and her impression of him was somewhat skeptical and not wholly incorrect).

“So,” Josuke began, “what’s the plan?”

“We’re going to find out what happened in August, 1989.”
“And with luck, use that information to catch the killer,” Koichi added, from somewhere behind him. His voice had a slight echo on account of the high ceilings.

“I hate to be a downer, but I’ve already told you everything I remember.”

“No, not nearly.”

Yukako drew her messenger bag into her lap. Unfastening the snaps, she reached inside and pulled out a familiar object.

Josuke suddenly had a foreboding feeling about where his day was headed.

“Josuke Higashikata,” Yukako mumbled as she flicked through the scrapbook’s pages. “From studying your page layout, I’ve deduced that you are harboring repressed memories.”

“Sorry?” said Josuke, who had in fact heard quite clearly.

“Take a look.”

Leaning across one of the sofa’s huge, overstuffed armrests, Yukako handed him the scrapbook. It was open on the page he’d seen her in the midst of assembling at the café. The brown cardstock he’d watch her fold had formed a set of flaps that covered the page, tied closed with red ribbon. The front of the cardstock was rubber-stamped with the word ‘CONFIDENTIAL’. Josuke gave one end of the ribbon a tug and it came undone. On folding back the cardstock flaps, he saw the Polaroid Yukako had taken of him. ‘Potential witness?’ the white label with black typeset lettering ventured to ask.

But from the unflattering, unguarded look on his face in the photograph, it looked more like a mugshot.

“There is something you’re keeping ‘confidential’,” Yukako continued. “I doubt you’re doing it intentionally – which is why I’ll be using hypnosis to recover your memories of that summer.”

“Hypnosis,” Josuke repeated. It wasn’t phrased as a question – he just couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Are you gonna wave a pocket watch in front of his face?” he heard Okuyasu ask.

When Josuke turned to look over the back of the chesterfield at Okuyasu, he was huddled in the corner beside the china cabinet, looking for all the world like a kid on time-out.

Yukako’s eyes narrowed. The scrapbook slammed shut with a whump. “Don’t be ridiculous. They only do that in movies. The technique I’ll be using is called ‘Progressive Relaxation’ – by lowering Josuke’s conscious inhibitions, I’ll be able to directly access his subconscious.”

“What if I don’t want to be hypnotized?”

“Then we’ll have to find another witness – Jotaro, maybe.”

A lump the size of a goose egg lodged itself in Josuke’s throat and remained there.

“Alright,” he murmured, fighting to swallow. “I’ll do it.”

“Good. Lay down, please. And take off the jacket.”

Heat crawled across Josuke’s skin as he shucked off his jacket and lay back on the sofa. Having the others all watching him made him uneasy. He felt hyperaware of his body. No matter how much he fidgeted he couldn’t get comfortable, not when he felt each and every nerve and muscle with acute
sensitivity.

Yukako was affixing him with an impatient look. Josuke gave a nervous laugh. “Sorry, I don’t normally do this sorta thing with psychiatrists on a first date.”

“I’m not a psychiatrist.”

“Then how do I know you’re qualified to hypnotize me? I don’t want just anyone opening up my brain and poking around in th – .”

“Josuke.” There was a tension running through Yukako’s jaw, like it’d been soldered shut with a wire. Josuke was gripped by a sudden awareness of his own mortality. “Close your eyes. Now.”

Josuke wasn’t prepared to push the point. Down came his eyelids, plunging his world into darkness. Into his consciousness, Yukako’s voice drifted:

“Good. Just relax, get as comfortable as you can,” she hummed, more melody than words.

She was back to her old voice again, the dulcet, demure one she could slip on and off like a convenient accessory. Josuke wished she’d just use her usual voice. The one blunt one, the one frayed around the edges, the one that didn’t care to mask her rage or impatience or spite – at least with that voice he always knew where he stood with her.

“While hypnotized,” Yukako continued, “you will still be aware of your surroundings. No matter what, you are still in control, and you can come out of hypnosis any time you wish… You may feel scared or anxious or sad about some of the things you remember in hypnosis… That’s perfectly alright. Just remember that you are in control and you are safe.

“Now, I need you to take a deep breath for me… Good… And hold it in, feeling the tension in your limbs, your torso, your face… Now very slowly, you are going to breathe out, and as you do, you are going to let your body relax, starting at your scalp and working all the way down your body… That’s it, feel the muscles in your forehead relax… Feel the muscles around your eyes working and just let them all go, let the muscles in your face loosen and smooth over… Your cheeks, your jaws, your lips, letting all that tension go away… That’s right.”

Josuke hoped she would slow down just a tick – he was still stuck trying to get his eye muscles to settle down and here she was already moving on to the shoulder portion of the program. He’d cross his heart up and down that he was trying his best. Honest. But muscles are the type of thing that once you become aware of them, it’s hard to stop.

“Let the tension in your stomach go… Let your spine relax, don’t try to hold yourself up… One vertebrae at a time let your back sink into the couch, finding length through your spine… Good… Next let your arms relax, and when you think they’re relaxed let them relax even more… Your arms should be feeling heavy, let them drop, your arms should feel like they’re sinking, sinking, deeper and deeper until they feel like they’re going to sink right through the couch… That’s it…Now in a moment I’m going to lift up your hand at the wrist… Just continue to relax… When I pick up your arm you are going to keep it loose and slack like a wet towel… Now in a moment I’m going to let go of your wrist and you’re just going to let it drop, alright? … Here we go.”

The fingers around Josuke’s wrist disappeared. Slowly, his arm lowered to the couch.

A beat of silence.

Yukako clucked her tongue. “Let’s try getting a little more relaxed, shall we?”
Her sing-song voice was blunted somewhat this time around – for that much, Josuke was grateful.

Once more, Yukako walked him through a series of relaxation commands, from his hips down to his toes, until Josuke was relaxing parts of his body he didn’t know were capable of being tense in the first place. Twice more, Josuke’s arm was picked up and dropped. When she deemed him sufficiently hypnotized, Yukako proceeded:

“Right. Good. Now Josuke, I want you to try to remember the last time you felt afraid – deeply, deeply afraid. And on the count of three you are going to put yourself into that situation, alright? – One…”

He could remember, alright. Kira Yoshikage – the one fight he’d almost lost.

“Two…”

It’d been early July, tail-end of monsoon season. The rain had fallen hard that day, releasing the smell of asphalt into the air – asphalt, and hard water, and blood. Kira had placed himself between Josuke and the flower bed where Okuyasu lay, sprinkling blood all over someone’s hydrangeas. He’d felt nauseous with indecision, the real and vivid fear he’d die if he went toe-to-toe with Kira and the dread that Okuyasu would be the one doing the dying if he didn’t.

“…Three. Tell me, in one word, what you feel.”

“…Uh, scared, I guess.”

He heard Yukako breath heavily through her nose. “Try harder, Josuke.”

“Alright. Angry.”

“Good, good. Now I want you to fall deeper into that feeling, down and down like it’s a tunnel going back in time… Now once more, on the count of three, you’re going to tell me, as far back as you remember, a time when you experienced the same feeling. One… Two… Three! Where are you?”

“Home.”

“Is there anyone with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Who?”

“Jotaro…” Josuke’s mouth felt dry all at once, his tongue heavy like lead. “…And my grandpa.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Try again. On the count of three you’re going to go back even further, as far as you can go, holding onto that feeling of fear and anger. One…”

He knew, of course, what Yukako wanted. There was no point making all these pit stops – they’d be here all afternoon if she made Josuke remember every time he’d been scared shitless. Surely, there was nothing wrong with taking a little short cut. It wasn’t like you could cheat at hypnosis.

“…Three. Where are you?” Yukako asked.
The smell of windblown dust at the top of the cliffs near the cape, the chill at the back of his neck where, a few steps back, the vertical drop lay open to him, a shout’s fall from a fingernail strip of beach and scree when the tide was low and a turbulent chase for waves when the tide was high.

The scene hadn’t changed at all – it was still just a jumbled collection of things he could only half see and half remember.

“...The cliffs. By the cape, not far from here.”

At the far end of the room, he could hear Okuyasu, or Koichi – one or the other – shift.

“Who’s with you?”

Josuke tried to put himself back in that scene. Tried to find something to hold onto, something he could nail down as certainty, because that was how these things worked, right? You found a peephole into that forgotten garden of memory and the rest of the wall would come down after. As if memory was something that remained in stasis, pristine and untouched until you handily picked it up again.

He’d been looking at the ground, he thought, because he remembered nothing of the sky or the water, or much of anything else for that matter – just the thin layer of topsoil scratched into the limestone. Beneath his feet July’s grass had already withered and gone to rot. There was a shadow too at his feet, tall and broad and moving strangely, pitching like a ship over waves.

“I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean, you’re not sure?”

“What’s it sound like?” Josuke mumbled, realizing belatedly that he was probably doing a poor job at playing the part of a hypnotized person. “I know someone was there. I just don’t remember a face or anything.”

“The stand user had you ask Jotaro to meet him at the cliffs, right? Could it have been Jotaro you were with?”

Yukako’s voice had gone flat. Shit, thought Josuke. She knows.

He tried again to remember, starting from the top:

The smell of windblown dust at the top of the cliffs near the cape, the chill at the back of his neck where, a few steps back, the vertical drop lay open to him, a shout’s fall from a fingernail strip of beach and scree when the tide was low and a turbulent chase for waves when the tide was high. In his chest his tiny, hummingbird heart was going, going. His voice rose and died in his throat. The shadow on the ground grew shorter and shorter as he backed away on trembling legs, closer and closer to the cliff’s edge. He felt sick and hot all over and just then he thought: so this is what it’s like to be afraid.

“I think it was the stand user,” he mumbled.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“What’d he look like?!” Koichi pipped up, and though he was all the way on the other side of the room, the enthusiasm carried his voice just as well.
For minute, Josuke heard nothing but the distant ticking of a clock he hadn’t realized was there.

“…Sorry,” Koichi mumbled, this time sounding ever inch as far away as he ought.

Josuke’s eyelids twitched as he resisted the urge to open his eyes just to see what kind of look Yukako was giving her boyfriend just then.

“Do you remember seeing him?” Yukako asked, and yup, there was definitely a kick of heat to that progressive verb.

“Uhhhh maybe? Let me just… give me a sec, gotta follow that emotion tunnel.”

He tried to remember – we’ll give him that much – but Josuke’s attention was quick to wander. The oxblood leather had grown hot and tacky under his skin, and his shirt was all bunch up beneath him. He squirmed, trying to get comfortable, but he only sunk deeper into the couch. In the stifling heat the leather smelt raw and meaty. The sights and sounds and smells of the cliffside faded; try as he might, he could only summon pale imitations, third-hand versions of a second-hand memory.

Yukako exhaled loudly. “I know you’re not really hypnotized, Josuke. You can open your eyes.”

Even with eyes open, Josuke couldn’t bring himself to look at Yukako.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, rubbing at his arm. “I wasn’t trying to make fun of you.”

“I know. A certain percentage of the population can’t be hypnotized,” she said, matter-of-factly. Josuke wondered if she’d been hanging around Jotaro behind his back.

“Guys!”

At the other end of the room, Koichi Hirose was struggling under the deadweight of Okuyasu Nijimura. The taller boy’s eyes were closed, his mouth twisted up in a grimace. One of his hands was pinned against Koichi’s body; the other hung down like it was attached to his shoulder by a string, fingers convulsing with mild spasms.

“I don’t know what happened!” Koichi wailed. “I got distracted and the next thing I know, he’s like this!”

Josuke took one look at the pained expression on Okuyasu’s face and – fear for his own mortality be damned – he shot to his feet and grabbed Yukako by the wrist. “What the fuck did you do to him?!” he snarled.

Yukako gazed back at him, unfazed. “Josuke…”

“I swear, if you did anything funny to his brain – .”

Before he could continue, Yukako stood up, slipping easily from Josuke’s steel grip. There was such an unerring aura of calm and certainty about her that he momentarily forgot his anger and stepped aside as she made her way across the room to where Okuyasu was half-leaned against the wall.

Stretching out her arm, she lay a hand on Okuyasu’s forehead. There was a momentary quirk in the corner of Yukako’s mouth as she took in his slack form, the rapid movements of his eyes beneath his eyelids – but then she adjusted her expression and said: “Okuyasu Nijimura – I am going to count down from three, and on one, you will wake up, refreshed and energized and feeling rested. Whatever bad memories you have relived, you will have forgotten. I am going to begin counting now. Three… Two…”
“I can’t believe you got to be hypnotized and I didn’t,” Josuke grumbled. “She didn’t even have to jiggle around your arm or anything – and you weren’t even on the right side of the room! That’s no fair, man.”

By the time they’d managed to extract themselves from Yukako’s place, the sun was already three-quarters of the way down the sky. The last bus had long gone by. Josuke and Okuyasu were left to make the long stretch back on foot.

“Yukako said some people are jus’ more sensitive to that kinda stuff. Like brainwaves and shit. Said I might even be a little bit psychic.”

Josuke loved to watch Okuyasu’s expressions. He wore himself so openly, compared to most people. He couldn’t keep the same face for long – his expression was always shifting, minute adjustments in the position of his mouth, flickers of his eyelids and wriggles of his nose. Forty-three muscles all broadcasting Okuyasu’s wayfaring train of thought. Right now, Okuyasu’s eyelids were at half-mast, eyes downcast, brow smooth, mouth fighting against a smile that wanted to break out. Pride wasn’t something Josuke saw often in Okuyasu’s face, not without the fine print to go along with it.

“You think so?” Josuke asked, watching as Okuyasu’s tongue poked at the corner of his mouth.

“Big Bro used to tell me I was sensitive. I used to think it was ‘cause I couldn’t eat ice cream without gettin’ a tooth ache.”

“He was probably talking about the emotional kinda sensitive. Like how you always cry when the dog dies in a movie.”

“I know better now,” Okuyasu mumbled, ignoring Josuke’s last remark. “I’m just tellin’ you how I used to think when I was a kid.”

Okuyasu reached back around behind his neck, digging at the junction of his shoulder like he was looking for a knot, something to loosen.

“Man. Sure is a long walk back. We shoulda gotten a taxi.”

“Why’d we come this way in the first place?”

Okuyasu gave up kneading at his shoulder and let his arm drop. Another flicker of emotion across his face – annoyance, this time. “I was just following you. Figured you knew a shortcut.”

Mid-step, Josuke stopped. Slowly, he brought his foot back down to rest beside its twin, one heel touching the other.

“Dude,” he began, “I thought I was following you.”

Okuyasu burst into a loud belly-laugh. Hearing it, Josuke felt something come loose and uncoiled within him.

“Well. Shit.”

“We really gotta plan these things better dude.”

“Don’t you worry, bro. I know where we’re going.”

“Where are we, anyway?” asked Josuke. For the first time since they’d left Yukako’s place, he took
a moment too look around – really look.

“The old highway to S City. If we keep going it’ll take us right downtown. Why?”

The highway stretched long before them. Two lanes, asphalt bleached and cracked beneath the sun. They kept to the shoulder, dirt crunching underfoot, their long shadows thrown behind them and becoming tangled in the shadows cast by the hydro lines above. To one side of the highway the ground leveled off, fields of grass sweeping away from them and toward the miniature summer cottages that dotted the horizon. Flowers bloomed out in the field. Josuke couldn’t see them but he could smell them – the spiced, heady scent of lily and clean, sweetish bursts of orchid. On the other side, the curb ran down at a lazy incline. A long grassy stretch, then the jagged outline of the forest, tame and unthreatening at a distance, and beyond that, the shadowy steeps of mountains. In the stretch of lowland before the forest, shards of gold winked between the grass – but it was only the low sun catching on puddles of water. A bog, fed by the runoff of those distant mountains. The smell of peat and sulfur cut insidious beneath the intoxicating, breathless haze of damp grass and wildflower.

And all this, to Josuke – the field on the left the bog and woods on the right, the power lines and the long shadows and the warmth of the asphalt radiating up his calves – was impossibly, inexplicably familiar.

He stopped again, feet dragging. And Okuasu, almost as if he was on some kind of tether, stopped too.

“C’mon bro – I gotta get home.”

“I’ve been here before,” Josuke said slowly, testing words on his tongue that he hadn’t even strung together in his head yet.

“What d’ya mean?”

“I’ve been here before,” Josuke repeated, with confidence this time.

Okuyasu shrugged. “Well, sure. This was the only way into S City before they built the new rail lines. Your mom had t’ take you into the hospital once when you were little, right?”

“No – I mean yeah, but that was winter. I was here – same time of year, exactly like this.”

“Like what?”

“On foot.”

***

The time of day was nearly the same, only a little later on. The cicadas and the crickets were in the midst of changing shifts. An hour ago Josuke’s shadow had stretched long and lean across the road; now the road and bog and field were all sunk in bruised shadows. There was heat still in the pavement, and heat trapped like air bubbles under his skin, but the air around him had cooled considerably. The chill against his skin made him feel feverish.

Pausing, he looked out over the bog to his left, where dark water oozed up through the grass. Behind and ahead the road carried on, seemingly unending. The soles of his feet were chaffed and blistered, his legs sore; he’d taken off his shoes when his feet first began to swell. Said shoes were tied together and slung over his shoulder, but the socks he’d worn with them were nowhere to be seen. He… they must have slipped out of his pocket, or maybe he’d left them back by the phone
booth, where he’d paused in the chiffon shade to slip off his shoes. A feeling of hopelessness bore down on him. Here he was, all the way out in the middle of nowhere – and he couldn’t even keep track of his socks.

He should have been home. He should have been in his bed, watching the sun drag slowly across his bedroom carpet, with his sheets kicked off as he waited, open-eyed and drowsy, for night to take the summer heat away.

At the side of the road he sat down, letting his feet slip into the long cool grass. Dew gathered on his skin and grew warm from the heat of his blisters. And in that moment, Josuke thought: I could just stay here, just like this. He could fool his mom and he could fool his grampy, but never for very long; they’d notice he was gone soon, and by morning there would be people looking for him. They were bound to come this way, bound to find him, and soon enough he’d be home safe and sound again, and maybe mom would be angry, maybe she would take his video games away or give him a good slap on the rear, but he could sleep in his bed again and not have sore feet or lost socks.

But the dull ache in his gut, the pain that settled between his ribs – going home wouldn’t take that away.

He didn’t know what to do anymore; and so, Josuke began to cry. Fat, ugly tears, the kind he usually put on for show when he wanted his mom or grampy or whatever adult happened to be handy to notice him, when he wanted to be comforted and coddled and soothed and pitied. Only now there was no one around to see.

“Hey. You alright?”

Josuke jumped. As he turned he fumbled at the waistband of his shorts – but then he saw the man’s face and recognition soothe over him. He began to cry again – more dramatically, now that he had an audience.

“N-n-no!” he gasped out between sobs.

“Hey, hey now. It’s alright. Here.”

Kneeling, the man – a teenager, probably Jotaro’s age – wiped Josuke’s cheeks with the corner of his sleeve. His jacket was ripped and ruined, and seeing it made Josuke feel a pang of guilt.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, eyes dropping to the ground between them. “S-sorry about your jacket.”

The man stared at him for a moment with a blank expression, then something like a spark went off behind his eyes. “Oh! You’re that kid!”

Josuke sniffed and nodded. “What’s your name?” he asked.

From the expression that flitted across the man’s face, he was sure the other wasn’t going to tell him – but then a grin wiggled its way onto the man’s lips and he said, “Daisuke. Yours?”

“Grampy says I shouldn’t tell strangers my name.”

“Hey, we ain’t strangers, are we? – But if you don’t want to, that’s alright with me.”

“Josuke,” he mumbled, so quiet that Daisuke had to ask him to repeat himself. “My name’s Josuke,” he said, louder but still no more than a whisper.

“Josuke, hunh? I like your hat, Josuke.”
Reaching out, Daisuke lifted the ragged black hat from Josuke’s head. A whistle slipped through his lips. “He-y~! Cool hair, man. We match ‘n everything!”

I know, Josuke wanted to say. But he was too embarrassed to admit to this man that he’d made his mom style his hair that way ever since January, that he’d gotten up two hours before the bus came each morning to be coiffed and fussed over all because of the man currently standing before him.

He hadn’t seen much of the man’s face that night in the car. The taillights had washed out almost all his features. Now, up close on the side of the road, he could see that the man had a bruised lip, and a fresh gash on his forehead – nearly in the exact same spot as the one he’d had last time – that trickled blood down one cheek. Daisuke’s skin was pale, the meat of his lips drained of colour. Josuke caught himself staring.

“Come on,” Daisuke said, reaching out to take Josuke’s hand. “I can’t take you any further than the end of the road, but there’s a payphone near town, and a gas stop just across the intersection – we’ll get someone to take you home.”

When Daisuke’s hand closed around his own, Josuke felt a chill spike up his arm. The hand was cold, too cold; the blood vessels in his palm contracted beneath it. With a yelp, he pulled away.

Daisuke looked at him, then down at his own hand. He immediately shoved both his hands in his jacket pockets, but with all the rips and tears, they just came out the other side.


Once again, Josuke thought about how easy it would be to go home and forget about the whole thing. And once again, the dart of guilt in his chest reminded him of why he couldn’t.

“I can’t,” he said. “I have to – I’m looking for someone. A man. He might’ve come this way earlier. Did’ya see him?”

To Josuke’s surprise, Daisuke’s entire expression shifted – that open, friendly face warping into something closed off to him. “Yeah. I saw him.”

“Please. I need to find him. He… he had someone with him, right?”

Daisuke’s shoulders stiffened. “I… I tried to stop him, Josuke, honest.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Josuke, that’s enough. Let me take you home, alright? Your mamma’s gonna get worried.”

“Please. I need to find him.”

For the first time, Daisuke’s eyes flickered to the waistband of Josuke’s shorts. For a second his mouth dropped open – and then he was looking at Josuke again, and that open expression was back, only now it was pleading with him.

“He went off into the forest,” Daisuke said in a rush. “We’ll head back toward town, get you on the payphone – you can call the cops and tell them that – Josuke!”
By then it was too late. Josuke had already bounded over the ditch and was making a line for the bog, tall grass tugging weakly at his arms and legs. He glanced over his shoulder expecting and half hoping that Daisuke would follow him. And he did. Three, short running steps – and then he came to an abrupt stop, whole body snapping into stillness like the momentum had been sapped from his limbs.

The next time Josuke looked back, Daisuke was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: I wrote this chapter the same week the second half of the Rohan arc came out. Seeing the flashback scene animated was a huge motivator -- I have way too many feelings for that one stupid plothole. At least I can flesh out that part of the story in fanfic~
Josuke, Koichi, and Yukako try to put a face to Josuke's childhood hero; Okuyasu, meanwhile, does some investigating of his own.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Updates may still be slow though, since I'm moving to another province next week and I have lots of packing to do and lots of loose ends to tie up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twice, Josuke was made to re-tell the memory from start to finish. The first time he repeated it was to Okuyasu, during that long walk home along the old highway, with sweat cooling on the back of his neck and his voice half-drowned by cicada shrills. The second time was to Yukako and Koichi, with all four of them gathered around a table at Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Parlour – because as much as they all loved the café, outdoor patios did not come equipped with air conditioning.

“‘Daisuke’… do you think he could have been the kidnapper’s accomplice?” Koichi asked. As he spoke he prodded absently at his root beer float sundae.

For the curious who may be wondering what a root beer float sundae entails, we can confirm that it is nearly the same as a regular root beer float – the difference is all in the ratio of ice cream to root beer.

“The fuck’re you talking about?” Josuke growled. He’d gotten the same thing as last time: apple pie a-la-mode with just the mode, though he suspected the waitress had snuck a little apple pie in there just to spite him. The vanilla ice cream tasted just a touch too homey. “The guy saved my ass – no way he’d have gotten tied up with that creep.”

“It just seems odd that he didn’t try going to the police about it until you told him you were chasing the kidnapper.”

Josuke was just about to lay into Koichi – because the only thing worse than insulting his hair was insulting the man behind his hair – when Yukako said: “I think Josuke’s right.”

“Why?” Koichi asked.

“Yeah, why?” Josuke echoed, sounding somehow more baffled than Koichi.

Yukako’s shoulders bobbed up in a shrug. “You seem like a good judge of people. That’s all.”

Yeah, thought Josuke, the first time I met you I thought you were sketchy as fuck. What he said instead was: “Is this another one of your ‘intuition’ things?”

“Something like that.”
“I thought I wasn’t compatible with that kinda stuff.”

“That was just hypnosis,” Yukako retorted, in a hurried, clipped way that suggested Josuke was being dense. “There are different types of intuition. Koichi knows how to get people on his side. Okuyasu’s susceptible to suggestion – but that also means he’s got a more vivid imagination. You know a good person when you see one, otherwise Okuyasu and Kishibe would have ended up as rare books or a lawn ornaments.”

“And you have your scrapbook.”

“And I have my scrapbook,” she conceded.

Ever since he’d sat Yukako and Koichi down to tell them about Daisuke, some part of Josuke had been on edge. Inapproachable, almost, in ways that Josuke Higashikata never was. Just then he felt that prickly bit of him smooth over. The faces surrounding him softened, losing their sharp, hostile lines. He felt himself being pulled forward from the anxiety of memory and into the moment, all his worries and cares overwhelmed all at once by the loud, tacky little parlour with its sticky tabletops and its nauseating, sugary smell of waffle cone.

“Thanks, I guess,” he told Yukako. “You, uh, gonna drink that quadruple-thick shake?”

“I’ve been trying,” Yukako mumbled, tipping her glass upside down for emphasis. The mass of chocolate milkshake remained congealed in place.

“So where the hell was Jotaro anyway?” Okuyasu butted in. He’d been quiet up until now, preoccupied nibbling on the batter shell of his deep-fried ice cream on a cone.

“Not sure. We must’ve gotten separated.”

Koichi hmm’d, swirling his spoon through the moat of root beer that, at present, lay siege to the curl-toppe moun of ice cream in his dish. “Do you think,” he wondered out loud, “that could be how the killer ‘got’ to you? If you and Jotaro went looking for the killer in the woods and the two of you got separated, he could have captured you and coerced you into making the phone call.”

Grinning, Josuke leaned back against the booth, stretching his arms back behind his head. “That’s not a bad idea! – It’d make sense, right? – why I remember confronting the guy twice.”

“Yeah!” Okuyasu chimed in. “That’d mean the stuff in the woods happened first an’ the cliffs came after!”

“You can’t just go looking for whatever story fits together nicely,” Yukako muttered. “It’s like this milkshake: you have to wait for it to melt enough before you can drink it, you can’t just force it.”

To emphasize her point, she attempted to give the milkshake a stir, only for the straw to bend clean in half. Josuke and Okuyasu stared.

“Uh, not for nothin’,” Okuyasu began, “but I don’t think that shake’s going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Yukako’s right, though,” Koichi said. “When you’re investigating a crime, you can’t start out with any preconceptions about what might have happened. You have to go in with an open mind and let the evidence tell the story.”

Slowly, Josuke lowered his arms back down to the bench. “Alright. So what’re we supposed to do?”
“Well, discovering the killer’s identity would be a start. So far, we have at least four witnesses. There’s you…”

Who can’t remember jack shit, apparently, Josuke thought to himself. He was still in a dour mood over the whole thing. After all: he could still remember the lyrics to his favorite childhood cartoon – hell, he could still remember in detail the plot of Mother, and he’d been playing the game around the same time everything with Jotaro and the kidnapper went down. Apparently, his mind had decided to discard all the important stuff.

“…There’s Jotaro…”

Something about getting Jotaro involved didn’t settle well with Josuke one bit. Morioh wasn’t his town after all – he had no reason for laying his life on the line.

“…And there’s Daisuke, of course.”

“What gives!” Okuyasu grumbled. “You said four, right? Didja forget how to count?”

“I was just about to get to that. There is a fourth witness we haven’t talked about yet: Yuki Imai.”

Silence covered over the four of them. In the absence of conversation, Josuke could hear strains of music waft to them from across the parlour, intermittently interrupted by the sound of running water and dishes rattling against one another out back, where the New Guy was washing the dishes. Mr. Watanabe had placed an old JVC tape deck on top of the broken jukebox. Through its scratchy speakers, music played: jukebox hits that hung thick and syrupy in the heavy afternoon air.

Stagger Lee told Billy

I can’t let you go with that

You have won all my money

And my brand new Stetson hat

Stagger Lee went home

And he got his forty-four

“Josuke,” Koichi continued, “you said she was your neighbour, right?”

“Was.” Josuke closed his eyes. “I think the Imai family packed up and moved after everything that happened. Couldn’t have been more than a year later.”

“And you don’t know her current address?”

Another silence.

Stagger Lee shot Billy

Oh, he shot that poor boy so bad

Till the bullet came through Billy

And it broke the Bartender’s glass

“Sorry,” Josuke mumbled, cheeks burning.
Yukako cleared her throat. “I don’t think Yuki Imai would have been much use to us anyway,” she said. Reaching out, she plucked Koichi’s spoon from his sundae dish. “It’s nearly impossible for someone to remember anything that happened to them before age four. When I was researching forensic hypnosis, I read that any memories retrieved from that age or earlier are usually thrown out of court.”

Into her milkshake, Yukako jabbed the plastic spoon. It broke off at the handle, leaving the trowel embedded in the milkshake. She glared at her glass, hair beginning to write in a way that boded trouble.

“What happened t’ not forcin’ it?” asked Okuyasu, in a moment of inspired bravery.

Yukako, thankfully, was too intent on her milkshake to take offense. “I didn’t eat lunch today,” was all she could manage.

Josuke clapped his hands together. “Alright! So Daisuke. We just need to find him, right?”

“Or we could give Jotaro a call,” Koichi suggested. His tone didn’t imply a rebuttal – even though that was exactly what it was. As Yukako had suggested, he had a gift for making himself as inoffensive as possible. Usually, he could get his way without forcing a point.

Usually.

“C’mon!” How hard could it be, finding one guy with a pompadour?

Josuke looked up and down the table, waiting for someone to agree with him. The cassette wound loudly over the boombox’s speakers – before the opening lines of a Chuck Berry song belted out, too loud and bassy over Mr. Watanabe’s modern sound system.

“Josuke,” Koichi began. As if using Josuke’s name as a preamble to whatever he was about to say next would somehow resolve him of all responsibility. “It’s just… it’s been ten years. Daisuke may have changed his hairstyle.”

Yukako, at least, was more to the point. “No one wears pompadours anymore, Josuke.”

Josuke’s ears rang. “Sure they do!” he snapped. “Look – the New Guy’s got a pomp!”

In the direction of the kitchen, Josuke jabbed a finger. The New Guy, who’d been in the midst of bobbing his head and humming along to Chuck’s guitar rifts while he did the dishes, grew still. He turned, and seeing Josuke pointing at him, went wide-eyed and side-scuttled out of view. Josuke’s finger continued to hover before him, pointing at nothing.

Leaning across the table, Koichi cupped a hand over his mouth and hissed, “Josuke! That’s a wig – it’s part of his uniform!”

Yukako broke into a girlish giggle that took them all by surprise.

Josuke felt heat rise to his face – a mixture of agitation from the spike in his pulse, and that specific brand of humiliation that comes from having no one else to blame. “Whatever,” he grumbled, conceding to withdraw his hand. “I’d still recognize the guy if I saw him, pomp or no pomp. There can’t be that many Daisukes in Morioh.”

“You gotta be kidding!” Okuyasu blurted. “I know like ten!”

“Thanks, Okuyasu,” Josuke said, voice flat.
“It’d be better if we could get a visual reference of some kind,” Koichi mused. “Like a drawing, the kind police have composite artists draw up.”

Grunting, Josuke shoveled a spoonful of ice cream into his mouth and uttered the famous last words: “Oh yeah? And where’re we gonna find a composite artist?”

***

Koichi’s solution did not involve an actual composite artist, per-say. As he told Josuke, it was the principle of the thing – getting a picture made up – that mattered.

In Josuke’s humble opinion, drawing tits for *Shonen Jump* did not in any way qualify a person for the serious business of forensic art, but what the fuck did he know?

To make matters worse, Okuyasu wasn’t around, so it was just him and the lovebirds and absolutely no one to act as a buffer between himself and The Great Rohan Kishibe®.

On the way up the porch steps, Koichi paused. Josuke caught just a wedge of the other boy’s face, lower lip curving inward where he worried at it with his teeth, lit by the dim glow that filtered through the sidelight curtain. Both the sidelight and the curtains were a new feature, courtesy of the recent renovations to the Kishibe residence. The curtains were for privacy. The sidelight was for getting a good look at whoever might be ringing the doorbell. These days, Rohan Kishibe preferred to err on the side of caution.

“Josuke…” Koichi began – yet another preamble to yet another non-suggestion.

Josuke waved a hand. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. I’ll be around the corner.”

Koichi smiled, a gesture Josuke caught only in the way the lit side of the other boy’s face lifted and dimpled. “Thanks. We’ll just be a minute.”

As Koichi rang the doorbell, Josuke sidled over to the bay window, and out of sight of the door.

It wasn’t like things were still on ice with him and Rohan. They’d called things fair and square after shit with Highway Star went down, and if he’d learned nothing else from hunting down Kira, it was that friends or not, they all had to look out for each other: him and Rohan and all the rest of Morioh’s stand users. Kira had made Morioh two ghosts heavier before any of them had swallowed the lesson.

(Well, one ghost, technically. Shigekiyo Yangu opted to move on after his untimely demise, but we are happy to report that Ms. Aya Tsuji has accumulated for herself an impressive clientele of genetically malaligned deceased ladies who wish to look like Jennifer Jones in *Portrait of Jennie*).

Even so – despite this tentative reconciliation – Josuke sometimes thought that there was a touch too much practiced tightness in Rohan characteristic grin whenever he was around. He couldn’t quite think of the right word for it, but we could – guardedness, or something close to it.

As much as Rohan’s personality could leave a little to be desire, he had to admire the guy’s character. He didn’t think he’d ever manage to care about anything half as much as Rohan cared about his work… and Josuke just happened to be the one who busted up Rohan’s ass bad enough to force him out of what he loved for a full month.

And then there was the house.

Josuke hadn’t been shook up about the fire, not at first – after all, Rohan liked to brag about how he wasn’t in need of money. But then he’d realized that along with the house, four years’ worth of ink
and paper and sweat and dedication had probably gone up in flame too.

And yeah, alright. Maybe the only reason he got stand-offish around Rohan was because, deep down, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was the bigger of two assholes here. If he were in Rohan’s shoes he’d be downright pissed, and the fact that Rohan wasn’t got to him at times. He wasn’t sure what the word for that was, either.

(Guilt deflection comes to mind – and oh, alright, so that’s technically two words. We’re ghosts, not linguists).

(Well, two of us were linguists during their lifetimes, but that’s beside the point).

Around the corner, Josuke heard the hinges of the front door give a squeal. A beam of light stretched across the porch and down onto the lawn, interrupted where Koichi and Yukako’s bodies cut long lines of negative space on the steps behind them.

“Hi, Rohan,” Koichi said.

“Koichi. Yukako. And I presume Higashikata’s hiding in the bushes somewhere?”

“By the window, asshole,” Josuke grumbled as he reluctantly shuffled out into the light.

Koichi’s mouth dropped open halfway through making up a lie. He turned back to Rohan, voice an octave higher than it’d been before. “How’d you know?”

Rohan hummed, slipping into a comfortable smirk. “I saw you and Yukako standing at the door and I thought, Koichi’s not the type of guy to third-wheel a friend. So I figured there had to be someone else, and if it were anyone but Josuke they’d have just come to the door. Anyway – the mosquitos are going to get in. Are you coming in or not?”

One by one they brushed past Rohan as he held the door open. Josuke was the last to enter; no sooner had he stepped over the threshold than the door slammed shut at his back. He hadn’t noticed from outside, but the front door was serviced by not one, but several locks: deadbolts and door chains and keyholes, and once they were all inside Rohan stooped and religiously locked and bolted every last one. A passing curiosity made him wonder if Rohan had always been this way, or if the locks – like the sidelight – were the product of more recent events.

“This way,” Rohan mumbled, stepping lightly around them and disappearing down a corridor.

Josuke hadn’t been back to the house since the fire. There wasn’t a trace left of the destruction: everything had been remodelled and repainted and refurbished, and in the process of renovation the designers and architects had even succeeded in smoothing over all those fond-familiar wrinkles and eyesores attributed to the charm of an older home.

“They sure got this place fixed up fast,” Josuke remarked.

Rohan doubled back alongside him, quiet as a cat and looking just as pleased. “Didn’t they?” And then, when Josuke was at a loss for reply, he added: “I should thank you, you know. The previous owners’ tastes had been haunting the place ever since I moved in. Can’t say I was sad to see the couch go either. I never even liked Pretty Woman.”

“Yeah?” Common courtesy – or whatever bastardized version thereof Josuke possessed – dictated he say something nice just then. He didn’t want to, not when Rohan was so obviously fishing for compliments, but Josuke was determined to be the bigger man for once. “Nice…” he began.
And then he stepped through the living room entrance and laid eyes on what had to be, in all his sixteen years of existence, the biggest, ugliest blue velvet sofa he’d ever seen.

“…Coffee table,” Josuke finished, when he finally managed to tear his eyes away from the monstrosity long enough to notice the rest of the furniture.

“How can I be of help this evening, Koichi?” asked Rohan, making a point of ignoring Josuke’s remark.

“Actually, we need a composite sketch made up of someone involved in a crime Josuke witnessed when he was a kid, and we were hoping you’d be up for it.”

Rohan snorted, letting his weight drape against the sofa’s arm rest. “A crime? What, did somebody steal his lunch money? You’d be better off going to the police.”

“But Mister Rohan, you’re the best person for the job! No one’s as good at making life-like pictures as you,” Koichi said, with one of his sincere little smiles.

That was the thing about Koichi: he never sounded like he was trying to butter you up, even when he was doing exactly that. Josuke gave an internal victory shout, knowing there was no way Rohan’s pride would let him walk away.

Koichi, apparently, did not share Josuke’s confidence, because just as Rohan was drawing forth the start of a long, deep, dramatic sigh of resignation, he blurted out: “Besides – we can’t tell the police. It’s a…” here, he lowered his voice, “…stand thing.”

Just then, Rohan had the look of a man who was on his last hand of cards and who’d just drawn himself an ace. “Oh? Is that right?”

In the middle of wondering why Koichi was being so oblivious, Josuke realized: the little shit knew exactly what he was doing. He didn’t have to mention the bit about the stand user to Rohan – he wanted to, because when Koichi Hirose got worked up about a thing, you could be damn sure half of Morioh would hear about it.

A languid, syrupy smile settled over Rohan’s lips. “Oh, well, I suppose I could help,” he said, slipping Josuke an appraising look.

He’s bargaining, Josuke realized with sinking dread.

“…On the condition that you let me in on whatever it is you think you’re doing.”

“No way!”

At his elbow, he felt the gentle touch of a small, soft hand. “Josuke, this is important. We need all the help we can get if we’re going to find the man we’re looking for before he kills again.”

“Kills, hunh?” Rohan quipped. “I’m already intrigued!”

“We’ve got it under control.”

“Really? Because I don’t think you do.” Clasping his hands behind his back, Rohan pushed off from the armrest and commenced touring in a slow circle around Josuke. “Besides – it’s been so quiet lately! I’ll run out of inspiration like this in no time. And, Josuke?” Just then Rohan paused at the corner of his peripheral vision, so that they were nearly shoulder to shoulder – Josuke’s feet facing forward and Rohan’s facing back. Josuke felt sweat bead at his hair line when Rohan leaned over.
“You owe me,” he hissed.

He could almost hear the way Rohan’s smile tightened around that sentence.

“Alright, fine!” he grumbled, shoving Rohan out of the way.

“Great! I’ll just go grab some paper and pencils, then we can – .”

“Wouldn’t it be quicker if you just used Heaven’s Door?”

In the absence of input from Yukako, Josuke had nearly forgotten that she was still in the room. She was standing a ways apart from them in front of a huge, wall-length mirror, combing her fingers gingerly through her hair. At first glance it just looked like she was preening, but Josuke realized on closer inspection that from where she stood, Yukako had a perfect view of all three of them in the mirror.

He realized this, a second before his body could complete the circuit between ears and brain.

“No,” he said, as dark and dangerous as any of them had ever heard him.

“Josuke,” Koichi piped up, “Josuke, she’s just kidding…”

“No, I’m not.”

“Fuck off!” Josuke snapped. “Ask me whatever you want, but I’m not letting Heaven’s Door anywhere near me!”

Back over to the sofa Rohan drifted. He laid a hand on the sofa’s back, his long knobby fingers sinking into the deep plush upholstery. “Come have a seat, Josuke. You can relax. Heaven’s Door doesn’t work on people without the basic capacity for artistic appreciation.”

“Watch it.”

“Don’t worry – humankind’s ability to create and judge art developed in the Stone Age. I’m sure you’ll catch up with the evolutionary line soon.”

“Rohan!” Koichi squeaked.

Rohan waved him off. “Come on, I’m only joking. But seriously – even if I used Heaven’s Door on Josuke, it wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” Yukako asked, turning her back on the mirror.

“Yeah, why not?” Josuke grumbled, fully anticipating that he was walking directly into another insult.

To his surprise, Rohan only asked, in the same professional voice he’d heard the man use when talking to his publisher: “How old were you when you witnessed the crime, Josuke?”

“Six. Why?”

“Just as I thought. You saw something important, didn’t you? Something you can’t remember?”

“The hell are you getting at.”

Lifting a hand, Rohan tapped himself on the forehead. “I’m talking about repressed memories,
Josuke.

Josuke gave an awkward laugh. “Yukako told you about the hypnosis thing, didn’t she?” He turned to Yukako. “Didn’t you?”

“When would I have done that?”

With a long, rattling sigh Rohan wandered over to the fireplace – little more than a decorative mantelpiece, now that it’d been filled in and grated off. On the mantle’s ledge a set of crystal tumblers were stacked, and beside them, what looked like a gold replica of an Egyptian canopic jar.

“Listen, Josuke,” Rohan said, as he set out one of the glass tumblers and reached for the jar. “Heaven’s Door’s power is its ability to read peoples’ memories – the full uncensored version, the one they wouldn’t in their right minds tell you. But that’s not so impressive.” Rohan tilted the jar over and a weak, drippy stream of piss-yellow liquid poured from mouth of the human-headed statue into the tumbler. “…A few drinks could get you about the same results with most people.”

“So what’s your point?” Josuke demanded.

“My point is – I wouldn’t be able to tell you anything you didn’t already know. That includes any memories you may have repressed.”

Over to the couch Rohan waltz, holding his drink loosely between his thumb and forefinger. Before taking a seat he set the glass down neatly – almost compulsively – on the center of a coaster on the coffee table.

Josuke was about to ask him how he could be so sure – or how he could even tell whether or not his memories were being repressed – but even without Heaven’s Door, Rohan seemed perfectly capable of reading his mind.

“I’ve been in your shoes before,” mumbled Rohan as he eased himself onto the sofa. “And I know my book better than anyone’s.”

“Reimi,” Koichi murmured, so softly almost none of them heard. But they did, and the name lingered, finding purchase in the velvet-plush opalescence of Rohan’s living room. Josuke picked absently at his collar. Yukako went back to studying herself, and everyone else, in the mirror. Rohan disappeared into the kitchen, returning moments later with a pair of silver tongs and a bowl of ice.

“Now then,” said Rohan, as he used the tongs to transfer two ice cubes from the bowl to his cup. He paused, holding a third contemplatively over his glass before deciding better of it. “I’m going to have my drink, and by the time I’m done, you’ll have a face for your killer. Koichi, would you be a dear?”

Without further instruction, Koichi raced off to some other part of the house.

“He’s not a killer,” Josuke grumbled. “Not the guy I need you to draw.”

“He isn’t? –Ah! Here we go. Aren’t you quick.”

He was speaking to Koichi, who’d just made a reappearance. With a breathless little “HereMisterRohan!” Koichi handed him a sketchbook and a pencil tin.

Setting his art supplies on his lap, Rohan leaned over, grabbed his glass, and turned his attention back to Josuke with a smirk. “In that case, Josuke, you better start talking. I want to hear everything.”
Pausing, he took a sip of his drink. “There’s the hourglass. Now comes the sand. How about we start with the guy’s name?”

***

The hour that followed was exhausting and sedentary. Josuke had never spent much time contemplating all the nuanced variations in the human physiognomy. At Rohan’s demand, he was rigorously acquainted with each line and muscle of the human face. Were Daisuke’s eyebrows straight? Arched? Were they thick, or thin? Were his cheekbones pronounced? Did they sit high or low? Did Daisuke have a wide jaw? What about his chin? Was the root of his nose deep, or shallow? What was the shape of his mouth like? What about his lips? Did he have a pronounced philtrum?

“The fuck’s a philtrum?” Josuke asked.

“The cleft between your lips and your nose,” Rohan answered, indicating the area in question on his own face with a tap of his finger.

In the long stretches between interrogations, when Rohan would bend over his work to chisel out in graphite the planes and curves of Daisuke’s face, Josuke re-counted, from beginning to end, all that he’d told the others thus far. He was already growing bored of the story – he galloped over parts and skimmed others, stringing loose and fast the series of events that had taken place over that summer ten years ago.

Rohan drew and drank his whiskey. Yukako hung back in the kitchen, having made camp at the table. Her entire arsenal of scrapbooking materials lay spread out before her: die-cutters and ribbons and scotch guns and acetone sheets (“What are you doing in there?” Rohan had asked her, to which she’d replied, “Forensic aesthetics.”). Koichi sat nearby and listened, hands folded between his knees, with the same inquisitive interest he’d shown the first time he’d heard the story.

Koichi was a good listener, but not in the way Okuyasu was a good listener – while his body language pointed outward, there was always an inward-facing look to his eyes, like he was turning over and examining every word and sentence. Okuyasu, on the other hand, was the perfect passive listener. Josuke got the impression that Okuyasu didn’t really care about what he was saying. Maybe he just liked getting lost in the flow of conversation; maybe he just needed to hear a voice that wasn’t his. There were things about Okuyasu Josuke didn’t know too well, things he felt he should start paying closer attention to; but it was so hard when Okuyasu would let every conversation be about him and what Josuke thought and Josuke felt, burying his own grievances in grumbles and jabs that were always uttered with a quirk to his lips or an affected indolence.

Thinking about Okuyasu, Josuke felt guilty crawl like a slimy thing down his back. If it weren’t for Okuyasu, all his memories of that summer would have lain where he left them, and Morioh’s latest string of murders would carry on uncontested. Okuyasu should have been here, just as much as any of them. It wasn’t his fault, Josuke reasoned. He’d tried going over to Okuyasu’s place – how was he supposed to know the other boy wouldn’t be around?

Come to think of it – Okuyasu had been dipping out quite a bit lately.

“There. All done.”

When Josuke glanced up, Rohan was holding a sheet of paper an arm’s length in front of him, prodding his bottom lip with the eraser end of his pencil while he inspected his work. And just like that, his guilt and worry fell away.

“Lemme see!” Josuke exclaimed, all but grabbing the paper from Rohan’s hands.
“Just a minute now, I can’t just let you – !”

“I’ll take that, thank you.”

Josuke watched, stunned, as Yukako pinched the paper between her fingers and deftly drew it out from Rohan’s hand.

“H-hey!”

Rohan sounded less impressed. “Just what do you think you’re doing with that? That’s my property you’ve got your greasy hands on.”

“I need it for my layout. It’s just about done.”

All three of them followed Yukako to the kitchen table, where they watched as she scotch-gunned the back of the drawing before turning it over and carefully pressing it into the middle of the open scrapbook page. Then, beckoning them over, she stood aside, giving them room to look.

Staring out at them from the page was a man who, at a distance, might have looked like Josuke. He had the same hair, same jaw shape – but that was where the similarities ended. The bridge of the man’s nose was much narrower, his lips thinner but with more shape to them. He had a deep dimple in his chin, just below his lips. There was just a touch of sallowness to his cheeks. His eyebrows were thick but straight. He had a lot more forehead going on, that’s for sure. But it was the eyes, mostly, that made the difference. They were eyes with puffy eyelids, eyes with a downcast look, eyes that crinkled with worry at the corners. Eyes that tried their best to smile but couldn’t quite muster it, eyes that’d long lost their sheen.

Looking at the drawing, Josuke knew: that was him. That was the man who’d begged him not to go off alone into the woods. The man who’d been walking home all alone after somebody roughed him up. A renewed feeling of admiration stirred up in him – but it was accompanied, this time, by unfamiliar pity.

The layout itself was pretty minimalistic, from what Josuke had seen of Yukako work. She’d colored in the page with orange gelatos, which she’d wet to look like watercolor. The original pale yellow paper underneath showed through in various little heart and star shapes that were scattered across the page – Yukako must have masked those areas off with paper stencils or metal dies. A hand-cut adhesive sheet of brilliant red flowers decorated the bottom of the page. When she’d stuck the drawing of Daisuke onto the page, Yukako had peeled up the top of the flower sheet in order to slide the drawing underneath, so that the red flowers stood out brilliantly against the white paper and the subtle grey shading of Daisuke’s collarbone. Finally, at the top, she’d written in black the kanji for Daisuke’s name, with a space left open beside it – presumably, where she’d write the rest of his name, if they ever learned it.

“So what’s the psychic scrapbook say about the guy?” Josuke heard himself ask.

Yukako traced one finger gently over the page. It had the slightest wave to it, where the watered-down gelatos had warped the paper. “For one, I find it interesting that there’s no frame to the picture. I thought about adding one while I was putting the page together, but it just didn’t seem to fit. If I had to guess, I’d say that it means Daisuke is very open person.”

Behind him, he heard Rohan give a snort – and then a little pained yelp, when Josuke may or may not have elbowed him in the ribs (which he definitely did. We saw it).

“From the colors,” Yukako continued, “I would say he has a warm personality, too.”
“Sounds like a real dreamboat,” Rohan sniped, letting the sheer power of sarcasm steer him through the pain.

Yukako paused, frowning. Her fingers hovered above the flowers at the bottom of the page. “These flowers… I don’t recognize them. Rohan, do you have a computer I could use?”

“No need. Those are Aloe flowers. They symbolize grief – and bitterness.”

When they all looked questioningly at him, Rohan shrugged. “I’m not just an artist, you know. I have to write all those stories I draw. So I’ve done my research. Symbolism, that kind of thing. Readers eat that shit up.”

“Grief,” Yukako muttered, gaze drifting back to the page. “I’m not so sure about bitterness, though. His personality doesn’t suggest a bitter person. Regret might be a better interpretation.”

“So what – are you going to use your scrapbook to find the guy?” Rohan asked.

This time it was Koichi who answered. “No, Mister Rohan – we’re going to use your drawing.”

***

The train to S City was forty minutes there and thirty-eight minutes back. It left station on the dot of every hour. Seventeen stops one way and fifteen the other.

Thirty, forty minutes was a long time standing still. Some people were good at sitting still. Okuyasu was not some people. But he did it, three or four times there a week and three or four times back.

The train was always a crowded, unless he was working a late shift, and then he’d spread out with a whole row of benches to himself and try to use the space and the silence to kick his brain into thinking about how he was going to pay the bills, how he was going to look after his old man, how he was somehow going to pull his shit together at school come September. But more often than not, his brain had other ideas, and those other usually took the form of a certain Josuke Higashikata.

He always had trouble sleeping, those nights when he worked late. Part of it was being so wound up from so much busyness, but only part of it. The rest was from that long, long ride home on the train, when all he could think about was the last time he and Josuke hung out, about hanging out again, about all sorts of things that would never happen but that he couldn’t help but picture anyway. And by the time he got home his heart would be racing, squeezes he could feel in his chest, and he’d lie awake all night feeling like he’d just gotten done running a marathon.

Thirty-eight minutes, coming back on the train. And then he’d get off at the train station, where he had another forty minute walk home ahead of him, and his only consolation would that he was halfway there. If you do a thing once, you can do it again – that’s what he liked to tell himself.

An eight hour shift and a thirty-eight minute train ride and a forty minute walk later (to say nothing of the commute he’d made in the morning), and Okuyasu found himself walking by Josuke’s house. He had a million things he needed to do and he was just about on the edge of passing out, but he’d spent a good portion of the past hour thinking about the conversation he’d had at the American-style ice cream parlour, with Josuke and all the others. An idea had occurred to him during that time. He remembered, in the same way he remembered many another stupid insignificant detail, that Josuke’s mom kept a list of names and numbers on the refrigerator.

What if she had the Imai family’s new number?

It was a plan riddled with ulterior motives, but nonetheless, it was enough that instead of going right home like his body and brain wanted, Okuyasu crossed the Higashikata family’s lawn and knocked
on the door.

Tomoko answered.

“You just missed him a while ago,” she said. “He and a couple others went over to the mangaka’s house.”

Rohan. Right. He’d forgotten about that. Josuke had told him they were going to try to get a drawing of Daisuke – he just hadn’t mentioned they were doing it tonight.

“No worries! Sorry t’ bother you.”

“Pshaw! You’re not bothering me! You wanna come in for a bit? – You look like you could use a pick-me-up or something.”

She stood back, holding the door open further – and, well, Okuyasu wasn’t one to refuse a good thing when it was put in front of him.

Tomoko Higashikata had learned to cook with perfect skill half a dozen dishes in her lifetime. For the most part, however, she liked things easy and instant. Meals you could transfer directly from freezer to oven, or better – to the microwave. No muss, no fuss. As Okuyasu sat at the kitchen table and watched her measure out instant coffee granules into two mugs, he thought about the kind of person Tomoko must have been when she was still in her twenties. Running back and forth between work and school and childcare, eating her supper over the kitchen sink straight from the microwave tray. He wondered if she ever had a spare moment to herself. He suspected that she probably didn’t. He couldn’t imagine living that way: but then here he was, on the tail end of a ten hour day with another one creeping up on his ass tomorrow.

He wanted to ask her how she’d managed.

Instead, they talked about mundane things. She asked him what he was up to; he lied and asked her the same. The smell of cheap coffee slowly diffused throughout the kitchen.

There was something profane, almost. His being here when Josuke wasn’t. But Okuyasu just couldn’t care. He wanted this – this welcome feeling of hominess and belonging. Wanted to pretend that it was his.

Then he lifted up his eyes, and saw the fridge, and remembered why he was here in the first place.

“Uh, Miss Higashikata?” he began. “I was wondering… ya don’t happen to got the phone number for the Imai family that used to live next door, do ya?”

Tomoko lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? Why’s that?”

“Uh, well… Josuke was asking about them. I guess he wanted to check in on their daughter, Yuki. Make sure she’s doing alright. Somethin’ about her going missing when she was little.”

Instead of calling him out on his blatant lie, as he expected her to, Tomoko rested her cheek against her hand, a pensive look on his face. “I’m surprised he remembers that. He’d been pretty distracted at the time, with everything that happened to Jotaro.”

Okuyasu froze. He wanted to ask – really wanted – but all he could get out was, “Yeah, me too.”

“I’ve got to admit – I was pretty worried about Jotaro too for a while, when the doctors were still saying things were touch-and-go. That Joestar family, I’m telling you…”
Thankfully, Tomoko turned just then to look at the fridge, because nothing in Okuyasu’s power could have school or chased the shocked expression from his face.

“Sorry,” Tomoko mumbled. “I don’t think they ever gave me their new number. After a thing like that, a family can get pretty withdrawn, you know?”

Turning back to him, her eyebrows drew down and her mouth tightened in a look of concern. “Hey, you feeling alright? I can give you a couple of gravol if you want.”

“No, I’m – I gotta get home. Tuck dad in and all that – thanks for the coffee!”

No sooner was he out the front door than Okuyasu bolted across the street. He didn’t stop running until he was halfway down his own driveway, at which point he slowed to a ponderous, dragging walk.

The front door was unlocked. It always was – they didn’t have anything worth stealing in that shithole, not since he’d sold off all of Keicho’s old stuff to pay the power company.

He wanted to go to bed. He wanted to sleep. But sleep would be hard, the way his heart was racing – and for once, it had nothing to do with Josuke. Except it did, in a roundabout way. Maybe a smarter person might’ve sorted out the situation better – hell, maybe they’d have handled it better, instead of playing along like an idiot the way Okuyasu had. But the way he saw it, there were two possibilities.

One: Josuke was keeping things from the rest of them and he’d just been let in on one such secret.

Two: he knew something about Josuke that Josuke did not.

In either case, there was a heavy, sick feeling in his chest, the same he always got when he lost his temper and let himself slip back behind the easy answers of violence, both its threat and realization:

Guilt.

Chapter End Notes

Fun easter eggs for this chap: spot the blatant reference, and guess which organ Rohan’s particular canopic jar likely held.

I realize that this fic’s had mostly Okuyasu doing the pinning so far. Don’t worry. Josuke will get his turn soon enough.
Okuyasu was a man of shortcuts, of erasing space rather than making his way around it. But just this once he thought it might be best to take the roundabout approach. And so he asked, in an off-handed way like the answer didn’t matter:

“What was Jotaro like when you were a kid?”

Chapter Notes

This is probably going to be one of the flashback-heavier chaps... I'm hoping to keep things more spread out in the future.

I hope you guys enjoy Jotaro being the world's worst babysitter, because BOY... (Also: most of this chap isn’t in chronological order, so apologies if things get a little... confusing)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They all got together at Rohan’s house the next day – because Rohan didn’t have family members to eavesdrop on them, and because buying ice cream every other day was getting to be a strain on the wallets of those of them who were not world-famous artists. Over tall, sweating glasses of lemonade, Koichi explained his plan for finding Daisuke. He'd start by putting up posters, staking out public places, that sort of thing. There were strings leading back to the Speedwagon Foundation that could be pulled, favors that could be called in – if they were needed. But Koichi was set against getting the Foundation too involved. Said there was only so much hinting around they could do before someone’d get suspicious, and then they’d have half the extended Joestar family crawling around Morioh, trying to get in on the action.

Okuyasu was glad to have someone like Koichi around. He didn’t have much of a knack for planning things – he’d get overwhelmed just thinking about how much needed to be done and then he’d put things off indefinitely, or at least until it was too late to bother getting mad at himself. Koichi made it look so effortless, the way he could breeze through phone calls and mountains of public records with clear-eyed direction. Okuyasu didn’t mind being the guy who just followed along.

At first Josuke was chewing at the bit to get out and field the crowd, and Okuyasu was there with him every moment of it of course, because neither one of them was the type to work alone and teaming up was just what they did. So they went on a few stakeouts, made a few calls, got chased away or told off or on one occasion nearly brought to blows with several men all named Daisuke. But to his surprise, Josuke’s enthusiasm turned out to be a quick-burning thing: a flash-bang that began to peter out no sooner than it was lit, so that by the end of the second day of searching the two of them were kicking back to iced tea and comic books in the park under the pretense of a stakeout.

On the third day, it rained.
By the time he made it across the street to the Higashikata’s house, the hems of Okuyasu’s sweatpants were muddied and soaked. They were hand-me-downs, too big in the waist and too long in the legs, so that when he walked the ends got caught under the heels of his sneakers.

When Josuke came to the door, he was still in his pajamas.

“Oh, right,” was all he said.

“Oh right?” Okuyasu repeated.

Josuke glanced back over his shoulder. “I’m not really feeling up to going out today, dude.”

“You coulda told me that before I came over here and got myself wet, jackass!”

Truth be told: Okuyasu didn’t mind a little rain. But he’d begged and pleaded with his boss to have the day off, and unlike his muddy sweatpants, that wasn’t something so easy to kick off and ignore at the end of the day.

“Shit. Sorry, man.”

He expected Josuke to say goodbye just then, to close the front door on the wind and rain and bluster and him, but instead Josuke chewed at the inside of his cheek a moment, before his lips quirked up in a grin, and then there was light in his eyes, warm and big and bright and even with the rain running down the back of his neck, seeing that look made Okuyasu feel like someone had wrapped a warm blanket around his shoulders.

“Hey,” Josuke said, “I’m stuck on this part in a video game – you wanna come cheer me on?”

***

When Josuke’d asked if Okuyasu wanted to cheer him on, what he’d really meant was: did Okuyasu want to do all the hard work while he lay around on his ass?

That was how, on a rainy Monday morning, Okuyasu found himself stretched across Josuke’s bed with an NES controller in hand.

Josuke lent him some clothes to wear. They didn’t quite fit right, too loose in the bottoms and too tight up top, but then, Okuyasu was used to wearing clothes that hadn’t been bought to fit him. His still-wet hair was soaking the pillow he lay propped up against, rat tails damp and humid against the sweep of his neck. Josuke’s room was too hot, even with the window propped open and the cold, rain-licked air breezing in. Ninety percent of that heat seemed to focus itself at Okuyasu’s left side, where Josuke was stretched out, half watching, half dozing off, and though they weren’t exactly touching the distance between them was such that Okuyasu would have sworn sideways that he could feel the static discharge seeping off of Josuke’s skin, because how else could he explain the sickish, shivery feeling he got like a bad rash all along that side of his body?

It didn’t help that Josuke had shit taste in video games.

“What the fuck is this?” Okuyasu growled. “Every room looks the same! Did the makers run outta money or something?”

When Josuke laughed, he could feel the vibrations through the mattress coils beneath him.

“It’s supposed to be that way, dude. That’s what makes it so hard.”
“Nah, I think they just got lazy. The graphics look like shit.”

According to Josuke, he was supposed to be going through a factory in search of some kind of rocket, but to Okuyasu it sure as hell didn’t look like a factory – there weren’t any conveyor belts or buttons or levers, just plain grey walls and plain grey floors.

“Game’s like ten years old,” Josuke said. “Of course the graphics are gonna look like shit.”

And just like that, the thread of their conversation slipped away on them. Okuyasu went back to navigating his way through the identical rooms and corridors of the onscreen factory. Outside, the rain hissed against the pavement. Ragged snatches of wind wailed and rattled the window casings. Josuke turned over onto his side – the mattress to Okuyasu’s left dipping at the shift in weight.

“…Sorry,” Okuyasu mumbled at long last.

“There’s nothing to apologize over. It is a pretty lame level.”

“No, I mean… About draggin’ you into all this.”

He heard the rustle of sheets, and when he looked over, Josuke was facing him, head cradled at the crook of his elbow.

“It’s not your fault,” Josuke mumbled. “I guess I’m just a part of the family business now.”

Though there was a grin on his lips, something in Josuke’s voice sounded stretched and thin, like he was telling a joke for the hundredth time.

“Josuke…” he began, pronouncing each syllable slowly as he stalled for time to search for words of comfort that he knew would never roll off his tongue the way he wanted them to.

But then Josuke was moving, leaning toward him with something dark and unreadable in his eyes. Okuyasu’s heart stopped, and then did overtime just to make up for it, right before Josuke’s head came to rest over his chest. He prayed that somehow, the flimsy fabric of his borrowed t-shirt might be enough to mask the rapid clip of his heartbeat, as if he couldn’t feel it all the way up his throat.

There’d been a time not so long ago when he’d spent the day with Josuke and his dad. Mr. Joestar had asked him to hold Shizuka for him, just for a minute. For Okuyasu, it’d been one of the most terrifying moments of his life. No matter how tight he held on, no matter how careful he was being, she was just so small and fragile. He couldn’t trust himself not to hurt her.

Now, with Josuke close to him like this, he was living through the same thing all over again. It would have been so easy just to reach up and close his arms around Josuke’s shoulders, but in that moment Okuyasu was too petrified to move. True, Josuke wasn’t a baby and Okuyasu wasn’t at risk of dropping him on his head any time soon, but this time around the thing in his hands wasn’t flesh and bone but something much more fragile.

“Ain’t a fuckin’ pillow,” Okuyasu grumbled, giving Josuke’s shoulder a shove.

Josuke just laughed and threw an arm around his middle, digging his nose into the space between Okuyasu’s ribs. “C’mon man, you’re comfy.”

“You’re gonna make me lose!”

“You suck at this game anyway.”
“I got further than you did!”

“How can you tell?” Josuke teased. “You said the rooms all looked the same.”

“Shut the fuck up man!”

A brief scuffle for the NES controller ensued, that somehow ended with Okuyasu having more of Josuke on top of him than before. That got him flushed under the collar and sweating like a lead pipe. He hadn’t been able to bear the thought of spending the summer without Josuke, but this, this was almost just as bad. He didn’t think he’d make it to September a sane man if had to contend with Josuke Higashikata at close proximity all summer long.

With his blood ringing in his ears, he didn’t notice at first that Josuke was talking to him.

“What?” he asked suddenly, angling his chin down to get a better look at Josuke, who had both arms folded on Okuyasu’s chest.

“I said Jotaro and his kid are going to be in town in a few days,” Josuke repeated.

Right then would have been the perfect time for Okuyasu to say something. His conversation with Tomoko had been bothering him for days now, a pebbling rolling around in his shoe that he just had to get out, somehow or another.

“Hey Josuke, you remember anything ‘bout Jotaro getting hurt that one time he was down for the summer?”

“Hey Josuke, why didn’t ya tell us Jotaro ended up in the hospital that summer?”

“Hey, Joskuke, remember that one time your nephew almost fuckin’ died?”

As quickly as each question filtered through his mind, it was just as soon discarded.

Okuyasu wasn’t normally the type to keep himself under a strict verbal filter. But then, he normally wasn’t the type to keep things from Josuke either, something he’d somehow made a habit of that summer, between his dumb, hopeless crush and the bills and the job and now this.

Okuyasu was a man of shortcuts, of erasing space rather than making his way around it. But just this once he thought it might be best to take the roundabout approach. And so he asked, in an off-handed way like the answer didn’t matter:

“What was Jotaro like when you were a kid?”

***

When Josuke thought back to that first summer he and Jotaro met, what he recalled about his nephew (with a few slight alterations, additions, and redactions on our part – all, of course, in the name of accuracy) was this:

***

Jotaro was the one who went with him when he hauled his entire life savings – half a coffee canister in change – to the nearest game shop. For a full ten minutes he waited around for the cashier to count out Josuke’s money, and then they were on their way back home again, Josuke with a bright red plastic bag swinging wildly at his side and all of sixty yen left to his name.

“What’s so special about this game?” Jotaro asked on the way home.
“Weekly Famitsu says it’s good!”

“I wouldn’t know anything about it.”

Josuke tried again: “It’s supposed to be like Dragon Quest, I heard, except... not. You play as a kid and you visit all these little towns like Morioh, instead of castles and dungeons ‘n stuff.”

“Why would you want to play something like that? You’re already a kid. You already live in Morioh.”

Josuke made a noise of indignation. “But it’s not like I get to fight monsters in Morioh! An’ I don’t have powers or anything either.”

As soon as he was through the front door, Josuke raced for the living room, socked feet slipping dangerously beneath him on the hardwood. By his mother’s decree the NES had been forced in hibernation during the winter and spring months while he was at school; when he pulled it out from the trunk where it’d spent its exile, he discovered that the controller cords, each neatly separated when he’d packed the system away, had somehow gotten tangled despite months of remaining completely sedentary.

By the time he’d gotten everything untangled and separated, Jotaro had retreated back to the basement.

“ Aren’t you gonna watch me play?” Josuke yelled from the top of the stairs.

“It’s too damn hot,” came the reply from somewhere in the murk.

“Fine! Then I’ll bring my game downstairs!”

When no sound of protest came from the bottom of the steps, Josuke marched back to the living room, gathered up his game system, and hauled the whole thing down to the basement.

While Josuke set up the NES, Jotaro paid as little attention to him as humanly possible, occupying himself instead with his Zippo lighter. Over and over again he’d pop the top, before flicking closed it again with a quick snap of his wrist. He only put the lighter away after Josuke had booted up the game and was in the process of moving his character (which, like all his other video game characters up until that point, was creatively named ‘Josuke’) around the first room.

“Don’t you have any friends to watch you play?” he asked in a gruff, unyielding voice that Josuke had learned not to mind.

“They’re all on vacation,” Josuke mumbled, in a tone that suggested that being on vacation was nothing short of a capital offense.

As the slow, lazy lines of a chiptune track filled the basement, Josuke scooted across the floor until his back was up against the couch. Jotaro didn’t say another word, but Josuke could tell his nephew was watching; every time he stole a glance behind him he would catch his eyes moving, following the character on screen.

Not an hour had passed before Josuke, on the verge of losing a fight with a zombie, leaned over and pressed the reset button.

“This game is the worst,” he declared.

“You sure had me fooled.”
Josuke being six – and six year olds not being particularly prone to admitting when they are wrong – mumbled, “The magazine’s the one that said it was great, not me.”

The couch’s wooden frame creaked as Jotaro sat up, looking every bit as attentive now as he’d pretended not to be before.

“How about it?”

“I keep getting lost. And dying.”

“Then just lay down some bread crumbs.”

“What?”

“You’ve got bread in your inventory, right?” Jotaro asked. “So use it to lay a trail so you don’t get lost.”

“The bread’s for eating. It gives you health.”

Jotaro’s fingers twitched. “You can lay a trail with it too. It said so when you were looking at the info screen earlier.”

After studying Jotaro’s face for any sign that he was being mocked, Josuke relented. “Fine,” he said – not without a coloring of skepticism. “But that’s not gonna help me with the monsters.”

“You wouldn’t have a problem with the monsters if you weren’t being so goddamn stingy with the LifeUp. You’ve got enough PP and the town’s not far away; it’s not worth taking the risk of dying just to hoard up your PSI moves.

“And another thing: don’t fight every battle you get into. Just because a crow or a zombie wants to pick a fight doesn’t mean you have to stick around and get your ass kicked. There’s nothing wrong with running away now and then and saving yourself for the important fights. It’s a matter of making a calculated decision.”

For someone with apparently little interest in video games, Jotaro sounded more deathly serious when he talked about them than anyone Josuke had ever met.

There it was again: a slight twitch to Jotaro’s fingers. Josuke glanced at those fingers, and then at the controller in his hands.

“You wanna play?” he asked, handing Jotaro the controller.

***

Two days went by, between Jotaro’s arrival at port and the weight of disappointment it brought with it, and the morning when Josuke awoke to his mother knocking on his door – despite it already being open and her, halfway through the threshold.

“Come downstairs,” she said, “I want to talk to you about something.”

As she marched him down the steps, fine-boned fingers closed easily around his small, curved wrist, Josuke found himself rushing through a list of all the reasons he could possibly be in trouble. Had grampa overhead him use a bad word when he’d jammed the door on his toe? Had someone told his mother about the time he’d stolen a classmate’s juice box when he thought no one was looking?
Had his mother found out about the porcelain elephant that he’d accidentally broken, and felt so bad about after the fact that he’d snuck his grandfather’s craft glue out of the cupboard every night for a week straight, and combed the living room carpet for missing pieces for hours on end, just so he could put it back together again without anyone noticing?

He rounded the corner – and there, seated at the kitchen table, was Jotaro Kujo. He seemed out of place in the sunlit, messy kitchen, like the room was built for someone with a presence much smaller than his own: his shoulders were hunched, head bowed. Only when Tomoko called his name did he glance up, the shadow cast by the brim of his hat receding just enough to give Josuke a glimpse of his eyes.

Parked in front of the fridge was an enormous travel trunk, cracked brown leather with dozens of stickers: flags he didn’t recognize and words in languages he didn’t know, iconoclastic art of buildings and vistas from places that were not Morioh.

His mother knelt before him, hands at her knees where the tension stretched her blue jeans taught.

“I’ll be working this summer, kiddo,” she said. “Your grandpa too. I’ve been talking it over with Jotaro and we both figured, since he’s planning on sticking around for a couple of weeks…”

At Jotaro she glanced, as if expecting him to add something, but he only took a sip of his coffee and went back to being a silent monolith.

“…It’s cheaper than hiring a babysitter,” she finished, with a dour tone of concession that, on Josuke anyway, was all but lost.

***

His mom had to leave early for work. Before heading out the door she asked Josuke to show his nephew around. There was a cot in the basement, she said, that he was welcome to use.

“I can carry that, you know,” Jotaro said when Josuke grabbed the handle of the travel trunk and gave it a heave.

“I’ve got it!” Josuke growled, despite the tremor that ran through his arms as he took his first step forward, swinging his leg out wide and letting the weight of the trunk and its momentum carry him.

He was halfway across the kitchen, legs buckling beneath him, when Jotaro’s shadow barred the way. Before Josuke could stop him he was reaching out and plucking the trunk from his grasp, holding it loosely in one hand like it weighed next to nothing, and seeing Jotaro and his careless ease, Josuke’s cheeks lit up with shame and irrational outrage. It didn’t matter if Jotaro was just trying to do him a favour – it was enough that he felt humiliated.

Jotaro didn’t wait for him to lead either. He went ahead down the stairs, wooden steps squeaking beneath his weight. Josuke was made to clamber after him. Only when he was at the bottom of the steps did Jotaro set his trunk down and turn to look back up at Josuke, who froze where he stood, one foot planted in place at the other touching down tentatively on the next step below.

“You were sick this past winter, right?” he asked.

The question took him off guard. Josuke could only nod.

He expected Jotaro to ask him if he was feeling better, or if he’d been scared – questions he’d heard a dozen times before from other adults in other circumstances, neighbours and relatives who’d told him how brave he was for weathering something he’d had no choice but to endure.
But what Jotaro asked instead was: “Can you see or do anything you couldn’t before you got sick?”

“Like what?”

There was a burst of light and a pulse of energy that made the hairs on his arms stand up – and then, there was a third person in the room. Or something nearly like a person, only it hung in the air, semi-transparent like a sheet of gossamer.

Josuke gave a cry and threw himself back against the stairs, fingernails scratching frantically against shaggy wood as he scrambled against gravity and the fear-tremors that made his body next to boneless.

Through his panic, Jotaro’s voice cut: “You don’t have one of your own? But you can see it, right?”

It was the fact that Jotaro could see the ghost-man – coupled with the resolute calm that went along with it – that, by degrees, brought Josuke back down to an uneasy lull.

And Josuke, instead of asking the obvious right back – what is that thing? What does it do? – asked: “Is he friendly?” – as if the ghost over Jotaro’s shoulder was some kind of dog.

“About as friendly as I am,” Jotaro replied, like that was any kind of answer. “It’s called a stand. You might end up with one of your own someday.”

“When?” asked Josuke. He’d all but forgotten his earlier outburst of fear, now that he was busy thinking about how great it’d be to have a magical friend around to carry him around on their shoulders, or to beat the really hard levels for him in his favorite video games. He hoped having a stand wasn’t like driving a car – something you had to wait until you were a grown up to do.

Just like that, Jotaro’s stand vanished. Before Josuke could wonder where it went, Jotaro was stooping to pick up his travel trunk by the handle. “Don’t be so eager,” he said. “It’s not nearly as fun as you think.”

Once again, Jotaro was on the move, confident and unfaltering in his steps like he knew the house every inch as well as Josuke did, and that infuriated him to no end. Determined not to be outdone, Josuke raced ahead of his nephew and threw open the closet door. The fold-away cot was leaned up against the wall; Josuke pulled it out and clumsily let it drop open on the floor.

At the cot, he jabbed a finger. “You can sleep here,” Josuke said, with an effected tone of authority.

Jotaro glanced down at cot, which in its entirety amounted to no more than a thread-bare canvas stretched over a rickety aluminum frame. Only one of the support beams was present; Josuke and his grandpa had lost the other one on a camping trip.

“Small,” Jotaro remarked.

Josuke had to admit: he didn’t see Jotaro being able to lay down on the cot without his feet hanging over the edge.

“I guess you could sleep on the couch if you wanted to,” he conceded.

The couch in question was a wooden-framed three-seater that had been his grandparents in the 70s; his mother had condemned it to live in the basement after they’d moved into their current house.

“Alright,” Jotaro said.
This time, he hung back when Josuke dragged out a musty old sleeping bag from the back of the closet. He didn’t say anything either when Josuke set to work making up the couch, with a devotion to detail proportional only to the underwhelming product of his efforts.

***

On one of the afternoons when both his mother and grandfather had to work, Jotaro took him on a walk into town.

The heat that day was suffocating. Against the exposed back of Josuke’s neck, the sun felt like a strip of hot tin. His legs were flushed red where the stuck out from under the legs of his shorts.

“I’m thirsty,” he said, for no reason in particular. He was still at the age where he felt the need to voice aloud every slight discomfort, as if the presence of an adult listener would somehow dispel the cause for his complaint.

Jotaro paused, heels clicking against the sidewalk as he spun around. “You know how to get pop for free?”

Not wanting to look like an idiot, Josuke said, “Course I do! Everyone knows that!”

Briefly, Star Platinum’s arm flickered into existence, just long enough to drop something into Jotaro’s hand. Before Josuke could get a better look at the item, Jotaro pocketed it and set off walking again.

“Alright, I’ll just have to teach you. Come on.”

Josuke’s utopian daydreams of some secret pop-dispensing location that only adults knew about were abruptly shattered when Jotaro came to a halt into front of a vending machine.

“Those ain’t free,” Josuke helpfully informed him, with the disappointment undertone due a swindled man.

Ignoring his remark, Jotaro knelt and fished out the object he’d pocketed earlier – a measuring tape. Holding the machine’s dispenser flap open, he eased the end of the tape measurer inside. Josuke watched, mesmerized, as Jotaro worked away like a snake charmer. As if by magic, the tape rose into view through the vending machine window, swaying with an almost animal motion before diving toward the nearest can of pop, the tape measurer’s metal hook catching on the lip of the aluminum can. Jotaro gave the tape roll a swift jerk. Out popped the can from its coil, landing at the bottom of the vending machine with a loud thunk.

“Here,” Jotaro said, handing the can to Josuke.

The can was frosty; Josuke’s skin stuck to it.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to drink this?” he asked.

“Sure. It’s not poisoned.”

Even at six years old, Josuke knew there was something not quite right about taking pop from a vending machine without paying. He was a police officer’s grandson, after all. All the same, he thought it would be a waste not to drink it, when there was no putting the can back now. Even if he left it in the dispenser, someone would just come right up behind him and take it anyway. Besides – Jotaro had went through all that trouble for him, and if Jotaro said something was okay to do then it couldn’t have been that bad.
Well, okay – maybe it was bad, but it was cool too! As far as he knew, none of his classmates knew anyone who could steal from a vending machine with just a tape measurer. Josuke popped off the tab and swigged back a long gulp of lemon soda, burying the curve of his smile in the taste of aluminum and sour fizz.

***

“Please?”

When Jotaro gave a sigh, Josuke’s keen ears picked up on the sound of his resolve breaking, and a grin stretched across his face.

“One,” Jotaro said. “That’s all you’re getting.”

Josuke – to whom such statutes were flexible things with loopholes and workarounds – nodded, hair flopping before his eyes.

Without any further ceremony, Jotaro summoned Star Platinum to his side. Reaching down, it took the offered toy from Josuke’s hands – a Gundam figure he never played with anymore – before abruptly turning and launching it into the air.

Josuke gave a shout of exclamation when, several seconds later, the toy fell back down to earth only for Star Platinum to catch it with ease.

“Again!”

“That wasn’t in the agreement.”

“Come ooooon Jotaro.”

Jotaro was prepared to stick to his guns – though really, that he expected the agreement to be honored in the first place was nothing short of foolish on his part – when Josuke added:

“I betcha can’t throw it any higher.”

A loud crack erupted when Star Platinum hurled the toy into the air, breaking at once several records for the maximum velocity of real-world representations of copyrighted characters as well as the sound barrier.

They waited, breathless, as the seconds went by. And then seconds turned into minutes.

“You don’t think…?” Josuke asked.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” Jotaro said, words blurred together in his haste to get them out.

“Can Star Platinum send me up into space next?”

“Absolutely not.”

***

From upstairs, Josuke could hear his mother and grandfather’s voices, and the voice of the man on the television, too. The latter lost its human timber in the course of passing through the floorboards, all dull and bassy like someone trying to play a trumpet through a ball of wool.

The way their voices carried, his mother’s and his grandfather’s and the television’s, he couldn’t
help but worry that the inverse situation might be true: that they could hear him the same way he
could hear them, and that even now the skulking quality of his footsteps was giving him away.

As always, the drawer of his grandfather’s nightstand was locked, but that didn’t deter him. The key
was where it always was, tucked up under his grandfather’s pillow where he’d discovered it first by
chance months ago.

In the stillness of the room, the sound of metal clicking together as he fumbled to fit the key into the
lock was just as loud to him as the voices downstairs. Eventually he had the key flipped right-way-
up, and one by one the lock’s tumblers clicked into place and the key turned smoothly. With hardly a
breath passing his lips, he carefully drew open the drawer.

His eyes made a quick, nervous pass over the service-issue handgun with its textured finish and
matte-black sheen, as if it were a living thing that might at any moment snap its teeth at him. Aside
from the gun, there wasn’t much else in the drawer: just a wedding ring, a couple important-looking
papers, and a second set of keys.

This last item he pocketed. Then, with as much care as he’d opened the draw, he eased it shut,
returning the nightstand key to its proper place before creeping on soft feet from the bedroom.

By the time he reached the bottom of the steps his pulse was already creeping up on him again,
pressing in on his chest, and his breath was cold in his throat but the door to the basement was just
down the hall, and he was nearly there. Just a few more steps.

“Freeze, scumbag!”

And Josuke did, blood screaming in his ears and spiking hot beneath his cheeks. When he turned
and peered through the living room entrance his grandfather was grinning, finger pistols cocked and
drawn on Josuke.

“Dad, quit it,” Tomoko growled. Then to Josuke: “Just where do you think you’re off to?”

From where he stood, his mother and grandfather looked strange: sprouted from the couch, small,
half shadow and half electric television light. He hoped they couldn’t see him too well from across
the room, because for all that his face was an uncurated collection of tells he might as well have
written ‘thief’ across his forehead.

“I was gonna go hang out with Jotaro,” he managed.

“Ten minutes. Don’t be late getting to bed.”

With a mute nod, he hurried away. He had enough sense, at least, to shut the basement door behind
him.

“How’d it go?” Jotaro asked, not bothering to take his eyes off the screen, where the vast, pixelated
stretches of the Yucca Desert were making an underwhelming use of 8-bit color’s potential. He
sounded bored, almost – like Josuke hadn’t just lived through most nerve-upending moments of his
(albeit extremely limited) criminal career.

“Fine.”

Jotaro stretched out a hand. Josuke dropped the keys into his open palm, then waited with nervous
anticipation as Jotaro inspected them, running his thumb along the keys’ toothed edges.

“Not bad,” he said at last.
Once again, Josuke felt his pulse thrum beneath his skin, only this time instead of the heavy, almost painful squeezing of his heart and the growing tightness in his chest, the quickening in his veins the thrumming of his heart left him feeling light, all his blood evaporating into bubbles of air.

***

Jotaro made the mistake of bringing up Josuke’s hair only once. But Josuke wasn’t like Jotaro, born with his teeth and nails already in and growing sharper by the day, and so in absence of fangs he hadn’t yet grown and vinegar that hadn’t yet gotten into his blood, his outrage found other means of escaping his body.

“It’s because of that guy who saved you, right?” Jotaro asked while Josuke was busy angrily wiping the tears from his cheeks. “Your mom told me about what happened.”

“S’none of your business,” Josuke grumbled.

He expected Jotaro to drop the subject, so he was surprise instead when his nephew said, “I’m sorry your dad couldn’t have been there.”

It was silly, Josuke thought, for him to apologize for something someone else had done, or failed to do – forgetting the outburst of anger he’d felt when he met Jotaro at coming off the boat, forgetting the dread he’d felt seeing Jotaro that first morning at the breakfast table, forgetting how he’d rushed ahead and tried to set Jotaro in his place, to let him know he wasn’t needed here, as if Jotaro was the one they’d gotten on just fine all those years without.

***

While waiting for their lunch at a diner on the edge of town, Jotaro told him about his travels to Egypt.

Josuke listened, all rapt-attention even when his lunch was set out before him and growing cold. He was so focused on Jotaro’s part in the story that he didn’t notice the way names would appear and disappear again in Jotaro’s retellings, characters taking leave of the stage without a bow or word of explanation.

The best part was, he knew the story was one he could trust, because Jotaro had the battle scars to prove it. There were battle scars on his ankle when he rolled down his sock to show Josuke where he’d delivered a kick that had incapacitated a vampire. There were battle scars on his stomach when he lifted his shirt to show Josuke where he’d been run through with a magical sword. There were battle scars on the inside of his wrist, too, when he reached for the salt and the sleeve of his coat rode up just for an instant.

***

There were too many people around during the day, according to Jotaro. They went at night instead, parking the car Jotaro had borrowed from his mother at the edge of the station lot (Jotaro hadn’t asked to borrow the car, per-say, but Josuke’s mom was visiting a sick family member in S City so it wasn’t like she’d be needing it, and his grandpa was already in bed by the time they left so it wasn’t like he’d be missing it). By then it was still early, so Jotaro put the seat back and lit a cigarette while he dissolved another one of his little pills under his tongue. The sun hadn’t fully set but it was a near enough thing that the inside of the car was semi-dark. Josuke got the emergency flashlight out from the glove compartment. While Jotaro smoked he read the comic book he’d brought along with him, the flashlight’s beam roaming slowly over the pages.
Josuke glanced up, redirecting the flashlight beam on Jotaro’s face. In the process of finishing up the chapter night had fallen unnoticed by him, fast and hard the way it always did even in the peak months of summer. When Jotaro blew a plume of smoke from his lips, the flashlight’s reflection got caught in it so that the smoke looked like it was glowing from within, dirty-gold against the streaky darkness of the windshield.

“Are you sure that’s where it’ll be?” Jotaro asked, and his voice was harsher this second time around. It occurred to Josuke that Jotaro’s first remark had probably been intended as a question – one that he’d failed to answer.

“Yeah. I’ve been in with grandpa a couple of times. That’s where he goes to put files away when he’s done with them.” Josuke paused. The cigarette smoke was starting to sting his eyes. “Are you gonna break in?”

“Won’t need to. As long as I know what I’m looking for… three, five seconds should be enough. Five’d be the ideal but I won’t get picky with three.”

Rolling down the window, Jotaro flickered the last smoldering stub of his cigarette out onto the pavement.

“Stay put,” he ordered, before throwing open the door and lurching outside.

In Jotaro’s absence, the car felt smaller, almost claustrophobic. Josuke set the flashlight aside and flicked on the overhead light. He tried to read, but he found himself just looking over the same panels again and again. Outside, the streetlights buzzed and flickered like lightning claps. He felt like he was waiting for something: a siren maybe, or for Jotaro to come running out of the police station with gunpowder crackling at his heels.

But there were no sirens or gun shots. Not five minutes later he saw Jotaro’s silhouette crossing the parking lot towards him, hands shoved deep in his pockets. Only when Jotaro slid into the driver’s seat did Josuke see the sheen of cold sweat that cast his face in harsh highlights, and hear the way Jotaro’s breathing came in ragged, shallow gasps.

“What happened?” Josuke asked.

In place of an answer, Jotaro pulled a stack of folders out from beneath his jacket and threw them into Josuke’s lap.

They’d planned this, of course – or Jotaro had, anyway – but actually holding the folders in his hands sent a cold shock down Josuke’s spine.

Beside him, Jotaro was shaking two more tiny white pills out into his palm. “Seatbelt,” he said.

“But –,” Josuke began.

“I’m not starting this fucking car until you’re buckled up.”

He complied, and then they were moving – normal speed at first, but then when the police station dropped from sight in the rear-view mirror, Jotaro brought his foot down to the floor. The momentum when they took the first corner sent Josuke sprawling against the car door, and after that he went the rest of the ride with one hand clasped around the door handle and the other white-knuckled into the seat. Jotaro of course didn’t seem bothered; he wasn’t even wearing his own seatbelt. To Josuke, there was nothing strange about this – Jotaro seemed more iron and grit than
flesh and bone, even when was driving like he had something to run from.

For the duration of the ride home, Josuke’s body couldn’t decide if he was terrified and exhilarated; all the same, he felt nothing but relief when the driveway came into view and Jotaro, at last, eased up on the gas. By the time they pulled off the road Jotaro’s foot was completely off the pedal. The car limped into the garage on leftover momentum.

Only when he had both feet back on the ground again did Josuke work up the courage to ask: “Didya get caught?”

“No.”

He thought that was all the answer he was going to get, when Jotaro added, quietly: “I just thought I’d have longer, that’s all.”

“What do you mean?” Josuke asked before he could stop himself.

“Two seconds,” Jotaro muttered. He was looking down at his hands; as he spoke he flexed them, fingers curling into fists. The sinews in his wrists tightened and bulged. “That’s all I could... fuck! I thought it’d be five, or three at least.”

Josuke didn’t know what Jotaro was talking about, or why the difference between two or three seconds mattered at all, but Jotaro was still pale and shaking all over, and so instead of bothering him for more details Josuke asked:

“You wanna help me get through Youngtown?”

***

Josuke bolted up when the phone rang.

“I’ll get it!” he cried, leaving no room for protest before half dashing, half tripping up the stairs.

“Sorry,” he said, when heard an unfamiliar woman’s voice on the other end of the line, “but my mom’s not here right now.”

He heard a small, pleased gasp through the earpiece. “Oooh! You must be Josuke! You’re not home all by yourself are, sweety?”

His grandfather had it drilled into his head that he wasn’t supposed to let strangers know he was home alone, and so he said, without any pause for thought, “No.” – only in this case, it just happened to be true.

“Whew! That’s good. Ooooh don’t you just sound so cute with your Kansai accent!”

Now and then he would hear pauses in the woman’s speech – barely-there, in no way long enough to interrupt the flow of conversation, but they were there all the same, like she was paying conscious effort to every word that came out of her mouth. Self-editing in a way people rarely did in their native language.

“I’m from Morioh,” protested Josuke, who wasn’t sure where Kansai was, only that it wasn’t Morioh, and therefore, not where he lived.

“Sorry, sorry! It’s just I don’t hear accents from outside of Tokyo very often. Is Jotaro there, Josuke? Would you put him on the phone for me, tell him his mamma wants to talk to him?”
“Okay,” Josuke said, and then: “I’m gonna put down the phone now.”

“It’s okay, sweety. Take your time.”

Somehow, Josuke had never pictured Jotaro having a family, besides him and his dad, of course. He definitely hadn’t pictured Jotaro having a mom. The way Jotaro carried himself had caused Josuke harbour a romantic notion that he was an orphan, the kind you read about in children’s books: rough and tumbled right out of the cradle, and too clever and adult-like for their own good.

There were implications: about the woman on the phone being Jotaro’s mother, and Jotaro being his nephew, but at Josuke’s age and with the unusual nature of his family’s circumstances, they went right over his head.

“Your mom wants to talk to you,” Josuke announced. From the couch, Jotaro gave him a strange look. “On the phone,” he helpfully added.

“Tell her no thanks.”

“That’s mean,” said Josuke, who was too young to consider the phrase “mamma’s boy” an insult.

In the end Josuke won out, if only by virtue of refusing to move until Jotaro did so first. He waited half a minute after Jotaro tramped up the steps to follow, light on his feet and sticking close to the wall. But when he pushed his ear up against the door all he could hear was the distant, human mumble of conversation – Jotaro had apparently wandered as far away from the basement door as the phone’s cord would allow.

Disappointed, he slunk back downstairs. That’s when he took notice of Jotaro’s travel trunk, in a double-rare state of unguarded and unlocked, as if Jotaro had been intent on unpacking but had either forgotten or thought better of it.

Without a second thought, Josuke dragged the trunk out into the open and undid the clasps. On throwing open the lid the contents that greeted him were understandably a disappointment: shirts and slacks and underwear mostly, along with two or three composition notebooks. The latter proved no more interesting than the clothes, perhaps even less so: Jotaro, apparently, was in a habit of recording the weather. The latest entry was from that same day. Twenty-four degrees Celsius, 57 percent humidity, barometer at 30.10 and rising rapidly. Sunrise at 4:51 AM. Josuke shoved the notebooks aside and dug down to the bottom of the suitcase, under the operating assumption that all good things had weight and, therefore, sunk.

Wrapped up in a sock he found a zippo lighter, plain brushed steel and heavier than it looked. He held it in his open palm, letting the weight of it pull down on his hand. Flicking open the cap, he tried rolling his thumb over the wheel – but his hands were too small and too clumsy, and the flint would not catch.

The last thing he found was a pill bottle, not rolled up in a sock, but sealed in a clear ziplock bag. He took the bottle out and turned it over in his hands, absorbed in the novelty of the English label, with its words that ran on and on until they seemed to exhausted half the Roman alphabet, names foreign in their native tongue that were to him completely incomprehensible. Behind the honey-tinted plastic he could see the tiny white pills, obscured and transmuted as if encased in amber.

Just then he heard the door slam open. Footsteps rattled like a roll of thunder down the steps; Josuke threw the bottle back into the trunk and slammed the lid shut, sliding the trunk into its original place just as Jotaro stepped lightly over the back of the couch.
“What a pain in my ass,” he grumbled, dropping his weight down onto the couch with enough force to shake the frame. And then, to Josuke’s horror, he reached down and pulled the trunk into his lap.

He knew he was found out the moment Jotaro undid the clasps and lifted the lid. He’d been in a hurry, throwing everything back in with no regard for neatness, something Jotaro would never do. In his haste he hadn’t even bothered to put the pill bottle back in its bag.

There was a pause, the silence gathering thickly at the back of Josuke’s throat in the form of apologies and excuses, and then Jotaro breathed in through his nose and mumbled: “Stay out of my stuff, Josuke.”

And that was that. No lecture, no reprimand. Jotaro grabbed the pill bottle, uncapped the lid, and shook out a dusty, tiny tablet into the palm of his hand. Josuke thought he was going to swallow the pill at first; instead, Jotaro popped it under his tongue. And then the bottle was re-capped and the trunk was re-shut – and locked, this time around – and after that, neither of them ever spoke of the incident again.

***

“I think you like watching these dumb games more than you like playing them,” Jotaro said one night, just as Josuke was passing him the controller.

They’d relocated, dragging all the cushions off the couch and spreading them out on the floor in front of the television. From their present distance, the glow of the cathode ray television was fuzzy and intimate, filling the whole of his view and then some, setting a smouldering burn behind his eyes.

“It’s not fair if I’m the only one who gets to play,” Josuke retorted.

The truth was, he only liked to play when he knew he could win. Losing over and over again wasn’t fun – it was boring! But Jotaro was good, and he never lost, and so long as he was playing Josuke could sit back and enjoy the story without the pressure of worrying about screwing up.

Getting through Rosemary Manor was the task they’d set themselves that night. Secretly, he was glad that Jotaro was the one playing. Though he’d never admit it to anyone, the ghosts and zombies scared him just a little. Not normally, not when he was just watching – but something about being the one behind the controller made him forget about just how goofy the sprite art was.

Off Jotaro went, rattling off tips while he rolled his thumb along the directional pad, as if anything he said could possibly change the way Josuke played: brute force, setting his teeth against his enemies’ HP and navigating by the principle of trial and error.

“You’ve got to be careful with the alarm ghosts. Knock them out fast, use PSI or a bomb if you have to, or they’ll start calling other ghosts then you’re fucked. Have Ana use PSI-Magnet when you can, that way you’ll have more PP to heal up and stay out longer…”

When they started it was just after supper. The first touch of night to appear through the window was the long shadow that gradually stretched across the lawn, deepening in color like a festering bruise until there was nothing but deep blue shadow all the way to the stand of trees at the edge of the property. By that point the sky was still light, but it too began to darken soon after, and the world outside grew smaller and smaller until night closed in on the window and there was nothing left to see but a black plane of glass.

Gradually, Josuke could no longer pay attention – to Jotaro, or to the game either. He let his eyes go unfocused and the picture before him blur. Pound-by-pound he shifted until he was leaning his
full weight against Jotaro’s side. With his eyes closed he allowed himself to drift, feeling the shifts in
the muscles of Jotaro’s arm beneath him as his nephew mashed the controller’s buttons. On the
edge of sleep the game’s music sounded harsh to his ears, the melody breaking down into a
cacophony of unrelated sounds that his mind was too tired to assemble into anything meaningful.

He was still awake when Jotaro powered down the NES. For the first time all night the velvet, gauzy
half-dark on the underside of Josuke’s eyelids was snuffed out so completely, that he knew that even
if he opened his eyes he wouldn’t be able to see a thing.

“I know you’re awake,” Jotaro said, but Josuke didn’t budge, didn’t make a sound, not even when
he felt the cushions being pulled out from underneath him.

He almost broke with his charade when he felt himself being hoisted into the air. For a second,
maybe two, he let himself be carried, no longer knowing which way was up or down, and then he
was deposited onto the freshly-remade couch. He could smell the musty, water-stained pillow
beneath his head. Could feel the permanent-damp of the sleeping bag where it was pulled up around
his shoulders. He listened to the retreating sound of Jotaro’s bare feet across the tile floor. A strange
sound came from across the room, like metal scraping over stone. He waited, holding his breath –
but after a minute, there was no sound but his nephew’s breathing, already deep and slow in the
midst of sleep.

When he sat up and peaked over the back of the couch, he could just make out the black-on-black
suggestion of the cot, and Jotaro’s form heaped atop it.

Two weeks – that was how long Jotaro was supposed to stay in Morioh. One week already had
come and gone, and it was lying on his back with the after-images of Rosemary Manor playing
across his eyes that Josuke realized just how short that week had been.

And it was this thought – the impermanence of present arrangements, how he’d soon go back to
spending his summers under the care of the woman next door, how there’d be no one left for him
except said woman’s daughter, who was much too young to play with anyway – that kept Josuke
awake until the first of dawn’s light worked backward from where night had left off, brightening first
the window and the sky before gradually working its way down and spreading across the lawn.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was totally 100% intentional, and definitely not the result of me looking at
my plot outline and realizing that I had huge number of 1989 scenes I was supposed to
cover before the turning point coming up in a few chaps. Yup.

I guess that’s one of the risks of writing serialized fiction XD
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Silent film, local news, and high school yearbooks.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is so late! I've started worked full time now so I don't have as much time to write... plus this chapter somehow ended up being like 10k. Whoops.

I forgot to mention it last time (since I'm pretty forgetful at 3 AM) but there is now some lovely art for this fic by leadlatte! The link is in the notes at the beginning~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You look terrible.”

Those were the first three words anyone said to Josuke all day – spoken to him by Yukako, of all people. The worst part was, he knew she was right.

“Wow,” he mumbled, rubbing a wrist the sleep-raw skin of his eyelids. “Thanks.”

“I wasn’t trying to be nice.” And then, scarecely a breath later: “Let me buy you an iced tea. They have a ginseng and licorice maté that works wonders on a fatigued complexion.”

“I thought you weren’t trying to be nice to me.”

“I’m not.”

Yukako raised a hand, beckoning to the waiters on duty. From across the café terrace Josuke could see the two young men glance at each other – before launching into a game of rock-paper-scissors. There were, after all, rumours abound concerning what became of the last server to cross Yukako Yamagishi. He’d brought her a lukewarm tea, the story went – though for all that they were technically friends of a kind, Josuke was as much of a loss as anyone to say just how much of the rumour was true.

“However,” continued Yukako, “as you know, there are certain expectations placed upon a person when they enter a relationship. You’re not only choosing your partner, but the people your partner surrounds themselves with. You! – one Sleep Blaster, easy on the ice!” she snapped at the loser of the rock-paper-scissors contest, who’d slunk over to their table with his tail between his legs and his notepad and pencil held in trembling hands.

_You can’t choose your friends_, Josuke thought. And in a sense, it was true: if he’d been given the choice, he might not have elected to make friends with half a dozen or so people who, at some point or another, had all wanted him dead. Though, now that he’d gotten to know them all, like hell he’d ever consider trading a single one of them in – well, maybe with the exception of Rohan, but only on
the bad days.

“I guess,” he said.

“What I’m getting at is that it’s a kind of social contract. Since you and Koichi are friends, I’m under obligation to look out for your best interests. You need all the help you can get.”

There was something in her voice, held out before him like something to take hold of, a handshake or an apology – but before he could make sense of it Yukako was already pulling ahead of him at the only pace she knew: one foot ahead of the other and her gaze fixed firmly forward.

“Speaking of Koichi: I’m surprised he isn’t already here. He sounded so excited over the phone,” she mused, a soft unconscious smile briefly smoothing across her lips at the mention of Koichi’s name.

“What’s he want, anyway?” Josuke asked. And then, with a shiver of anxiety running across his stomach: “Did he find Daisuke?”

Yukako gave him a blank look. “Do you expect me to know exactly what Koichi is doing and thinking at all times?”

“Well – .”

“I have other hobbies, you know.”

He bit his tongue to keep himself from pointing out the way she said other hobbies, as if Koichi was something she’d picked up the same way other people took up ping pong or hiking. “Oh yeah?”

“There’s the scrapbooking, of course. But I have knitting too, and my cooking classes.” She lowered her chin, glaring intently at Josuke through thin, coal-black eyelashes. “You don’t learn to knit a sweater overnight and cook a five course meal just by reading how-to articles in teen magazines, Josuke.”

This she declared, with so much force and certainty, that Josuke could only conclude that Koichi Hirose was not an isolated incident: when it came to the things she was passionate about, Yukako Yamagishi was an all-or-nothing type of person.

A long stretch of silence followed, and for once Josuke was alright with it. He was starting to feel like Yukako was someone he didn’t mind being around when he was in a shitty mood, the way she didn’t bullshit around the bush – more like his mother than he’d ever dare to admit.

“Josuke,” she said all of a sudden, “are you lovesick?”

He’d been in the process of accepting a glass of iced tea from the waiter. The moment those words left her mouth his hand stilled, half-curled fingers going slack – and the glass slipped right through his them. The waiter bowed as deeply as he could, nearly grinding his nose into the cement in the process, mumbling all the while about deepest regrets, free appetizers, drinks on the house – but one look from Yukako sent him scrambling away.

Josuke was too stunned to notice.

“Why’d you say that?” he demanded.

“You look terrible.”

“I thought we already established that.”
“What I mean,” she continued, raising her voice as if daring him to try talking over her again, “is that you look the way I felt. Back… then.”

He didn’t need to ask to know what back then meant for her.

The thing was: he wasn’t lovesick. He was just worried, that’s all – and if the person he was worried about happened to be Okuyasu Nijimura, he failed to see what difference that made.

Over time, Okuyasu and his mannerisms were something Josuke had grown to count on. During the school year, Okuyasu would show up at his door at the exact same time every morning. He’d order the same thing off the menu whenever they went to a restaurant. And whenever they were together, Okuyasu would hang around him like he had nowhere else in the world to be, until Josuke had to all but tear himself away – if only because, unlike Okuyasu, his wellspring of social energy had a bottom.

But two nights ago, Okuyasu had bumbled his way through excuse after excuse, until eventually, he’d bumbled his way straight out the Higashikata’s front door.

“Look,” Josuke said. “I’m not lovesick, or anything like that. It’s just… Okuyasu’s been acting kinda weird lately.”

“In what way?” Yukako asked.

Josuke was on the verge of answering when he heard Koichi’s voice call out to them.

“Hey guys! What’s up?” he exclaimed as he tossed his briefcase on top of the table and scrambled up into one of the free seats. They’d made sure to grab a couple extras this time.

“Josuke’s lovesick,” Yukako said.

Koichi’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh! Josuke, you – ?”

“I’m not lovesick!” Josuke snapped.

“He’s worried because Okuyasu has been behaving strangely,” Yukako amended, in a tone that suggested there wasn’t really any difference.

“Okuyasu? Why, what’s wrong?”

They were both looking at him then, awaiting an answer, and Josuke couldn’t shake off the feeling that on some level, they were already blaming him. “We were hanging out the other day, right?” Josuke began. “And Okuyasu just… got up and left all of a sudden. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Did you notice anything unusual when you were hanging out?” Koichi asked, all genuine concern with an unabashed hint of gawking curiosity.

“Nah, we were just talking.”

This time, it was Yukako who asked the question. Josuke was starting to feel like he’d wandered into the middle of a good-cop-bad-cop skit. “About what?”

“Y’know. Stuff.”

Yukako and Koichi glanced at one another – looking for a reflection of their own skepticism in the other, he suspected.
“…It was about that summer,” Josuke quietly added.

“About the killer?” Koichi demanded.

“Nah. Okuyasu was asking what Jotaro was like when he was a teenager, so…”

Hereupon the contrast between Koichi and Yukako became most apparent: his eyes grew wide and bright, while she yawned and complained about the apparent complacency of the waitstaff for not having already brought Josuke a new drink. The two, after all, had greatly different impressions of Mr. Kujo. Koichi had seen Jotaro in the thick of battle; Yukako had seen him only in the thick of several equally regrettable wardrobe choices.

“What’d you say?” Koichi asked.

“I didn’t really *say* anything – we were just *talking*,” Josuke asserted. “Just… things I remembered about Jotaro, or thought I remembered. When he came to visit I was kinda pissed at first, the way he just showed up out of nowhere and didn’t seem to give a shit about anything. But he was so damn *cool*, you know? He showed me his stand, even taught me a neat trick for stealing pop cans from the vending machine."

Koichi looked at Josuke like he’d just told him that his family dog was run over by an ice cream truck. “*Jotaro* did?”

“It must run in the family,” Yukako remarked, quiet and calculated beneath Koichi’s disbelieving exclamation.

“Shit, that’s not even half of it. I remember him breaking into the *police station*, back when he was looking into the kidnappings.”

“Were you there?”

“Yeah. Sorta. I waited in the car. I mean, it wasn’t like he broke down the door or anything – he must have stopped time, grabbed the case files when no one was looking.”

As Josuke spoke, a grin spread its way across his face, starting out as just a quirk at one corner of his mouth and working its way outward until he could feel his smile like an elastic band of tension that wound its way from one cheek to the other,

“It was great, though. I spent the summer hanging out with him in the basement, playing video games and goofing off.”

A wrinkle of uncertainty set askew Koichi’s otherwise perfect expression of awe. “Did you used to live somewhere else, Josuke?”

The question took Josuke off guard, when it seemed to have no relation to the current conversation, but it was Yukako who asked: “Why do you say that?”

“It’s just… You said you hung out with Jotaro in a basement, right? That seems like something I would have remembered about your house.”

In the process of re-telling what he remembered to Okuyasu – and now to Koichi two days later – Josuke had been too caught up in a rosy whirlwind of nostalgia to pay attention to the granular details of his own story. As we have said before: in Morioh the layout of things, both as they are and how they should be, has a tendency to become muddled.
“We used to have a basement,” Josuke explained, and now that he was saying it out loud, it was strange to think that the room from his retellings, with its cold damp tiles and its wooden-frame couch and its rabbit-eared cathode-ray television, was now just memory without counterpart. “Mom had it filled in seven or eight years ago. There’s a crawlspace there now.”

Yukako actually winced. “I’m sure that must have done wonders for the property value.”

“Look, it wasn’t her fault. Back when grandpa built the house nobody bothered to tell him that it wasn’t a good idea to put a basement in, what with the neighbourhood being so low and close to the river. The basement must have flooded, eight, nine times that I remember, before mom barged into the house one day with a wheelbarrow full of gravel and a shovel. She said the insurance rate was going to put her out of the house anyway if things kept up, and that she wasn’t planning on going anywhere anytime soon so it didn’t matter what the house was worth. My grandpa made her call some professionals to get the job done, but I think she must’ve put down a good foot or so of gravel before he could stop her.”

“Charming,” mumbled Yukako. “If you told that story to Okuyasu, I can see how he might’ve gotten bored.”

“I never told him about the basement – he didn’t even ask!”

“So the only thing you said to him is what you told us about Jotaro?” Koichi asked.

“Yeah, mostly. I might’ve gone into more detail.”

He refrained from mentioning, of course, the way Okuyasu always made him lose his mind, made him say more than he ever meant to – that dangerous, intoxicating comfort Josuke took for granted.

Koichi was frowning now, lips flushed pale and pressed together in a thin line. “You don’t think Okuyasu could be in trouble, do you? – that this could be some kind of stand attack?”

“I doubt that,” Yukako muttered with feigned disinterest. “If Okuyasu were under a stand attack, we wouldn’t hear the end of it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Koichi said, though his expression was just as severe and thoughtful as before. “Come to think of it, Okuyasu hasn’t been around a whole lot lately. Do you know if he’s having problems at home or something, Josuke?”

The way both Koichi and Yukako looked at him just then, leaning forward with their elbows resting on the table, Josuke realized: they both expected him to know the answer. While they were all Okuyasu’s friends – even Yukako, in her own socially-contracted way – back when they were all in school it was Josuke who always went home with Okuyasu at the end of the day. There were aspects of Okuyasu only Josuke got to see, expressions and half-mumbled words that the others looked to him to translate. They understood one another – that’s what Josuke had said once, but that was then and now, with the others waiting on him for an answer he just didn’t have, it occurred to Josuke that perhaps he’d taken that familiarity for granted.

They’d done a whole lot of talking the night before, but it’d been more than that. He’d pushed things. His arms around Okuyasu’s waist, his head on Okuyasu’s chest. Letting their heat unfold around one another, the bare skin of their shoulders separated only by the water-barrier of sweat that sprung up wherever they touched. He’d been pushing things a lot lately. As much as Josuke was unwilling to see things change, he wasn’t the patient type either. He let the cart go before the horse, so to speak, because that was what they both wanted. Or at least, what he’d been sure they both wanted, from the way Okuyasu looked at him and the way he never pulled away when Josuke was
the one doing the chasing. But two nights ago, he’d felt the way Okuyasu had gone rigid like someone with sleep paralysis – wide awake and thrashing inside but unable to move a muscle. And when he had wrestled back control over his limbs, he’d immediately jumped up and excused himself.

The more Josuke thought about it, the more it seemed that Okuyasu’s recent string of disappearances happened to coincide with Josuke’s growing boldness and their inversely proportional shrinking proximity. That night on the beach, the kiss that almost but never was – he could practically trace the whole thing back to that night, the way Okuyasu had cut things off early the next time they’d hung out together.

In the August heat, panic ran like a draught of ice water from his head to his toes.

Koichi and Yukako were still looking at him, still expecting an answer, because Josuke was the one who claimed to know Okuyasu better than anyone else. And that was just it, wasn’t it? – he always assumed he knew what Okuyasu was thinking and what Okuyasu wanted. He never bothered to actually ask.

What if – .

From somewhere behind him he heard a yelp, and the sound of glass becoming acquainted with concrete.

“Aw jeez, man. Watch where you’re going next time!”

There was Okuyasu, and there was the missing waiter – the latter, in the midst of having a minor mental breakdown over the decimated remains of what was supposed to have been a replacement for Josuke’s first ill-fated beverage.

“Sorry m’late,” Okuyasu mumbled as he helped himself to the extra seat. He must have seen the way the others were looking at him with the guilty expressions of someone caught prematurely discussing the death of a friend – all but Yukako, on whom a polished neutral expression came about as naturally as any – because he stopped just then to chew at the inside of his cheek, before asking: “Did I miss somethin’?”

“We were just – !” Koichi began, only for his half-formed lie to die, aborted, at the back of his throat.

Josuke, whose conscious had over time built up an immunity to dissembling, fared little better. “… Talking,” he added, lamely.

It was Yukako who said, “We were discussing how we’re going to find the murderer.” – with her pale thin fingers steady as steel where they rested on the laminated pages of the café menu.

She could lie with the kind of easy grace of someone who’d been taught, by nature or nurture, that lying was as much a requisite social nicety as saying hello or goodbye.

Okuyasu just nodded, reaching up to run his thick, blunt fingers through his sweat-damp hair.

“Right. So we got this Daisuke guy’s full name now?”

“Actually,” said Koichi, “that’s what I wanted to talk about.”

From his bag, he produced a stack of papers, spreading them out across the table. From what Josuke could see, each page was identical to the last: rows and rows of names, and every one of them struck through with a red felt pen.

“This is a list of all the Daisukes who currently live in Morioh,” Koichi explained. “The man Josuke
met when he was little isn’t one of them.”

Okuyasu’s eyes roamed back and forth, scanning the pages line-by-line – despite having already been told that there was nothing useful or valuable contained within them. Something about him seemed off today. It was the way he held himself, back straight, hands folded in his lap – like he was playing charades and trying (and failing) to pantomime the way someone else might act.

“You don’t think he mighta changed his name or something?” Okuyasu asked.

“It’s more likely he moved away,” Yukako retorted.

“Well if he did, then we’re shit outta luck,” muttered Josuke. There was, in that pre-emptive declaration of defeat, an unexpected measure of relief. Part of him wanted Daisuke to remain buried, deep deep in the past where the first object of his admiration was free from all scrutiny and revision. “We don’t even know the guy’s full name.”

Koichi, on the other hand, was not so quick to give way to apathetic pessimism. He gathered up his papers, tapping them lightly against the table to straighten them out again – but even through this tidy flourish, Josuke couldn’t miss the self-satisfied grin that tugged his lips. “I’ve been thinking about that. I may have come up with a way of finding out Daisuke’s surname.”

“Yeah?” Josuke asked.

“You said Daisuke looked like a high schooler the first time you met in the winter of 1989, right? Well, I did some quick research, and it seems Budou-Ga Oka was a middle-only school up until 1991. Which means…”

“Ichio,” Yukako mumbled.

“Exactly!” Koichi exclaimed.

He and Yukako shared a knowing look, all soft-eyed and saccharine – Josuke thought he might be sick, and for once, we were quite in agreement.

Thankfully, Okuyasu was there to break up the otherwise awkward public display. “I-chio,” he mumbled, treading carefully over each syllable. “Whazzat?”

“It’s a river,” Josuke explained. “It runs west, past your place and the cemetery.”

The words were out before he could help them. Okuyasu’s eyes flitted off somewhere, and Josuke couldn’t blame him – he was acting like an idiot, scrambling to blurt out some silly bit of trivia as if that sort of thing would actually impress Okuyasu.

“I wasn’t thinking about the river,” Yukako corrected him.

Koichi nodded. From his school bag (which he carried everywhere with him even now in the midst of summer, out of force of habit or a pathological dependency on preparedness or some mixture of the two) he drew out a pen. As he spoke, he began to draw out a map on the back of the napkin in front of him. “Let’s see… back in the eighties and seventies, there were three schools in Morioh. On was Budou-Ga Oka – our school – which was just a middle school at the time. Then there was a primary school, but I can’t remember the name of it, and the high school: Ichio High.”

When Koichi lifted his hand, Josuke saw he’d drawn out a rough, exaggerated outline of the Pacific, as well as the river flowing inland, in bleeding blue lines of ink – and around it, three henscratch buildings: two north of the river, and one, south.
“Ichio High was given its name because of its proximity to the Ichio River,” Koichi went on to explain, tapping his pen against the southernmost building. “My mom went to school there, so I remember her telling me about it – apparently, the building was pretty old even when she was a student. The elementary school on the other side of the river was also in pretty rough shape. Around the time that the town was figuring out what to do, the new rail line to S City got built, and more and more people starting commuting. In the end, the town decided to amalgamate the high school and the middle school, and build a new elementary school.” On the napkin, Koichi drew an ‘X’ through Ichio High. “The reasoning was that there wasn’t as much need for a new high school building, since enrollment was lower in the non-compulsory grades, and it’d be just as fast for students on the outskirts of town to commute by train to S City as it would be to take the bus to school. What I’m trying to say is: if Daisuke was a high school student in Morioh in 1989, he would have been a student at Ichio High, which means his picture has got to be in the school yearbook somewhere.”

“Uh, dude,” Okuyasu mumbled. “That’s not a paper napkin, ya know?”

A short burst of watered-down curses – followed swiftly by a rescinding apology – tumbled from Koichi’s mouth, and then he was pressing the ink-stained napkin into Josuke’s hand. “Josuke – can you…?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

“Yes sure you don’t want me to erase that shit?” Okuyasu asked.

“…Like trimming your nails with a hedge clipper,” Yukako mumbled.

“Hey! I’ve been practicin’! I’m not Jotaro or anything but I’ve got some pretty fuckin’ ace precision.”

Josuke, in spite of everything – the last couple lonely days and his anger at himself and at Okuyasu for leaving him high and dry without a word – smiled as he brushed his hand over the white linen napkin, tracing away the lines of ink under his thumb until the map of Morioh was no more.

“And anyway,” Okuyasu was saying, “how’re we supposed to get our hands on any yearbooks if the school ain’t even around anymore?”

“Well,” said Koichi, “there’s one place that would still have copies of all the old yearbooks.”

***

A word or two concerning the Morioh Municipal Library:

The library itself was created upon the endowment of a modest collection of classic and contemporary texts – as well as a pittance of money – to the town of Morioh in 1876 by the will of a late local recluse. The building that currently houses the library’s collections is not the original, nor was the building before that; the library, as buildings filled with paper are wont to do, had caught fire and been razed to the ground more times than any living resident of Morioh could remember.

For all its vulnerability to discarded cigarettes and electrical sparks (or, on at least one occasion, a glass of water left on a windowsill by a staff member acting as a magnifying glass when exposed to the mid-afternoon sun), the library seldom suffered the effects of theft, unreturned books, or general unruly shenanigans. This was due mostly to the continued vigilance of the one and only librarian to have ever worked at the Morioh Municipal Library since its inception in 1876. This term she served despite the library’s frequent change of venue – because in a place like Morioh, where the boundary between worlds is at its thinnest, the site of a haunting may be as broad as an entire town, or a public...
institution with an unfortunate proclivity for spontaneous combustion. Morioh’s Librarian is perhaps the only documented case in all of the town’s history of a ghost going unrecognized as such for any extended period of time – 123 years, by our count. That in those 123 years not one of library’s patrons took notice of the Librarian’s unchanging appearance is perhaps not so surprising, given the stubborn persistence of the notion that all librarians are variations on the same paradigm: straight-backed, bespectacled, and downright fiendish. No one could be bothered to look too long or too closely at the Librarian, when she had the sort of gaze that could sour milk and the sort of voice that rattled out like the creaking of old pipes. Nor did the town council take any notice of the Librarian’s unusually long tenure; at present, she made the same wages she did at the time of her death in 1891, and the expenditure of 8 grams of silver daily – or, approximately two yen a week – went summarily unnoticed by all.

As for the reasons behind the strength and longevity of the Librarian’s manifestation: there is no power on earth more enduring than a love of books and a profound disregard for the general competence of humanity. In all her years of service, the Librarian had made only one friend: a one-of-a-kind book with an alluring title and a habit of punishing its readers with a nigh-incomprehensible plot and the occasional verbal insult. The Librarian spoiled that book with all the thoroughness of a parent, and in turn it made itself comprehensible only to her, and even then, it seldom had little more to say than the occasional plea for a handsome new dust jacket or a shelf with a better view. Of all the books in the library, *Enigma* alone was permitted to break with the strict sanity of the Dewey decimal system for the sake of watching the frequenters of Horror section gasp and fidget and nail-bite their way through terror and peril.

Even habits 123 years in the making, however, require the occasional concession. The libraries of S City had already branched out to include music and film in their collections – the Morioh Municipal Library (and by extension, the Librarian), were soon under pressure to do the same. Thus, after many long months of petition by Morioh’s Video and Media Club, Movie Night was created – under the condition that said practice follow all existing library rules.

Including, amongst other things, a strict observance of silence at all times.

“The fuck’s *Movie Night*?” Okuyasu asked. He was gazing at the poster taped to the library’s front door, which conveyed the name and date of the aforementioned event through the creative application of comic sans and clipart.

“No idea,” Josuke grumbled. Much to his dismay, the group gathered outside the library doors was a couple heads larger than their usual crowd at *Deux Maggots*.

“It’s something the Video and Media Club started up,” Rohan replied. “When you think about it, the library is the perfect location for it – they already have the space and equipment.”

How he’d weaseled his way into tagging along was beyond Josuke, though he suspected Koichi and Koichi’s saint-like benevolence had something to do with it. Apparently, just being kept up to date on how investigations were going wasn’t enough for Rohan. He wanted to *experience* his material (all for the sake of authenticity, he claimed). Josuke shouldn’t have been surprised – pretending to be the protagonist of his own story was exactly the kind of thing a guy with Rohan’s ego would enjoy.

As for the other newcomer…

“Why are you here again?” Josuke asked.

Mikitaka shook the hair out of his eyes and grinned, cold and sharp as a surgeon’s knife under those perpetually curious and clinical eyes of his. “Mister Kishibe mentioned he was going to the library. I thought I would come along and study how your species organizes and stores its knowledge.”
“Why, are you planning on starting up an invasion or something?” Josuke joked.

Mikitaka hummed, pleasant and unmusical. “Interplanetary aggression is not part of my directive.”

The way he said it, with just a decibel too much emphasis on the my, left Josuke wondering if there were other directives out there that did involve some Independence Day-level shit.

Just then, he heard the door swing open. When he glanced up there was Yukako, halfway through the threshold, stray threads of hair lit up like silver filaments where they framed her quarter-turned face.

“I’m not sitting out here all night,” she mumbled, before slipping fully inside. The darkness closed on her first, followed by the door – squealing on its too-tight hinges before shutting with a soft click.

As soon as it closed, the door was pulled open again – and held open this time, thanks to Koichi, who waved them inside with a dip of his head that to Josuke had the feeling of a prepared apology.

“We can split up,” he whispered, half drowned-out by the sound of the door as he eased it back into place behind him. “Rohan and Mikitaka, you can take the west wing, and Josuke and Okuyasu, you can take the east wing. Meet up back in the middle if you find the yearbooks.”

“Ok!” Mikitaka exclaimed.

Koichi winced. “You have to whisper when you’re in the library,” he hissed.

“Ok,” Mikitaka repeated, in a forced whisper that Josuke was certain half the library could hear.

At Rohan, Koichi directed a pleading look.

Rohan, in turn, peeled himself from the wall with a monumental show of effort normally reserved for theatrical actors or small children throwing a fit. “Fine. I’ve got this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Relax,” Rohan muttered.

Already, he was in the process of grasping Mikitaka by the arm and leading him somewhere far away. As the pair slipped between a darkened aisle of bookshelves, Josuke could hear Mikitaka ask in a stage whisper if human books were vulnerable to sound the same way he was.

When Koichi turned back to them, the nervous smile on his face had frozen over, lines of tension where his lips propped up the weight of his cheeks. “I should get caught up with Yukako – meet you guys back here later!” he whispered, before darting off past the (presently unattended) circulation desk.

Koichi was being painfully obvious – but whether he was forcing the two of them to work alone together for Josuke’s benefit or for Okuyasu’s was as good as a coin-toss guess. As far as Josuke was aware, Koichi was just worried about Okuyasu, same as him – but sometimes he got the feeling that the little guy was more perceptive than he let on. Maybe, if that were the case, this was supposed to be Josuke’s big break to patch things up.

Now, fixing things was what Josuke was good at. But it was awful hard to fix a thing when you didn’t know what was wrong with it in the first place. He and Okuyasu weren’t dating, so it wasn’t like they were in need of any kind of relationship troubleshooting. They were friends, the close and comfortable kind – he didn’t think that had changed any. Rather, the problem seemed to be all on his
end, in the way he felt and in the things he wanted, and how all at once he wasn’t reading Okuyasu loud and clear anymore the way he thought he should be. Like they were a set of two-way radios, and Josuke’s radio happened to be broken. There Okuyasu was, not two feet from him, eyes on the floor and his fingers running unconsciously over the dips and swells of his knuckles where there’d once been scars, and where there were now only memories, but for all that, Josuke was worried that he wouldn’t be able to say the things he wanted to say the way he wanted to say them – or worse – that he was hearing Okuyasu all wrong, or not at all.

Regardless – something was in need of fixing and therefore it was Josuke’s responsibility to fix it, but it was Okuyasu who spoke first. At normal volume his voice had a sandpaper grit; when he was trying to be quiet, the roughness did not shrink to accommodate the smallness of his voice. His words ground out like stone on stone, and Josuke caught nothing.

“What was that?”

“I said I’ve been to the library before, but I ain’t ever seen any yearbooks.” He paused, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. “…ain’t ever been dark before either.”

It was strange that all the overhead lights in the library were out. Thinking about that was all Josuke could do to distract himself from the sudden, intrusive thought: that to Okuyasu, he seemed like the type of person who would just assume he’d never been to a library in his life.

“They probably keep yearbooks somewhere out of the way,” he heard himself say. “Tucked away on a bottom shelf or some shit.”

“Probably. Maybe they keep ’em in with, like… ancient history.”

“Yeah. Or self-help.”

“Self-help?” Okuyasu asked.

“Because you feel a whole lot better about yourself after looking through someone else’s old yearbook.”

When Okuyasu grinned at him, he felt like they’d been paused in freeze-frame; time resumed, the film continued to roll, and they were moving again, two-by-two toward the library’s west wing.

There were only a handful of other people in the library. They were scattered, one to a table, the translucent honey light of desk lamps trailing off into the dark like a solemn processing of paper lanterns along a river. Somewhere, deeper in the library, there was another source of light that Josuke couldn’t see – he caught glimpses of it second-hand, in the shifting silver beams that played across the ceiling and that appeared and disappeared between the cracks in the books along the bookshelves.

He only realized he’d been spacing out when Okuyasu tugged on his wrist and hissed: “Local history?”

It took Josuke a second to process that he’d been asked a question. And then he shrugged – only to realize after the fact that Okuyasu probably couldn’t see the barely-there rise and fall of his shoulders in the dark.

“Sure,” he mumbled. “Might as well take a look.”

He tried not to read too heavily into it when Okuyasu’s hand stayed locked around his wrist as he pulled him down the aisle in question. He tried not to notice the way Okuyasu’s skin felt warm
where his rough, textured thumb pad slid across the inside of Josuke’s wrist, directly over his pulse point. He tried not to think about the fact that they were alone in the dark together, just like they were at the bonfire, and just like back then his throat was scratchy with the secrets he wanted to spill and the confessions he wanted to make, because it felt so much easier to say anything when the world and its tomorrows and its consequences were swept away behind the black curtain of present and proximity.

“Kinda hard to see anything like this,” Josuke mumbled, pulling his hand free as he crouched down in front of the bookshelf.

“You don’t got a flashlight do you?” asked Okuyasu.

“I was hoping you’d have one.”

“Sorry.”

It was an innocuous word – probably said more out of force of habit than anything else – but it struck something raw in Josuke’s nerves. “Dude, don’t apologize,” he grumbled. “It’s not like I asked you to bring one.”

“Yeah, but – .”

“Look. I made an assumption, and it was wrong, alright? You don’t have to fuckin’ feel sorry about that. You don’t ever have to feel sorry for something like that.”

An aborted, half-formed word that sounded suspiciously like the start of another apology escaped Okuyasu’s mouth, but then he went quiet. Josuke went back to scanning the bookshelf, feeling somehow shittier than he did five seconds ago, something like shame bubbling up and breaking out across his body in fever-hot pinpricks.

“You think these tall ones might be yearbooks?” Okuyasu asked after a while.

“I don’t know.”

He pulled one of the books Okuyasu was pointing to off the shelf, a silver sliver of light rushing in to fill in the gap left behind. When he cracked the book open and held it up to the light, he was just able make out bits and pieces of what he was looking at: a few justified paragraphs and several illustrative photocopies of old newspaper articles, all about some long-forgotten local earthquake. Definitely not a yearbook.

Josuke was just about to slide the book back in its place, when through the gap in the bookshelf something caught his eye.

Movement. The monochrome flash of a sword.

He yelped and stumbled backwards, elbows bumping up against the bookshelf behind him.

“What’s up?” Okuyasu asked.

“Nothing, I just… thought I saw something.”

“Saw something?” Okuyasu repeated. Bending forward, he peered through the gap between the books. Then: “Dude! Check this out.”

Okuyasu pulled an armful of books from the bookshelf, setting them on the ground before waving
Josuke over. They pressed in, shoulder-to-shoulder. Through the gap, Josuke could see the other side of the shelf, where all dozen-odd members of Morioh’s Video and Media Club – most of whom were aged between six and sixteen – were scattered across the carpeted floor, kneeling or reclining resting back on elbows before a projection screen with various expressions of boredom and confusion. A silent sword fight played out across the screen, actors pacing and turning and swinging their arms with the choreographed precision of a kabuki drama. Josuke might have mistaken it for a filmed play, if it weren’t for the jarring way the images were stitched together, characters disappearing from the frame or shifting position between cuts.

Beside him, the silver light of the projector shifted softly across Okuyasu’s rough-cut features.

“What’s that?”

“A microfilm.”

After hours, the library lights were all off with the exception of the circulation desk, where a banker’s lamp lit the face of the library’s sleepless, undying guardian from below. Every now and then she would lift her head from her work to glare across the room and the two of them, pre-emptively scolding them for crimes they had not yet committed.

For all that S City’s libraries were bigger and better stocked, there was one advantage the Morioh Municipal Library held over its well-funded counterparts in the city: even when the doors were locked the library was never closed, not really. Not so long as the Librarian was there to let you in, which she always was – provided you were there on the purpose of serious reading or research.

There were few purposes as serious as the investigation of a potential serial murderer.

“Is it… like a movie?” Josuke asked, trying and failing to extrapolate from his pool of technical knowledge, which beyond the realm of video games, had a tendency to run rather shallow.

“No. They’re images of documents. Newspapers.”

Josuke glared down at the film cells, trying (pretending, more than anything) to make out lines of text, individual pictures – even so much as the familiar block and grid layout of a newspaper page. Nothing.

“You must need a magnifying glass to read something that small,” he remarked by way of self-reassurance.

“That’s what this machine’s for,” Jotaro explained. He was talking about the bulky device in front of him, which Josuke had mistaken for a computer at first – only now, on closer inspection, did he notice that it had neither a mouse nor a keyboard. “It uses light to project the image onto the screen.”

As always, there was a level, almost textbook quality to Jotaro’s explanation. He’d never once heard an edge of impatience in Jotaro’s voice when he attempted (often, with little success) to convey to Josuke the finer points of subjects not even in his vocabulary. Sometimes, Josuke wondered if Jotaro was even aware that he was speaking at times like these – it was like he was on autopilot, some misfiring part of his machine-brain regurgitating compulsively hoarded facts at the prompting of an offhand passphrase, a coincidental jumble of keywords. But all that was normal, from what he knew, or thought he knew, of the man he’d spent the last couple weeks in the company of – there was something else tonight, a ponderous heaviness in his voice like the words were sitting heavy on his tongue.
Josuke was too busy gazing up at Jotaro’s face, at the chemical serenity that settled like frost over his eyes as he explained how the controls worked and at the silver light of the microfilm reader that settled across the planes of his face, that he missed the way Jotaro’s hands fumbled with the film as he threaded it across the glass plate and through the takeup reel.

The film hissed as Josuke pressed the red forward button and the motorized takeup reel spun and spun. Across the screen flashed ribbons of newsprint and blurred images, with no reason or progression to any of it other than the occasional glimpses he got of the ever-incrementing date at the upper left hand corner of each page. He wasn’t sure what they were looking for, exactly, but Jotaro sure seemed to know.

“Right here. Stop.”

And then he was reading out loud, stiff and formal and unenunciated, as if he were just repeating the words phonetically without really digesting their meaning:

“Nakamura Hiroshi disappeared from his bedroom sometime after midnight on May 14th, 1986. Police investigations discovered that Nakamura’s bedroom window on the second floor was open, but there was no sign of forced entry. Security footage from a bank across the street showed five year-old Nakamura leaving the house through the front door.”

Jotaro tilted his head down, watching Josuke carefully. “Does that sound like it might be your suspect?”

“How should I know? Doesn’t sound like anything special to me.”

“It’s in the details. The open window – doesn’t that seem strange to you? If someone – ,” here, Jotaro lowered his voice, “if someone were standing below the window, they could have spoken to Nakamura. Pretended to be a friend of his, maybe.”

“I don’t – .”

“There’s more.”

And so Jotaro went on, winding and winding the film until he was looking at another article, another tragedy. It wasn’t the kidnappings or the murders themselves that started to get to Josuke – he’d seen worse on evening television. What got to him were the ages – three, eight, seven, five. Six. While there were some older kids and teens mentioned too, for the most part the victims were all around the same age as him. He tried to picture himself waking up in the dead of night, a stranger with a familiar voice waiting for him just beyond the porch lights’ reach – but in this regard his brain was mercifully deficient in creativity, and instead of a human face it supplied archetypes of boogeymen and ghouls, the sorts of creatures that would keep him up all hours of the night but that would never, ever frighten him one lick in the rational light of day.

Eventually, Jotaro gave up reading the articles out loud. He sat hunched over the microfilm reader in silence, one hand wrapped around the corner of the screen and the other curled over the forward button, while Josuke peered over his shoulder at the window above, watching the greasy tracks of rain race down the window while he listened to the soothing whisper of film sliding over glass.

He was just beginning to get lost in the memory, the black and white images onscreen bleeding into the black and white impressions of newsprint, when – .

“Did that guy just turn into a frog?” Josuke demanded.
“It’s supposed to be based on some old legend or somethin’,” Okuyasu explained. “Movie’s called *Jiraiya the Hero*.”

“Why’s it quiet?”

“It’s old as shit, dude. They didn’t have sound back then.”

Something clicked for Josuke just then. “You’ve seen this movie before?”

Beside him, Okuyasu went taught, like he’d turned to stone. “Yeah.”

And that, Josuke thought, was all he was going to get – but then after a moment Okuyasu licked his lips and added. “My… uh, my brother likes silent films. Or he did.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. He was more into the ones from Russia and stuff, like *Battleship Potemkin* and all that.”

Suddenly, it was like he was standing beside a whole other person. Okuyasu never spoke about growing up, especially not about Keicho – but here he was, word by word dredging up the drowned child of his past, as if all along he’d been putting up a dam. Now that it’d ruptured, there was no holding back the flood.

“He told me once that he liked films without sound ‘cause of how the movie could change based on what whatever you had playing in the background while you were watchin’ it. Keicho didn’t care for movies too much but he loved music. Kinda weird that someone like that would like silent movies, but – I guess in a way, it made sense. Whenever he took me to the movie theatre to see a new release he used to complain that he didn’t like the music. He was real particular about that sorta thing. When he watched silent films he’d put on his own music. Me, I didn’t understand much about the stuff, and the movies were all kinda boring but… sometimes there’d be a certain combination of a song and a movie and it’d just get to me. Like, I’d watched *A Page of Madness* with Keicho a few times, and I always hated it, but then one time he played some Beethoven shit during the opening – the first movement of Moonlight Sonata, I think – and I cried like a fuckin’ baby.”

On the other side of the bookshelf, the movie continued to play, but Josuke couldn’t tear his eyes off Okuyasu. In the midst of playing through the memory his entire face became animated, alive, as though he were a part of the performance, the way the flickering film reel cast him in black and white. He was all softness, liquid eyes and dust-mote halo, backlit like a Hollywood starlet, only this was *Okuyasu* and he was near and so real it made his jaw ache. And Josuke thought: it was a shame that Okuyasu wasn’t more of a storyteller, because he was a natural for the part. Unselfconscious in his word choice, but fully invested, the way he immersed himself in the memory until it was just it, and him, and the stream-of-conscious recollection as he picked his way through familiar corridors, familiar rooms.

“Sometimes, he wouldn’t play any kinda music. It’d be just the movie, and the house, all quiet-like. It used to piss me off; all that quiet. I couldn’t stand it. When there was music there was music, and you knew you were supposed to shut your damn mouth and just watch the movie, ‘cause it’s rude talking over fuckin’ Beethoven, you know? But just sittin’ there, no sound, no music, and knowing I still wasn’t allowed to say nothing…”

All the while that Okuyasu was talking, Josuke found himself drifting closer and closer, until their shoulders were tucked into one another, their noses threatening to bump together. There was a stupid grin on Okuyasu’s lips, words breathy with laughter, but at the same time there was an underlying tremble to his voice too, a crack in the brittle nonchalance he’d built up around his childhood, and
Josuke couldn’t stop thinking about kissing him, the image of himself of doing so playing over and over in his head like a catchy half-remembered song.

But then as he drew closer he saw the way Okuyasu drew back, how his eyes went wide and elsewhere. He saw the little quiver of fear that ran across Okuyasu’s lower lip – and just as soon as the impulse was there it was gone, replace with a cold, gnawing feeling in his chest.

The expression on Okuyasu’s face was not one he ever, ever wanted to see, let alone be the cause of.

“You alright, dude?” he asked, trying to keep his voice as light and as level as possible.

Before Okuyasu could answer, a feeling that could only be described as a presence settled over the two of them. They both turned at the same time to see the long, gaunt figure of the librarian at the end of the aisle. Her eyes seemed to have their own source of light, and even from twenty feet away in the near-dark both Josuke and Okuyasu could feel the intensity of their glare. Her clothes were a century out of date, and if Josuke’s memory were better he might have recognized her dress as the same one she’d worn when he was six and she, still Morioh’s librarian. But she was exactly what he thought a librarian ought to look like, and therefore, he thought nothing of it.

Without so much as uttering a word, the Librarian lifted one thin, bone-white finger to her pursed, wrinkled lips.

When Okuyasu turned back to Josuke, there was a completely different expression of fear in his eyes – one, Josuke suspected, that he was wearing too.

“Oh, guess we should be getting back to the others,” he whispered, cupping his hand over his mouth as if doing so would possibly keep the Librarian’s hawkish ears from overhearing.

Josuke, at least, had enough sense not to reply: he nodded adamantly before leading the swift retreat back toward the center of the library, Okuyasu tailing after him all the way. The others all finished their sweep around the same time they were making their way back, all three groups converging around a study table, just below the raised platform on which the Video and Media Club was hosting its Movie Night.

Rohan and Mikitaka, at least, had been successful in their endeavour. The two of them arrived with their arms loaded down with books. Ichio High’s yearbooks, to be exact – every last one of them from between 1975 and 1991.

“If we go through one book each, starting at 1991 and working our way backward, it shouldn’t take long,” Koichi said, ever the picture of optimism.

The table shook when Yukako dropped the by-now familiar scrapbook onto its center. Josuke figured there had to be at least ten, twenty pounds worth of glitter and decorative felt in the thing – to say nothing of the paper, glue, and acetate.

“This is the student we’re looking for,” Yukako reminded them, opening the scrapbook to Rohan’s drawing of Daisuke.

They got down to work, each of them with a yearbook spread open before them under the weak light of the table’s desk lamps. What should have been an easy cover-to-cover sprint, however, somehow dragged on. Between the jabs and the gawking at awful school uniforms and even worse hair (as if any of them had the right to criticize – we’ve seen the way they dress themselves!), ten minutes passed before any of them were through with their yearbook.

Josuke was just grateful for the distraction. With the others around them, Okuyasu seemed to revert
back to his original self – grumbling, joking, poking his tongue out of corner of his mouth as he struggled to concentrate on the task at hand. And with Okuyasu acting like his old self, it was easy for Josuke to act like nothing had changed – and that nothing, by extension, was wrong.

“Is this your friend?” Mikitaka asked, pointing to one of the photographs in the yearbook. He had, within the past ten minutes, asked the exact same question six times.

Josuke groaned and lowered his face to his hands; the rest didn’t bother looking up. “Dude, for the last time – they don’t look anything alike!”

“No?” Frowning, Mikitaka turned the book onto its side and squinted at it. “The male pictured has symmetrical features, two light detection organs, one protrusion with two nasal cavities, one oral cavity . . .”

“Dude, literally everyone has those!”

“And you wonder why I have such trouble telling all of you apart.”

Across the table, Koichi suddenly went still. “Guys. Where’s Rohan?”

Slowly, Josuke lifted his face from his hands – just as a clear, theatrical voice stirred amid the library’s dusty silence:

“…And then, just as Orochimaru’s followers closed in on Jiraiya, he whipped together a pinch of magic . . . and turned into a giant frog!”

Sure enough, when the five of them slunk up to edge of the platform, there was a giant frog at the center of the flickering image onscreen.

Rohan had his hackles up as he prowled up and down with exaggerated menace past the Video and Media Club’s younger members, who were trying and failing to hold back bouts of giggles.

“Gug gug gug!” Rohan rumbled, in time to the opening and closing of the giant frog’s mouth. “Who wants to feed me next?”

He lurched forward with a roar and the kids in the front row squealed and flinched.

“And then, just like that – Jiraiya was gone! And all of Orochimaru’s baddies were left with their swords pointed at one another.”

“You know,” Yukako began.

“Don’t,” Josuke warned.

“Jiraiya’s hair looks a bit like Josuke’s doesn’t it?”

Just then, the breaker went off with a loud thunk. The children screamed, for real this time.

When the projector reeled back to life, there were no images of battle or magic on screen – only a flickering square of light, and standing framed inside it, the Librarian.

“Noise and horseplay are not permitted in the library,” she boomed. For someone of her profession, she certainly knew how to make her voice carry.

Rohan blinked, smiled cordially at her, and then, without further ado, proceeded to launch into a long, surprisingly nuanced explanation of the history of benshi performance in Japanese silent
cinema, and how by stripping silent film of its spoken-word component she was, essentially, telling the entirety of a rich cultural tradition to go fuck itself. He concluded by comparing the Librarian unfavourably to several fascist political figures, and by ascribing to her, on no uncertain terms, the entirety of post-modern decline.

Had Josuke and co. not been so preoccupied with such tediously mortal concerns such as ‘running’ and ‘not being murdered by the librarian’, they might have noticed that throughout her pursuit, the Librarian’s heels were floating two or three inches off the ground. As it were: all six of them escaped by the skin of their teeth, thanks in part to Koichi’s clever suggestion that they split up (“she can’t chase all of us at once!”), and in part to the practical limitations of trans-planar negotiation. After all: no matter how powerful and vindictive a spirit the Librarian might have been, she was still a bound ghost, and therefore, unable to pursue her quarry any further than the library’s front steps.

“I can’t believe we stole library books,” Koichi rasped between gulping in deep, desperate draughts of air. He looked like a fish out of water, the way he was half propped-up against the wall of the post office, behind which the six of them were, at present, hiding. “They weren’t even lending copies!”

“I can’t believe we haven’t found Daisuke’s yearbook photo yet,” Yukako grumbled. She was in the process of leafing through the 1977 yearbook. “I thought you said he was a high schooler when you saw him in 1989.”

“I mean, he looked like he was,” Josuke mumbled. “He had the uniform and all that.”

Rohan snorted. He was looking pretty pleased with himself, for someone who’d just told a 123 year old woman to fuck off. “Always wearing a school uniform at inappropriate times – sounds like someone else we know.”

“Guys!” Okuyasu piped up. “I think I found him!”

All six of them pressed in at once to peer at the page Okuyasu currently had open in his lap. The photos were of an eleventh grade class – and there, smiling at the camera from the back row, was Daisuke. Josuke was sure it was him, from the lurching feeling of familiarity that took hold in his chest.

“Doesn’t look like they wrote the names anywhere,” Okuyasu mumbled.

“We should check for his senior pictures!” Koichi exclaimed. “We can probably find his name there, and maybe some other useful info in his writeup – what year is that book from, Okuyasu?”

Okuyasu turned the book over, glancing at the cover. “Uh. 1976.”

Which meant Daisuke would have been at least thirty when Josuke met him. He wondered if he’d been mistaken – thought the man had been younger than he really was. But whenever he tried to call forth an image of Daisuke into his mind, all he could see was a teenager’s face: no lines or wrinkles, not even a grey hair in sight.

“I’ve already been through the graduate photos,” murmured Yukako. With the initial buzz of discovery worn off, she’d gone back to flipping through the 1977 book. “He’s not there.”

“You sure you looked at all of ‘em?” Okuyasu asked.

Yukako lowered the book just long enough to give Okuyasu a pointed glance – and with that, he promptly shut his mouth.

“Well,” Koichi bean. “I suppose he could have moved away.”
“Yeah, but in that case we’re just stepping in the same shit as before,” said Josuke. “No leads, no way of finding him – nothing!”

Yukako had been just about to turn to the next page without looking, when she glanced down – and her hand froze. It was enough that the rest of the gang immediately took notice.

“Is that Josuke’s friend?” Mikitaka asked, leaning over Yukako’s shoulder.

Beside him, Okuyasu let out a huff. “I told you you mighta jus’ missed him.”

“I said I checked the senior photographs,” Yukako said – slow and measured, even for her. “This isn’t a senior photograph.”

Curious, Koichi leaned in to get a look for himself – and immediately let out a soft “oh.”

“What?” Josuke demanded.

Despite Josuke’s unnecessarily rude tone, when Koichi looked up at him there was nothing but apology written on his face. “Josuke,” he began, “you’re not going to like it.”

“Show me.”

Before Koichi could stop her, Yukako handed Josuke the yearbook.

The first thing he noticed about the opened page was that the layout was practically identical to the one in Yukako’s scrapbook: yellow background, red flowers, and at the center of it all, Daisuke’s picture. As if Yukako’s layout were the original, and the twenty year old yearbook page had been photocopied from it. Even the photograph and the drawing were identical, from the angle to the expression, and it was almost enough to make him wonder if Rohan, too, didn’t have some kind of weird psychic bullshit going on.

There were only two major differences between the yearbook page and Yukako’s scrapbook layout.

At the top of the page, where Yukako had left a blank beside Daisuke’s name, there was a surname: Mitsukoshi.

At the bottom of the page, where there were only red flowers in Yukako’s layout, there was additional text. Two dates, separated by a dash. One on the left, one on the right.

Suddenly, Josuke was six again, in the library with Jotaro, seeing in newsprint the ages of children just like him.

The only difference was that Daisuke Mitsukoshi had been eighteen.

Chapter End Notes

Not much of a plot twist, since I'm pretty sure everyone saw it coming from miles and miles away, but hey!

I'm looking forward to writing the next chapter haha.

If you're curious about the movie from this chapter, you can watch it for yourself here!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnacAyzpf-M
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The gang sets out to find Daisuke.

Chapter Notes

Time 2 inflict some ridiculously specific headcannons about background characters on all of you. I'm so sorry.

Finding out that Daisuke Mitsukoshi was dead was the easy part. Finding out the cause of death – and why Daisuke was playing the good Samaritan more than ten years after supposedly parting ways with this world – was the hard part. All anyone seemed to know was that sometime between the summer of 1976 and the summer of 1977, Daisuke Mitsukoshi had gone from one of three dozen students all lined up and crowded together for their junior year photo, to having his own single-page spread – a footnote at the very back of the yearbook, out of sight and out of mind.

Finding out what happened might have been facilitated through the Morioh Municipal Library’s carefully curated archive of the past 100 years of local and national news on microfilm, but on account of Rohan’s spontaneous benshi performance, and Okuyasu accidentally erasing an entire shelf of first edition prints in the struggle to escape the Librarian following said benshi performance, and Josuke calling the Librarian an ‘old broad’ when she tried to chastise Okuyasu following said wanton erasure of property, the entire group, barring any and all chance of appeal, was banned indefinitely from the library premises.

After countless phonecalls with the police, the newspaper publisher, and even the office of the mayor, the six of them ended up at Johnny’s on the day following the library incident. There, they affected the motions of doing something productive by ordering a plate of the parlor’s latest concoction: a monstrosity dubbed the ice cream slider, which consisted of a sacrilegious marriage between ice cream, chocolate sauce, and two donuts.

“You know,” Koichi began, looking every bit as despairing as someone an ice cream slider and a half into a conundrum ought to be, “we could always just ask Daisuke how he died.”

“Whaddya mean?” Okuyasu asked.

“I mean – we need to find out what happened to Yuki Imai anyway. That’s the whole reason for finding Daisuke in the first place. Besides,” here Koichi’s voice slid down into a volume range strictly reserved for hair-brained theories, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“Daisuke Mitsukoshi died in 1977… that would have been only a few years before the last string of abductions began! And didn’t you say he acted like he knew the killer?”
Up until that point, Josuke had been in the process of gnawing on the end of his straw with a vacant look on his face. Just now he paused and pulled the straw out from his mouth, jabbing the flattened end in Koichi’s direction. “You saying our murderer might’ve killed Daisuke?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It could have been a – warmup, almost.”

“Or a moment of realization,” Yukako mumbled.

She had been distracted by the process of attempting to cut her ice cream slider into dainty morsels with a flimsy plastic knife. So far, all she had to show for her efforts was a soggy donut puree.

“If he’d never killed before, he might have been sloppy,” she continued. “First-timers usually are. He might have left clues behind. If it were me I would probably go out of my way to cover up the crime as much as possible.”

“Son of a bitch,” Josuke growled.

Beside him, he heard a creaking sound, followed by a loud crunch.

“Do you think your friend Daisuke is a ghost?” asked Mikitaka through a mouthful of crushed ice. He’d forgone the ice cream sliders in favor of a sundae dish full of whole ice cubes.

“He’s gotta be!”

Mikitaka made a thoughtful clicking sound at the back of his throat. To the horror of everyone else present, he reached for the ketchup bottle and proceeded to squeeze out a watery drizzle of ketchup all over his bowl of ice.

“What are they like?” Mikitaka asked as he popped another ice cube into his mouth. “Ghosts, I mean.”

“Dude, you should know,” Okuyasu said. “You were there when we said goodbye to Reimi!”

“Technically, yes.”

“Technically,” Rohan repeated, the question mark going unpronounced at the end of his sentence.

“I overheard all of you speak to someone,” Mikitaka offered. “And when you all looked up at the sky, I thought it would be rude if I didn’t do it too.”

A beat of silence, then –

“Oh my God,” said Josuke.

“You couldn’t see her?” Rohan asked. “At all?”

“Or hear her, no.”

“Quit fucking around,” Josuke said. “Even if you are an alien or whatever, there’s still no reason you couldn’t see Reimi. Ghosts aren’t, like, a stand thing – anyone can see them!”

“Actually, there is a strong link between belief in ghosts and the likelihood of seeing one,” Yukako said, as if she hadn’t just conversed with a ghost a few weeks ago.

“Actually, I had a theory,” said Mikitaka. “I believe the ability to see ghosts may be tied to object permanence!”
“What now?” Okuyasu asked.

“It’s what allows me to know that my ice cream slider is sitting right here in front of me even when I’m not looking at it,” explained Rohan.

To demonstrate, he proceeded to reach for his ice cream slider – only to grasp empty air. He immediately zeroed in on Josuke, whose face was caked in powdered sugar and guilt.

“I was feeling kinda peckish,” he offered by way of apology.

“Mister Kishibe is right,” Mikitaka said. “It’s very useful, which is why most intelligent species in the galaxy have it!”

“But if you have it too, then why couldn’t you see Reimi?” Koichi asked.

“Even if object permanence is a trait many species share, it doesn’t always work the same way! There are some species that have an extremely short-term object permanence, so when they look away from an object they only remember that it exists for a few seconds. Then there are other species who, if you show them an object and then put a screen up in front of you, can still track the movement of the object even without the ability to see it.”

From the sundae dish Mikitaka removed an ice cube. He set it in the middle of the table.

“Humans, I think, have a special kind of object permanence when it comes to other humans. Not only does your kind have a tendency to think of people as existing even after death, but apparently, you can sometimes see and hear the your dead too. It’s a lot like this ice cube.”

Over the ice cube, Mikitaka draped his napkin.

“…I can’t see it anymore, but I know it’s still there. And if I look close enough I can see the outline of it through the napkin.”

“Yes, and if you draw a couple of eye holes on it you’ll even have something that looks like a ghost,” Rohan remarked. “But really – isn’t that more like an after image?”

“An afterimage is more like a snapshot,” Yukako retorted. “A static representation of something in a moment in time. Ghosts have a consciousness that continues to exist in flux.”

“Not necessarily. It’s not like Reimi ever got any older – and she still had the marks from Kira.”

An argument ensued over whether ghosts were an example of object permanence or a physiological phenomenon, with Mikitaka and Koichi playing the unfortunate buffers between Yukako and Rohan. Occasionally, one or the other would attempt to divert the conversation by way of contributing their own input, only to be immediately and thoroughly dressed down.

Neither Rohan nor Yukako was entirely correct. On one hand, spirits are not static beings. They can act according to their free will, and make new memories. On the other hand, ghosts do not develop or change either. From the moment a person dies, their spirit is in a state of decay. If they do not move on from the physical world, their personality, their identity, their memories of their old life, the sum of everything they were and never will be again, erodes one bit at a time until they are vanished – or worse, become something not quite a ghost.

None of which, of course, is a concern when you are part of a fine, democratic, community-minded (and dare we say handsome) collective of spirits, in which the natural progression of decay is fought off by the continuous influx of the new(er) dead.
Josuke, who was used to being at the center of conversation, to being the first with a quick line at the tip of his tongue, could only sit by and do his best to follow along. Failing that, he put on his most studious expression and allowed his attention to wander to Okuyasu, who’d been quiet all day. He had one of the stolen yearbooks set out in front of him, the pages weighed down with a glass of water. By then it was midafternoon, and the light inside Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Parlor was opaque and golden. Okuyasu’s glass cast a long, luminous shadow across the page, layering alternating bands of light and dark over the faces of Ichio High’s 1976 junior class.

Currently, Okuyasu was gazing down at those thirty-odd faces, his ice cream slider untouched on the plate beside him.

“You alright, dude?” Josuke asked.

When Okuyasu lifted his head, there was a dreamy haze over his eyes. “Sure,” he said, voice stretched around the word. He had to fight to close his mouth, as if he had a yawn coming on. “M’just… thinking.”

Things like this – tabloid horror stories, newspaper tragedies, sad pictures of forgotten dead boys in high school yearbooks – they didn’t bother most people. They shouldn’t have bothered Okuyasu Nijimura either, but here he was imagining their senior yearbook, and finding one of his friend’s pictures on the back cover. Maybe he’d just gotten used to seeing the faces of friends and family in the papers, single-paragraph obituaries shouldered between advice columns and horoscopes. Most people had their own safety bubble of separation – it was always somebody else’s friend, somebody else’s brother. Okuyasu had been that somebody else enough times that he couldn’t see things at a distance anymore. Or maybe, like Yukako’d suggested, there was just something about him that’d always been this way: a vulnerable slightly-psychic organ in his brain that left him open and unshielded to the hurt and suffering of the cosmos.

Josuke was saying something, his skin warm and flushed in the sunlight and alive, and Okuyasu wanted so badly to reach out for him and hold on, because right now, with a facsimile face of the boy before him staring out from a grainy black-and-white photograph, he was afraid of what would happen if he let go, even for a moment.

“What?” he asked, voice gruff with something that wasn’t quite annoyance or anger.

Before Josuke could repeat himself, the mention of his name from across the table caused both boys to slip back into the original stream of conversation. From what Okuyasu could tell, the argument was either in the process of heating up or ramping down – it was impossible to say which.

“Besides, object permanence implies that Josuke would have had to meet Daisuke before his death,” Rohan had just come to remark. “You can’t know that something continues to exist if you never saw it.”

“But how do we know Daisuke is a ghost?” Yukako demanded. “For all we know, he could be a stand user.”

“But he died!” Koichi exclaimed.

Yukako shrugged. “There are ways of faking these things.”

“No. He’s definitely a ghost.”

When they all glanced up, Josuke had his hands flat on the table, apparently in the process of examining his cuticles. The only indication than he’d spoken at all was the tension in his hands, the
veins along the side of his wrists taught and visible under his tawny skin.

“What makes you so sure?” Rohan asked.

“On the night I ended up alone on the highway and me and Daisuke met, I thought he would follow me when I took off. Except he didn’t – or he tried to, but then stopped. It was like he couldn’t physically leave the road. Same as Reimi, right? – she was bound to that neighborhood behind the pharmacy.”

“Right!” Koichi exclaimed. “So if we search along the old highway, we’re bound to find Daisuke!”

“That highway,” said Yukako, “is over 100 kilometers long.”

A silence eeked by, during which they all tried to calculate how long it would take to walk a 100 kilometer stretch of road. Okuyasu, who’d never had much of a knack for numbers and figures, was the first to capitulate. He reached for his ice cream slider, but by then it had been mellowing in the late-afternoon sun for nearly half an hour; as he lifted the slider to his mouth, fat droplets of liquid ice cream dribbled through the donut hole on the bottom and left a trail along the table, Okuyasu’s pants, and the front of his shirt.

Josuke was startled out of his reverie by Okuyasu’s wounded noise of distress.

“Shit, dude!” he mumbled, voice airy with suppressed laughter. “Let me…”

Josuke reached out, hand already glowing with Crazy Diamond’s energy, but Okuyasu caught him by the wrist.

“I’ll go with you,” he mumbled.

Josuke looked at him in a way that Okuyasu immediately misread as hesitation. “If you wanna go,” he added. “If you don’t – that’s fine too.”

Then Josuke was smiling from ear to ear, and Okuyasu felt like a piece of sunshine had gotten lodged in his chest.

“I’m not gonna pussy out just because of some ghost,” Josuke said.

“Count me in too!” Koichi exclaimed.

“If Koichi’s going, then I’ll go,” Yukako mumbled, with much less exuberance than her other half.

“Great! Mikitaka?”

“Sorry, Josuke – but given the circumstances, I don’t think I’ll be of much use.”

“Yeah, s’fine,” said Josuke. At Rohan, he nodded. “What about you – you in?”

“Oh, I’d love to,” Rohan muttered. As usual, genuine sentiment had a way of getting all jumbled up by the time it snuck past Rohan’s lips, coming off as sarcastic even where no sarcasm was intended. This unconscious habit was nine-tenths the reason why Rohan Kishibe’s fanbase was so intimidated by him. “Unfortunately,” he went on to add, “I have a manuscript due in a few days.”

“Can’t you finish a whole bunch of pages in one night?” Koichi asked.

“I’m trying to get away from all that. Slow down, smell the roses – however you want to put it.”
When half the table looked at him like he’d sprouted an additional head, Rohan sighed and let his hands drop down into his lap. “Shrink’s orders,” he murmured.

“That makes four of us, then. Should we meet back in an hour?”

“Hell yeah!” Okuyasu bellowed. “Let’s go hunt us a ghost!”

Josuke balked. “Shit, dude, don’t say it like that! Just ‘cause he’s a ghost doesn’t mean we’re gonna kill the guy – or whatever you do with ghosts.”

“Alright,” Okuyasu mumbled, feeling somewhat less invigorated than moments before. “Let’s go talk to a ghost, I guess.”

***

The last bus for S City departs from Kame Square, Morioh, at 5:45 PM. From Kame Square, the same bus heads south and travels along the river, until it reaches the place where the mouth of the river widens out into the bay. There, the bus merges onto the Old Highway, and carries on north for an hour and a half until it reaches its destination. The route is little-traveled on account of the rail line – even at peak hours, there are never usually more than half a dozen riders at a time.

At 5:54 PM on August the 4th, Josuke Higashikata, Okuyasu Nijimura, Koichi Hirose, and Yukako Yamagishi all boarded the bus as it stopped behind Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Parlor. The next time the bus stopped again was at 6:12, just across the street from the payphone that stood at the intersection of the Old Highway and the road that ran perpendicular in the direction of the Morioh Grand Hotel. There, the four of them disembarked.

For a moment, they all stood blinking, allowing their eyes to adjust as the bus rumbled on its way, its dusty windows glinting like molten gold in the evening sunlight.

Looking back behind them, the town of Morioh seemed dark and dozy, like a curtain of night stood between here and there. The only immediate signs of human activity came from the gas station-slash-minimart across the street, where the canopy lights of the pumping station overhang cast the pumps and the pavement below in an otherworldly glow. From across the street, the people milling about between shelves of candies and magazines looked like dolls in a diorama – small and still and tilt-shifted in the harsh florescent light.

Like the rest of Morioh, the road that ran before the gas station had been paved within the last few years – sleek, grey-black oilskin asphalt with freshly-painted lines. By contrast the Old Highway out to S City looked as though it hadn’t seen anything more than the occasional patching within the last decade. The asphalt was sun-bleached and cracked, beginning to bleed into the shoulder of the road at the edges, where the sand and gravel and grass were slowly creeping inward with the passage of time.

“You sure we shouldn’t have gotten off earlier?” Koichi asked.

“Yeah, I remember going past here,” Josuke said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the phone booth. “I must’ve met Daisuke between here and S City – probably an hour or two’s walk out.”

“We better start walking, then,” mumbled Yukako, who did not so much as wait until she was done talking to do exactly that. The others all went scrambling after.

There was no way Okuyasu could keep up with someone like Yamagishi, who’d turned speed
walking into a serious pursuit – but he did his best anyway, plodding along with the sweat gathering in a hot line around the collar of his shirt. Josuke and Koichi made it easy to keep ahead, falling back in step together to talk about a of couple recent disappearances that Koichi was trying to link to their murderer; though mostly, Okuyasu thought, Josuke was just making sure that Koichi didn’t fall behind. It was easy to lose a group member when said group member had half as much stride-length to work with.

The reason for Okuyasu’s trying to push ahead was the same as the reason for the grocery bag that he was carrying on his person, flimsy plastic handle wrapped double around his fist. He could feel the bag slowly stretch with the weight of its contents, but then it was the only bag he could find that didn’t have one or more suspect holes at the bottom. As for the thing in the bag: it had been an afterthought, brought along after much humming and hawing during the interceding fifteen minutes he’d spent pacing his room after walking home from the ice cream parlor, and before walking back to the ice cream parlor again. He had only one thought at the time: that for once in his life, he was not going to be useless. The one that needed his dumb ass bailed out, the one that Josuke would have to put back together again when everything was said and done. Humpty-Dumpty Nijimura.

The desire was one that had been gnawing away at him ever since the afternoon he spent on Josuke’s bed, listening to the patter of rain and the smooth cadence of Josuke’s voice while a familiar chimera of shame, inadequacy, and jealousy made itself at home in his chest. It was like that time he’d seen a to-scale image of the solar system and other nearby stars. Wanting Josuke was bad enough when he was the one they were all orbiting around; it was worse, hearing how Josuke’s voice could bubble over with excitement just from talking about someone else. Suddenly he was looking at that poster all over again, seeing the sun next to stars like Sirius and Arcturus, and it made Okuyasu feel small.

In the present, he felt the weight pulling down on his arm. Felt the plastic warm against his clammy palm. He couldn’t stop thinking about just how ridiculous his backup plan was. And it was, of course, ridiculous – but we suppose he ought to be given some measure of leeway. Okuyasu knew just as much about ghosts as the rest of his friends, which is to say, not much at all. And like the rest of them, his only modicum of knowledge concerning self-defense against spectral assailants was what he could glean from the limited, unoriginal trove of popular media on the topic.

As for the rest of the group: their patience fared about as well as could be expected from a bunch of high school students. Which is to say: after half an hour of walking, it was universally decided that whatever they were doing, they weren’t doing it right.

“Maybe there’s some trick to it,” Koichi suggested. “Like with Reimi.”

By then he’d taken off his sweater and tied it around his waist, leaving him with only his undershirt on. Even still, sweat made glistening tracks across his dusty skin.

“Maybe if we try callin’ his name or somethin’ he’ll come out,” said Okuyasu, tightening his grip on the plastic bag wrapped around his hand.

“Oh I’m sure that’ll work,” Yukako mumbled.

Nonetheless: she joined in when the others began to shout.

“Daisuke!”

“Mister Mitsukoshi!”

“Daisuke, dude, you there?!”
“Hey, ghost man!”

Along the open stretch of road, where the thick air sizzled and rippled above the pavement, their voices fell flat. All the while the shadows of the telephone poles lengthened, and the shade of the mountains crept closer and closer to the bright silver ribbon of road. After a time, even Yukako slowed her pace, pulling up short to walk alongside Okuyasu so that he could smell her clammy, sun-baked skin under the heavy, sweetish scent of her lilac shampoo.

“Josuke’s friend must be shy,” she remarked, half to him and half to herself.

“Man, how the fuck are we gonna get home?” he heard Josuke ask aloud behind them.

Okuyasu glanced over his shoulder, just in time to notice Josuke’s chin soften – when he was stressed, tension had a habit of collecting along his jawbone as he spoke. He never did catch Koichi’s reply, however – because something just over Josuke’s shoulder drew Okuyasu’s attention.

For a moment he stopped, and Yukako, after a few paces, stopped too.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. Sun’s just gettin’ in my eyes.”

They continued on, but Okuyasu continued to glance back from time to time, even after Josuke and Koichi had caught up. The urge to say something was a warm, palpitating impulse at the back of his throat. He felt that if he were to so much as open his mouth, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself. But a rare streak of pride had taken hold of him – or at the very least, self-consciousness dressed up as pride – and so he said nothing, even as the sun began to sink below the mountains.

“Daisuke Mitsukoshi!” Koichi called out with limping gusto. Then, to the rest of them: “I don’t think this is working.”

“We’re close to my parents’ summer home,” Yukako pointed out. “We could head there.”

Thoughts of comfortable couches, air conditioning, and water straight out of the refrigerator crossed Okuyasu’s mind. “You gonna let us crash?” he asked.

“No. But there’s a payphone across the street. I’m sure you could dial a cab.”

Okuyasu was on the point of complaining when Josuke pushed his way past them, bumping shoulders with Okuyasu and nearly knocking Koichi over in the process. They all watched as Josuke staggered ahead along the shoulder of the road, heels kicking up clouds of dirt.

“Daisuke!” he hollered, cupping his hands around his mouth.

“Daisuke!”

“Where the fuck are you, you sonnabitch.”

Koichi and Okuyasu exchanged glances – before setting off in a sprint.

By the time they both caught up to Josuke, he was already at the next telephone pole. For a minute all either of them could do was rest with their hands on their knees, lungs working double to make up for lost oxygen, while all the while Josuke continued to shout Daisuke’s name, with an increasingly colorful series of modifiers.

“Josuke,” Koichi panted out, “it’s fine. We can come back and later and look.”
When Josuke whirled around, there was a glass smile on his face – the kind liable to shatter at the very least provocation. Okuyasu had seen that smile enough times to know that Josuke wasn’t putting it on for their sakes, but for his own.

“But it was right here!” he exclaimed, voice thin and high. “I remembered…!”

The embarrassment, at last, caught up with him, and he let his voice drop. “I thought I remembered,” he mumbled, arms coming up to fold across his chest.

Okuyasu took one last glance behind them, and one last glance ahead, and he reached a decision.

“I dunno if it makes any difference,” he began, “I mean, I wasn’t gonna say anything.”

“Say what?” Yukako demanded. Though she looked as collected as ever, the breathless lilt to her voice betrayed the fact that she, too, had run to catch up with Josuke.

“It’s probably nothing, but… I think somethin’ might be following us.”

Josuke, along with Yukako and Koichi both, turned to look behind him. Seeing nothing but the road behind – and the distant, twinkling nights of Morioh town, where night had already fallen – he turned back to Okuyasu and asked: “Where? When’d you see them?”

“I didn’t see anybody,” Okuyasu mumbled, color rising to his ears. Saying it out loud, he felt even more ridiculous. “Just… look at the shadows.”

Josuke’s eyes flickered down, just long enough to take in his own shadow, before alighting once more on Okuyasu’s face. “What about them?”

“The numbers don’t match!” Koichi exclaimed, tugging on the hem of Josuke’s shirt.

“I get it now,” said Yukako.

“What the hell are all of you talking about?” Josuke demanded. Between the heat and his own agitation, his temper was running short.

Koichi opened his mouth to explain, but Okuyasu beat him to it. “There’s two telephone poles on either side of us, yeah? And four of us. So that should make six shadows.”

“You sure you aren’t forgetting to count your own shadow?” Josuke asked.

“I counted them too,” said Koichi. “There’s seven.”

In the last seconds of daylight, the human shadows and the shadows of the telephone poles all looked the same: long, opaque bars that stretched horizontally across the road, where they intersected with the vertical sweeping shadows of the power lines. Sure enough, when Josuke counted, there were seven shadows all told: one for each of them, two for the telephone poles they stood between, and a seventh shadow that stood out like the prong of an Escher fork. An impossible object: there, but not a part of anything, like it existed on a different plane.

“Okuyasu,” Yukako began, “how long has that been following us?”

“Since about the time you first starting hollerin’ Daisuke’s name,” Okuyasu replied, scratching shyly at the side of his nose. “I thought I was seein’ shit at first.”

The sun, at last, dipped fully behind the mountains to the west. In a matter of seconds the golden glow of pre-twilight withdrew, leaving the world with a grey, almost winterish look. All along the
highway, the lamps grafted on to the telephone poles hummed to life, flickering and guttering lazily as if shaking off the effects of a long sleep.

“Fuck,” Josuke mumbled, drawing out his stand.

Koichi had already done the same. He was in the process of untying his sweater from around his waist, hands clumsy and distracted. “Josuke, what’s going on?”

“Hell if I know! I’ve never seen this shit before.”

“If it was Daisuke, he would have just shown himself, right? He wouldn’t have follow us like that, would he?”

“Maybe there’s something else here,” Yukako muttered.

“Like a stand user?” Okuyasu asked. He was clutching the grocery bag he’d brought close to his chest.

“Or another spirit. I bet lots of people have died along this road.”

Josuke glanced around. With night having closed in, the world suddenly got a lot narrower – as if there was nothing that existed outside the long corridor lit by the streetlamps. “You think this is where he died – here?”

With a thunk, ever last one of the streetlights suddenly went dark – but only for a moment. One by one they came back on, flickering wildly and loudly with an almost living sound, as if the bulbs were filled with beating wings that whirled and tilted and pinged off the brittle glass. Overhead the wires began to hiss and whine.

In the alternating intervals of light-dark, the four teens shouted and clambered, pressing together until they were in something of a circular formation. Something smooth brushed against Okuyasu’s wrist. He nearly jumped out of his skin – before realizing it was only Yukako’s Love Deluxe, threading in and around the rest of them in a way that seemed almost protective.

From everywhere and nowhere at once, a voice boomed: “GET LOST.”

Koichi was the first to recover his courage: “We’re not here to cause trouble!” he yelled.

The lights flared, day-bright, before fading once more.

“Go home! You’re not safe here!”

“We’re looking for Daisuke Mitsukoshi,” Yukako said.

“How do you know him?” When the voice spoke again, it was more focused this time. Several places, instead of everywhere at once.

“Me and him – we’re friends,” said Josuke. He pulled away from the others, spreading his arms out before him with his palms up – an offering, or a concession perhaps.

This time, the voice seemed to come only from one side. Though still distorted by reverberations, Josuke and the others could almost pick out the timber and tone of an individual, human voice.

“I’ve never seen any of you around school before. How do you even know my name?!”

Much to Okuyasu’s alarm, Josuke took another step forward, putting even more space between
himself and the imaginary safety of the group.

“We saw your picture in your school yearbook,” Josuke replied. “You… you died, right?”

All at once, the streetlamps went dark. Even the buzzing of the wires fell silent. Without the relief of a breeze or the sound of cicadas the air was still; Okuyasu’s breath roared in his ears, and even from a few feet away he could feel the humidity and warmth radiate off the bodies of the others as they panted and shifted in the dark.

“What sent you?”

There was only one voice this time, thin and small and somewhere above and behind them. They all turned just as the streetlight immediately behind them flickered back on. All the other lights remained dark, so that they were all alone with just one another, the telephone pole, and the figure hovering twenty feet in the air in front of it.

Hovering is perhaps not the correct word. To hover implies a type of motion. Even if a person were to hover in place, you would expect to see some evidence of motion acting on their body: their hair and clothes rustling or blowing perhaps, or their body bobbing slightly like a buoy on water. The young man above them exhibited none of those signs. Instead, it was as though time had frozen around him. His jacket remained unfurled in an impossible position; his feet were pointed forward, as though planted against the ground.

And then, Daisuke opened his mouth and spoke: “Who sent you?” he repeated. “Is this some kinda sick prank?”

“We just wanted to ask you a few questions,” Koichi said, in as diplomatic a voice as he could manage. “We think you may know something about a kidnapping that took place.”

All four of them stepped back at once when Daisuke began to drift toward the ground. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said when he finally came to a pause inches from the ground.

The spirit before them was so much different than what Josuke remembered. The person he’d met had been human – dead, maybe, but human no less. He’d moved like there’d been gravity acting on his body, like he was a solid, breathing thing that the wind had to go around instead of through. Josuke had seen his eyes dart and shift and move, his mouth quirk and tremble, his nose scrunch – but this being before them was nothing like that. There was no emotion to the face; his eyes glowed faintly, and if you looked close enough you could see a dark line pass through his body where the telephone pole behind him showed through.

“We think a stand user may be responsible for a series of abductions and murders several years ago,” Koichi said. “Josuke thought you might know that person’s identity.”

Yukako leaned forward and tapped Koichi on the shoulder. “He can’t see your stands,” she hissed, just loud enough for Josuke and Okuyasu to hear too.

Sure enough when Daisuke scanned the group, his eyes skipped right over the spaces between the four of them where their stands were readied for a fight.

“Who’s Josuke?” Daisuke asked. “Who put you up to this?”

“We weren’t –,” Josuke began.

Daisuke cut him off: “No one’s ever gone looking for me. No one’s ever mentioned my name before. Did some guys from my class dare you? Did you read about me in the paper or something –
think it’d be funny to go see where some kid died, have yourselves a good scare?”

As Daisuke drew closer, the temperature of the air plummeted. When Okuyasu let out a breath, a silver plume of fog ghosted past his lips. The moment he opened his mouth his lungs felt like they were burning; his nostrils tightened as the moisture inside them froze. Beside him, he could hear Koichi’s teeth chatter as the smaller boy hurried to pull on his sweater.

Josuke tried again. “Don’t you recognize me?” he asked. Already, his lips were beginning to turn blue.

“Stop it! Stop acting like you know me!” Daisuke snapped.

For a moment, Daisuke looked like he was about to reach out and grab Josuke by the collar of his shirt. When he did so, it was almost like he set of a trap – a tripwire between Josuke’s safety and the part of Okuyasu’s brain that kept in check all his inhibitions and common sense. He was only half conscious of himself as he reached into his shopping bag and used the Hand to insert himself into the space between Josuke and the ghost. In those intervening seconds, he saw nothing but red.

Okuyasu’s blood was hot and roiling in his body, so it took him a moment to process that the roaring that he was hearing wasn’t just in his head.

He looked down, around the same time that Daisuke did, to see the nozzle of his mother’s old dustbuster pressed snugly against Daisuke’s chest.

Behind him, Josuke cleared his throat.

“Okuyasu,” he began. “What the actual fuck are you doing?”

“Um,” Okuyasu eloquently responded, feeling his embarrassment grow exponentially for every second that Daisuke was not being sucked into the handheld vacuum.

That was when Daisuke burst into laughter.

“Oh maaaaan,” he wheezed. “That kinda tickles!”

Yukako made the prologue to a movement that was stopped by Koichi laying a hand on her arm.

“Wait,” he said.

All around them, the spell that had taken hold seemed to dissipate. The other streetlights came back on. The chill faded from the air, so that it was no cooler than any other summer’s night. Daisuke’s feet came to rest on the ground, the otherworldly aura about him replaced by a big, undeniably human grin. He was still different from what Josuke remembered – different, even, from the picture at the back of Ichio’s 1977 yearbook, or the reproduction Rohan had sketched from Josuke’s description. He was gaunter, shabbier in some way. Shorter too – an inch or so shy of Okuyasu’s height, when he wasn’t hovering. But without a doubt, he was the same person Josuke had seen in the snow storm all those years ago.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you!” Daisuke shouted over the sound of the dustbuster. “I can walk all of you back to Morioh if you’d like!”

Reaching over Okuyasu’s shoulder, Josuke flicked the dustbuster’s shut-off switch. The vacuum died down with a drawn-out whirr.

“Don’t you remember me?” Josuke asked. “You helped me and my mom out when we got stuck in the snow on our way to the hospital.”
For a minute, Daisuke just stared at him. And then his half-lidded eyes went wide-blown with surprise. “You’re that kid?”

His eyes darted around, as if search for something, before settling again on Josuke and Okuyasu.

“So this is super embarrassing, but: what year is it?”

“1999!” Koichi called out from somewhere behind them.

Daisuke lowered his head, bringing one hand up to his mouth. “Aw jeez.”

“You, uh… You okay there, dude?” Josuke asked.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. It’s just, being a ghost, you don’t really…” he waved his hands around in the air vaguely, before giving up and switching back to spoken word: “It’s hard to keep track of time, is what I’m saying.”

Okuyasu and Josuke glanced at one another, as if hoping the other would be the first to ask the question.

Koichi, thankfully, was way ahead of either of them.

“What happened to you, exactly?” he asked.

“You mean you don’t know?”

“The yearbook didn’t say anything about how you… you know.”

“Except the date you kicked the bucket,” Okuyasu helpfully added.

Yukako, as usual, was impatient to cut to the chase: “Were you murdered?”

“What? No!”

Hearing that, Josuke felt like a weight he hadn’t known he’d been carrying had slipped from his shoulders. He had his reservations about meeting Daisuke before – fears of ruining something sacred, fears of disappointment – but now that they were face to face, he felt oddly calm about the entire situation. As though Daisuke were just another childhood friend he hadn’t seen in a long time.

“We tried asking around about you, but no one seemed to...” he began, trailing off when he felt the temperature begin to drop again. “But I mean, that’s normal, right? People move away all the time.”

Daisuke shook his head. “No, it’s fine. I mean, it’s not like I went out in any spectacular kind of way, you know?”

And still, the temperature dropped. Already, Josuke’s breath was beginning to fog up again.

“Hey, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Josuke said.

At last, Daisuke noticed the way the living persons present were shivering. He took a step back, and then another. “Sorry,” he said, barely more than a whisper. “I didn’t mean to get upset.”

The air began to warm once more. Josuke let out a sigh of relief as Daisuke lowered himself to the ground and patted the space in front of him, inviting the others to do the same. They arranged themselves in loose single-file along that narrow little shoulder of gravel, all sitting but for Yukako, who stood behind them with her arms folded over her chest.
“When I was in high school, I used to go up to S City all the time on weekends,” Daisuke began. “I had friends there. No matter when you went there was always something happening, right? For the longest time I’d just take the bus, but once I turned eighteen and got my license, dad started lending me his car, since it was cheaper that way.”

His voice, all at once, grew quiet. “Then one time in my senior year my friends invited me out to S City for a party. January 2nd, I still remember the date – not much else, though. Which is funny, ’cause I always thought you were supposed to remember the night you died. It was the same as any other weekend for me. Kind of a blur. We played pachinko, snuck into a bar. I normally didn’t drink much, but it was just after New Year’s so… you know what it’s like.”

Another vague hand gesture, like he was trying to draw out the idea mid-air.

“Josuke – you remember the storm on the night we met, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it was like that around the time I got it into my head I was going to drive home. I could barely see a hand in front of me. I figured I’d be alright if I just drove slow enough, though.”

“Let me guess,” said Yukako. “You got into a car accident and died because you were drunk and didn’t bother to check the weather report.”

“No! … well, I mean, yeah I was drunk and yeah I got into an accident, but I was fine. I was driving along, and – I must have hit a patch of black ice, ’cause next thing I know I’m waking up against the steering wheel with this,” here, Daisuke pointed to the gash on his forehead, “and my car rolled over in the ditch, totally out of commission. I…”

The streetlights flickered and dimmed. Josuke kept waiting for the temperature to drop again, but Daisuke seemed to have gotten a hold of himself.

“I wasn’t thinking straight. Between not being able to see a thing and, you know…” This time, they all caught the meaning of the gesture. “…I thought I was closer to Morioh than I really was. A lot closer. You guys ever met any other ghosts before?”

The question took them all off guard.

“Yeah,” Josuke murmured. “How’d you know?”

“You all seem pretty chill hanging out with a dead guy – but anyway. The point is, you know about boundaries, right?”

“Those’re the limits of the space a ghost haunts, right?” Koichi asked.

“Exactly! Anyway, I’ve tested it, and my ‘boundaries’ seem to be the halfway point between Morioh and S City, where the accident happened, and near about the phone booth at the intersection just outside Morioh. I can’t get more than two feet from the road itself on either shoulder, either.”

Okuyasu was the only one with the guts to ask: “So if the halfway point’s where your car got wrecked, what’s so special about the phone booth?”

Daisuke was silent a moment, picking thoughtfully at the gravel. “You know how I said I thought I was a lot closer to Morioh than I actually was, right? Well, I decided I was just going to walk home. At first, I actually did think I was going to die. I couldn’t see anything, my arms felt like they were going to fall off… but then, after a while, it was like everything was fine again. I felt great, not cold
or anything. I figured maybe the weather was warming up and the snow would let up soon.”

Though he could already guess how the story ended, Okuyasu remembered, with a sinking feeling, what he’d read once about hypothermia. You always felt warmest right before the end. By then, your core temperature dropped so that there was no longer any difference between it and your frost-bitten extremities. Your heart slowed down, which meant your blood wasn’t being pumped as fast, which meant becoming light-headed and sluggish. So much so that you didn’t realize what was happening to your own body until it was too late.

“By then I’d been walking for hours,” Daisuke continued. “I felt so tired, and for some reason I thought, if I could just lay down and rest for a bit, then everything would be alright. So I did. And here we are.”

Then, as if only just remembered the question he’d been asked in the first place, Daisuke added: “I must have been pretty close to the phone booth. Just across the street, I think – too bad I didn’t see it.”

“So why did you become a ghost?” Yukako asked.

“Come on! He probably didn’t have a say in it or anything,” Josuke protested.

“That’s not true. Spirits usually linger for a purpose, correct?” No, Miss Yamagishi, not correct – but we commend your effort. “So what’s his reason?”

Daisuke dipped his head. “It’s… kind of embarrassing, actually.”

“Try me.”

“Allright. I’ll tell you. In high school, I used to do okay. Got so-so grades, that sort of thing. I didn’t really participate in any clubs, enter any contests – lacked motivation, I guess you could say. On weekends I’d just stay around the house and watch television, or go out to S city to hang around or play pachinko or whatever. My parents used to rag on me for wasting my life. My dad especially. It’s not like I was much different from a lot of kids my age, but they were still right, y’know? Maybe it wouldn’t have bothered me if I hadn’t died when I did. I probably would have gotten older and sorted things out. But when I was lying there in the snow, still thinking everything was going to be alright and that I was going to be fine, I thought about how I’d never wanted to do anything or be anything, how I’d never had anything that made me want to try. And I was just so glad that I wasn’t going to die, because if I did there would have been nothing for people to remember about me.”

A tight, throat-high laugh escaped Daisuke. “So anyway, I guess that’s why I’m still here.”

“Nothing quite says living life to the fullest like hanging out along a highway,” Yukako remarked.

“It’s not like that! It’s more… I want to help people. I figured maybe if I made a difference in Morioh, it wouldn’t matter what I did and didn’t do when I was alive.” Another nervous laugh that didn’t quite reach deep enough to draw the air from his lungs. “Though, mostly, I just help hitchhikers catch a lift. And, uh, I haven’t even done much of that lately either.”

“How lately are we talking here?” Josuke asked.

“The last person I actually talked with before now was – well, you.” Daisuke was blushing now – dark violet spreading through the ruptured blood vessels of his cheeks and staining his pale, blueish skin. “Guess that’s why I didn’t recognize you at first. I just couldn’t believe it’d been that long since anybody had passed through who needed my help.”
“Of course you haven’t seen anyone,” Yukako began to say. “1989 was just before they –”

She was cut off by the sound of a car screaming by. Glancing at the road, however, there was no sign of retreating headlights: only Echoes, hovering innocuously over the asphalt.

“Hunh,” said Daisuke, “that was weird. You think he had a tail-light out?”

“Do you mind giving us a moment?” Koichi asked. He had both arms wrapped around Yukako’s waist, like he was doing his best to hold her back.

“Sure? Yeah, go right ahead.”

Koichi jerked his head and Josuke and Okuyasu and they scrambled over. In a circle the four of them knelt, heads bowed together.

“Listen,” Koichi said, “we can’t tell Daisuke about the rail line.”

“What’s the matter with that?” Okuyasu asked.

“Because we can’t let Daisuke find out that no one uses the old highway anymore!”

“Koichi’s right,” Yukako conceded. “Finding out would destroy his reason to live.”

“But he’s a ghost!” Okuyasu exclaimed. “He can’t die again!” A pause. “Can he?”

Josuke was on the verge of saying something when he felt a cold, stiff wind against the back of his neck.

“Oh shit,” he mumbled.

Sure enough, Daisuke was standing right where they’d left him, but something in his posture had changed. He’d been drawn taught, gone from water to hardened ice, in the set line of his mouth and in the way his fists clenched up at his sides.

“Sorry,” Daisuke muttered. “I guess I should have mentioned it earlier, but... I kinda know everything that happens or gets said along the highway.”

Though the temperature had indeed dropped, it was different this time from the hostile, frigid feeling Okuyasu had noticed when Daisuke first appeared. It was a mild cold, like a November’s day; all around Daisuke snowflakes began to form, falling slowly to the ground in a ponderous, swaying, two-step motion that reminded him of a partnerless waltz. This time, when Josuke stepped out from the group, the triwire of instinct lay flat and undisturbed in his chest – Okuyasu only watched, unmoving, as Josuke approached the ghost.

“Hey,” Josuke said, softly.

Daisuke raised his head. Even for a ghost, he looked absolutely miserable.

“I know maybe it doesn’t mean a whole lot, but you sure made a difference to me,” Josuke continued. “And I sure as hell haven’t forgotten. You see this hair?”

“Y-yeah.”

“I’ve been wearing my hair like this every goddamn day since I was four ‘cause some stranger on the side of the road one night didn’t mind getting his jacket torn up just so I could get to the hospital in time. You know how fuckin’ long this doo takes to style?”
Over his mouth, Daisuke clapped his hands. “Oh.”

“You still wanna help save lives and shit, right?”

“Yeah, heck – hell, yeah, I wanna help,” Daisuke mumbled. He was rubbing furiously at the corners of his eyes, and if he’d been flesh and blood Josuke would have sworn the other boy would have been crying.

“Ten years ago, I came out here looking for a man who’d taken my kid neighbor. You said you knew the guy – we figured he might’ve been the reason you ended up like this, but I guess not, hunh?”

“Oh.” Daisuke’s eyes dropped. He tugged at the sleeve of his sweater. “So it’s back.”

“What do you mean by it?” Koichi asked. He and the others had all closed off the gap, so that they were all crowded around Josuke now. “Is the murderer a stand user?”

“A – what?”

“Never mind,” Yukako said. “Tell us what you know.”

For a moment, Daisuke rubbed at his arm and chewed on his lip, not quite sure how to proceed. The others waited.

“There’s always been something… wrong about this place,” he said at last. “At least since long before I died. It’s easier to pick up on these things when you’re dead, but you guys have probably noticed it too, right? All the serial killers. The kidnappers. The rapists. More than a town this size should have.”

“I noticed that,” Koichi said. “I thought it was because stand users – er, certain type of people, I mean – attract one another.”

“Maybe – but then you gotta ask yourself why here, right? Why Morioh?”

Across the street, a gust of wind picked up, rustling through the grass. Daisuke paused, eyes making a quick scan of the field before continuing: “There’s this thing in Morioh. I don’t know if it’s a ghost or some other type of spirit or something completely different. It doesn’t got a body, not even the type other ghosts can see – but it’s got a voice and it can talk to people, so that’s what it does. The Voice in the Dark – that’s what the kids called it. Because it was mostly the kids that would hear it, and the adults wouldn’t believe them. But the thing likes to call itself Vox in Tenebris, or ‘Vox’ for short.”

“Why Vox?” Josuke asked.

“Beats me,” said Daisuke.

The real answer, of course, is that spirits are amongst the most insufferably pretentious beings to inhabit our conjoined worlds. Teach a spirit a little Latin and the next thing you know they’ll be dressing in white robes and carrying around candlesticks and writing all sorts of cryptic nonsense on the walls.

“So how do we destroy this thing?” Okuyasu growled.

“You can’t kill Vox. It doesn’t have a body. I said it talked mostly to kids, but older people can hear it too. Teens. Adults. Vox has a way of figuring out the people who’ve already got a bit of bad thing
going for them, then it gets in their ear talks them into doing all the terrible things they’ve always
hesitated to do.”

To Josuke, he said: “That guy you were chasing last time? He’s been dead for years.”

So his memory about the forest had been right after all, then.

“If people are dying again,” Daisuke continued, “it’s because Vox has found someone new to talk to.
How easy a time you’ll have finding out who the new best friend is depends. Sometimes Vox just
plants an idea in someone’s head and moves on. They might never know they’ve heard its voice. But
sometimes Vox likes to get cozy with its friends, and if that’s the case, it shouldn’t be too hard
finding whoever’s been doing your killings.”

“What do you mean?” Koichi asked. “Where?”

At the darkness beyond the streetlamp’s light, Daisuke pointed. “There’s a forest, just past the marsh
– that’s where it usually hides out. For some reason Vox isn’t too keen on staying in town any longer
than it has to. Who knows? – maybe it is a ghost, and he or she died somewhere out in the woods.”

Incorrect. The real reason Vox doesn’t like to get too close to Morioh is because they know exactly
what we will do to them if they set foot in the wrong part of town.

Daisuke turned back to the group, arm dropping heavily to his side. “But you probably shouldn’t
bother looking. There’s no point.”

Against his palm, Okuyasu smacked his fist. “Why not?!” he demanded, feeling a touch offended at
the idea that the four of them couldn’t beat one measly creep, stand user or not.

It was Yukako who answered: “Because no matter how many times we beat Vox’s host, the problem
will just keep coming back so long as Vox is still in Morioh.”

“That’s bullshit!” Josuke snapped. He turned to Daisuke. “There’s gotta be some way of beating it,
right?”

“Sorry, Josuke. Maybe the Neighborhood Watch or someone would know, but – I’ve told you just
about everything I got. I don’t really know much about what happens away from the highway.”

“The Neighborhood Watch?” Okuyasu repeated. “You mean like that group Koichi’s mom’s in?”

“Nah. The Neighborhood Watch is a bunch of ghosts who think they’re hot stuff. They call
themselves Morioh’s guardians, whatever that means.”

“Is there some way we can ask them about Vox?” Koichi demanded.

Daisuke made a face. “Not a good idea. Not a good idea at all. For one: most people who see Watch
don’t exactly, uh… come back. Second: they’re all jerks. Most stuck up bunch of ghosts you’ll ever
meet.” Lifting his eyes above Josuke’s shoulder, Daisuke added: “Uh, no offense.”

Offense taken, Daisuke.

Josuke made as if to look over his shoulder – but luckily for him, Daisuke cleared his throat before
he could do so.

“Sorry,” Daisuke mumbled. “I wish I could be more helpful.”

“Hey,” Josuke said, “don’t worry about it. Here.”
From his pockets, Josuke pulled out two ten yen coins and pressed them into Daisuke’s hand.

Daisuke looked down at the coins like Josuke had just handed him a live grenade.

“They’re for the payphone,” Josuke explained. “Call me if you can think of anything else. I’ll write down my number for you too.”

Slowly, Daisuke’s fingers curled over the coins – but he continued to hold his arm out before him, as if unsure what to do with it.

Suddenly, a look of horror dawned on Josuke’s face. “Shit! I gotta go – my nephew’s supposed so show up in the morning with his kid and I told mom I’d be home early. But, uh, it was great seeing you again.”

“Nice meetin’ ya,” Okuyasu said.

“Same,” Koichi said with a little grin.

Yukako nodded.

After a few tagged-on words of parting, the others started off down the street, in the direction of Yukako’s family’s summer home, but Josuke lingered behind. He had his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans. His foot tapped out a rhythmless beat against the asphalt as he glared at the ragged, torn up jacket slung behind Daisuke’s back, and swung back and forth between indecision and finally making up his mind, until –

Daisuke made a startled noise and scrambled back when Josuke stepped toward him without warning. Tearing off his own jacket, he draped it over Daisuke’s shoulders, ignoring the ghost’s half-stammered protests.

“What are you – ?”

“You looked cold.”

“I’m a ghost.”

“Just – keep it, alright?”

With that, Josuke turned and sprinted after the others, keeping his eyes fixed ahead of him all the way.

***

If Daisuke’s sudden change in demeanor at the start of his and the others’ meeting seems a bit too dramatic, then perhaps we ought to explain a thing or two considering the nature of ghosts.

Yukako earlier exemplified the myth that many living – and ghosts too, for that matter – believe to be true: that those who remain after death, do so for a purpose. This is, as we mentioned before, not quite correct. We said once that in most hauntings, there are two components: an emotion, and a place. It is out of an emotion that the idea of a goal or purpose might sometimes grow. A deceased father tied to the living world by his love for his son, for instance, might early on decide that his purpose for staying is to guide his wayward child down the right path.

The trouble with purposes is that they are formed from the personality of the ghost who decides upon them, which unlike the powerful single feelings that bind spirits to our world, is mutable. We said
earlier that from the moment a person dies, their spirit is in a state of decay – in a way, ghosts have their own half-life. Think of it this way: if you were to cut a cake in half, you would still have a fairly sizeable portion on your hands. But once you begin dividing up the remaining half the same way, you’ll quickly find yourself with meaner and meaner portions until you have nothing left that might be recognized as a slice of cake. This same exponential phenomenon is observable in ghosts: they are usually quite like themselves as they once were for the longest time after death, but once they have reached their own half-life, the onset of decay is swift and frightening. In the early stages, they may still be much like themselves, but with inexplicable bouts of mania, melancholy, anger, or forgetfulness. They may behave quite rationally at times, only to throw an unexpected tantrum, making the lights flicker and the temperature drop, the sort of thing we of better tastes find so droll and cliché.

And what, when a ghost begins this transformation, becomes of those goals and purposes the dead and the living alike love to speak so fondly of? Why, that all depends on the emotion that has kept the ghost on this earth all along! The ghost who lingers because of his love of his son will continue to love his son – but over time his morals and principles will erode away, so that instead of trying to steer his child on the path of good, he will instead fiercely protect his son, at the expense of others, and to the ignorance of his son’s wickedness.

We’re certain you know exactly what we’re talking about – we’re not pulling our example out of thin air, after all, but are instead basing it on very real, and very recent circumstances. Cases like these are constant danger in Morioh, where spirits are freer to stay as they please – and by consequence, do not always have a strong enough tie to this world to prevent their rapid deterioration into a town nuisance.

To turn our attention back to Mr. Mitsukoshi.

Being dead does funny things to one’s inhibitions. The dead are more likely than the living to perform stupendous acts of generosity, for the same reason they are also more like to commit atrocities. The way you think and perceive the world changes when you die. Which was why it might be easy for a ghost tied to the world by his own crippling feeling of unworthiness to make his purpose the help and rescue of others.

But self-loathing is a dangerous emotion to tie a person to this world. Where it may be a source of altruism at the start, such feelings almost inevitably lead to resentment at some point or another. If Daisuke spoke unfavorably of us, it is only because we have made these facts clear to him.

One can only do so much, we suppose.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive me for the plot-dump! At least the narrators and the baddie have names now. You have no idea how many times I have had to stop myself from referring to Watch by their name in my comments.

I wasn't originally planning on referencing Yoshihiro Kira in this fic at all, but the timing was right and I've been trying to sneak all the side chars into this one way or another anyway, so hey, why not?
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Jotaro and Jolyne arrive in Morioh.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long! It's been super busy and stressful at work lately + I went through a bit of a depression slump and kinda sorta accidentally wrote a completely unrelated 12k fic that will likely never see the light of day :’)

I added another link to some art someone did of this fic in the first chap comments :D Go check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On waking up, Okuyasu managed to forget – if only for a second – where he was, and how he’d gotten there.

He was used to getting up early for school or for work, so that by now his body was wired with its own internal clock that woke him up around the same time each morning. By the time he untangled himself from his sheets the sun would still be a yawning, red-gold promise, and when he padded, barefoot, out to the front gate to collect the paper, the sidewalk would still be cold beneath the soles of his feet. Morioh in the mornings was soft and grey, and so quiet he could hear the echo of the door as it slammed shut behind him, the sound ringing in the glass-clear air. Okuyasu wasn’t much of a morning person, but if he was going to get up he’d prefer to get up sooner rather than later. There was something satisfying about being out and about before everyone else, while the streets and the sidewalks were still empty – it was a lot like strolling through a movie set while all the actors were on break.

But when Okuyasu awoke that morning, it was not to the pale blush of dawn glowing softly through his curtains. Instead the ragged, moldered curtains were transparent in the strident sunlight. The rest of the room was just dark enough that he could see the dust motes wink and glimmer. Bright, diffuse highlights plucked out details from the shadows – creases in the bedspread, furniture contours, posters on the wall behind him – and left out the rest, so that even the dingy little bedroom with its peeling wallpaper and its clutter and its sagging ceiling seemed bright and clean. And Okuyasu, if only for a second, thought he was back in Tokyo, in the modern little bedroom he barely remembered sleeping in.

He lay motionless, briefly. From downstairs he heard a knocking at the door – the quick, tenor rapping of knuckles that he could always pick out from the heavier sounds of an open palm or the heel of a hand, that belonged to the knocking of others. Just then he remembered, in jarring fragments, the events of the night before. How it had been nearly dawn when he’d stumbled through the front door and up the stairs. He wasn’t in another house – it was his body’s clock that was all wrong.
Another series of knocks, beating out the bars to a made up-tune. Okuyasu scrambled out of bed, hardwood floor squeaking underfoot as he stumbled, first on one foot and then on the other, to pull on the first pair of jeans he could find.

Despite the sun being up and well on its way, Okuyasu’s father was still slumped in bed when he hurried past the open door. Where before he’d paced and groaned day and night, sleeping lightly between fits of restlessness, now that his father had Stray Cat, his body had settled into a kind of rhythm. He slept when Stray Cat slept, and woke when it did. It was a schedule that shifted with the seasons, and depended mostly on the position of the sun relevant to the bedroom window: both almost-man and almost-cat would rise in time to stretch out in the warming sunbeam that would spread across the floor at various times in the mornings.

Okuyasu paused to watch, for a moment, and listen. As his father slept, the broad, spongy flesh of his back rose and fell with every shallow, whistling breath. A deformation of the epiglottis, probably – Okuyasu had heard of it happening in pugs and other short-nosed designer dog breeds. It didn’t happen often in humans, at least not without an infection, but then his father’s circumstances were far from ordinary.

At the front door, Josuke was waiting for him. Over his school slacks he was wearing a button-up that Okuyasu had never seen before. The shirt looked like the sort of thing Tomoko might’ve picked out.

Josuke had on a look of anxiety people only ever seemed to get when they were stuffed into their nicest clothes.

“What’s up?” Okuyasu asked.

“It’s almost eleven!” Josuke cried, answering nothing – and yet, somehow, the moment those words leapt from his mouth something clicked into place.

“Shit, dude!”

There was a pair of sneakers Okuyasu always kept by the door for occasions like these. An old pair, with holes in the toes, and backs that had been crushed down from walking on them with his heels, and laces that had been double knotted once and never undone since. He pulled the sneakers on without bothering to run back upstairs for a pair of socks.

“How long’ve we got?” he asked when they were both hurrying down the driveway.

“Twenty minutes, maybe? I was supposed to leave the house by ten.”

“What happened?”

“Slept in.”

“So whatcha gonna do about it?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” Josuke demanded, shallow and forced between breaths. He was doing the better part of a full-tilt spring by then. “Just book it.”

Okuyasu – who’d been running too, though he couldn’t say why – slowed to a jog. “Dude, relax. The bus comes by at five after.”

Josuke’s stop was a little more abrupt. He doubled over, hands on his knees, gasping after a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. “Fuck! You’re a goddamn genius, you know?”
“Were you plannin’ on running all the way to the harbour?” Okuyasu asked.

“Shit, I don’t know. It’s too early to think straight.”

With the immediate illusion of crisis there and gone, they settled into their regular pace: ambling, slouching, dragging their heels on the sidewalk, and letting the rhythm of conversation be the metronome that timed the swinging of their feet. To Okuyasu, it felt like they were on their way to school again. With his eyes closed, he could almost walk the route from muscle memory, timing the twists and turns by the individual bumps and dips in the sidewalk and the way his body swayed over them, and by the mesmerizing lull of Josuke’s voice that he followed with a one-two two-one step.

“… Couldn’t sleep,” he overheard Josuke say. There was a strange sense of distance in his voice, like Okuyasu was overhearing a conversation he was not a part of. “I couldn’t stop thinking about last night.”

Without Okuyasu’s prompting, he carried on under his own steam: “I’ve been trying to piece everything together. It’s been driving me nuts, the stuff I can’t remember – but after talking it out with Daisuke, I think I’ve got a handle on it.”

“Yeah?” Okuyasu muttered.

If Josuke heard him, it was hard to tell. “What I’m guessing is that there wasn’t a stand user. Or – at least, the guy Jotaro and I were after wasn’t one, but we wouldn’t have known that. I mean, if you didn’t know anything about ghosts or spirits outside of stands, you might’ve assumed the same, right? It’s like Daisuke said – Vox must’ve gotten cozy with the guy. He probably let it do the talking.”

“So you thinkin’ Jotaro still might’ve done the guy in?”

“Maybe. I’ve got a theory. The killer wanted Jotaro to meet him at the cliffs, right? I remember being there, and I’m pretty damn sure the killer was there too. But I must’ve gotten away somehow. ‘Cause if Jotaro’d shown up, there would’ve been a fight and I sure as shit would’ve remembered something like that.

“But here’s the best part: when I met Daisuke – not last night, but back when I was a kid, the second time around – I’d been walking for a long time. I remember my feet just killing me. So what I’m thinking is, the reason I must’ve been out there was because it happened just after the cliffs. I wouldn’t have been far from where Yukako’s place is now. I must’ve made the same mistake you did the other day, and gotten lost on the way back into town.”

Okuyasu huffed. “I told ya, dude – I was following you!”

“C’mon, man, that’s not the point! What I’m getting at is that if the killer went after me, then Jotaro might’ve gone after me too. They must’ve met up in the woods.”

Any further discussion was delayed by the timely appearance of the bus. With the town so far out of the way of city traffic, the buses ran like fine-tuned machinery: punctually, predictably. Josuke was silent on boarding the bus, and as they made their way to an empty pair of seats, bow-legged and side-stepping to counteract the momentum as the bus pulled out into the road and sped around the corner. The silence persisted after they’d taken their seats. Okuyasu, who thought he’d heard the end of it, had just turned his attention to the passing scenery through the window when he heard Josuke say:

“Me and Jotaro were investigating the voices, I remember. We snuck out one night and went down
to the river to check things out. It was around the time they first started putting up the new station.”

The bus was turning again. A sunbeam swept slowly over Josuke’s figure, hunched with his arms folded across the back of the seat in front of him.

“You remember all that?” Okuyasu asked.

“Yeah. I mean – sort of. It’s all there, it’s just kinda… scattered. There’s things that I think should fit together, but when I try to imagine them happening side by side it’s like there’s something off.”

“Like a tv show.”

“What?”

This time, Josuke was the one looking at him with expectation. To Okuyasu, seeing Josuke look at him that way made it seem like something had gotten turned around backwards. “S’nothing,” he mumbled. “I mean – you know how they’ve got breaks n’ stuff in shows, right? For the commercials? An’ when your show comes back on you know it’s supposed to be like it’s picking up right where it left off, like no time’s gone by or nothin’, but something always feels off or different. Like sometimes it’s the angle, or the actor will say the same line twice.”

“Yeah, that about nails it.”

Josuke sank against his seat. He tilted his head back, until the base of his skull was nestled against the nape of his neck – and Okuyasu, from his angle, could see the mound of Josuke’s neck swell and retract as he swallowed down his reluctance.

“There was a classmate of mine,” he began, “who told me she’d heard voices while crossing a the bridge over Ichio River, not far from my place.”

***

By the time they left the house, it was already past nine. Josuke’s mom and grandpa had gone out to a movie, and ten minutes after they left, there was a knock on his bedroom door.

“You coming or not?” Jotaro asked, while Josuke clutched the doorframe, letting his weight rest against it.

He chewed his lip, and glanced back over his shoulder at the empty room. “Okay,” he said at last. “I just gotta get changed.”

Before Jotaro could answer, Josuke was slamming the door shut on his face with a rushed exclamation of: “Waittheredon’tcomein!”

Be in bed by nine, his mother had told him. Which of course meant he’d had plans to be in bed by half-past. But that was a minor act of rebellion, committed within confines he’d familiarized himself with through trial and error. Sneaking out was a deviance on a whole other level. But he imagined someone like Jotaro probably snuck out all the time, and Josuke wasn’t willing to disappoint.

Even at his age, however, Josuke was utterly incapable of going anywhere in a hurry. He’d just laid out his three favorite t-shirts on his bed when, on the other side of the door, he heard Jotaro sigh with annoyance.

“Just a minute!” Josuke yelled.
After another round of deliberating and indecision, he settled on the middle t-shirt, just as he heard Jotaro mutter, “I’m leaving” – accompanied by the sound of footsteps in the hall.

A childish, irrational fear of being left behind managed to overcome any trace of Josuke’s vanity. Through the door he burst, shirt on backwards, hopping on one foot as he struggled to get the other through the unoccupied leg of his shorts. He made a brief, panicky noise that sounded almost like “wait!” – right before he saw that Jotaro had gone no further than the top of the stairs, where he was presently waiting with his arms crossed.

“You’re mean!” Josuke snapped. Schoolyard chatter had yet to supply him with a better (read: crasser) repertoire of insults.

“Sure. I’m leaving,” Jotaro said, and this time, he actually did begin to walk away, making it all the way to the bottom of the steps before Josuke raced after him.

And then – and then he was stumbling out the front door, and out into the open night air, and all spiteful and cowardly thoughts shook free from him. He stood for a moment on the porch step, air comfortably cool against his skin and tingling where it settled into the hot, heavy meat of his lungs. There was something thrilling, something novel about being out late and chasing after human specters like the ones Jotaro had told him about in his stories. Enough to make him remember why he’d wanted to do this in the first place. But he didn’t linger long – not when Jotaro was already ahead of him, his coat melting into the night.

Walking along the roadside with Jotaro, Josuke didn’t mind the dark so much. There were streetlights every few meters, and a warm incandescent glow in the windows of the neighbours’ familiar homes. Every now and then they’d pass someone taking their dog for a walk, or a couple out for a stroll – all told, Jotaro was probably the most threatening-looking person on the road, and that thought made Josuke stand just a little straighter whenever they passed a stranger in the street.

As they neared the river, however, the fog gradually thickened around them, until thick wreaths of it were swirling and snaking past Josuke’s legs, so thick and solid-looking that he felt like he could reach down and brush them away.

He didn’t realize they’d left the road altogether until he glanced up and saw a series of lights hovering impossibly high above them. The lights trailed off into nothing – a highway floating in the sky, with neither road nor car in sight. Only when Jotaro helped him over a stretch of damp, slick rocks, and he heard the gulp and slap of water to his left, and saw the massive steel piers rise up from the ground before him, did he realize where they were.

“This where you classmate said she heard the voices?” Jotaro asked, as he lay his hand against the concrete pile at the pier’s base.

Josuke copied the gesture, feeling the rough, ragged surface of the concrete nick and scrape at his palm.

“Uh, yeah. I think.”

Jotaro craned his head back. “It’s about a hundred and fifty feet, I’d say, from here to the top. That’s a long way for a voice to carry with the proximity to traffic.”

Without giving any further signal, Jotaro turned and walked back in the direction of the road, where the slope the bridge rested on was reinforced with a concrete abutment. Josuke wasn’t sure if he was meant to follow or wait, but the lurking shadows beneath the bridge and the mist that coiled over the surface of the sluggish, viscous water put him in mind of the things that might be lurking, unseen,
just outside of the immediate safety that followed wherever Jotaro went – and that was enough to make up his mind for him.

He pulled himself up onto the abutment, paying no mind the way the concrete gouged scratches into his bare legs. The slope of the abutment was steeper than he’d anticipated. Halfway up, he stumbled, and nearly slid back, when he felt himself being lifted by his shirt collar.

“Give me a break,” Jotaro mumbled, as he set Josuke down at the top. “If you didn’t think you could make it, you should have just stayed put.”

“Sorry,” Josuke mumbled.

Sighing, Jotaro leaned back against the pillar, on which the bridge’s deck rested, and above that, the guard rail. They were just below the edge of the embankment now; looking up, Josuke could see the silver back of the road sign that signaled to drivers the approaching bridge.

“He might have talked to her from here,” Jotaro mused, craning his neck to look up and behind him at the bridge. “But there’s nowhere to hide from this angle. He could have been further down the slope, but that depends on the acoustics. This is a pretty big bridge.”

He asked again: “Are you sure this is the right spot?”

Josuke, who had not at the time of telling the story that brought them here considered such things as the practical limitations of the human vocal range or the acoustics of a particular bridge, could only murmur: “I don’t know.”

Standing, Jotaro slid back down the abutment, the sandy surface of the concrete skittering beneath the soles of his shoes. Josuke, who was feeling significantly less daring, followed after on his behind, half scooting, half sliding his way down on the seam of his shorts. By the time he reached the bottom Jotaro was already preoccupied touring up and down along the riverbank beneath the bridge, eyes sweeping over the rushes. To Josuke, it looked like he’d lost something.

Before Josuke could ask what he was doing, Jotaro stooped and picked something up off the ground. He brushed away the dirt and held the thing up to the light, and it was then that Josuke could make out what it was: a glass bottle, green and ghoulish in the soupy light beneath the bridge.

“Label’s more or less undamaged,” he said, handing Josuke the bottle. “Some of the reeds closest to the path have been trampled, too. There must have been someone here within the past few days.”

Josuke stared at the general space occupied by the bottle, without looking at the bottle itself. “Do you think it coulda been the murderer?” he asked, making an effort to emulate the rising pitch of shock.

“It could’ve been a vagabond or some kids, for all we know. There’s not much to go by.”

Then Jotaro was moving again, long legs falling into quick and even strides, and Josuke scrambled to keep up.

“Where’re we going?” he demanded.

Jotaro paused just long enough to pull the little amber bottle out of his jacket. “Just following the river,” he muttered, uncapping the lid and tapping the bottle against his open palm. “There’s three more bridges somewhere along here.”

They continued walking in the strange fog-banked world at the river’s edge. The sky was much too
bright for the time of night. Light from the streetlights that ran along the road and from the bridges before and behind them leaked into the surrounding sky, as though light itself had been transmuted into vapor. The air was so thick that you could cast a shadow on it. Josuke felt like he was walking through a dream: the mist, and the lights of the bridge stretching like faerie lanterns over the water, and across the way on the opposite shore, buildings floating above the fog, more like mirages than structures with weight and mass.

He heard at one point the splash of something in the water nearby. When he looked out over the river, he saw something wending through the water, that at first he mistook for a snake. But then it drew closer to shore, and he saw by the wet fur and wrinkled, folded ears that it was a rat, brown and perhaps as long as his forearm with its rutter-tail thrashing after it. To her back clung four naked pups, their eyes blind-shut.

With a mix of miasmic terror and revulsion, Josuke retreated to Jotaro’s other side, putting his nephew between himself and the river.

They passed under another bridge, and then another. And then they left the main road behind them, so that the lights of town shrunk to a distant, twinkling island off in the distance. By then, Josuke’s good shoes were mud-splattered, his favorite shirt damp and cold where it clung to his skin. As the darkness deepened, the space between him and Jotaro closed, until he was clinging to the latter’s arm for fear of losing him in the thick, stewing shadows.

Up ahead, a tripod-shaped outline loomed – then it was upon them suddenly, body straddling the drainage ditch akimbo and its long, serpentine neck bent at an angle across a set of railroad tracks. On the other side of the tracks its trowel head rested, half-buried in the mud.

Josuke jumped, and dug his fingers into Jotaro’s jacket sleeve, until he realized that what he was looking at was an excavator abandoned for the night. Still — with steam rising from the machine’s cooling metal frame, there was something about it that seemed almost animal-like.

“This must be the new line to S City I heard about,” Jotaro muttered, more to himself than anything, as he stepped up onto the tracks.

For the first time that night, Josuke hung back, arms wrapped around himself. “We shouldn’t be walking on the tracks,” he said.

“The tracks aren’t even complete yet. We won’t have to worry about a train coming along.”

Still — no matter how self-assured Jotaro sounded, there was something about the situation that stood in opposition to everything Josuke had ever been taught. But Jotaro was walking away, and behind him the excavator loomed ominously, as though at any moment its engines and pistons might come alive and begin to move by their own accord. And so, swallowing back a burning lump in his throat, Josuke chased Jotaro down. Underfoot the wooden railroad ties were wet and slippery.

They were supposed to be having fun, Josuke thought. And it had been fun, at the very start — sneaking out past his bedtime, getting to follow Jotaro around, wandering through places where people rarely went, seeing the underside of the first bridge with its steel guts and bones. But it’d long since stopped being fun. He was cold, his legs ached, his socks had gotten wet and his feet squelched in their shoes. And beside him, Jotaro continued to ramble about the railroad, and the bridges, and the murders, and how all three were somehow connected, through a series of muddied arguments that jumped unexpectedly from point to point, and by then Josuke was too tired to even make an effort to follow along. And all the while Jotaro walked with his gaze fixed ahead, stepping only on the railway ties and avoiding the ground beneath, as though under a compulsion. Stopping now and then to fish out a tablet out from the accumulation of powder at the bottom of that little amber pill
Eventually the lights of the town grew brighter as they approached Kame Square, where the half-completed train station rose up from the mud, its steel skeleton matte and grey in the foggy twilight. By Josuke’s best guess, they’d left the house more than an hour and a half ago. His mother and grandfather would be getting home soon, and his mom was bound to creep upstairs, the way she always did after a night out, in order to sneak into his room when she thought he was asleep to give him a goodnight kiss.

When they reached the train station he stopped, with the firm knowledge that he could go no further. Jotaro turned and looked behind him, a crease forming in his forehead.

“Come on,” he muttered.

“No.”

“Alright.”

Jotaro turned and began to walk away, expecting Josuke would follow.

Instead, Josuke called after him: “I want to go home!”

Jotaro stopped, but did not retrace his steps. They were ten paces apart just then, more or less – far enough to test Josuke’s comfort, but close enough for him to see the way Jotaro’s fingers were curled into fists at his side.

“You’re the one who told me about your classmate hearing voices in the first place,” Jotaro mumbled.

“I’m tired. Mom and granpa are gonna be home soon.”

“So what?” Jotaro stalked closer, drawing up short just a few paces away, close enough that the full height of his frame loomed over Josuke. “Something’s out there. Do you want to wake up tomorrow and find out that one of your friends died because you didn’t do anything about it?”

Josuke didn’t know how to reply. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

All night long, the aura of safety he felt around Jotaro had been shrinking, bit by bit. Just now, Josuke realized with Jotaro towering above him, and seeing his red-rimmed eyes, and hearing the jangle of his jacket chain as it shifted in the breeze, and smelling the reek of cigarette smoke and sour sweat that rolled off of him – he felt no safer, here at an arm’s breadth, than he did ten, twenty feet back.

Taking out his wallet, Jotaro produced a handful of crumpled 1000 yen bills. He held them out to Josuke. “Here. There’s a payphone on the other side of the square. Dial zero for the operator, tell her you want a taxi to take you home. I’m going to keep going.”

Josuke gazed at the creased bills, the implication of Jotaro’s words slowly collapsing over him like a wave. He thought about standing alone in the empty square, a still target under the streetlight, waiting to get into a car with a stranger.

“I’m sorry,” he repeating, the burning lump resurfacing in his throat and nearly choking out the words. Jotaro’s face grew blurry as tears filled his eyes.

Jotaro went pale.
“Hey,” he said, kneeling down in front of the younger boy. “I’m not – I didn’t say any of that because I’m mad at you.”

Josuke tried to answer, but when he opened his mouth, only a loud sob came out. He clasped a hand over his mouth. Jotaro let out a sharp exhale.

“You’re alright,” Jotaro said, clapping Josuke on the back. “Come on, let’s go.”

For a moment, he was terrified that Jotaro would drag him by force down the endless stretch of unfinished railway track. Instead, he took Josuke by the hand and led him through the empty construction site and across Kame square.

Josuke sat on a bench, legs kicking restlessly beneath him, while Jotaro dialed up a taxi on the payphone. Then they waited together, ten, fifteen minutes, for the taxi to arrive. Jotaro paid the driver up front – two thousand yen, more than twice the cost of the ride.

“ Aren’t you coming?” Josuke asked, as he slid into the taxi’s back seat.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” Jotaro said – shutting the car door on Josuke before he could protest.

And then he was watching Jotaro in the rear-view mirror, back-turned as he strode toward the convex frame of the station.

Josuke had no sooner gotten home, shambled into his room, and turned out the bedroom light, when he heard his grandfather’s car pull into the driveway, following by the sound of doors opening and shutting, and footsteps echoing off the asphalt.

Shortly after, his bedroom door opened with a soft ‘click’.

“Josuke,” his mother whispered, “are you awake?”

The question was, of course, a trap. He kept quiet and willed his breathing to even out, in imitation of sleep. Tomoko clucked her tongue.

“Don’t play dumb,” she said, “I saw the light on when we were driving up the road. Trying to sneak in some video games while your mamma wasn’t home, eh?”

When he continued to stay quiet, she relented with a huff, stamped across the room, and gave him a loud, wet smooch on the forehead. Then her footsteps retreated, and the door clicked shut, and eventually, silence settled over the whole house.

He passed the night in troubled dreams, where he walked along a path with no behind or before, and watched the bodies of friends and classmates drift by past his feet, while rats paddled busily around them, making rafts of the buoyant dead. One of the corpses rolled over onto its back. It looked up at Josuke with its maggot-eaten eyes, and began to mutter an accusation of some sort, but then dream ended and the moment he woke he could no longer remember what he was accused of.

At first, he wasn’t sure what had woken him – until he heard something ping against the window.

Not for the first time that night, adrenaline squeezed at his heart, but when crept over to the window and peaked out, there was no one outside but Jotaro, who looked like he was in the process of throwing another pebble at the window. When Jotaro saw him heave open the window, he stopped, arm bent mid-arc.

A series of confused hand gestures passed between the two of them. Josuke never caught the gist of
the conversation; all he knew was that it ended with Jotaro using his stand to scale up the side of the house. By the time Star Platinum pulled him through the window, Jotaro was shaking with exhaustion. His pants were soaked up to the knees in mud, and there was mud too under his fingernails, like he'd been digging with his bare hands.

“I'll be downstairs in a minute,” Jotaro mumbled, as sunk down onto Josuke’s bed. “Just going to rest my eyes.”

Josuke was too taken aback to speak for a minute. “What happened?” he managed at last.

Jotaro drew his legs up, trying as best he could to make himself fit on the child-sized bed. “Nothing,” he mumbled, as he closed his eyes. “Went looking but – couldn’t find anything.”

And just like that, he was out.

With no place for him to sleep – and with too much adrenaline in his bloodstream to do so – Josuke settled on the windowsill with a comic book. He remained there, until just after six. And then, with an air of ceremony, he rose and woke Jotaro up.

***

“Anyway,” Josuke was saying, “we didn’t find nothing out by the tracks either. It was getting late by then, so Jotaro and I ended up sneaking back home before mom and grandpa could get back and catch us.”

In the thick of his entrancement, a muffled alarm bell was sounding somewhere far away in Okuyasu’s conscience. “You think that’s why the killer went after ya? ‘Cause the two of you were snoopin’ after ‘im?”

“Maybe, but if so that’s just good news for us, because – ,” here, Josuke’s voice dropped down into a whisper, “it wasn’t just the killer, right? If he was just some regular guy, he wouldn’t have known what we were up to. But a ghost? Shit, it might’ve known. And if we were making Vox nervous, there’s gotta be a reason.”

He wondered, for a moment, why Josuke was whispering – and then a thought occurred to him. “You don’t think Vox can hear us, do ya?” Okuyasu asked, lowering his own voice to match Josuke’s whisper.

“I dunno. Maybe. Daisuke did say it was the sort of ghost you can’t see.”

Okuyasu did a brief flip-through of his (woefully short and inaccurate) catalogue of ghost-fighting expertise. Trouble was – there was little in the way of dealing with an eavesdropping ghost in the repertoire of popular film.

“Maybe,” he began, “we could try wrappin’ tinfoil around our heads?”

Josuke snorted. “C’mon, dude. Everyone knows that only works on aliens.”

Okuyasu huffed and raked his fingers through his greased-back hair. “Whatever, man.” While in the process of rummaging through his scalp, he apparently struck on a misplaced thought, for his eyes suddenly went off to the middle-distance the way they always did when he was thinking. “Doesn’t it seem strange? – Vox comin’ back now that Jotaro’s gonna be in town?”

“Not really. It’s not like we had any serial killers poking their noses around last time Jotaro dropped in.”
Okuyasu stared at him. He managed to get his mouth half-open before Josuke (who apparently had not been paying attention throughout the entire plot of part four) waved his hand. “I mean besides Kira. And Angelo. Besides – shit! That’s our stop.”

Josuke yanked on the pull-cord, but by then it was too late. The bus was already bombing right on past the harbour, taking both boys with it.

Five minutes later – and a ten minute walk down the road – they got off at the next stop, Okuyasu meanwhile hurling all manner of insults at the bus driver, the majority of which either called into question the driver’s competence at his job, or asserted the likelihood that, in manno-a-manno combat, Okuyasu could (and we quote) “kick your [sic] ass”.

When they were five minutes down the road and Okuyasu was feeling a little cooler under the collar, he said: “Still – you figure ghosts would be all about revenge ‘n stuff. You think it’s safe, Jotaro being here with his kid an all?”

“Jotaro can handle it,” Josuke grumbled. And then, after a pause: “Look. I’ll tell him today, alright?”

Okuyasu, who was just starting to feel a little bad for the bus driver, and a lot angry at himself for losing his temper, was caught off guard by this last capitulation.

“Thought you didn’t want him gettin’ mixed up in this,” he mumbled, unable to keep the skepticism out of his voice.

“I said I’ll do it, alright? We’re all supposed to go to lunch later – me and him and his daughter and the lovebirds. It’ll be easier with Koichi and Yukako around. They can give him all the nitty gritty. You’re welcome to join us if you want.” Josuke glanced at his watch and swore. “Shit. Speaking of – it’s twenty after, dude. I’ve gotta hustle.”

Okuyasu stopped cold in his tracks. “Dude,” he said. “Tell me it’s not Wednesday.”

“It’s Wednesday, why do you – hey! Where’re you going?”

“Sorry, bro!” Okuyasu called over his shoulder. He was already halfway down the road by then in a dead sprint, and gaining ground. “I forgot I had a thing – see ya tomorrow!”

Josuke grumbled, and toed at the dirt. It was one thing to show up late in the company of others. It was quite another thing to show up late alone. Besides – he’d been nervous about meeting his second-great-whatever niece. Having Okuyasu around would have been nice. Okuyasu was never shy around new people. With his lack of verbal filter and volume control he could break the ice no problem.

Eventually, Josuke got over feeling sorry for himself and gained back his nerve. Alone, he continued on his way in the direction of the harbour.

***

By the time he arrived, Jotaro was already waiting for him on the dock, a familiar travel trunk – as well as several black and silver flight cases which, he would later learn, were filled with scientific instruments – at his side. He wondered, at first, where Jolyne was, until he spotted her, half-hidden behind her father’s billowing trousers (the hideous white article in question having unfortunately survived, spotless, the whole Kira debacle). Previously, Josuke had only seen her in the tiny, grainy picture Jotaro carried around in his wallet. Up close, she was waifish and puppet-like, with her big, black button eyes, her narrow, beaky mouth, and her knobby, bare knees.
Jolyne stayed quiet when Josuke offered to help Jotaro with the trunks. Thankfully, Josuke prided himself on having a way with kids – a self-impression he’d formed without any backing hard evidence.

Squatting, he put on the biggest grin he could manage and said: “I’m Josuke, what’s your name?”

In answer, Jolyne retreated further behind her father’s leg, burying one small fist into the fabric of his trousers.

“She can’t speak Japanese,” Jotaro explained.

While Josuke was still in the process of trying to mentally translate his question into English (a task best left incomplete – believe us, we’ve seen his English scores), Jolyne tugged on Jotaro’s jacket. With a dutiful, ponderous slowness, Jotaro stooped over, and waited patiently while Jolyne cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered something into his ear. And then, at an equally ponderous pace, Jotaro rose again, and clasped his hands in front of him to address Josuke. Then entire process took nearly a minute.

“She says she’s hungry,” Jotaro announced.

“Great! Well, I told Tonio we’d be over for noon, so…”

“And you’ve arranged for transportation?”

Josuke looked at Jotaro, and then at the three enormous cases all piled up beside Jotaro. An acute feeling of humiliation and despair that comes with having committed a small but preventable mistake began to work its way through him, starting with an ache in his jaw.

“I was thinking we’d just take the bus,” he mumbled. And then, because it was one of the few words he could translate off the top of his head, he added, for Jolyne’s sake: “Bassu.”

Jotaro was about to put on the long-suffering expression of a parent speaking to someone who has never been on a long trip with a five year old before, when Jolyne gave an urgent tug on his pant leg. Once again, he stooped like a tree bending in the wind, and once again, he rose upon hearing this whispered communication of the plaintiff.

“I guess she wants to ride in the bus,” he muttered.

“Bus-u!” Jolyne exclaimed, trying and failing to affect Josuke’s accent.

It was just Josuke’s luck, of course, that the first bus driver to stop would be the bus driver he and Okuyasu previously tussled with. He’d just reached the end of the line and was in the process of making his way back along the circuit.

“That’s three fares,” the bus driver grumbled when Josuke fed enough change for two tickets into the farebox.

“C’mon, the kid’s four,” Josuke said. “Four and under ride free, right?”

The bus driver muttered something under his breath. He was about to disengage the parking break when Jotaro spoke up.

“She’s five.”

The bus driver let go of the parking brake and leaned back in his seat.
“You gettin’ off or stayin’ on?” he said, to Josuke, mostly.

Josuke – after complaining out loud about the state of his bank account and sending several sidelong looks in Jotaro’s direction – magnanimously paid the third fare, and soon they were on their way.

***

He’d learned over the duration of Jotaro’s stay that his nephew was subject to peculiar shifts in mood. Today was the advent of one such fluxuation. He’d refused to come to breakfast, instead spending all morning stretched out on the basement couch, not sleeping but not doing anything of particular interest to a six year old either. Playing with his zippo, mostly, or staring at the ceiling. He’d wanted nothing to do with Josuke either, until Josuke offered to procure a cigarette for him from his mom’s purse the next time she let him fish through it for a piece of gum. In exchange, Jotaro agreed to take him to the park.

After all that, it was Josuke who wanted to go home early. He was still exhausted from the late night spent at the library, the silver glow of the microfilm reader searing negatives onto his eyeballs: black sheets with white letters that continued to float before his vision long after he crawled into bed.

“Josuke!”

They were just walking by his neighbour’s house when he heard the voice. When he glanced over in the direction it had come from, he saw Mrs. Imai standing on her front step, waving to him.

“C’mon,” Josuke said.

He grabbed Jotaro’s hand and attempted to tug him down the walkway. But Jotaro remained rooted in place, and the hand Josuke was holding slipped from his grasp.

Mrs. Imai leaned against the door, her infant daughter propped up on one hip. The little girl had a big, brightly-colored plastic ring clasped in both hands. The part of the ring that was not in her hands was in her mouth. A bubble of slobber was forming at one corner of her lips

“Mornin’,” Josuke murmured when he was standing just in front of the doorstep.

He was always shy around adults while out in public. At home was another story altogether – there he was the number two man of the house, and had a disproportionate sense of entitlement and authority to go along with it.

“I have a castella cake that’s been sitting in the cupboard for weeks now,” Mrs. Imai explained. “I was going to wait until Hiroji got home to have it, but he had to go away for work. Would you like a slice?”

“Yes!” Josuke exclaimed. And then, remembering his manners, he tacked on a mumbled, “please”.

“What about your friend? Would he like a piece?”

Josuke glanced back over his shoulder. At the edge of the driveway, Jotaro was right where he’d left him: hands shoved into his pockets, pretending to take an interest in the local dirt.

“If he doesn’t want it, I’ll have his piece,” Josuke decided.

Mrs. Imai beamed as she readjusted her hold on her daughter. “You wanna give Josuke a piece of cake, Yuki?” she cooed, bouncing the girl lightly in her arms.
Yuki stopped slavering on her plastic ring long enough to pop it out of her mouth and gurgle, “Jojo!” – her small, wrinkled pink fingers reaching briefly for him before she remembered the ring and went right back to holding it in both hands.

Mrs. Imai slipped inside, leaving the door half-open behind her. When she emerged, the ring in Yuki’s hands had been replaced by two slices of castella wrapped in a brown paper napkin. For a two year old, she was remarkably well behaved. From the kitchen to the front door, she hadn’t once succumb to the temptation to nibble on the cake.

“Thanks,” Josuke said as he took the napkin-wrapped cakes from the toddler’s hands – a transaction that required Mrs. Imai to kneel.

“What do you say, Yuki?” Mrs. Imai asked.

“Welcome!” Yuki crooned.

Etiquette dictated that Josuke linger and make small talk, but he was a kid with two slices of cake and zero self-control. With no more than a quick “See ya!” thrown over his shoulder, he raced back up the driveway.

As he approached Jotaro, he sensed yet another change of mood had come over him. Where before he’d been quiet and watchful, he hardly seemed aware of Josuke when he took hold of Jotaro’s hand and started off down the road once more. When he did come back to himself, it was a slow, gradual process – like he’d been somewhere else, leaving his body behind.

“What’ve you got there?” Jotaro asked. He sounded distracted, and distant – his voice growing faint when he turned his head away to glance over his shoulder.

“Mrs. Imai gave me some cakes,” said Josuke, who thought better than to inform Jotaro that half of said cakes were, technically, for him.

Jotaro gave no indication of having heard his reply. He moved in short, agitated steps, his hands shoved inside his pockets to hide the nervous shakes. Instead of turning down the Higashikata’s driveway, Jotaro kept on walking, and Josuke was compelled to follow after.

“We’re not doing enough,” Jotaro said at last.

“‘Bout what?”

“You know.”

Josuke tried to recall from the details he’d gleaned eavesdropping in on his grandfather, all the nuances of catching a criminal mastermind. These rags of information were so thoroughly cross-contaminated with what he’d seen in forbidden late-night crime dramas, however, that he had no way of telling apart what was useful and what only worked in fiction.

“You thinkin’ we should have a stakeout?” he asked.

“We need more information.”

“Wasn’t that why we went to the library for?”

They were coming up now to a quiet stretch of road, where the houses and lanes were concealed behind closely-crowded stands of chestnut trees that lined either side of the road. The sidewalk and the street were bowered under the chestnut trees’ wide, parasol canopies, enveloping Josuke and
“The newspapers are more interested in telling a story,” Jotaro explained. “They try to make sense of tragedy, because that’s the readers want. A narrative. An unsolved mystery is more exciting than a case that’s gone cold because there was never enough evidence to form a conviction. You know what double jeopardy is?”

“Does it mean you get a second chance to win a prize?” asked Josuke, whose grandfather was in the habit of watching re-runs of Quiz Grand Prix.

The wind stirred, inverting the chestnut leaves on either side of them. Darts of impressionist light moved in quavering, radial tracks across the asphalt and the sidewalk. A sunspot slowly rolled up Josuke’s shoulder, warm and solid where it touched his skin.

“Double jeopardy forbids someone from being tried twice for the same crime,” Jotaro was saying. “Even if you’re sure someone committed a crime, you need solid evidence before you go to trial, or else you’ll never be able to bag the perp again if the case gets overturned.”

In Josuke’s mind, there were no intermediary steps between finding the culprit and the swift execution of justice. Like most persons under the age of twenty, his first religious feelings were toward a sense of dualism, and he had not yet developed a spiritual capacity for nuance, particularly in moral subjects. Like most persons his age, however, he practiced moral greyness frequently through the discipline of creative justification.

He asked Jotaro what double jeopardy had to do anything.

“Not a whole lot,” Jotaro said. “Not to us. But if we could get the case files, we could find out who the police were looking into. And then – we could do our own investigations.”

“How’re you gonna get the files?”

Jotaro shrugged. “I could always break into the police station, if I had to.”

Josuke paused, chewing on his hesitation and his promises. In the end, he justified.

“If you think it’d help,” he said, “I know where grandpa keeps the keys to the station – I could…” He trailed off. The thought of uttering the word ‘steal’ left him with a bad taste in his mouth.

“You sure you’re up for it?”

“You want to catch the guy, right?” Josuke asked – justifying, once again.

Something that was not quite a smile, not quite a frown unsettled Jotaro’s expression. “Pretty tough for a kid, aren’t you?” he mumbled.

For one brief moment, Josuke felt the weight of Jotaro’s hand on the back of his skull – almost too incidental to be a pat – and then it was gone, and Jotaro was walking on ahead, a blue silhouette in the deep deep shadow scored into the summer’s day.

What was left behind was a warm, weightless feeling in Josuke’s chest. It was not quite the same feeling that went along with doing something right – but he was young enough to mistake one for the other.

***
The trouble with Tonio’s was that there were only two tables in all the restaurant. Two tables, and two seats per table – the perfect spot for couples, but not so much for, say, a party of five. By the time Josuke arrived at the restaurant with Jotaro and Jolyne in tow, Yukako and Koichi were already seated. Jotaro and Jolyne, by virtue of being guests, were awarded the other two seats, leaving Josuke the odd man out.

He was beginning to feel like it was the kind of day where the universe would be satisfied with no small sacrifice.

The closest thing to a fifth chair the restaurant had to offer was a mob bucket, which when turned upside down, was serviceable as a stool. Tonio seemed a little too pleased to offer Josuke this substitution. He suspected it had something to do with his previous familiarity with the restaurant’s cleaning implements.

“Cia, bella!” Tonio exclaimed, as he reached out to take Jolyne’s hand. She pulled away, with an expression far too cross and too serious for someone her age. “Is this your first time trying Italian cuisine?”

Jotaro mumbled an English translation – ‘cia bella’s notwithstanding – to Jolyne.

“Nah,” Jolyne replied.

“She likes spaghetti,” Jotaro offered by way of translation.

“Very good, very good! In that case I’m sure you will – .”

“I like Chef Boyardee,” Jolyne amended.

“She’ll eat canned spaghetti,” Jotaro translated. “Can’t get her to touch the homemade stuff,” he added.

All this translation, of course, was unnecessary. The Italian language shared more of its genes with English than it did with Japanese, and in his travels Tonio had become acquainted with the former long before the latter. As with the culinary arts, language was something to be acquired over time, starting first with the familiar before expanding outward to more exotic pallets.

Just then, Tonio’s smile mimicked his uniform: tight, polished, uncomfortably pristine.

“Of course,” he said, not bothering with the thoroughfare of Japanese this time. “But my dishes are made so that anyone can enjoy them – even picky eaters! Today we have a bruschetta to start, followed by an acquacotta soup and spaghetti al pomodoro.”

Jolyne wasn’t so impressed. She was a shy child, normally – but the effects of a long voyage made her grumpy, and the added hunger made her bold. “I don’t want spaghetti.”

Tonio shot a look in Jotaro’s direction that, while absolutely maintaining his otherwise professional veneer, anyone with any amount of insight would have correctly interpreted as a cry for help.

Jotaro, unfortunately, had none.

“You got a kids’ menu or something?” he asked, before Josuke or the others could stop him.

The smile on Tonio’s face remained unmoved, but Josuke could see the vein on the side of his neck throb.
“Maybe you could make a fancy version of whatever she likes,” Josuke suggested, thinking of Tonio’s extensive collection of knives in the kitchen less than twenty feet away. “You know, like you did with the pudding.”

Koichi nodded vigorously in agreement. “Yeah! There’s even a show on television now about world-famous chefs competing to make the best fast food dish! You could do something like that no problem!”

“Of course,” said Tonio, his shoulders slackening by degrees. “What would you like, patatina?”

And Jolyne, without pause, answered: “Dino nuggets.”

“You mean chicken nuggets, yes?”

“No! The ones with dinosaur shapes!”

“She won’t eat the regular ones,” Jotaro explained, in Japanese, as if doing so would somehow get the point across.

This previous exchange – with the exception of Jotaro’s comment – was lost on Koichi and Josuke. Yukako, meanwhile, inspected her place setting and mumbled, “she has a point”, under her breath.

“I’m afraid dinosaur nuggets have little nutritional value,” Tonio said, mostly to Jotaro. “It won’t do much to help with her fatigue or headache.”

Just then, Josuke remembered an important fact about Tonio’s restaurant. “No nutritional value is fine,” he said, loud enough that no one would attempt to interrupt him. “We could already probably go without for the day, yeah?”

“R-right!” chimed in Koichi, who remembered, around the same time that Josuke came to this realization, the grotesque specifics of his first date at Tonio’s.

Josuke had to admit – he felt a little bad for Tonio when he stomped off back to the kitchen, his chef’s hat looking somehow more deflated and floppy than it had moments ago. He was only trying to help, after all. Josuke just didn’t want to see him get pummeled by Jotaro for serving a pasta dish that made his daughter’s eyes temporarily fall out, or some other weird shit. Guys like Jotaro tended to act first and apologize later.

“Soosoo,” Josuke began, in an effort to dispel the awkward atmosphere that had settled over the table. “How was the trip?”

Once again, Jotaro gave him that look reserved for use by the parents of toddlers. “Long,” he replied.

“We’re glad to have you, Mister Kujo,” said Koichi. “Morioh could use you right now.”

Jotaro, who’d been in the process of lifting his glass of water to his lips, paused and lowered the glass back down to the table. “What for?”

“Well, lately,” Koichi began, but that was about as far as he got.

The table beneath them gave a jump, silverware and glasses rattling, and suddenly Josuke was doubled over his place setting, wheezing.

“Are you alright?!” Koichi asked.

Jotaro took a brief interest in the spectacle, only to be distracted by the sudden appearance of tears in
Jolyne’s eyes and she sniffled and snuffled out of fright and want of attention. From across the table, Yukako glared at Josuke.

“I’m – fine – .” Josuke grit out between clenched teeth.

What had happened was this: on Koichi first beginning to speak, Josuke had endeavoured to shut him up with a kick beneath the table. Only, he’d overestimated the length of Koichi’s legs, and underestimated the length of Yukako’s. In retaliation, she’d landed a perfectly-placed kick to his shin bone.

“Like I was saying,” Koichi recommenced.

“ – It’s a good thing you’re back,” Josuke interrupted, “cause I’ve been hearing all sorts of things lately about – you know. Those things you were studying, what were they called again…?”

“Sea stars?”

“Yeah, those!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Josuke could see Koichi and Yukako shooting him questioning looks. He endeavoured, through subtle jerks of his head, to indicate the five year old in the room. Unfortunately, subtlety was not one of Josuke Higashikata’s strengths.

“Do you have a crick in your neck, Josuke?” Yukako demanded. There was an animated look in her eyes just then – she’d recently added ‘power massage’ to her menagerie of hobbies, but was woefully short of victims to apply her practice on.

Koichi, thankfully, at least understood the general principle of the message: that now was perhaps not the best time to discuss abduction, murder, and other topics that were strictly pg-13. “Right, sea stars!” he said loudly. “We’ve been, ah, having problems with those.”

Both Koichi and Josuke were startled when Jotaro said: “That’s correct. The Northern Pacific Seastar has been devastating the oyster farming industry within the past decade. I’m surprised the issue’s made it into the news.”

Josuke snuck a glance at Yukako, half-expecting her to call them both out on their fib. But she only sipped thoughtfully at her flute of mineral water, as she watched the scene unfold before her with the repressed glee of a sadist witnessing a train derailment.

“I mean, it’s all pretty neat!” Koichi exclaimed with falsetto enthusiasm. “Who wouldn’t be into that sort of thing?”

For just a split second, Josuke thought he saw the start of a grin on Jotaro’s face. “If you’re both so interested,” he went on to say, settling once again into a familiar scowl, “You can come along with me over the next few days to take oyster populations counts.”

“I’m the research assistant,” announced Jolyne, who of the entire proceeding conversation understood only the word for sea star.

She had not yet realized that, for someone her age, being the research assistant encompassed waiting in the jeep, and occasionally getting to touch the specimens, if she promised not to tug.

“Koichi won’t be able to make it,” said Yukako. “My father’s flying down to Hawaii on business for a few days, and he’s offered to take Koichi and I. Josuke, on the other hand, I suspect won’t be doing anything important.”
Josuke turned to Koichi with a look of betrayal and disbelief. “Dude.”

“I was going to tell you!” Koichi blurted.

Any further argument was postponed by the arrival of lunch.

***

“Not bad,” Jolyne said later, regarding Tonio’s ‘breaded, herbed chicken breasts a forma di dinosauri’. “I like the ones that come in a box better, though.”

Tonio, thankfully, was busy preparing dessert at the time this remark was made.

Dessert, according to Tonio, was “Vanilla-bean gelato, with a raspberry reduction, served nestled between two zeppole di San Giuseppe.” – the latter, being a kind of sweetened fried dough.

None of the three frequenters of Johnny’s present had the heart to tell Tonio he’d accidentally re-invented the ice cream slider.

***

When Josuke got home it was only eight o’clock, but his day had been so full, that he felt he couldn’t fit another minute of busyness in. He flopped over onto his bed, limbs content to mellow and do nothing for the rest of the night. At the same time: a feeling absence was gnawing holes in his chest. He felt like a shot-up barrel – everything corked up now leaking out from a hundred places all at once.

He was a needy person. This was a general characteristic, but one which manifested especially strongly where it concerned the person of Okuyasu Nijimura. Ever since the night in the library he’d been trying to hold back. Rationing out blatant displays of affection into sane portions. A recommended serving size for a healthy platonic relationship. But there was only so much withdrawal a guy could take.

Josuke was on his feet again, just long enough to sneak downstairs to unplug the living room phone and sneak back up with it to his bedroom on the sly without Tomoko noticing. Thankfully, there was a functioning phone jack in his room, and the wire was just long enough to reach from the jack to his bed.

After dialing the number, he lay curled on his side with the phone base cradled to his chest, and the receiver nestled between his shoulder and ear. He felt giddy, and childish, and nervous all at once. Speaking with Okuyasu was easier in person, when he had the whole room to work with. Some inherited skill for his father’s sleight of hand. Show them a smile and they won’t hear the stumble in your words.

Over the phone? He found himself thinking too hard about what he wanted to say.

“Sorry for dippin’ on ya,” Okuyasu mumbled. His voice sounded heavy, and slow – but it was hard to tell if there was anything unusual about it, when Josuke heard his voice so rarely over the phone.

When he asked what Okuyasu had been up to, he got two similar but slightly different accounts of going into town to do some shopping. Okuyasu had never been any good at keeping his alibis straight.

He tried to tell himself that it was fine. That he wasn’t entitled to know every little detail of what Okuyasu was up to at all hours. That Okuyasu was allowed to keep a secret if he really wanted to.
But repeating these things to himself over and over didn’t make it sting any less.

The first question out of Okuyasu’s mouth was: “Didya tell him?”

All day long, he’d been fighting off the feeling that he’d forgotten something.

“Uh, yeah,” Josuke said, speaking quickly so that Okuyasu wouldn’t catch the note of uncertainty in his voice. “He said he’d be on the lookout for Vox and shit.”

At sixteen, Josuke was past the age of justifying, because while lying to others gets easier with age, lying to oneself requires more fineness the more one learns about the world. He’d adapted by turning instead to excuses. No, he hadn’t told Jotaro about the serial killer on the loose. But it’d been a busy day, and it was bound to slip anyone’s mind.

Excuses were easier than justification, because admitting to a mistake was the first step in correction. Only, in the case of chronic self-deceivers, it was often the only step ever taken.

“What was it like seeing Mister Jotaro again? He change much?” Okuyasu asked.

Josuke wound the phone cord around his knuckles, clenching his fist until the curls left beaded indents in his palm. “He’s pretty much the same. He doesn’t act like someone who’s been gone a month. It’s like – he’s having a conversation with you, and when he goes off he expects you to just pick it back up again when he comes back.”

And then, because it was something to keep Okuyasu on the line: “He was like that when I was a kid, too. Did I ever tell you about how he tried to skip town without saying anything?”

***

He hadn’t heard it from Jotaro himself. The information had come in on a tip from his mother, whom Jotaro had asked about taxi arrangements the day before.

He galloped down the steps, almost tripping in the process.

By then, Jotaro was halfway through packing his travel trunk – though it was not so much an act of packing as it was an act of taking everything out of the suitcase and folding it neatly so that the lid would close properly. He’d lived out of that trunk ever since arriving.

“You can’t go,” Josuke said. He’d meant it to sound like a command, but it came out more like a plea.

“None of the police files turned up anything useful,” Jotaro explained without looking up from his folding. “A different suspect behind most of the cases. No known link between the subjects.”

Jotaro went to slam the trunk’s lid shut, but Josuke prevented him.

“Josuke,” Jotaro said as a warning.

“There’s gotta be something else we can do, right?”

“Maybe, if we had something else to go on. Until then – you’ve got the Foundation’s number. Just call them if anything new comes up.”

For a moment, Josuke tightened his grip around the suitcase’s lid. His dual ideologies waged war, the want of good things clashing with the fear and loathing of the bad.
“Actually,” he began, “one of my classmates was saying she was walking home across the bridge yesterday, and –

Chapter End Notes

When I explained my plans for the scene at Tonio's restaurant to my girlfriend, she put her head in her hands and groaned.
An oblong of light hung above – warm, dim, the color of heated steal. Looking at it filled his head with a thin, grainy hum. As he continued to look the sound expanded, ballooning outward until he could feel it pushing against the inside of his skull.

Then, Josuke blinked, and his vision pulled back until he found himself standing on the sidewalk, looking up at the streetlight. Despite the bright, washed-out blue of the early afternoon sky, the lamp above was lit; with his eyes closed, he could still see the burning impression of the bulb’s coils, white against the darkened inside of his eyelids, wound about in cursive loops. The effect of this sudden shift in perspective was jarring, like he was looking at the world through the intermediary of a camera without any control over the zoom – but he considered it no more than a minor inconvenience. Nor did he think too hard about what he’d been doing just now. He felt only a vague compulsion to return home.

Jouzenji Road was bustling with a cacophony of all the sounds he’d come to associate with summer in Morioh. The steady chop-chop-chop of a sprinkler going off. The rapid staccato chopchopchopchop of a lawnmower’s blades, nearly drowned out by the throaty revving of its engine – so clear and visceral that Josuke could almost smell the sweet, noxious gasoline fumes. The bark of a dog and its answering echo. And beneath it all, the pulsing hiss of cicadas.

Despite all the noise, however, the roads and sidewalks were empty. The neighbors’ yards, too, were vacant, despite looking like they’d all been tended to recently: the grass was a deep verdant color, the way it always was when it’d been freshly watered. In the afternoon sun, the moisture was beginning to evaporate off the grass, and a thin, wispy fog hung just above the ground.

When he passed the Imai family’s old place, there was a police car sitting in the driveway. A boxy-looking black and white Nissan Cedric, like the one his grandfather used to drive. He wondered, briefly, what the police car was doing there – but the thought was only a passing one, and slipped from his brain moments later without leaving a trace, like so many mercury droplets.

“I’m home!” he hollered, nearly before he had the chance to open the front door.

No reply greeted him. From the depths of the house, he heard the sounds of activity – thumps and gurgles and other noises not out of place in the realm of home economics. He decided that his mother hadn’t heard him.
That his mother might not be home never occurred to Josuke. Tomoko Higashikata worked part-time as a clerk at the local department store’s cosmetics counter. As far back as Josuke could remember, however, she’d always made a point of being at home in the mornings before he left for school, and in the late afternoon when he returned. This schedule was maintained for his sake, mostly – to foster the illusion that she was always around if he needed her, even when she wasn’t – and it accounted for the majority of her short temper toward Josuke’s habit of after-school tardiness. A ten-to-three job selling foundation and eyeliner didn’t pay much; up until Ryohei’s death, the addition of a senior police officer’s salary had taken care of the household expenses. As for after -- the policeman’s salary was replaced by a ten-year backlog of child support checks, which Tomoko, out of a lingering romantic hopefulness, had left untouched and uncashed until the passage of time had convinced her of what all her friends and relatives could not: that the cover had long closed on her and Joseph’s love story.

Kicking off his shoes, Josuke stepped inside. The hallway carpet was soft and sank underfoot. As he padded along it, the sounds coming from within the house sharpened into focus. They seemed to be originating from the kitchen. He could hear water boiling, someone stirring a pot – steel scraping steel. The ch-op ch-op of a knife against a cutting board, drawn out and delayed by the introduction of resistance. The wet hiss of oil.

“What’s for supper?” Josuke asked, as he rounded the corner.

The cutting board was out on the kitchen counter, a knife set aside at its edge and a half-chopped yam sitting on top of it. Beside it, the rice cooker was chugging away with a sound like a locomotive, a steady jet of steam escaping from under the cooker’s glass lid. On the stove, fish flanks were sizzling in oil – on the cusp of burning, if the charcoal scent in the air was anything to go by. There was a kettle, too, on the stovetop, rattling against the burner as the water came to a rolling boil. Josuke noticed it around the same time he noticed that, despite the noises he’d heard moments ago, he was all alone in the kitchen. He did not have long to contemplate this discovery, however – just then the kettle began to gutter and scream.

And scream and scream the kettle did, the shrill sound rising to one crescendo only to begin on its way to the next, until, at last, Josuke slipped into the kitchen and turned the stove off. The kettle’s whistle trailed off with a whimper. The oil in the saucepan crackled and sizzled and fizzled out. On the counter, the rice cooker shut itself off with a click.

For the first time since he’d stepped inside, silence settled over the house. The perfect quiet was made all the more striking by the previous cacophony; it was as though even the house itself had ceased to shift, the whole of its frame holding itself in tension like a baited breath, waiting to see what he’d do next.

For a moment, he lingered at the stove, holding the kettle by its handle. He felt drowsy. He couldn’t remember how he’d come to be there, or what he’d been in the process of doing. Two teacups were set out on the kitchen table, with a teapot between them. Josuke supposed he must be waiting for someone.

Wrapping the tea kettle handle in a dishtowel, he carried it over to the kitchen table. Two tea bags had already been placed inside the teapot. He tipped the kettle over and a stream of hot water gulped and guttered out from the spout. He watched through a veil of steam as the teapot began to fill, the water around the teabags staining slowly, first golden and then a rich red-brown.

With the tea steeping, he took a seat at the table, and waited.

On the opposite wall was a phone. Bright yellow, like the one he remembered his family owning when he was small. As he waited, he caught himself staring at it. There was something about the
phone that drew his eyes to it, something almost like a form of tension – as if its frequency was off, too quick or too slow, vibrating out of sync with everything around it. He could only compare the feeling to those times when he’d watch a movie and immediately know, either through the camera angle or the way the scene was staged, that the gun on the table would later be fired, or the closet door would creak open by its own accord, or the living room window was about to be smashed by a rock. Movies had a way of imbuing static objects with potential. Sure enough – while he was watching, the receiver slipped free from the switch hook. It fell two, three feet before the cord remembered its shape, and then it dangled, rotating slowly, as the drone of a dial tone filled the room.

He got up with the intention of crossing the room to put the phone back on its hook, but all at once his legs felt too light to support his weight. For a moment he stood leaning against the table, willing his legs to stop shaking. Down the hall he heard the front door slam open – and just like that, the strength that had bled out from him returned, and he found he could stand up straight.

Across the room, the sound of the dial tone ceased. The receiver hung, silent – turning slowly in air as the residual momentum of its fall traveled up and down the telephone coil.

The first floor of the Higashikata household was spread out along one long hallway that ran from the front of the house to the back. When Josuke stepped out into the hall, he noticed right away that the front door was open at the other end. As he stood gazing at the vacant door frame, the hallway between himself and the open door folded in on itself, until he was standing at the threshold. There was no one at the door, no car in the driveway – just the neighbours’ homes, and the burning turquoise sky that hung like a giant marble above, pressing down until the world below bent around it, the line of the horizon and the streets and houses along it curving to follow the contours of the sky.

From outside, he could hear the sound of cicadas shrilling starting up again, quiet at first and then louder and louder. Bit by bit the scene outside drew closer, until the doorframe disappeared in his peripheral vision, and then there was nothing but the naked sky pressed up against his retinas, and the cicadas screaming and screaming until the sound filled up his brain with its white noise, until he could think of nothing else –

Josuke was sitting on the couch, NES controller clutched between his sweating, too-warm hands. The televisions screen in front of him flickered, alternating bands of light and shadow rolling across the screen. His party was in the process of scaling the cliffs of Mt. Itoi. He rolled his thumb over the directional pad, feeling the texture of the button rub his skin raw. There was no music playing the way it normally did in the Itoi segment; just the occasional one-note sound whenever he accidentally bumped up against a cliff or a rock.

He realized, at some point, that he didn’t want to play the game anymore. There was no rational process behind this thought – it was a gut reaction, more physical revulsion than anything else. A sickish feeling was gnawing at his guts. Leaning over, he felt for the console’s lid – but his fingers met nothing but a seamless panel. The buttons on the front of the console seemed to be missing, too. Josuke didn’t see the point in trying to unplug the system – or rather, he couldn’t see the point – and so he resigned himself, and pressed on.

The game played out just as he remembered at first. He reached the healer’s home only to be ambushed by one of the alien robots, R7038. No matter what he did, no matter how he stacked his party, the results were always the same: he couldn’t make so much as a scratch on R7038. His party was thrashed, spared only by Lloyd showing up late with a tank and blasting the robot (along with the party) to smithereens.

It was the part that came after that he didn’t remember. He was returned to the healer’s house, and Anna with him. At that point the music started up again: a minor-key version of the game crackling
through the television’s tinny speaker, a prolonged succession of single notes broken by long, droning pauses. None of the other characters had anything to say to him – none of the ones he spoke to, anyway. It was just his character, and Teddy’s immobile sprite on the bed, and a vague feeling of dread at the thought of talking to him.

For a moment, his eyes strayed from the television screen, and he noticed a long beam of sunlight stretching down the hall, past the living room entrance. He wondered if someone had left the front door open.

Outside, in the road, he heard the sound of metal dragging over asphalt.

Josuke was sitting on the couch, NES controller clutched between his sweating, too-warm hands. The televisions screen in front of him flickered, alternating bands of light and shadow rolling across the screen. His party was in the process of scaling the cliffs of Mt. Itoi.

R7038 thrashed him. He grit his teeth, veins tight around his eyes. Feelings of frustration and futility dug their fingers deep under his skin.

There had to be something he was doing wrong. Some way of making it through the fight with everyone in one piece. He’d done it before, hadn’t he? – Otherwise, he would have remembered Teddy getting hurt.

Outside, coming up the front steps, he heard the sound of metal dragging over concrete, and something else. A muffled drag and thump, drag and thump of a heavy object being pulled up the steps.

Josuke was sitting on the couch, NES controller clutched between his sweating, too-warm hands.

He could hear the buzz of static crackle across the television screen as he fought on in silence. R7038 arrived, one by one his party members dropped. He lost Teddy. It was all wrong, he thought. This wasn’t how the game was supposed to play out.

He would have remembered.

In the front entrance, he heard the shhshhh of something dragging across the carpet runners, followed by a thump. Drag, thump, drag.

Josuke was sitting on the couch.

In his peripheral vision – where his perception was more sense than sight, more light and shadow than form – he caught the impression of movement in the living room entrance. Drag, thump, drag. Something metal squeaked and scraped against the hardwood floor. Jingle, squeak, jangle.

Shhhhszzzshhhhh.

He wanted to turn his head, to see whatever was out in the hallway, but every last one of his joints was locked in place, so that he couldn’t so much as move a muscle.

When it was just on the threshold of the living room entrance, the movement in Josuke’s peripheral vision grew still, and the parade of sound stopped.

Panic set its razor teeth into his throat, tightening up on his windpipe until he found it hard to breathe. In the absence of sound, in the anxiety of waiting, dread oozed ice-cold down his back. He imagined whatever was in the hallway crossing over the threshold into the living room, creeping toward him. Sure enough – he heard the thing begin to move again, drag, thump, drag.
Then, just as his heartbeat swelled up so that he could feel its pulse spasm in his throat, the sound grew quieter as whatever was making it moved on down the hall.

_Sshhhshh, drag, jingle, squeak, thump, drag, shhhhshhhh, squeak, scratch, jangle._

As the sound moved off, the paralysis that had overcome him slowly dissipated. He managed to turn his head just as the tail end of whatever he was hearing disappeared past the entrance and out of sight, there and gone too quickly for him to process. The rest of his body thawed out by degrees. By the time silence reclaimed the hallway, he could stand without hindrance – as if he’d never been under such a spell in the first place.

Toward the hallway he crept. Carefully, each footstep nestled against the last. No matter how quiet he endeavored to be, however, with each shift of his weight the hardwood floor moaned and creaked. Closer, closer. As he drew near to the door, the hallway opened up before him. He saw for the first time the bright red blossoms newly scattered along the carpet runner – smeared where something heavy had been dragged over them. A faint glisten had worked its way into the carpet’s weave; when he knelt and ran his hand over it, it was wet to touch.

His hand came away red. He rolled his fingers together, experimentally, feeling the pearly texture of the fluid between them before straightening out and wiping his hands absently on his jeans.

The trail of blood led down the hallway, continuing on until it reached the hall closet, into which it disappeared.

The closet door was open.

Some rational, half-conscious part of his brain was telling him that he ought to turn back. To make a run for the front door while he still could, because despite experience having taught him otherwise, he still carried around an ingrained belief in the safety of daylight and public spaces. Instead, he found his feet moving by their own accord, down the hall and deeper into the house, and that, more than the noise, more than the blood, was what frightened him most: the loss of control. Even though he was moving, he was no less paralyzed than he’d been in the living room. One foot after the other, repeat. The carpet was soft underfoot, and gave and gave until he was sinking into it, until every step felt like he was trudging through knee-deep snow. And every step left behind an impression in the carpet that the blood would rush in to fill.

He was not merely looking at the world through the intermediary of a camera, he realized. He was watching a movie – one that he happened to be a character in. Someone else was calling the shots, deciding what he could and couldn’t see. Pushing him along a track. Arranging his every move. In his head he was howling and thrashing and beating with what strength was his against the prison his body had locked him in, but to no avail. He took another step, then another. Within three steps, he’d forgotten his source of panic. He didn’t even remember what he was doing in the first place. He thought only of the door at the end of the hall, and his intense curiosity to see what lay behind it.

The hall closet was tucked away between the bathroom and the steps leading up to the second floor. His mother always kept their winter clothes in it: coats arranged on hangers, hats and mittens thrown together in a plastic grocery bag during the warm months. There was a trap door, too, that led down to the crawl space where they stored an old badminton set, and the Christmas lights, and various other odds and ends that had been accumulated out of good intentions and forgotten out of the failure act upon them.

There were no winter coats when Josuke peered through the open door. There was no trap door, no badminton set or mittens in grocery bags. There was only a wooden set of steps leading down into the yawning dark, and a trail of blood running down it.
As Josuke stood on the threshold, he could hear sounds coming from the bottom of the steps. *Drag, thump, drag.* Metal screeching over cement. A pulsating, organic drone. Warm, slimy air wafted up the steps and coiled around him – as though the door opened up to a living part of the house, panting and bleeding and beckoning him down into the miasmic dark.

The blood on the steps began to flow upward in reverse, streaming past his feet and retreating back down the hall. The lights overhead flickered. Josuke watched as strings of red, beaded droplets came together and leapt up to the next step to join with the upstream current. He heard the sound of metal rattling against metal, and dim awareness settled over him: that whatever had left all that blood behind was bound to come back up the steps too.

Less than an inch from his ear, he felt a hot puff of breath, and heard a voice demand: “What are you waiting for?”

In the kitchen behind him, the kettle was going off again. Louder and louder it wailed, and outside the cicadas were chattering, and in the living room the theme of *Mother* was creaking out over the television’s speakers. He heard all these sounds – and the quiet scratch of fingernails against the wooden steps.

***

Josuke awoke to a shrill sound, so loud and so close that he immediately jolted upright in bed. Only after a few seconds had passed did his brain make the leap from his previous assumption – that he was still hearing the shriek of the kettle from his dream – to the realization that he’d fallen asleep curled around the telephone, which at present was ringing insistently.

He ripped the phone from the hook with the intention of either hanging up immediately or demolishing the whole apparatus (he’d fix it in the morning, of course). As far as sleep habits went, Josuke Higashikata wasn’t much of a morning person, much less a two-in-the-morning person. He held several decided views about the quantitative and qualitative connection between sleep and personal beauty.

In the half second he held the receiver in his hands while debating what to do with it, however, he underwent a change in feeling. The echo of the phone’s ring was still knocking around in his skull, the muscles around his eyes were still tight from exhaustion and irritation. But from the receiver in his hands he heard neither the drone of a dial tone nor the murmur of a human voice, and maybe it made him just a little curious – or maybe, it was because no one else ever called him this late at night except Okuyasu.

Okuyasu. Josuke’s head was warm and buzzing with the onset of something like a headache at the thought of hearing Okuyasu’s voice wash over him in the dark, hushed and husky with the remnants of sleep. The quiet on the other end of the line sure didn’t feel like him, though.

Slipping his legs out from under the covers, Josuke lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Hello?” he asked – and then winced. In the quietness of the house, his voice sounded too loud, seemed to fill up the entire space of his bedroom. He wished he could bubble his voice, speak quietly enough that he could hold it close and private in the space between his lips and the receiver. “Hello?” he tried again, softly this time.

There was a pause, and he almost wondered if the person on the other end had hung up after all, when:

“Josuke?”
“Speaking,” he said. The word came out slow and uncertain, with an unpronounced question mark at the end of it. He was still groggy, after all – still not entirely certain that he was awake.

There’d been a voice in his dream, too, but after only a minute or so the recollection of said dream was already fading. All he had left by then were the keypoints, and a handful of images that had managed to embed themselves so deep in his brain he didn’t think he could get rid of them even if he wanted to: the way the blood on the hallway carpet had looked from the living room, the light reflecting off the kettle as he lifted it from the stove, the front panel of his NES that had been smooth and seamless to touch when he ran his fingers over it in search of the cartridge cover. Trying to recall the dream was its own kind of archeology: reconstructing forgotten scenes with a pottery shard, a fragment of a hipbone, a many-colored mural that existed only in writing.

He was in the process of trying to decide if he’d heard the voice in the dream somewhere before, when the speaker on the other end of the line said: “Are you awake?”

“I am now.”

“Right. S-sorry.”

At last, he put a face to the speaker. He’d heard the voice before, plenty of times, but never on the phone like this: Koichi’s voice, his real voice, the one he was used to hearing from a foot below and not coming from the receiver right next to his ear. It was not the voice itself he recognized, but its modulation. The pauses. The rushed, nervous quality.

“You need something, dude?” Josuke asked.

The question was asked out of courtesy; Josuke had every intention of hanging up so he could sleep through the rest of the night. The only thing stopping him was Koichi’s voice. On the phone, he always sounded collected – grown-up in ways that made Josuke feel awkward, like he speaking to an older relative or a teacher, and not his high school friend.

“Well… I was thinking about the other night… and what Daisuke said about Vox.”

Groaning, Josuke threw himself down onto the bed, taking the receiver with him. He was in no mood to discuss schemes and theories. He felt like he’d come away from somewhere far away: waking up left him jet-legged and apathetic. So far as he was concerned, the present’s issues were better off the problem of the Josuke Higashikata who’d wake up come morning.

“Can’t it wait?” he grumbled.

“Not really!”

“Come on, I’ll swing by first thing in the morning, we can talk then.”

“Josuke!” on the other end of the line, Koichi was beginning to sound exasperated. “I’m leaving tomorrow! Just let me finish before I forget!”

“Leaving?” he asked – though the word hadn’t fully left his lips before he remembered the conversation at Tonio’s the day before. Yukako had said something about her father and an upcoming trip. “... Right.”

Josuke, of course, doubted he’d recall anything by morning. But he relented anyway, and asked: “Alright, what’ve you got?”

“Do you remember when I got shot with the arrow? You told me my stand was a representation of
my spirit… and if my stand got hurt, then I’d get hurt too.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Right! So, um, say…. If the arrow could give form to Vox’s spirit, do you think we could beat it?”

It took Josuke a minute to process the implications of what Koichi was telling him. He was used to hearing the word ‘stand’ thrown about so often, that he didn’t tend to think too much about what stands actually were.

“Let me get this straight,” he began. “You want me to stab a ghost – who apparently doesn’t even have a body – with the arrow, all so that I can give it a stand.”

“Well, when you put it that way… I guess it does sound silly.”

“And you want me to kick the shit out of its stand.”

“It was just an idea!” Koichi retorted.

The headache was starting to return. Josuke rubbed at his brow bone, kneading the skin beneath his fingers as he willed the pain and nausea to go away. A part of his brain was telling him that there was a tangible, albeit demented logic to whatever Koichi was saying – even if he was too foggy at present to work out the specifics for himself.

“Okay. So say I stab the guy – spirit, ghost, whatever – and he… develops a stand. How the fuck am I supposed to do that in the first place? Daisuke said this guy doesn’t got a body.”

“Just because it doesn’t have a body doesn’t mean it’s not still there! It’s like… like…”

“A voice?” Josuke suggested.

The other end of the line went quiet. In the background, Josuke could hear the ticking of a clock, keeping time of their conversation.

Then Koichi gave a quick, breathy laugh. “I guess that goes without saying.”

Josuke could almost picture him: the smile on his lips, the worried crease in his brow. He’d gotten better at keeping his cool in the time Josuke had known him, but he was still a worrier. That was a good thing, Josuke supposed. He needed a voice of pessimism in his life to let him know when he was full of shit – just not at two in the morning.

“Koichi?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going back to bed now.”

He paused, one finger hovering over the switch hook, when he heard Koichi say: “You’ll look into it while I’m gone, won’t you?”

“I don’t see the point. I mean – this Vox guy’s been pretty quiet lately, assuming he’s still around. There hasn’t been a murder in Morioh in weeks.”

“But say if something happens…?”

“Then yeah, I’ll give it a shot.” Shot. Arrow. He really was in a state if he was making subconscious
“Thanks, Josuke,” Koichi said – all soft, genuine sincerity that made for a better shackle of obligation than any chains or cords Josuke could name.

“Sure. ‘Night.”

He depressed the switch hook, and the drone of the dial tone filled the room. Josuke was asleep again before he had the chance to put the phone back on its cradle.

***

The first time Jotaro took him to the park, he asked about the memorial.

Josuke never paid much attention to the flowers or the toys left out beneath the tree that stood a little ways off from the path. The toys and the flowers had been there nearly a year now – changed out at every season, so that the teddy bear leaned up against the tree’s roots still looked soft and clean, and the wreath of white chrysanthemums still looked fresh and hale. All in an effort to combat the image of decay. He supposed he must have asked about the memorial too, once upon a time – though he only recalled being told that he was to be respectful, and not to touch.

“It’s for a kid who died,” Josuke explained. “Akihiro, or Akihiko – something like that.”

He might have been content to leave the conversation at that, but then Jotaro asked:

“You knew him?”

“He was in my class last year,” Josuke said, with a strange, morbid sense of pride in this connection. They’d been in different classes, actually, but that didn’t sound nearly so impressive. “He went missing right before winter break.” And here Josuke watched Jotaro closely, hoping to see a reaction: “he was murdered.”

Much to his disappointment, Jotaro only shoved his hands into his pockets. “They catch the guy?” he asked.

“Nah. But you hear things.” He paused for dramatic effect. Until now, Jotaro had only ever been the one telling stories. Being the one with the story to tell for once gave Josuke a taste of what it was like to have power over a listener. He found he liked it – or at the very least, the attention it was earning him. “They say there’s this monster in Morioh. It copies other peoples’ voices and pretends to be them so that it can trick kids into following it.”

“And you believe that?”

“Some of my classmates said they heard it,” Josuke asserted. “One told me he was sleeping, right? – and he woke up hearing his mom’s voice coming from underneath the bed. Said she was stuck, or something. He was going to look, but then he heard his mom downstairs in the kitchen talking to his old man, so he got spooked and just hid under the covers all night.”

“That so?”

“Yeah, and – don’t tell mom this – but I overheard grandpa say that the last time someone saw Akihiro he was standing under that tree,” here, he pointed to the memorial, “talking with someone. Or that’s what it sounded like – the lady who saw him said she didn’t see anyone else around.”

And then, because he thought it might impress Jotaro, he added: “And there were other murders,
too. Grandpa and mom used to talk about it when they thought I wasn’t around.”

He stated this last confession with a boastful tone.

When Jotaro spoke again, his voice was tighter than before. Like he was speaking from his throat. All surface calm, revealing nothing. “Has anyone ever investigated these voices?”

“Probably not. Grandpa said I shouldn’t believe all that.” At this omission, his unshakeable confidence in byword and rumour faltered somewhat, and his cheeks colored. “Said the bigger kids were just trying to scare me.”

Jotaro pulled something from his coat pocket and began to fiddle with it. “Probably.”

“Why’d you ask?”

“No reason.” Popping off the pill bottle’s top, Jotaro shook one, two little capsules into his palm. “Familiar, that’s all.”

Josuke watched in a kind of trance as Jotaro opened his mouth and shoved the pills beneath his tongue.

“…Anyway,” Jotaro resumed, slipping the bottle back into his coat pocket, “I want to take a look for myself. Just to be sure. There some kind of library around here?”

“Yeah. Aren’t you supposed to be going back tomorrow?”

“I can always put it off by a few days.”

He wasn’t sure at the time why Jotaro would take an interest in what was, even by Josuke’s admission, nothing more than a local legend. He’d wanted to get a reaction out of Jotaro. Show him how tough he was, by repeating without the slightest hint of trepidation the stories that had made him sleep with the light on for weeks on end at the time he’d heard them. But then: if it meant holding onto Jotaro for a few days more, Josuke supposed he didn’t care much for the reason.

***

A peculiar incident occurred in the winter of 1854. In those days, we were a much younger spirit-amalgamate – prone, as it were, to allowing incidents in Morioh to slip our notice. We have since taken great pains to correct this shortcoming of ours.

There were two major earthquakes in the year 1854, each only a day apart from the other. The first occurred on the twenty-third of December, and the second, on the twenty-fourth. They, along with a third earthquake that struck further north the following year, would later become known as the Ansei earthquakes.

The town of Morioh – like us, younger then, no more than a village – was rattled by both quakes of 1854. When the first hit, on December twenty-third, the lives of several were forfeited. Worse loss was avoided: the wake of the tsunami that landed in the aftermath missed the town by a margin. Still – the wave did strike, and it did enough damage and took enough lives to put fear into the people Morioh village, to say nothing of the rumours that began circulating of mass casualties in villages only a few miles away.

At the time, there was an old samurai house at the town’s edge, near the empty, scorched fields where sunflowers bloomed every summer. The house had passed into the care of village officials at the time of its owner’s death, and had since then been maintained as Morioh’s one and only
stronghold. On the night of December 23rd, 1854, several families huddled within its walls, placing their hopes in the ingenuity and protection of the deceased owners’ spirits, and the gates they built. They feared another wave would come – most of all, they feared drowning, and a slow breathless death.

Sometime in the late afternoon of the next day, another earthquake hit. The quake was bigger than the last, and it brought with it another tsunami. What we remember most of all, however, is how in that place where sunflowers grew, faults broke open and from them mud and sand bubbled up from the earth. The ground beneath the old samurai home became like liquid: the foundation sunk, the walls shook and cracked, and the ornate, heavy roof caved down on those who’d gathered beneath it. In less than an hour, no trace remained of that house upon the hill, except a flattened pile of rubble.

There are several powerful emotions that can bind a spirit to this earth after death. Fear. Regret. Desire. For the forty-seven who took shelter in the old house at the town’s edge, the principle feeling was anger. Rage and betrayal, that the one thing they’d pinned their survival upon was the thing that became their prison in death. They died in the manner they feared most: drowned, not by water but under tonnes of rock and earth that slowly suffocated and crushed them all to death.

We – still young and foolish back then – offered the victims of December twenty-fourth a place in our ranks. But they had been buried together, and died together, and in death they were thusly bound: each to the other by a universal feeling of anger and despair. They were wholly insular, with no thought or concern for anything outside of themselves. We’d never seen anything like it before, and hadn’t any notion of how we ought to proceed. In the end, we made the mistake of leaving them be.

December twenty-fourth, 1854, was the greatest disaster in Morioh’s history. After the earthquakes a series of protuberances emerged along the fault line at the town’s edge, some as high as five meters tall. To the superstitious 19th century mind, these protuberances – dubbed "the Wall Eyes" – which appeared quite suddenly in a place where so many had died, were nothing short of an omen. The spot was relegated to cursed ground, and for years to come development in Morioh shrank back and away from it, with the town expanding out along the coast instead of inland, where there sunflowers grew and where the Wall Eyes cast their wicked shadows all year long.

As with most things in life, however – history forgets. The world moved on to bigger and more spectacular disasters, ecological and manmade alike. After Kantō and Hiroshima, Morioh’s loss of some few dozen lives began to look puny by comparison. The names of the deceased were forgotten, the entire tragedy reduced to a single-sentence aside for the history books. In 1979 the only monument to the Ansei earthquakes in Morioh, the Wall Eyes, were leveled to make way for the planned rail line – which, following vehement local backlash (not regarding the Wall Eyes, of course, but potential noise complaints), ended up postponed another ten years.

As for the dead themselves: if they were fused at the time of their death, the inseparable nature of their afterlife only deepened as time wore on. Eventually, there was nothing to distinguish each from the other, all those men, women, and children.

Except, of course, the voices.

Chapter End Notes

I had a hard time with this chapter. For one: I decided the first section would focus
almost entirely on sound-based descriptions, which is the type of description I happen to be worst at writing. Second: dream sequences are not my forte :I They usually come out cliche for me ahahaha... So I went with something a little more grounded in sound + weird dream logic than forced symbolism (although there’s still lots of that too).

Also: I realized belatedly that the NES was the name given to the North American release of the console, whoops.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Concerning oyster farming, antibodies, time distortion, and the particularities of Morioh's civil engineering.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for yet another hella late chapter. I haven't had as much time to write lately :<

The good news is I have a week off work coming up, so hopefully I can do more writing then!

At the time, Josuke’s dream and the phone call that followed had seemed like an omen. But he’d been on the edge of waking and sleep, when his grey matter was most permeable; the next morning, he found himself in an altogether different mindset. With warm sunlight spilling across his face and birdsong reaching him through the open window, the earlier nocturnal portents loosened their power of suggest. He could write off the dream as a product of all the stress he’d been put through lately, and the phone call, as a continuation of the dream. Even if the phone call hadn’t been a dream, he figured his memory was distorting it, making much of what was no more than a well-intended phone call that just happened to follow on the heels of a completely normal, unrelated dream. If there was any connection the two events, it was all retroactive – how had Yukako put it? – injected into memory by the need to make a narrative out of everything.

By that afternoon, it wasn’t only the phone call with Koichi that he was questioning. The whole conversation with Okuyasu from the night before was beginning to feel like something he’d imagined too: an unfulfilled fantasy that managed to creep in when he was on the cusp of sleep: the kind of conversation he loved to imagine himself having with Okuyasu, long and ambling and behind closed doors with the receiver brushing intimately against his lips. But on second inspection, he remembered the bits of the conversation he’d tried to ignore. Okuyasu’s obtrusiveness, his own lies about what he’d told Jotaro. And suddenly, the Okuyasu over the phone was not so different than the Okuyasu who was nowhere to be found the next day when Josuke went looking for him, or the day after that.

The thing was: Okuyasu wasn’t being nearly as clever or subtle as he thought he was being. Josuke didn’t suspect anything the first two or three times he knocked on the Nijimura’s front door only for Okuyasu’s dad to answer. But on the tail end of day two, he happened to glance across the street and catch sight of the light on in Okuyasu’s bedroom window. When he called, the phone rang all the way through to voice mail, ditto the time after that.

The third time he called, he heard the click of the receiver – and something that sounded suspiciously like a sigh – followed by the sound of the dial tone.

Okuyasu Nijimura had hung up on him.
There is an oft-said adage about all people being born equal, spoken most often by those lucky to be born into privilege. Perhaps Josuke and Okuyasu were equals in substance, made of the same meat and bones as everyone else, but the pains and troubles of life are fewer and easier to bear when a person is born with a clear complexion, a disarming smile, natural charisma, a pretty mother, a respected grandfather, and a nice house. Which is to say: Josuke was more or less used to getting his way, especially when it came to people. He was the one girls in his class would smile at; the one who could drop in, unannounced, at a friend’s house and receive a warm reception.

With Okuyasu acting the way he was and the cold shoulder he was putting up, Josuke was beginning to realize, with a newborn’s feeling of helplessness, that people were not his objects — things he could leave lying around, only to pick up again at the next convenience.

Now, in the general case, relationships are relatively effortless to patch up when both parties are forced together daily by the economic considerations of public education, to say nothing of living within shouting distance of each other. Okuyasu and Josuke had not, as other do, the gulf of many years or many miles to hinder their efforts. However — there exists among the living a certain dysfunction (or perhaps merely a gross misunderstanding) of object permanence. Mr. Hazekura mentioned that object permanence is a common feature across all intelligent species, but for certain members of the human race, there is a persistant belief that if a problem is ignored long enough, it will cease to exist.

And so began a long week wherein Josuke, in payback for the perceive slight afflicted on him, decided to return the favour. He wanted to take his mind off the constant anxiety of being sixteen and hopelessly in love, if only for a little while. More than that — he wanted to send a message, more to himself that anyone else. That he, Josuke Higashikata, was not the clingy, dependent type. If Okuyasu Nijimura could have a life of his own, doing whatever it was Okuyasu did when he wasn’t around to pick up the phone, then so could he.

Only by then it was mid-August, and summer vacation was in its twilight days. This, and other practical considerations that included but were not limited to finances and the fickle nature of Morioh’s public transit, meant that despite Josuke’s resolution to have the Best Summer Break Ever, he was not in any position to spend the remains of his summer abroad, or working a cool job, or catching a criminal. Which left only one option open: to don a pair of fishing waders and spend his days accompany Dr. Kujo, marine biologist — and Jolyne Kujo, research assistant — on their daily excursions.

He’d been optimistic when Jotaro mentioned that most of the work would be centered on local oyster farms. Josuke, who was not familiar with the word ‘mariculture’ much less its connotation, went in with the notion that oyster farms were a lot like the seafood section of the supermarket: an air-conditioned building with rows and rows of tanks filled with shellfish just waiting to be taken home and eaten.

Which was why Josuke was more than a little surprised to find himself clinging onto a raft for dear life on his first day afield. The floating oyster farm, Jotaro told him on the boat ride out, produced upward of twenty-million yen in shellfish per year. All fine and good for the oyster farmers: except the farm itself amounted to no more than several yards of bamboo poles strung together with steel cables and foisted atop Styrofoam floats. It was exactly what Josuke imagined a boat would look like, if said boat was constructed by a handful of boy scouts over the course of an afternoon. Out on the open ocean, the raft’s only anchors were a couple of concrete blocks, and the weight of its hanging cables, laden with the spat gathered at the end of the rainy season. The spat were collected in empty scallop shells, which were spaced out along the cables by two-inch bamboo splints. At a later date, when the spat grew into pebbled handfuls of oyster seed, the cables would be raised, and the collectors transferred to thicker cables — and then they would be lowered again, vertical nurseries.
fifteen meters tall that swayed and rocked like a cradle in the gripping undersea tide.

On these outings, Jolyne was made to stay in the boat with her life jacket on at all times. It was too dangerous for her to be out on the raft, Jotaro had told her – with the flat, forceful finality of an order. The same safety concerns apparently did not apply to Josuke. Despite his numerous insinuations – and later, blunt confessions – that he could not swim, he spent day after day out on the rafts on his belly, crawling on trembling arms and legs along the bamboo poles while the fishermen, laughing or sneering, stepped over him.

Jotaro, meanwhile, strode the raft from end to end as if he too had been born into the profession. If anything, he was more graceful on the water than he was on land. On land he was awkward, his movements stiff and his arms tight at his sides, posturing like a man who wanted to escape notice but was too big to be anything but noticeable. Balanced over the water, some aspect of Jotaro seemed to come unfurled: he stepped lightly, stood straighter, gestured widely, as if somehow, there’d never been enough room to do so before.

If Jotaro noticed Josuke’s discomfort at the motion sickness, adverse weather conditions, and the general omnipresent threat of drowning, he didn’t show it. Instead, he carried on as if oysters and oyster farming were a mutual passion.

“Go ahead and pull up the line” he said, as if he was doing Josuke a favour.

Josuke, who did not have much experience being in a position that required him to say ‘no’, could only make a face as he dragged up the line, hand-over-hand, the metal cable leaving wet lines of mud and rust on his heavy-duty rubber gloves. Once the line was sufficiently raised, Jotaro removed his pen from his coat pocket and used it to point out various sections on the cable where the oyster crop formed into clusters, which to Josuke did not look so much like collections of animals, but calcified mineral growths: greenish and brittle and grown over with barnacles. Jotaro explained the signs of damage caused by sea stars using words and phrasing that suggested Josuke, too, had been studying marine biology for years. He was beginning to develop the feeling that he was to Jotaro’s thesis what rubber ducks were to software.

We suppose it is only fair to Josuke to mention that despite his monumental struggle with the feeling of being in love and not knowing what to do about it, despite his self-pitying martyrdom via boredom and shellfish, he had not forgotten that there was, in theory, a murderer under the influence of an evil spirit afoot. On the two or three rare occasions he found him and Jotaro out of earshot of both the local fishermen and Jotaro’s daughter, he attempted to ascertain the current location of the arrow – because, by-product of a two A.M. phone call or not, the arrow was the only lead he had to run with. If nothing else, chasing this cryptic excuse for a lead gave him the satisfaction of feeling like he was doing something. To which end, he applied every tool of subtlety and cunning he had at his disposal.

“Sure is some nice weather we’re having,” said Josuke, who immediately followed this remark up with: “So, about the arrow.”

Before Josuke spoke, Jotaro had been in the process of counting the number of predatory sea stars clinging to an oyster cable that was suspended above deck by a crane. At present he paused, the tip of his pen hovering in the air before him and something like a pained expression on his face, before turning slowly to Josuke.

“What?” he asked, thrown sharp and quick like a jab to the face.

The hit missed its mark; by then, Josuke had learned to not to take anything Jotaro said or did personally. He’d found that these momentary glimpses of heat didn’t tend to last long – they were reactionary, more than anything. You had to go a long way to genuinely piss of the likes of Jotaro
Kujo.

“It’s nothing,” Josuke said, hoping to come across as nonchalant as possible. “I was just wondering…”

“Yes?”

“What’d you end up doing with it?”

For a moment, Jotaro stood under the shadow of the column of oysters, gazing up at it as his hands slowly curled and uncurled. Josuke wondered if he was contemplating whether or not he should say something.

(Jotaro was doing no such thing – he was only trying to remember where he’d left off in his count. He could not).

“It’s somewhere safe,” he said at last, with an air of resignation. “Where I can keep an eye on it.”

“So, like… didya bring it with you? To Morioh?”

Jotaro didn’t move, but Josuke could feel his gaze shift and its weight settle on him.

“I don’t know why you would need that information.”

Again, Josuke didn’t take offense at Jotaro’s tone. They had, after all, dealt with imposter stands in the past. He imagined someone like Jotaro was always on the lookout for that sort of thing – handling every conversation like the person on the other end could be an imposter. That was one of the marked differences between them. Josuke couldn’t help giving people the benefit of the doubt.

“Just askin’,” Josuke said, voice high and tight as if his vocal cords, too, were on the defensive.

“Alright.”

After that, Jotaro went back to counting, starting again from the top of the column.

The next time Josuke asked about the arrow, they were out on one of the rafts. Once again, Jotaro was in the midst of counting: oyster seed this time, instead of sea stars.

“The arrow – it works on anything with a soul, right?” he asked.

“…Thirty-six, thirty-seven,” Jotaro continued, raising his voice to speak over top of Josuke’s question. He had one of the scallop shell collectors in his lap. The oysters he was counting were no bigger than uncooked quinoa seeds.

Josuke tried again: “What’d happen if you tried to use it on a soul that, you know. Didn’t exactly have a body.”

Jotaro, at last, relented. “You’re referring to ghosts, right?”

He was, after all, a father – and therefore, used to decoding the motives of seemingly innocuous questions.

“I guess ghosts’d be a good example, sure. So – say Kira’s dad. You think he might’ve gotten his stand after he died?”

“Doubtful. He must have possessed it beforehand. There may be a connection between his stand and
the reason he became a ghost.”

“Bullshit. Reimi didn’t have a stand. Neither did –,” Josuke stammered, words slamming together as this last sentence came to a sudden, grinding halt. “…Other famous ghosts,” he concluded, mentally congratulating himself on (in his view) a smooth save.

He thought Jotaro might have decided opinions about him and the rest of the gang befriending yet another ghost on a mission to catch yet another serial killer.

“Alright. So his ability may have carried over with him.”

“You figure that Dio guy stabbed Kira’s dad with the arrow, then?”

“I’m positive.”

Until then, Josuke did not have any opinions regarding the origins of Kira Yoshihiro’s powers. But there was something infuriating about Jotaro’s steely self-assurance that made him want to argue.

“If that’s the case, you think Dio would’ve kept the guy around, ya know? Being able to control the photograph world – seems like a pretty useful ability.”

He thought he saw Jotaro’s lips twitch. “Maybe he thought better of it after what happened to the Hanged Man.”

“The Hanged Man?”

“You know how Kira Yoshihiro’s ability works with photographs, right? Same thing, only with reflections. We came across him somewhere in India.”

“Piece of cake. Just don’t go anywhere near a mirror.”

“Almost anything can be a reflective surface. Even the human eye.”

“So how’d you beat him, then?”

“I didn’t.”

At that moment, Jotaro made a bracing motion, the significance of which was lost on Josuke until a wake rolled up under the raft. The bamboo poles rose up beneath him, pressing back against his quivering hold. He lost his grip and slipped. There was a single, blank moment of fear – and then he felt the cold pacific water close like a vice around his left leg. Jotaro looked on with what could only be described as an indulgent look of satisfaction, while Josuke yipped and flailed and scrambled to pull the submerged parts of himself back atop the raft. The bamboo poles wobbled and creaked and groaned beneath him, suddenly not as solid as they’d seemed moments before.

“You were saying?” Josuke mumbled. Unfortunately, the note of sarcasm he’d intended to convey was lost in the chattering of his teeth. He was the very picture of human misery.

“It was a friend of mine,” Jotaro continued. “Stand users like that can be difficult. They turn their environment to their advantage. Force everyone else into a corner.”

When Jotaro shifted, letting the length of cable he’d been holding in his lap slip back beneath the raft, Josuke realized that the person he was talking to just now was not the man who’d been taking count of oyster seed only moments ago.

“People who develop stands like that tend to have a certain character,” Jotaro continued – his Jotaro,
the one who he’d gotten used to seeing during his last visit in Morioh, not the Jotaro who carried around granola bars and juice boxes and who dressed like an edgier Jacques Cousteau. “They’re the type of people who feel the need to control and punish others. Or the type of people who are too weak-willed to have any control over their own lives. Or sometimes both. They create a world where they can hurt others, but where others can’t hurt them. They can do whatever they want without consequence.

“Remember, though – a stand like that is only going to be as strong as its user. Those types of people – they rely on a gambit. They’ve got control over their environment, but there’s always a trade-off. All you need to do to defeat someone like that is to turn their advantage against them. The way you trapped Yoshihiro in the photograph. Or the Hanged Man – the moment a surface was no longer reflective, he was forced to move and expose himself.”

“Don’t know what that’s got to do with the arrow,” Josuke mumbled. Now that he was no longer halfway off the raft, his soaked pant leg was clinging uncomfortably to his skin.

Another wave rolled by. This time, Jotaro’s knees buckled ever so slightly as it went under. “Just trying to make conversation,” he said.

Lately, most of his conversations had involved either his students or his daughter. The trouble with children and pupils is that you really couldn’t talk to them – you had to talk at them. Not only that, but it was the type of position that necessitating talking in a downhill direction. Going from talking up to talking down was easy; going from talking down to talking on equal foot with someone else was significantly more difficult. He was prone to lecturing without taking notice.

Josuke didn’t know much about children or students, but he did realize, with a familiar heaviness in his lungs, that Jotaro was being sincere. He tried again – only, the problem with conversation is that it operates best unobserved. Once a conversation is drawn attention to, it is difficult to keep alive, much less natural.

“You were saying,” Josuke prompted, “about why Dio wouldn’t want to keep Kira’s dad around?”

“Nevermind.”

“Look. I’m sorry, alright? Just get on with it.”

A minute past, during which he anxiously watched Jotaro, and waited.

“I don’t remember the point I was trying to make,” Jotaro said at last.

Josuke wanted to scream.

“So you don’t think Kira’s dad could’ve gotten his stand. After he died and all.”

Taking off his hat, Jotaro ran a hand through his short hair. “Doubt it.” His hand paused midway on its journey, tufts of hair sticking up at odd angles in its wake. “Although…”

“What?”

Jotaro cast a quick look in the direction of the fishermen. They were all back aboard the boat. One of the men was showing Jolyne how to clean and restring the collectors – a task she took to with all the enthusiasm of someone who had not been performing the exact same sequence of steps over and over again, season after season, for years going back in ancestral memory. She wore the same grave expression Josuke had noted on her face earlier throughout the week whenever she was handling a specimen or stapling papers for her father: gaze ahead, lips folded into each other, a small wrinkle in
the smooth eggshell of her brow where her eyebrows sloped toward each other. She had only one level of intensity, and the luxury available only to children of believing everything she did of the utmost importance.

“Did I ever tell you how the arrows get their power?”

In the process of watching Jolyne’s progress with the collectors, Josuke had nearly forgotten that Jotaro was there. He made a small, reflexive movement, turning around just in time to hear the bamboo poles creak as Jotaro sat down atop the raft. He looked like a natural, the way he stretched languidly across the poles – like he was sitting on a couch and about to crack open a particularly good book. Instead, he rolled up his pant legs and slipped his feet beneath the bamboo poles, and into the water.

“No,” he said. He was busy wondering if Jotaro had taken into consideration that fact that he was sticking his legs into what was essentially several thousand oysters’ worth of free-floating bodily waste. Knowing Jotaro, he probably had.

“In the 1970s, a team of scientists in Greenland decided to examine the site of a meteor impact near Cape York. Several members of the party ended up getting sick. Most didn’t make it. When an autopsy was done, the virus was discovered to have originated from remnants of the meteor. You ever had a flu shot before?”

“Sure, why?”

“Then you know how it works, right?”

Josuke shook his head.

“The vaccine contains an inactive virus. When the human immune system is exposed to the vaccine, it develops antibodies.”

A look of horror crossed Josuke’s face. “I thought those things had medicine or some shit in them.”

“The virus is dead by that point, so it’s not going to hurt anyone. Exposure to it causes antibodies to develop that make the recipient immune to the flu. The same principle of immunity applies to the Cape York virus: those who were exposed to it developed a special type of antibody in their immune system’s attempt to fight it. But for most people, the antibody isn’t enough. Like my mother. And you.”

Dimly, Josuke was beginning to grasp where the conversation was headed. “You’re talking ‘bout stands, right?” he asked – slowly, enunciating each word, like he was afraid of being wrong.

“Right. At the time, of course, no one knew the connection – until we had the chance to analyze Akira’s arrow. The arrowhead was carved out of the same rock that was found at the meteor site.” Little by little, the clip of Jotaro’s voice increased. He started off at a plod, but by the last sentence he was galloping through his explanation at a pace Josuke could barely keep up with. “It’s one of the first known bioweapons ever found.”

“So if surviving the arrow means you can’t get the virus again, how’d Kira end up pulling a Groundhog Day?”

“You can’t catch the same flu twice, but the problem is viruses mutate over time, finding new ways to attack the immune system.”

“…Then Bites the Dust is just a different type of antibody,” Josuke concluded, somehow sounding
more confident in the subject than Jotaro. He wasn’t a quick learner, per-say: but he was a talented bullshitter and a quick study of a mimic.

Jotaro gave a vague nod. He twirled his pen in a circle: moving along. “That’s the idea. To answer your question, I can’t say for certain whether or not someone without a body could be affected by the arrow. The Cape York virus – the arrow’s virus – isn’t like anything found on earth. It doesn’t act the way normal viruses do, transmitted through contact. Dio is shot with the arrow and every member of the Joestar family suddenly develops a stand. There’s genetic diseases, you see those all the time – but nothing like that. Nothing retroactive. The virus somehow spread via a medium other than DNA, across thousands and thousands of miles. Hard to say, with something that might’ve come from another galaxy. For all we know, other ecosystems may have completely different paradigms of sickness and transmission. But the form of the antibodies gives us an idea.”

“Spirits.”

“This is all just speculation,” Jotaro said. All the same – he lifted a hand to his face, but not quick enough for Josuke to miss the beginnings of a smile at the corners of his lips. He wondered if this was how Jotaro’s thesis, too, had begun: with flippant speculation, and a secret smile. It was like the old parable: a man stumbling upon treasure only to re-bury it in its place, with the anticipation of coming back for it later.

Unfortunately, hints at a buried truth weren’t quite enough to hinge a solid answer on.

After that, Jotaro slipped right back into his work. The conversation before left no trace, no ripples behind on the surface that Jotaro wore as he stood, and pulled on the cables, and unstrung the first collector plate from the line. He was back to being Dr. Kujo once more – Jotaro, at least for now, was set aside.

***

And so the week wore on.

Jotaro was an early riser. Over the course of the week, Josuke had grown used to being dragged out of bed by the sound of Jotaro’s car horn at seven or eight in the morning. So it came as a surprise when he woke up one morning to discover he’d slept in until noon.

His first assumption, of course, was that he’d slept through Jotaro’s usual car horn Reveille. Down the stairs he dashed, still in his pajamas, to make a frantic phone call in the vain hope that Jotaro hadn’t yet left his hotel room. He wasn’t personally invested in the study of agriculture or anything like that – he just had a steadfast aversion to letting people down. Especially someone like Jotaro, who was bound to take notice.

Of course, his call ended up going through to voicemail.

“Oh, Jotaro.” He wandered over to the living room window, the phone cord stretching taught behind him. “Uh, it’s Josuke. Hi – again. I kinda. Slept in. So yeah.”
On the pull-cord he tugged, opening up the blinds to let some light into the room.

“Anyway, sorry about that. I’m not doing much today so if you still want – .”

Sitting in the Nijimura’s driveway across the street was a white civic. The same one Josuke had vivid memories of riding in the back seat of over the past week (only Jotaro’s delicate scientific equipment had the privilege of sitting up front).

He knew, even as he was crossing the street and stepping over the gate, that he was doing some inherently wrong. That if Jotaro wanted him to be there, he would have called. Still – it was an easy trespass to justify. Jotaro was not one for social visits or Sunday drives; as a rule, if Jotaro Kujo appeared unannounced at your doorstep, bad news was sure to follow.

Before Josuke could knock, the front door swung inward. Jotaro was standing on the threshold, one hand on the door handle, his head turned away as if he were in the process of saying something to someone within the house – but the moment he noticed Josuke at the doorstep, he turned and the words fell, half-finish, into the air.

Despite knowing that he was going to find Jotaro at the house, Josuke was the more startled of the two; in the time it took for him to find his words again, Jotaro was already ahead of him.

“You’re here. Good.”

“Am I… supposed to be here?” Josuke enquired, rising on the balls of his feet in an effort to look past Jotaro’s shoulder.

“No, but it saves me a trip. I need you to watch Jolyne tomorrow.”

“What – .”

“I’m needed at the Hiroshima Prefecture for a couple days,” Jotaro continued. He spoke like he’d mentally rehearsed the whole spiel already – like any interruption might cause him to lose his place. “I have meetings with the folks behind some of the large-scale operations out there. Not the kind of thing you can bring a kid to.”

From within the house, Josuke heard the rumble of footsteps coming down the staircase. Okuyasu swung around the corner. He paused just a few steps shy of the staircase, one hand stretched out behind him, still gripping the banister, as though he couldn’t make up his mind whether to remain or flee back upstairs.

“Josuke – .”

“Get Okuyasu to help,” Jotaro said, nonplussed by Jotaro’s lack of assent or Okuyasu’s sudden intrusion. “You’ll want another set of eyes. She likes to wander.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Josuke mumbled. Over Jotaro’s shoulder, he watched Okuyasu’s body sag a little – though whether it was from relief or disappointment, he couldn’t tell at the distance. Usually, Okuyasu wore his expressions large – but the high ceilings and deep shadows of the Nijimura house swallowed him up, made him seem small and his expression, painted on. Like a doll’s.

“Just so long as you don’t distract one another, you’ll be fine.”

“Where is Jolyne?” Josuke asked. He hoped Jotaro had brought her with him – the alternative had him somewhat apprehensive, for all the wrong reasons.
“Back at the hotel.”

“You got someone watchin’ her or somethin’?” Okuyasu asked.

“I left the television on,” Jotaro said. As if the real danger at large were boredom, and not an unattended child, or said child’s apparent proclivity to wander off.

Already, Josuke was seeing the next two days slipping by on him – as if the summer weren’t short enough already. “Look,” he said, “maybe you should ask someone else? Like my mom?”

“Does your mom know I’m in town?”

“No.”

“Do you feel like telling her?”

“No.”

Rolling up his sleeve, Jotaro checked his watch. “Good. I’ll be by tomorrow with Jolyne, then,” he continued, not looking at either of them. “I’d recommend a wallet chain if you have one.”

“What’s the chain for?” Okuyasu asked. He’d been born too late to remember the wallet chain as anything other than a flashy counterculture accessory.

Jotaro drew a deep breath, seemingly on the point of launching into an explanation – but then he paused, and shook the pensive expression from his face. “You’ll do fine,” he said, one corner of his lips forming briefly into a smirk.

And with that, he left them both on the porch step to stew in their mutual awkwardness.

Those not familiar with Jotaro Kujo might be tempted to draw the conclusion that his plan was a smidge too contrived. Without Koichi or Yukako around to play referee to Josuke and Okuyasu’s more outrageous feelings, these were allowed to float nearer and nearer to the surface, until they were nearly wearing them openly – the way they held themselves just then, they did not look at each other, did not talk directly to one another, though the change in the complexions of both, and the curious language of their bodies, which even now were oriented to face one another, gave them away. Surely, it wouldn’t be a stretch to hypothesize that Jotaro’s request had been an excuse for Josuke and Okuyasu to kiss and make up, as the saying goes. He’d even delivered his lines the way all bad actors do: stiffly, like he’d thought over what he was going to say, and was focused more on saying it correctly than with any kind of feeling.

A nice theory: but one we are disappointed to assert is not true. Jotaro was always a bad actor, even when he was not acting – the only time in his life he ever managed to come across as sincere was when he didn’t have time to think his reactions through. If he had any wind of Josuke and Okuyasu’s standoff, Jotaro chose to keep his head down and ignore it, out of the belief that it would blow over in a few minutes, or a day. He was prone to conflating mood and feeling – thinking that both were the temporary, passing clouds that left no mark of their stay on the land they cast their shadows over.

And so there they were: staring one another down from opposite sides of the threshold, Josuke firmly planted on the front step and Okuyasu, little by little, inching back toward the staircase, like he was trying to get away. At least the musty dark within the house was familiar.

“I’ve gotta go,” Okuyasu was saying. He eased back another half-step, struggling against the social elastic that held them together. If he could only get far enough away, it would snap, and then Josuke would have to say goodbye.
Just then, seeing the cornered, guilty expression on Okuyasu’s face, Josuke knew that if he opened his mouth and asked what the hell he’d been doing all this time, that Okuyasu would have no choice but to answer him. But neither of them wanted him to ask.

The way a person experiences time at sixteen is different than the way a person experiences it at sixty-six – and this does strange things to a person’s patience when they are young. The younger you are, the longer time seems to stretch, both before and ahead. Each year represents a fraction of your total lifespan that dwindles as you age: we might conclude that a year to a person of sixteen seems four times as long as it does to a person of sixty-six. You may understand, then, why people of the former age are so prone to rushing into things. Why couples together for no more than a few months might already be dreaming up plans for the house they’ll buy or the places they’ll travel. After all – they have already been together for 1.56% of their lives.

The opposite holds true, too. A year or even a week is a long time to wait for something you want when you are sixteen, but it also means that problems seem a lot further off than they really are. It’s a familiar conundrum: objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. For us – and perhaps you as well – putting of the inevitable as Josuke wanted to may seem inconsequential. What different does a day or two make? – But to him, a day or two was an amount of time that stretched off into the horizon from the point of view at which he stood.

He was aware that things with Okuyasu were past the tipping point of being alright. But the living are seldom ready to rip off the Band-Aid.

“Yeah,” said Josuke, “me too.”

From the stairs, Okuyasu grinned at him. This time, he could see the relief – even with the distance, even with Okuyasu doing everything in his power to make himself seem small. “Catch ya tomorrow.”

After Josuke closed the door shut behind him, he stood for a moment on the front porch, suddenly feeling more exhausted than he had in a long, long time.

***

When the phone downstairs went off at three in the morning, Josuke awoke with a disorienting sense of déjà vu.

By the time he got out of bed and made his way downstairs, the phone had long stopped ringing. The door to the kitchen was open and a wedge of light was spilling out across the floor and up the opposite wall. With his eyes half-shut, Josuke shambled into the kitchen, pausing only for a moment when he saw his mother at the kitchen table, wrapped up in her housecoat. On the countertop, the electric kettle was gurgling, steam just beginning to rise from the spout. Everything was at once too loud and too bright.

“Phone’s for you,” his mom said, nodding at the telephone on the stool by the door. Like him, she was squinting under the florescent light. She hadn’t been up long.

“Sorry,” Josuke mumbled.

He expected her to chew him out, but she only shrugged. “Sounded important, anyway,” she said – and then he remembered she was used to it. That before his grandfather died there were nights just like this when he’d come downstairs to find her sitting in the kitchen like she was now, with the kettle on or a cup of herbal tea already in her hand, and his grandfather’s shoes missing from the mat by the front door.
“Hello?”

“Josuke!” The pronunciation of his name was one he was by then used to hearing: all three syllables raw and dragged out by a rough, scratchy voice, with the third held for a fraction of a second longer than he was accustomed to. Jo-su-kay. “You sleepin’?”

“Okuyasu?” Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as his mother got up and fiddled with the kettle – pretending not to listen. He lowered his voice: “Yeah, I was asleep. What’s up?”

“There was a – on the way home I – .”

A pause ensued. In the absence of Okuyasu’s voice, Josuke began to notice the background sounds filter in from the other end of the line. Murmuring voices. The squeak of a car’s breaks. The static swell of wind blowing against the receiver.

“Where the fuck are you?” he demanded.

“Uh, Kame Square.”

“On my way, stay right there.”

As he hung up the phone, Tomoko rose from her seat. She had her fine-boned fingers wrapped around two mugs, one in each hand.

“Guess I made yours for nothing, hunh?” she asked.

“Sorry,” he repeated.

Tomoko studied him for a minute. Josuke was getting harder to read, the older he got. He had more depth to hide behind.

“Don’t suppose you need a drive?”

“Nah,” Josuke lied. “Okuyasu just wanted someone to walk him home from the station.”

“I’ll put your tea in the fridge.”

“You’re the best.”

His mother just shrugged. She’d learned to master herself in the wee hours of the morning where most people would be half-asleep and given over to the extreme ends of the emotional spectrum. All those fretful feelings she translated into activity, keeping her mind occupied with small tasks and minute movements. It became a kind of game for her. How many hours can you whittle away before you start itching for the telephone.

“Don’t be out long,” she said.

When he was three blocks away, he turned back and saw the lights on in the kitchen window. They remained on, even when he was far enough away that the house melded into its neighbours, and he knew they’d still be on when he came back.

***

As Josuke approached the square, he saw a red light creep across the face of the buildings ahead of him. At first, he thought it was only the traffic lights at the intersection – but then the light passed on, rolling over the sidewalk and the street, and another beam of red light swept through after it, and then
another. By the third rotation, Josuke had broken into a sprint.

Kame Square’s name was something of a misnomer. It was a square in the sense of its double ring of sidewalks – a place for pedestrian traffic to congregate. In form, however, it looked rather like a roundabout. The story went that there had not been enough space for a traditional square, and so the town had, literally speaking, decided to cut a few corners. It was the sort of bastardized monster of civil engineering that could only be found in a place like Morioh.

At present, the roundabout was grid-locked end-to-end with emergency vehicles. They’d been staggered so that any vehicles that needed to come or go in the one-lane square-cum-roundabout could do so. The cars and trucks looked like the dropped toys of a giant child in their haphazard arrangement, as though they’d been placed with no understanding of roads. The lights on the police cars and ambulances rotated slowly, punctuated by the intermittent wail of a siren. Round and round the square the red beams roamed, slipping across the faces of buildings, and over porous tree canopies, only to disappear in the midst of the empty streets. Round and round, an inverse carousel, a lighthouse beckoning to passersby: come and see.

To Josuke, the strangest thing about the scene was the unrushed sense of calm that settled over it. Aside from the occasional siren, there was no sound except the idling of the trucks’ engines. Even the spectators seemed oddly sedate: a patient ring that surrounded the circumference of the sidewalk, men and women who viewed the scene with the same silent attention of spectators at an opera. The presence of the vehicles parked around the roundabout’s inner circle was sufficient to keep them away. And then there were the emergency workers. As he walked past one of the ambulances, he saw two EMTs sitting on the truck’s tail, passing a cigarette between them. A stretcher was waiting on the street beside the truck.

And still: he did not realize exactly what he was looking at, until he happened to glance at the square’s center, by the fountain he’d passed so many times before, and notice several cops gathered around a tarp. This surreal scene appeared before him for only a moment or two before a parked ambulance interceded – but for a split second, just as he was about to look away, he saw a small shoe peeking out from beneath the tarp – and the dirty, baby blue sock attached.

“There’s kids out there who gotta go to bed hungry, you know.”

“Sorry,” Josuke mumbled. He was absently mashing his rice down with his chopsticks, leaving prong-shaped impressions in the sticky, gelatinous grains.

It was a lackluster response. He hoped it would be enough that his mother wouldn’t keep talking. He didn’t want to talk to anyone just then; he wished he could forget to think.

“No dessert or video games until you eat your veggies.”

“Okay.”

When Tomoko spoke again, there was a change to her tone. In a voice he wasn’t used to hearing, she asked, “You’re not feeling sick, are you?”

“M’fine.”

Regardless: she batted his hands away, and insisted on pressing his humid palm to his forehead, and then his cheeks, and then on comparing the temperature to her own. At last satisfied that Josuke was not suffering an onset of fever, she cleared her throat and asked:

“So what’d you and Jotaro do all day?”
At the front door, a knock came. Tomoko turned from the table – in time to miss the subtle change in Josuke’s expression, the way his teeth worried at his lower lip.

As she got up and ambled toward the darkened hallway, Josuke could feel the beat of his blood beneath his skin: a thrumming, frenetic pace to match the spasms of his heart. He felt he could see the next few minutes laid out before him; when his mother answered the door and he heard the deep voices that rumbled in answer, and saw a red light swing across the hall floor, his suspicions were confirmed.

He was frightened; yet at the same time, animated by a nervous energy and the need to be a spectator in whatever was happening. The living and dead are alike in this way: everyone feels the need to look when they pass by a scene of an accident, even if it is their own.

The hall lights were still off when he crept from the kitchen. His bare feet moved soundlessly over the floor, skin sticking slightly to the humid, tacky hardwood. At the other end of the hall, he could see his mother, her figure framed by the door. There were two men on the other side of the threshold, wearing the peaked caps he associated with Morioh’s police force, and though they were little more than backlit shadows, he could tell from their silhouettes and the way they carried themselves that neither one was his grandfather.

From where Josuke stood, he couldn’t see the officers’ car where it was parked in the driveway, but he could see its lights through the cracks between the adult bodies in the door. Across the hardwood floor and the runner carpet the police car’s red lights swung, casting three long shadows in triplicate that shifted from left to right like an animated stereogram.

At any moment, he expected the policemen to push past his mother and come for him. They’d take him away in their car, slap handcuffs on him like the ones his grandfather told him about (“Don’t worry,” he’d said when Josuke slipped his small, bird-boned wrist through the set of handcuffs his grandfather kept in his patrol car, “they make ‘em in your size too.”). And then they’d lock him away somewhere until he was old, and everyone forgot about him. But what he was afraid of most of all was that they would tell his mother. More than the handcuffs or even a life sentence, he dreaded her disappointment.

He wanted to run, but his legs were small and weak with fear, and they had a car and guns and mace.

But the policeman at the door never spared him a glance. They spoke in hushed tones to his mother, and after a minute he heard her wish them both goodnight. The front door closed; the lights dancing across the floor vanished. Moments later, his mother stumbled into the light of the kitchen, rubbing at her eyes. She hadn’t seen him. The way she looked just then, the distant touch of thoughtfulness in her eyes and the pinched expression on her lips, reminded him of the first time he’d watched her from the bathroom door when she took out her earrings and washed off her makeup. She was, if only for a moment, transformed into a private person, with her own private thoughts and feelings – but then she noticed Josuke at the kitchen entrance watching her, and the expression immediately vanished. She put her face back together into the configuration he was used to: sardonic and affectionate and every bit his mother.

“It’s rude to eavesdrop, kiddo,” she said, hands on her hips.

He might have mumbled something in reply, but he couldn’t remember – he was still too shaken by the police officers’ visit.

Tomoko glanced away briefly, seeming to contemplate something. “Hey,” she said after a moment, with a firmness that suggested she’d made up her mind about something. “I’m going to take the day
off tomorrow and stay home with you. I guess Jotaro’s not feeling well.”

This was, technically, not a lie. She was taken off guard, then, when Josuke asked:

“Is he gonna die?”

She looked at him like he’d just uttered a four letter word. “No! Is he gonna…? – since when do you know what that word means!”

He couldn’t give an answer. Amid all the talk of murders and murderers, all the newspaper clippings and blundering along the riverbank in the waning hours of the night in search of corpses and fingerprints, Josuke Higashikata had never once thought about death – in the same personal, philosophical way adults do – until that morning.

Josuke’s heart was racing. He turned his gaze ahead and tried not to look, but it was too late. The glimpse had been brief, his impression of it half-formed. He might have even second-guessed himself, if the presence of all the emergency vehicles and the strange lack of urgency on scene didn’t align with what he thought he saw.

He was so caught up in trying not to turn and stare that he almost passed Okuyasu by the first time. He was sitting on a bench by the payphone, on the exact same spot where ten years prior Josuke had waited for a taxi. A gym bag was resting between his feet.

Josuke wanted to ask him where he’d been, and what he was doing out that time of night. But he was still riding high on the adrenaline of seeing the dead body, and the most he could manage was: “The fuck happened?”

“You saw, right?”

“Sorta. There was a tarp over…” He trailed off, unsure of what pronoun to use. ‘It’ was the most obvious choice – but ‘it’ sounded too impersonal when dealing with a body that was still warm.

Okuyasu nodded. And then nodded again. “Yeah. When I first saw it, they hadn’t put the tarp up.”

Josuke thought of the news casts on television about accidents and homicides, and how they always made Okuyasu’s eyes mist over. At the moment, Okuyasu was dry-eyed, but he was being quiet too, and that was almost worse. The ends of his nails looked ragged – he wondered if Okuyasu had been gnawing on them.

“You figure it’s murder?” Josuke asked.

“Had to be. When I – when I saw – it had…”

Josuke held up a hand. “Dude, you don’t gotta tell me.”

Okuyasu looked up at him with the eyes of a large, hapless mammal. They were the eyes of an elephant or a blue whale: baleful, forbearing, staring blankly down the barrel of a rifle or a harpoon.

“You think it’s your guy?”

“Fuck.” Josuke grit his teeth and brought a fist up to cover his mouth. “S’gotta be.”

If you are anything like the typical reader, you have perhaps listened with frustration to the first half of our story, knowing that the murderer was going to strike again. You may find yourself thinking of Josuke as lazy or selfish for not having pursued the murderer at once, or told Jotaro about it, or done any number of things that those not themselves in the situation like to believe they would have done.
While we in no way wish to make a habit of excusing the behaviour of Josuke Higashikata, it may help to explain the principle of procrastination. We have already mentioned once before that being of a certain age causes one’s sense of time to become distorted. Procrastination is another form of time distortion; it is the belief that there is always enough time left to do whatever it is that needs done. To a chronic case like Josuke, waiting another minute, or even another hour, to catch the criminal did not signify. After all: when everything is going fine one minute, it seems unlikely that circumstances will be reversed in the next. Not a lot can go wrong, in the span of a minute. But all those minutes add up. The deficiency of a procrastinator is their poor grasp of temporal mathematics. A few minutes spent lounging about, a few hours of video games, a few days chasing dead-end leads, a week on an oyster farm. All told, more than three weeks had passed since the last murder, but to Josuke, it seemed that hardly any time had gone by at all. He was not trying to be lazy or irresponsible; like a startlingly high percentage of the population, he just assumed that he had more time to work with than he really did.

“Fuck, we gotta do somethin’,” Okuyasu was saying. “Call Jotaro, or Koichi.”

“Jotaro doesn’t know.”

“That’s why we gotta tell ‘im.”

“I don’t mean about… this,” Josuke said, jerking his head in the direction of the square. “The whole thing about the murders and the voices – he doesn’t know.”

“The fuck you mean?” Okuyasu snapped. Anger was boiling in the cavity of his chest and at the back of his throat. He was conscious of it these days, more than he used to be; but after an eight hour shift, and seeing the body, his skin had worn away to a paper-thin resistance. The anger was eking out of him now, through his pores and through his clenched teeth. “You said you filled him in!”

“I forgot, alright? Jesus.”

“You’ve been sittin’ on your ass all week. You had time.”

“I wasn’t sitting on my ass,” Josuke retorted. “I was helping Jotaro with his marine biology whatever. And I think I mighta found a way of dealing with Vox.”

When Okuyasu didn’t say anything, Josuke took it as a sign to continue. This was the paradigm he’d come to accept as the status quo in their friendship: Okuyasu listened, and he did the talking. “Koichi called last week just before he and Yukako took off. Said something ‘bout the arrow. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Like – you can’t normally kick the shit out of a ghost, but I could beat Kira’s dad because he got a stand. So anyway, I’ve been trying to get Jotaro to tell me what he did with the arrow. If we can get that outta him, then Jotaro doesn’t even have to know about Vox.”

And then Okuyasu asked: “Jotaro got hurt real bad the first time you guys messed around with Vox, didn’t he?”

He hadn’t been quiet because he was waiting on Josuke. He’d been quiet because, internally, a struggle was taking place. He’d wanted to hit Josuke, at first, because all his life that was the only recourse he had: two fists and a whole lot of anger, add in nails and teeth and all the rest of the repertoire of tactics belonging to the desperate and the dirty. Okuyasu Nijimura did not fight back with words, because when it came down to names and labels, he’d spent his whole life with his back against the wall. He’d been told that he was useless, that he was unwanted, that he was dumb and good for nothing – and against these weapons, his own feelings were flimsy and ineffective tools. He could only keep his mouth shut – or hit, when anger got the better of him.
But Josuke wasn’t like Keicho, or even like his father. He never gave Okuyasu the lower ground the way they had. And so: he brandished this rusted, forgotten weapon, and watched with a mixed feeling of victory and self-loathing when Josuke’s expression caved in.

“That what you and Jotaro were talking about?” Josuke murmured at last. His voice was quiet, and trembling under restraint.

“No. Your mom told me.”

Seeing the flush of mortification spread across Josuke’s face, Okuyasu’s anger softened. He was not used to being in control – but now that he had control, he didn’t know what to do with it. His first instinct was to hand back the reigns.

“You coulda said somethin’,” Okuyasu continued, gentler this time. “You coulda said you were worried about Jotaro. You coulda told me about the arrow. We’re a team, yeah? You don’t gotta hide shit from me.”

All at once, Josuke seemed to rally. “I told you, I forgot. Besides, you’re the one hiding shit!”

“Whuddya mean?”

Josuke gestured to – well, all of Okuyasu, really. “What the fuck were you doing when you found the body? It’s, like, three in the goddamn morning!”

Dropping his gaze, Okuyasu toed at a pebble underfoot. “I was just goin’ fer a walk,” he mumbled. “Bullshit. What about all those other times?”

“There’s just somethin’ I gotta do, alright? It’s important.”

“That why Jotaro was over for a visit?”

Once again, Okuyasu set his jaw against the anger that was desperately seeking a way out. “You’re the one who’s been off on a cruise with him all week.”

“It was a raft. I told you – I had shit to do,” Josuke said.

At one another, they glared. They were standing on separate sidewalk squares, sharing the distance between them, and the exact same suspicion about one another, which both refused to speak because it was too absurd for words.

It was the first real argument they’d ever had, and it was the first time either were exposed to the realization that real love was not built on puppy-dog feelings. That caring for someone, even as a friend, involved a measure of hurt. In even the healthiest of relationships, one or both parties will inevitably agonize over the flaws of the other, or some self-destructive tendency, or some external circumstance inflicted on the other that they are powerless to help. A long time ago a philosopher posited that human beings were once halves – or thirds, or quarters, or wherever your inclinations may lie – of a whole. When the separated pieces come together again, they are perfected and never willingly separate. This, is our experience, is not entirely true. Our philosopher’s human pieces go through life suffering its stumbles and falls. They get chipped, scratched, and misshapen, so that when a whole finally does reunite, it does not fit together quite as it should.

Josuke and Okuyasu were doing their best, but in trying to fit together, they were brushing over each other’s bruises and scars.
“Fine, fuck it,” said Josuke.

He began to walk in the direction of home, turning his back on the scene of the emergency vehicles, and the bystanders, and the small, barely visible lump in the tarp on the sidewalk. Some of the onlookers, already bored with murder, had turned around and were watching the both of them.

“Where d’ya think yer going?” Okuyasu called, ducking his head to avoid the curious gazes of the bystanders. He had already capitulated, and was following on Josuke’s heels.

“We’re gonna go back to your place, and when Jotaro shows up, we’re gonna tell him everything. That’s what you want, right?”

He did not say this because he was trying to compromise, but because he wanted Okuyasu to feel bad for forcing him to step up and be the better person. Because even when doing it unconsciously, people excel at hurting one another.

There was a man leaning on an aluminum garbage bin on the other side of the road. He was holding a shovel and a broom, and the garbage bin was filled with sand. Okuyasu’s brother had told him once what the sand was for. As they passed the man, he turned his eyes to the ground and quickened his pace.

“Do whatever you want,” he mumbled to Josuke. “I ain’t gonna stop ya.”

At their backs, the first hints of sunlight were already appearing on the horizon. By the time the sun was quarter of the way across the sky and the morning rush hour was just beginning to hit Kame Square, the emergency vehicles had cleared out, and the sand had been spread over the blood and swept away. Yet, by midafternoon, most of the town knew about the murder. In a town of Morioh’s size, even if you did not see the body in person, you were bound to know someone who had, or one of the emergency workers on call that night, or someone at the funeral home, or one of the victim’s neighbours or a member of the family. Almost everyone in Morioh had a new second or third-hand anecdote of horror and tragedy to tell. There were many such anecdotes in circulation already. The people of Morioh are wonderful and resilient – but to outsiders, their dinner conversation is always a touch morbid.

***

By the time Josuke and Okuyasu got back, it was four-thirty in the morning. And at four-thirty in the morning, they discovered Jolyne Kujo sitting on the Nijimuras’ front porch.

“Where’s your dad?” Josuke asked. She gave him a startled look. And then he remembered the reason why he hadn’t exchanged more than a few dozen words with his great-niece over the past week.

“Shit.”

He spared a desperate glance in Okuyasu’s direction, hoping for a little help – but Okuyasu had hung back at the end of the driveway. He had his hands in his pockets, and was intent on studying the cracks in the asphalt.

Once again, Josuke felt an exhausted, heavy sensation settle over his body, and it had nothing to do with getting four hours of sleep.

After a couple of doomed attempts, he managed to cobble together enough recollections of the previous year’s English lessons to ask: “Where is father?”
Jolyne shrugged. She was in the process of picking the paint off the porch support with her fingernail. A little pile of paint chips had already amassed on the grass below. “He’s gone,” she said.

Thankfully, Josuke found English easier understood than spoken.

“Back when?” Josuke asked, pointing emphatically at his wrist. He realized, belatedly, that the gesture might have been more effective were he in the habit of wearing a watch.

In front of her, Jolyne held up two fingers. And then she went back to picking at the paint.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Josuke and Okuyasu enlist help getting their hands on the arrow.

Chapter Notes

I decided it would be nice to get a more comedy-centered chapter in before we get down into the nitty gritty plot stuff C: Apologies to anyone who thought a chapter about Josuke and Okuyasu babysitting Jolyne was going to be even remotely heartwarming.

I added a link in the first chapter notes to an adorable comic someone drew of one of the flashback scenes from this fic :D Go check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fifteen minutes after discovering Jolyne on the front porch, Josuke found himself sitting on a condemned sofa in the Nijimuras’ living room, the television set in front of him blaring the upbeat, frenetic backtrack to a high-impact aerobics program for early birds. He’d taken the seat with the large unidentified stain. On the other end of the couch, Okuyasu was slouched on a ripped-up cushion, glimpses of yellow foam showing through the gashes. Between them, on the deflated cushion with a permanent sag in the middle, sat Jolyne, her feet swinging back and forth in time to the music. Of the three persons crammed into the sofa, she seemed the least at risk of falling back asleep at a moment’s notice. For lack of the various sugary cereals she’d demanded for breakfast (the only American cereals Josuke had ever seen around Morioh came in tiny boxes, and cost a fortune), he’d placated her with two or three bowls of choco-strawberry ice cream. She was practically buzzing, loud and clumsy and obnoxious, handling the sugar high of her existence the same way amateur alcoholics handled a drink or two: it was all placebo effect, mostly.

On the other side of the room, a golden blush was creeping in through the drawn blinds. Morioh would be waking up soon, and word of the murder would spread through town one way or another, on the morning train or at the park or over the wire. They’d clean the square up quick and then people would be all over it, trampling down the trail and getting their smells and fingerprints all over the place until victim and murderer were just two more anonymous entries in the incalculable sum of the morning traffic.

They should have been talking it over, what had happened, and deciding on a course of action. But Okuyasu hadn’t said a word since their argument and that, more than the murder, was something Josuke just didn’t know how to deal with.

He wanted – needed – Okuyasu to say something. To tell him they’d find the murderer and fix everything, together – or whatever other lies of comfort people usually told one another when there were no other easy answers to latch onto. But Okuyasu was acting like a stranger in his own house, sullen, awkward: his legs drawn up to his chest, arms looped around his knees. He was looking at the television, or looking through it, one thumb tracing small circles over the bony knob of his wrist.
A month or so ago, with Okuyasu’s limp arm hanging around his shoulder, Josuke had gripped that same wrist, holding it tight enough to feel the creak and give of Okuyasu’s bones. He’d struggled back then under the burden and implication of the unresponsive weight on his shoulders. The worst part of all had been feeling alone, even with Okuyasu right there – the realization that no matter how hard he pleaded, he wasn’t going to get a response.

The Okuyasu on the other side of the couch just now had a pulse beating through the veins inside his wrist, but the feeling was the same. He was alone in Okuyasu’s company, only this time there was no one else to blame.

The aerobics program on television cut to commercial.

“Can I change the channel?” Jolyne asked.

The meaning of the last word was lost on Josuke. “Sorry?”

Jolyne pointed at the television. “Can I change the channel?” she repeated, louder this time. She seemed to be under the impression that anyone could understand English, if spoken with enough volume.

Figuring there were only so many things a six year old could possibly want to do with a television, Josuke handed her the remote. The remote’s programmable buttons were all in Japanese, but the concept of up and down arrow buttons transcended the language barrier; soon, Jolyne was flicking absently through the channels, and wondering why she couldn’t find Nickelodeon.

Josuke closed his eyes, feeling the tension and tightness in his eyelids. He tried to prod his brain into thinking, but he found thinking was a lot like breathing. Once he was conscious of the process, it switched over to manual and stopped working on its own. Through the cottoned cloud of exhaustion hanging around his head, the television sounded fuzzy. Jolyne was still going through the channels; the half-second snippets of chatter and music all blurred together into a white noise of sound.

“How’d it happen?”

When he glanced over the top of Jolyne’s head, Okuyasu’s eyes were still locked on the television – but his arms had closed tighter around his knees, thumbs pressing soft indents into the sunburnt flesh of his forearms. When Josuke didn’t answer, Okuyasu’s gaze strayed over to him, but as soon as he realized Josuke was watching him, he averted his eyes. Colour crept into his cheeks: pink beneath the warm sienna left over from too much time spent out in the sun.

Okuyasu’s thoughts had been meandering down a path not so different from Josuke’s own. He couldn’t stand the silence, or the things people hid behind it. He didn’t like being taken by surprise. But this sort of thing – “personal shit” (not our wording) – he wasn’t sure how people usually went about it, or where to begin. He had no template to follow. No one had ever asked him how he felt, or what was going through his mind. And so he asked the same way he’d been asking questions all summer: unraveling his ragged bundle of string, laying down trails for Josuke to follow.

“Jotaro ending up in the hospital,” Okuyasu clarified. “The last time you were chasin’ Vox.”

Josuke stole a furtive peek at Jolyne. She’d given up trying to find all her usual channels. Instead, she was watching an infomercial for a product with an English name. Some kind of kitchen appliance that the announcer claimed could chop, blend, grind, mix, mince, or whip just about anything.

Okuyasu was watching him with the look of a man who’d just jumped out of a plane without a parachute, and so Josuke picked up the slack laid down for him and took his first few stumbling steps
back into the dark.

“To be honest? I’d forgotten about it,” he heard himself say. “I guess – not forget, exactly. More like didn’t think about. And then last night happened, all the sirens and people running around, and suddenly there’s this memory in my head.”

“‘Bout what?”

“Nothing much, just… about sitting at home. With mom. And the police coming to the door – not grandpa, but some other guys I didn’t know – and talking to mom, and mom telling me Jotaro wasn’t doing so hot.”

“Like, the sick kind of not so hot?”

“She didn’t say.” And then, as an afterthought: “I asked if he was gonna die.”

“Why’d you ask that?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“You think he mighta gotten his ass kicked?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you there? When it happened?”

Ten yards back, the waves picked up speed as they neared the shore, stacking one atop the other until they toppled down onto the sand as one white wall, with the loud and booming noise of a distant explosion, and the whisper of wet sand grains tumbling against one another.

He’d been running. His knees were boneless beneath him; his lungs felt like they were filled with hot coal. There were gashes in his knees and hands, shallow cuts that stung and welt up blood in bright red beads – but for the moment, he couldn’t remember how he’d gotten them. There was blood, too, on the sand under his feet, little flecks of it, and drag marks that left behind alternating animal impression, like wounded variation on the box step: one-two-three one-two-three…

Okuyasu was watching him, waiting for an answer Josuke wasn’t sure he had. If it’d been a month before – if they were still back on the beach at the tail end of Marine Day – he might have run with what he could remember. Spoken confidently of his foggy, distant memories, improvised and filled in the gaps and made his six-year-old-self seem braver, less afraid than he really was. As if doing so would impress Okuyasu. Showboating was a lot harder when there was no longer a layer of microfilm or acetate between him and the bodies. The victims weren’t characters anymore, and the murders, no longer stories.

“It’s hard to say, y’know? I’ve got – I got these memories of the beach.”

“By the cliffs?” Okuyasu asked.

“I think so. I don’t know when they take place or who’s in ‘em. Who the fuck knows? Maybe I just saw it all on TV once.”

“What kinda memories?”

“Walking. Or running, maybe. There’s blood.”

“Jotaro’s?”
Up ahead, a black shadowed shape rose from the sand. The abstract pose it was arranged in, legs and arms bent at uncomfortable angles, combined with its stillness made it seem more inanimate than human. It blended with the scenery: a driftwood log, maybe, or a cobble of torn fishing net. The coat’s loose ends fluttered in the wind, the collar and the long flaps, like a cormorant fidgeting its great black wings.

Josuke chewed on the inside of his cheek. “Maybe.”

“You remember the murderer being around?”

Seeing Josuke grimace, Okuyasu retracted the question. “Sorry. I know it ain’t easy tryin’ to remember stuff you don’t wanna remember.”

Josuke let out a groan and flung his head back against the sofa. Jolyne glimpsed up at him – but, unable to eavesdrop, her attention was immediately recaptured by yet another infomercial.

(As an aside – 80% of four A.M. television in Morioh consists of Shop Japan infomercials. Another 18% is taken up by local news, national news, and television drama reruns. The remaining 2% is accounted for by a 24/7 live update feed of the temperature and atmospheric pressure at various points across Morioh, and by a special program that can only be accessed on an old television set by turning the channel dial midway between six and seven. Anyone who happens across this halfway channel will have the misfortune of listening to an exclusive demo Akira Otoishi’s new self-titled album).

“It’s not like I don’t want to remember,” Josuke said. “I’ve been trying.”

“I know, but – .”

“It’s not like I got anything to hide.”

“I know,” Okuyasu said – and nothing more. He’d learned by now to recognize when someone was in the kind of mood that defied all contradiction, no matter how rational. It was the kind of skill anyone could pick up, given enough bumps and bruises.

“Maybe it’s like Rohan and Yukako said – I got suppressed memories or whatever.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Okuyasu mumbled: “Think it was some word that started with an ‘r’.”

Start with something small, he thought. A minor disagreement to test the waters. Better to lose a toe than a whole leg, in case of sharks.

“Yeah, sure. Suppressed memories, ruppressed memories – however you want to call it. Point is: thinking about it’s not gonna do shit. We already know what we’re up against, right? Until Jotaro gets back, that’s as good as it’s gonna get.”

Josuke’s eyes, as he said this, where everywhere but on Okuyasu. He had one fist balled and pressed to his lips. This kind of reticence wasn’t something he was used to from Josuke. Josuke was open and easy; he wore his heart on his sleeve and his cards face-up on the table. Made it simple for someone like Okuyasu to trust him. You felt like you knew where you stood with Josuke. He had his bag of tricks but he played them like an honest con man, with a sincerity to his performances that made him believable – or at the very least, someone you wanted to believe. The loaded die was always for someone else. The Josuke who fibbed and told stories was always an act put on for other people.

What Okuyasu found himself in the process of witnessing was no conman’s sleight of hand.
Somehow, in the midst of the story, he’d stumbled on a magician’s black box. Things went in and didn’t come out.

There were other types of black boxes – lock boxes, flight recorders. Coffins. They all had their purposes – to keep safe, keep secret, to hide what shouldn’t be shown. Black boxes didn’t do much good when you poked around in them. And people loved to poke. In the past, perfect strangers had asked him about the marks on his face, as casually as they might comment on the weather. As if, because they could be seen, because he had the nerve to be seen, they were entitled to his history, as if, because his own black boxes were harder to hide, they were therefore public property, therefore open to inspection.

“You don’t gotta tell me if you don’t wanna.”

When Josuke glanced at him, there was a blank, slackened look of surprise on his face – for a moment. And then his features tightened, the soft curve of his jaw squaring off as he pressed his teeth together. “I’m not – .”

“I know!” Okuyasu blurted. “I mean – if you do remember. Later. Just so y’know.” He licked his lips, tasting copper where the skin cracked and split. “Just ’cause you told me all that other stuff doesn’t mean you gotta tell me everything.”

“I thought we were playing truth or dare.”

Josuke said this with such a perfect straight face that for a moment, Okuyasu balked. “That was a month ago, shithead!”

And then Josuke was grinning at him. Showing off the stacked hand he’d double-dealt himself. And Okuyasu – Okuyasu was still pissed, but the quick flash of anger and heat had simmered down into something warm, and it was spreading to every part of him now, leaving behind a tingling sensation in his limbs. He’d missed this version of Josuke, and all those old feelings were rushing back in all at once to fill the hole they’d left behind in his chest when he’d tried to dig them out.

“You mean we’re not still playing?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

The grin on Josuke’s lips melted away, leaving behind teeth that worried into his lower lip, and a distracted look in his eyes as he turned his face away. The infomercial was in its death throws, the announcer making one last desperate plea to the camera before the five A.M. time slot could usher in the start of the station’s early morning children’s programming. They were on the verge of entering a magical twilight zone, occupied on one side by adult insomniacs with money to burn, and on the other, by children whose underdeveloped internal clocks ran by the motions of the sun, left to entertain themselves while their parents chased down a few precious extra hours of sleep.

“I guess,” said Josuke, “if that’s the way it’s going to be, I don’t get to ask either, hunh?”

On screen, a cartoon man with rosy cheeks and a cherry nose was soaring around the opening credits. Jolyne watched, leaning forward slightly, her ankles tapping together as she hummed and mumbled a made-up approximation of the Japanese lyrics.

“Ah, ah, ah pon ma!”

It didn’t sound much like singing – she didn’t have the aptitude for that – more like spoken word, but with feeling. The words weren’t even real Japanese, but it didn’t matter – she uttered them with enough conviction that they seemed to fit regardless.
Over the top of Jolyne’s head, Okuyasu could feel Josuke’s eyes on him. He was being watched with the same genetic predisposition for intensity with which Jolyne was watching her early morning cartoons. The idea that two people words apart without so much as a language in common could share so many of the same behaviours was mind-boggling. Jolyne and Josuke were as close as one could get to proof of Lamarckism: how by exercising the cerebral muscles responsible for handling danger and excitement, these traits had necessarily passed on.

Okuyasu took a deep breath, squeezing his hands into fists. The skin of his palms was cold and damp; he’d been sweating.

“I wanna tell ya,” he said at last, “just not yet.”

“Tell me what?”

“S’not important. I’ve just had a lot going on lately.”

“If it’s not important, why are you making such a big deal out of it?” asked Josuke. There was an underlying iciness to his voice that Okuyasu wasn’t used to hearing – not like this, not when it was the two of them just hanging out.

Were Okuyasu to be honest with himself, he might have admitted that he’d gone past what we might call the point of no return. He’d skittered and snuck and evaded his way around the truth for so long now that he’d become committed to the act. Not only in regards to his whereabouts throughout the summer, but where his entire relationship with Josuke was concerned. The truth might have been easier to admit if he’d gotten it over with – but we’ve mentioned before the aversion among the living toward ripping off the Band-Aid, so to speak. Now that he’d been pretending for so long, evasion felt like just another part of his body. He couldn’t imagine tearing it off. Carrying on lying, both to Josuke and to himself, seemed so much easier, even when he was already buckling under the stress, compared to the incalculable number of imagined future pains that would come out of confession.

Instead of explaining all this to Josuke, he said: “I just wanna be sure first, y’know? It’s like homework. If I say I’m gonna do it, I’ll just keep puttin’ it off. I wanna have somethin’ to show before I start talking shit outta my ass.”

“You got something you need to do?” Josuke hazarded a guess.

“Something like that.”

“Well, whatever it is, you know you got…” Josuke paused and drew a breath, speaking through the exhale: “…friends who’ll help you out.”

“Like how you asked for help with the arrow, right?” the anger was creeping into Okuyasu’s voice, the way it had that morning on the walk home.

“The fuck are you talking about? I was trying to get a hold of you all goddamn week!”

Jolyne glanced up, distracted by the volume and tone of Josuke’s voice. “Are you fighting?” she asked.

“Not fighting,” Josuke insisted.

Okuyasu said nothing. He was red up to his ears – not with anger, except perhaps the self-directed kind.
“Okay,” said Jolyne, turning back to face the television.

At her age, anything and everything was ingestible. She’d reached the point of learning to fib – but had not yet arrived at the realization that others, even adults, were just as capable of fibbing as her.

“So where is it?” Okuyasu mumbled.

“Here. I think.”

“In Morioh?”

“Jotaro said it was somewhere he could keep an eye on it. You know what he’s like, right? Type of guy who’s gotta do everything himself.”

“What if he took the arrow with him?”

“He mighta,” said Josuke. He tapped his feet against the floor. “I thought – I don’t know – we could bust into his hotel room and look for it.”

Okuyasu waved a hand in the air. “I’ll erase the door if you put it back.”

He said this as easily as he’d waved his hand. There was something familiar about the situation and the banter. Both of them knew their lines.

A tension in Josuke’s jaw that he hadn’t noticed until then gave out, and then he was grinning. “Got it,” he said – and though it was the same line as always, the expression wasn’t the one he’d practiced in front of the mirror: cocked eyebrows and a half-sincere smirk. Instead he wore an ugly smile, with crows’ feet and crinkles beneath his eyes.

Then the moment passed, and silence crept in between them, cold and sobering.

Josuke tilted his head back. Above, he could see the dark mottling in the corner of the ceiling where mold was beginning to fester; the hairline cracks that ran the length of the ceiling and continued down the wall; the dirt-streaked windows through which the morning sun cast a thick oily light; the patches on the walls, discernable only where the light struck the plaster in such a way that it stood out with a glossy glow against the matte surface of the surrounding paint; the wooden window frames and wooden trim, here and there marked with paint where someone had tried carefully to paint around them. Josuke had been through the house before, had repaired what his fight with Keicho had destroyed and what had already been falling apart on account of nothing more dramatic than neglect and the passage of time. He thought he’d fixed everything, but that had only been at a glance. Now that he had time to look, he could see how the deeper damage was slowing revealing itself on the surface: the weak walls that buckled under the weight of the ceiling, the rot festering in the damp woodwork and beginning to spread. He could fix the cracks as much as he’d please, but there were some things in the Nijimura household that were beyond his skill to repair.

He wondered what would happen to Okuyasu and him, when all was said and done. With the case at hand, they both had an excuse to push everything aside for the time being. Getting back to normal would be the real test. He’d thought at the start of the summer that they were going to get together – that was what people did, generally, when they liked each other. Now that he’d gotten a taste of distrust, however, he couldn’t get the flavour out of his mouth. Many relationships end pre-emptively, not because of the volume of accumulated wrongs one person inflicts upon the other, but because of one or two slights that get under the skin, that cause the slighted to look ahead and see their whole relationship played out before them with the same arguments, the same feelings of frustrations, repeated again and again in a hopeless cycle.
Beside him, he heard Okuyasu wonder out loud: “Where d’ya suppose Jotaro would keep the arrow, anyway?”

“Hotel rooms usually have safes,” his voice sounded flat and tired. “Seems like the best bet.”

“I dunno, I can’t see Jotaro using a hotel safe. It’s, like, too obvious, y’know? – it’s the first place someone might look.” Okuyasu rubbed his chin, thumb scraping over rough stubble. Josuke had never seen him with stubble before – as near as he could figure, Okuyasu hadn’t shaved in weeks. “I bet he’s got some kinda hiding place. Like one of those hidden panels in the nightstand drawer, the kind you gotta turn the handle a certain way to reveal.”

“Why the fuck would a hotel room have that kind of shit?”

“I’m just brainstormin’ here,” Okuyasu mumbled. Josuke watched, with growing apprehension, as Okuyasu’s eyes slid down to the space between them, where Jolyne was hunched over, elbows on her knees, a technicolour glaze in her eyes and a slack-lipped expression on her face. “You figure she knows?”

“Why don’t you ask?”

“Dude, you ask – you’re her great uncle.”

“Second uncle.”

“That’s not even a thing!”

Another protest began to take shape at the back of Josuke’s throat, but he forced himself to swallow it back. He’d fought a goddamn serial killer – he wasn’t about to make talking to a four year old girl the hill on which he’d die on. Besides, this was what he was good at: chatting people up, putting them at ease (or on edge; not that he had any plans to give Jolyne the genuine Higashikata shakedown). Not to mention they were family. What could be cooler to a four year old than a badass older relative with super powers and street appeal?

Emboldened by this disproportional evaluation of his charismatic personality and delinquent image, Josuke tapped Jolyne on the shoulder and asked, with a wide, toothy smile: “You know where is being the arrow?”

In Josuke Higashikata’s defense, we’re certain he was a good deal more charming when he wasn’t attempting to converse in a language that he’d flunked out of on at least two occasions throughout his academic career.

Jolyne’s wispy, barely-there eyebrows flattened into a frown. A little crinkle appeared above the button of her nose. She slid over – closer to Okuyasu, and away from her great-uncle, who was still wearing a grin that, with each passing second, was slowly turning into a grimace. Okuyasu, meanwhile, peered at the toddler currently pressed up against his side like she was a grenade that had landed in his lap.

“Alright,” said Josuke, keeping his gaze fixed on Jolyne as he reached over and grabbed an empty, torn-open envelop from the coffee table. “Alright. English is no good, hunh? How about this.”

On the back of the envelope, he drew a quick sketch of the arrow from memory. He had to admit, drawing wasn’t nearly as easy as Rohan made it look, but after thirty seconds and a minimal expenditure of effort, he had what passed as a representation of an arrowhead with a beetle design.

“See this?” he asked, turning over the envelope to show Jolyne.
When Jolyne’s eyes widened, Josuke knew she recognized what she was seeing.

“You know it, okay?” he said. “Where is arrow?”

Jolyne, in response, popped one of her knuckles into her mouth.

“Where?” Josuke repeated, jabbing the envelope for emphasis.

Jolyne shook her head.

“Dude,” said Okuyasu, “you gotta speak her language.”

“What do you think I’m trying to do here?”

“No, I mean…” Grinning, Okuyasu rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, “her language.”

Josuke glared dubiously at the space between Okuyasus’s fingers. “Man, I’m not giving her money.”

“Doesn’t hafta be money. Kids, man – they don’t care about that. Just give her some toys or candy or something.”

For someone who claimed not to be very smart, Okuyasu had moments of genius. Josuke ought to have known – he was an ideas man himself, could smell a good plot or scheme from half a mile upwind.

“You got any candy on you?” he asked.

Okuyasu thought for a moment, tapping his fingers against his thighs – before jumping up off the couch. “Got it!” he exclaimed, when he was already half out the room.

Both Josuke and Jolyne leaned to one side at the same time to peer through the open doorway. On the other side, they could hear Okuyasu pulling open drawers and dropping things and cussing. When he emerged, there was a small packet wrapped in black and silver foil in his hand. Josuke saw the packet, and the bold serif label printed on it – and the suddenly, that unshakeable confidence he’d felt moments ago was starting to wobble.

Like him, Okuyasu was an ideas man. But unlike Josuke, Okuyasu hardly ever got much further than the idea. Execution of a plan involves a certain level of attention to detail and the ability to adjust one’s strategy at a moment’s notice. Okuyasu’s style of execution, on the other hand, was a lot like driving a car without a steering wheel. Or brakes. He just gunned it, and hoped for the best.

“Dude,” said Josuke, “why the fuck do you have that stuff?”

“Been pulling some late nights,” Okuyasu replied, seemingly oblivious to the note of disgust with which Josuke pronounced ‘that stuff’, “it’s cheaper than buying coffee.”

He extended the packet out to Jolyne, who popped her knuckle out from her mouth and reached for it with saliva-wet fingers.

“Not yet,” Okuyasu said, retracting his hand. “First, you tell us where is the arrow.”

At Josuke’s drawing he pointed. Jolyne’s eyes slid from the drawing, to the packet of gum in Okuyasu’s hand, then back to the drawing again. She was no novice to bribes. Her father had always been better at birthday gifts and surprise trips to the park than he was with, say, playtime and basic conversation; he had, inadvertently, made a shrewd negotiator out of her.
There was a chain attached to Jolyne’s shorts, one end clipped onto her belt loop and the other disappearing into her pocket. Josuke hadn’t taken much notice of the chain before. But now, Jolyne reached down and pulled the other end of the chain out of her pocket. There was an amulet attached to the end of the chain: gold, with a design like a beetle. It looked only abstractly like Josuke’s drawing; his had only been a childish scribble.

For a moment, all either Josuke or Okuyasu could do was stare – during which time, Jolyne took the opportunity to neatly pluck the packet of gum out of Okuyasu’s hands.

“Bla-ck bla-ck,” Jolyne read aloud, pausing as she sounded out each syllable. “Hi-teck…tech-ni-cal e…-ex-el-le-ent tas-te and fla-vor.”

She glanced up, a frown on her face. “What’s hi-technical mean?” she asked.

“Yes,” Josuke said. “That’s the arrow. Part of it, anyway.”

Okuyasu rubbed the back of his neck. “Where’s, ya know – the business end?”

“Beats the hell outta me.” Toward Jolyne, Josuke stretched out a hand. “We’ll take, thank you,” he said – his ‘th’ softened and rounded until it curved off his tongue like an English ‘s’.

But Jolyne pulled her hand away, clutching the amulet close to her chest with a determined look in her eyes that said: over my dead body.

Okuyasu gave her a light, backhand tap on the shoulder. “I’ll trade you more gum,” he said, pointing to the amulet in her hand.

As we said before: Jolyne Kujo was a shrewd negotiator. She looked from one boy to the other, her flat nostrils flaring. The first rule of negotiation: don’t take the deal before knowing what you’re getting in return. Slipping the amulet back into her pocket, she tore open the foil gum packet wrapper and crammed a stick of the ash-grey gum into her mouth.

She chewed, once, twice. Midway into the third bite her face scrunched up and her arms curled inward, fists balled against her chest.

“Yuck!” she exclaimed, pulling the soggy, half-masticated grey mass from her mouth and sticking it in the middle of the coffee table.

“Good going,” Josuke mumbled.

“Hey man,” Josuke mumbled.

“No trade,” she said.

There was that look of resolve in her eyes again. But the way Josuke saw it, there was no way her grip strength was any match for her mental fortitude. Besides, she wasn’t going hold any grudges for long at her age. Give her ten years, he thought, and she won’t remember a thing.

Nonetheless: he spoke as softly as he could manage when he reached toward her and said, “I just borrowing for few minute, okay?”

When Jolyne tensed up, he nodded to Okuyasu over her shoulder and muttered through clenched teeth and a put-on smile: “Grab her.”

Okuyasu did. And Jolyne, barring no hesitation, let out an ear-splitting screech.
Countless studies have been done that posit there is something special about an infant’s cry that tugs at a muscle-memory buried deep in human DNA: a primal urge from a time before walls and roofs when the species shared its bed with creatures of claw and tooth and Pyranine eyes that glowed in the dark — or perhaps the principle was the same as the philosophy behind burglar alarms. The guilt was implied by the noise. Either way, the scream was effective: both Josuke and Okuyasu pulled away, Josuke casting a glance around as if to make sure no one was watching, and Okuyasu with an expression like he’d just been electrocuted.

Jolyne continued to scream until they had both retreated behind the couch. Then — and only then — she closed her pink, feline mouth and returned to watching cartoons as if nothing had happened.

Okuyasu was the first to break.

“Fuck, man,” he said. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Just go for it already.”

“How’s about you do it then?”

Josuke huffed, and pinched the bridge of his nose, and then dropped his arms back down to his sides. “Okay. How about this. You distract her.”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t know.” As he watched Okuyasu palm the pen he’d picked up off the coffee table to distract himself with, an idea occurred to Josuke. “Do a magic trick.”

“I don’t know no magic tricks!”

“Sure you do. Make some shit disappear.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that?” Okuyasu asked. Then he followed Josuke’s scowl, and glanced down at his own right hand. “Oooh.”

“Get it now? – anyway, you do that.”

“Yeah.”

“And then, when Jolyne ain’t looking, I’ll use Crazy D to punch a hole through her, grab the amulet, and patch her up before she even notices.”

“Dude!”

At the sound of Okuyasu shouting, Jolyne glanced up. Okuyasu was leaning over the sofa, hands braced against the armrest, looking paler than he had moments ago. The blanched color of his skin made the dark circles under his eyes stand out all the more.

“What?”

“You can’t just punch holes through people!”

Josuke was nonplussed. “Why not? I do it all the time. People never notice, I mean, Crazy Diamond’s pretty fast.”

They probably didn’t notice, thought Okuyasu, on account of the hypovolemic shock. In that state, Josuke could run them over with a bus and they wouldn’t blink. He briefly considered pointing this
out, but then decided Josuke was better off not knowing.

“What do you mean ya do it all the time?” Okuyasu asked.

“Come on, isn’t it obvious? Touching people works fine, but if you’re in a pinch and pumped up full of adrenaline in the middle of a fight…”

Groaning, Okuyasu doubled over, pressing his face into the armrest. Josuke could hear him stomping his feet against the floor. “Fuck! I can’t believe you’ve had yer dirty fuckin’ hands inside me! That’s disgusting!”

“Okuyasu.”

Alright, alright! Just give me a moment.”

Okuyasu took a deep breath, shoulders drawing up and back on the intake so that he stood up straight. Jolyne watched him with suspicious interest, keeping one hand over her shorts pocket.

“Five,” Okuyasu began. “Four…”

“We don’t need the countdown,” Josuke interrupted.

“Man, fuck off! I gotta psyche myself up somehow.” He resumed, his shoulders sagging back down into their natural slouch. “Five, four…”

While Jolyne’s focus was on Okuyasu, Josuke summoned Crazy Diamond. It hovered alongside him, two sets of eyes calculating the shortest path to the toddler’s pocket, via the toddler.

“Three, two – dammit!” Okuyasu threw his hands up in the air. He turned away for a moment, collecting himself, before resuming his previous position, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. “I can’t do it,” he said. “It doesn’t seem right, ya know?”

“We need that amulet,” Josuke reminded him.

He didn’t have time to give the conundrum further thought; mid-sentence, he noticed Jolyne’s attention had returned to the television, despite the argument passing over her head. There was a commercial playing, nothing out of the usual at first glance: a noire-esque shot of a car pulling up outside a restaurant front lit up with neon red letters. But then the camera cut to the inside of the car.

“What the hell,” Josuke mumbled. “Okuyasu, you seein’ this?”

The passenger in the backseat was Pink Dark Boy, dressed in a tasteful black three-piece suit.

“Oh yeah, I think Koichi told me about this,” said Okuyasu. “Something about Rohan’s publisher sellin’ the rights to use Dark Pink Guy or whatever in a commercial. Guess he threw a fit.”

The scene shifted to the inside of the restaurant. Pink Dark Boy sat at a table with two men, equally well-dressed. A waiter brought over three glasses and a bottle of wine. As the camera rolled, Pink Dark Boy’s cartoon eyes flitted nervously from the wine glasses to the human actor sitting across the table.

“How’s the Italian food in this place?” the second man asked.

“Good,” said the first man. “Try the veal, it’s the best in the city.”

“I’ll have it.”
“Capide?”

The waiter nodded. Pink Dark Boy looked on, eyes wide with trepidation, as the waiter unscrewed the cork, the loud squeak of cork turning against the snug glass neck of the bottle filling the otherwise silent restaurant. The cork came out with a pop. The first man – Josuke decided to call him Mr. Eyebrows – passed Pink Dark Boy a glass of wine before turning to the second man, whom based on the established pattern we will go ahead and call Mr. Jowls.

“I’m gonna speak Italian to PDB,” said Mr. Eyebrows.

“Go ahead.”

Mr. Eyebrows leaned in, eyes slipping over the empty space where the animators had drawn Pink Dark Boy in post-shoot. There was a slight twist to his mouth: he was wondering, probably, if the clean-shaven boy detective could even keep up with conversational Italian.

“Latte,” he said. “Contralto piano, expresso, pesto gusto spaghetti belladonna confetti inferno bravado magenta.”

He said this last word with emphasis, gesturing with one hand raised beside his head.

“Fresco vibrato,” Pink Dark Boy responded.

“Al dente,” Mr. Eyebrows began – but he was interrupted when the waiter reappeared and set a plate of veal down on the table.

“What I want,” said Pink Dark Boy, finding a second wind now that Mr. Eyebrows’ tirade had been interrupted, “what’s most important to me is that I have a guarantee: no more attempts on Chef Pink Dark Boyardee’s life.”

“What guarantee could I give you, PDB? I’m the hunted one here! I missed my chance. You think too much of me, kid. I’m not that clever. All I want is for Italian cuisine to be great again.”

A lapse in the conversation followed. Pink Dark Boy looked away, legs jiggling impatiently beneath the table, before turning back to Mr. Eyebrows. He steepled his fingers before him: a gesture of prayer or asking for favour.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” he said.

Mr. Eyebrows’ left eye, almost imperceptibly, gave a twitch.

Mr. Jowls, until now forgotten by the scene, shrugged. “You gotta go, you gotta go.”

When Pink Dark Boy stood up, Mr. Eyebrows gave him a quick pat-down before muttering, “Don’t take too long.”

The shot cut away to inside the washroom, where Pink Dark Boy was standing on the toilet seat. He reached up, feeling around behind the tank. Nothing.

Back to the table. Mr. Jowls glanced toward the restroom; Mr. Eyebrows blew a series of fat, wobbly soap bubbles out of his pipe with a severe yet composed expression.

Back again in the washroom, our presumed-protagonist went still. A look of relief smoothed over his expression as, from behind the tank, he pulled out a tin can of ravioli.

(‘Who the fuck puts canned pasta behind the toilet?’ Josuke asked).
Cut to the table, and then back to the bathroom again. Because the cross-cuts were apparently not enough, a series of jump cuts followed that showed Pink Dark Boy cracking open his can of ravioli (“Guess there must have been a can opener back there too,” remarked Okuyasu), Pink Dark Boy sitting on the toilet and shoveling ravioli into his mouth with a manic look of joy (“I hope he didn’t find the fork back there too,” said Josuke), Pink Dark Boy licking his sauce-coated fingers (“Can’t believe he ate that shit without heating it up first,” Okuyasu muttered).

At the table, Mr. Jowls and Mr. Eyebrows glanced up as the restroom door swung open. The camera followed Pink Dark Boy from behind as he strode back to his seat.

“Everything alright?” Mr. Eyebrows asked.

Finally, the shot cut to a medium close-up of Pink Dark Boy in his seat, two vivid smears of tomato sauce at the corners of his lips. His eyes shifted wildly from side to side under the effects of some great mental anguish.

“Si,” he replied.

The scene’s sound faded into a jaunty accordion tune as the ravioli brand’s logo appeared onscreen, along with the slogan: “Criminally delicious!”

Josuke scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t get it.”

“I think the guys at the restaurant, like, had it out for canned ravioli,” Okuyasu suggested.

Jolyne, meanwhile, hummed the accordion jingle. “Criminally delicious!” she repeated, in minced Japanese phonetics.

Ever since her arrival in Morioh, she’d been immersed in a foreign language. A tough change to swallow, when she was used to everything she saw on television being catered toward kids like her. The reappearance of casual English this side of the sunrise was a novelty she took to immediately. It was the first time she’d ever personally identified with art, if we apply the word “art” in the loosest sense of the term.

“I can definitely see Rohan throwing a fit over something like this,” said Josuke.

Before the words had even fully left his mouth, he was struck by an idea.

“Be right back,” he said to Jolyne before pulling Okuyau aside.

The kitchen was filled with honey-thick sunlight. Through the window above the seafoam tile backsplash, he could see the overgrown garden outside, full shaggy bushes and drooping wildflower heads crowding the bottom of the glass. Josuke leaned against the doorframe, keeping one eye on Jolyne in the next room over. Opposite him, Okuyasu folded and unfolded his arms.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I got an idea.”

“Why do we gotta whisper?”

“Kids are smart, dude,” Josuke explained. “Don’t want her getting suspicious.”

Because there was nothing suspicious about standing around in the doorway and whispering. This time, when Okuyasu’s arms folded, they stayed folded. “Whatcha got?”
“I think I know how we can get our hands on the arrow, but I’m going to need something from you.”

“What’s that?”

Josuke took a deep breath, stealing his pride against what he was about to say next: “I need you to give Rohan a call for me.”

***

Another day of oppressive August heat – and it was only late morning. Josuke began to wonder when the rain would punch a hole in the sky, ease off a little of the pressure that felt like it’d been building in Morioh all summer. The road ahead shivered and dissolved like a gasoline slick, reflections of the surrounding trees and houses glimmering off the bone-dry asphalt. At no more than a walking pace he already felt short of breath. It was the kind of day where the hot, humid air stuck to the inside of your lungs.

The only one who didn’t seem bothered by the heat was Jolyne. She walked foot-over-foot along the white line at the shoulder of the road, arms spread out on either side of her. She had all the concentration and purposefulness of a tightrope walker, as though the road on either side of her were fifty feet down and covered in shark-infested water or molten lava.

When they were within sight of Rohan’s house, Okuyasu heard music. The melody seemed to be coming from nowhere in the neighborhood in particular; it hovered in the air like a spell, belonging to the street as much as the sound of cicadas or the arid breeze rattling through the trees.

By the time they were at the end of the driveway, Josuke could hear the music too.

“Where’s that coming from?” he asked, just before ringing the doorbell.

They waited a moment. From within the house, they could hear the sound of the doorbell echo up and down the corridor.

“The music? Beats me,” said Okuyasu.

Josuke shrugged and rolled his shoulders. He felt like his head was screwed on too tight to his neck; must have been the lack of sleep, he figured. “Looks like Kishibe ain’t home. Thought you called him.”

“I did. He said he was.”

Then, from the same broad non-direction as the music, they heard a voice: “Door’s unlocked. You can come in, you know.”

Both Josuke and Okuyasu jolted. Jolyne peered up, mouth slack with surprise.


Down the porch steps Josuke marched. When he was out from beneath the awning, he turned back, shaded his eyes from the sun with both hands, and gazed up at the Kishibe house. The dormer window on the third story was open. In the window sat Rohan, one leg inside the house and one leg dangling outside it, his sketchbook balanced in his lap. There was a tape recorder, too, on the windowsill – an old Panasonic RQ-2102. The music they’d been hearing all along was playing on half-volume out the recorder’s built-in battery-powered speakers.

“Just meet me upstairs,” Rohan called down, without looking away from his sketchbook. The pencil
in his hand moved in bold, smooth strokes across the page. “I’m assuming you’re not here to drop in and say hello, right?”

Now that he was close enough, Josuke recognized the upbeat 80s pop music.

“Didn’t pin you for the Seiko Matsuda type of guy,” Josuke shouted up at Rohan.

Half an inch off the page, Rohan’s pencil stilled. He set it down, folding his hands over his stomach before continuing. “What’s wrong with Seiko Matsuda?”

There was, intrinsically, nothing wrong with Seiko Matsuda. Were he just hearing her music for the first time Josuke might have even been into it. But the only reason he was aware of her existence was because, every weekend going back to time immemorial, his mother always put on Squall while doing the chores. If there was one thing he did not ever want to associate with Rohan Kishibe, it was his mother.

“I just thought… you know. You’d be more into classical music. Opera, Mozart, all that.”

“What’s that about Seiko Matsuda?” Okuyasu asked. He’d emerged from beneath the awning, with Jolyne following right behind him, one fist balled up in his pant leg.

“Rohan’s got a thing for her.”

“Doesn’t your mom listen to her?”

“Well hello to you too, Okuyasu,” Rohan muttered, leaning forward to turn down the tape recorder’s volume. He paused, squinting down at Jolyne. “Is that… Hazamada?”

Jolyne tugged on Okuyasu’s pant leg. When he stooped over, she whispered in his ear: “Is he gonna fall out the window?”

“That’s Jolyne,” Josuke explained. “Jotaro’s kid.”

From down on the ground, it was difficult to make out the exact expression on Rohan’s face. A long pause ensured, before Rohan cleared his throat.

“Adopted kid?” he asked.

“Nah, she’s got the birthmark and everything.”

“I see,” Rohan continued. He was still struggling to process the implication that Jotaro Kujo had fumbled his way through the mechanics of procreation. After all: people did not usually wear that many layers in the summer except as a form of deterrent.

He reached for his pencil – nothing. Josuke watched, with a satisfying tug of amusement, as Rohan leaned over the windowsill to peer down at the bushes two stories below.

Rohan straightened out slowly, inch by inch regaining his composure. “Well,” he said, “are you three coming up or not?”

***

Inside the house, the air conditioning was running at a temperature of deep-freeze. Okuyasu had gooseflesh on gooseflesh; all that sweat from outside had cooled in a flash, leaving him clammy and uncomfortable. Beside him, Jolyne peered, wide-eyed, at the marble busts and original signed artwork (Rohan’s mostly, to the surprise of absolutely no one), and glass jars of clotting black ink; if
it weren’t for the way he had one hand locked around one of her own, keeping her on a short tether, her sticky little fingers would have been everywhere and on everything. He had to keep switching up his hands, holding onto Jolyne with one and wiping the other on his shorts when it got too damp.

In the time it took for them to walk upstairs, Rohan had gotten hold of another pencil. He was back at his sketching when they found him. In the background, Seiko Matsuda continued to wail away over the synth piano track.

“On the desk,” he said without lifting his eyes. “Take a look.”

There was a newspaper copy on the desk. When Josuke picked it up, his eyes were immediately drawn to the headline: ‘BODY DUMPED IN KAME SQUARE FOUNTAIN’. The story continued on in small print below, arranged into neat digestible columns, but he was distracted from reading further by the image to the left of the article. A patch of sidewalk and people standing around it, official in starched uniforms and severe, practical expressions, all washed out in the green-grey color that belonged to neither dusk nor dawn, and the world beyond the patch of sidewalk and behind the group of people receding into black, except for the blurred notations of individual lights – white for the streetlights, red for the emergency vehicles. There was a tarp in the bottom center of the image, bright blue and filled out with form and dimension to suggest the shape of something beneath. Dark spots splattered the sidewalk, wet patches that might have been water or blood or any number of things in the ambiguous light; Josuke wondered if the ambiguity was intentional.

Okuyasu was still holding onto Jolyne’s hand, but he let his grip slide as he ambled to the desk to peer over Josuke’s shoulder. He got only a glimpse of the headline before Josuke folded the paper shut and tucked it under his arm.

“It’s just about this morning. That kid.”

“I wanna read it,” Okuyasu insisted.

They stared down one another. Josuke searched Okuyasu’s eyes for any trace of reluctance, any sign that he was just waiting for Josuke to stand his ground and make things easier on the both of them. But there was nothing but resolution in his eyes, and there wasn’t a wall on earth that could stand in the way of Okuyasu Nijimura.

When Josuke handed over the paper, Okuyasu went pale – his eyes, too, had been drawn to the picture first. But then the moment passed, and his eyes were moving over the page, left to right in short movements that mimicked the width of the columns. Okuyasu rubbed his chin as he read, his mouth soundlessly moving around the shapes of the words.

“So you already knew about the murder,” Rohan remarked. A frown ghosted over his forehead; he flipped his pencil over and smudged out something on the page with the eraser end.

“Dammit… how’d they print the story so fast? That was just last night!”

Rohan hummed, brushing away the eraser dust with the back of his hand. “The broadsheets and bigger tabloids all run on a tight schedule. You fire up the press by midnight, get the papers on the trucks, drive those trucks to the distribution points, get local pickups to collect their stacks at the distribution points, and have the stacks dropped off to carriers to be stuffed with inserts and delivered to readers’ doors by five AM. But a local tabloid with only a few thousand readers and a late-morning delivery schedule gives you more flexibility. You get your papers printed at midnight, same as everyone else – but say a huge local story comes down at two AM when the press is still hot. It’s not a big deal to print off a new version of the front page, throw it in with the deliveries to get swapped out by the same guy stuffing flyers in your newspaper. They’ve even got templates for last
minute stories like that."

“Templates?”

“Pre-written, generic articles for common new stories. All the writers have to do is swap out the name, age, date. Add one or two gritty details. It’s like a journalist’s version of murder by number.”

He uttered this last sentence with a smirk that made Josuke wonder how long he’d been dying to use that line. Though – he supposed the explanation made sense. The article had said, in no specific order, that a body had been found in the Kame Square fountain around one AM, that the body belonged to an eight year old girl whose name had not been released, that foul play was suspected, that an investigation was underway, that traffic delays were expected in the morning. Nothing he didn’t already know, except that the girl had been found with several puncture wounds, and her jumper soaked in blood. One or two gritty details – just like Rohan had said.

All this conversation and the gloomy atmosphere that had settled over the room were lost on Jolyne. She wandered over to the window seat, rising onto her tiptoes to peer at the sketchbook in Rohan’s lap. And Rohan, out of the corner of his eye, started watching her back. She was a shy child, most times, but something about being behind a sketchbook exempted him from that. It is easier to overlook the humanity of a person when they are working. This is especially true of artists. What Jolyne saw, what most people saw, was a pair of hands, attached to nothing, thinking and feeling nothing, creating something that was meant for the sole purpose of being looked at. And so, she looked.

“Whatcha drawing?” Jolyne asked.

“The neighborhood,” Rohan replied, in much better English than either Josuke or Okuyasu could manage. He tilted the sketchbook toward her, only slightly – just enough to make the shift look accidental, just enough to give her a better view of the immaculately rendered drawing of the street. “It’s just a sketch, really. A doodle.” He’d spent the past six hours working on it.

“There’s no people in it.”

“You’re right.”

“Are you gonna put people in it?”

“No.”

“What about animals?”

“No.”

“Oh,” muttered Jolyne. In her mind, all good pictures needed a focal point: a character doing something interesting in the foreground. The extent of her artistic tastes had come from cartoons, and there was, after all, no such thing as a cartoon with just backgrounds.

Clearing his throat, Rohan snapped his sketchbook shut. “Josuke, I assume you want to tell me something about the murder this morning. Don’t you think Jolyne would be better off waiting outside?”

“She’s kinda the reason we’re here, actually,” Josuke admitted. When Rohan raised an eyebrow, he added, “Uh, Okuyasu, you wanna tell him?”

“Why do I gotta tell ‘im?”
“Hey man, you’re the one who called me.”

Even Jolyne was watching Okuyasu now, her eyes all over his face, reading every expression the same way a linguist might read the Rosetta Stone: looking for patterns, correlations between certain words and shifts in the muscles of his face. Okuyasu looked at his feet, at the paintings on the wall, anywhere but the three other faces of the room; he didn’t like being read, and he liked being the center of attention even less.

“Whatdya want me to say?” he mumbled.

“You could start with the call from Koichi,” Josuke suggested. “He rung me up the night we went out and had a talk with Daisuke.”

“The dead kid?” Rohan asked.

“Didn’t Koichi tell you? So we went out to find the guy after meeting up at the ice cream parlor, right…”

And so Josuke carried on, explaining everything from meeting Daisuke to Jotaro and Jolyne’s visit to the phone call to the murder to the current predicament with the arrow. All told, Okuyasu spoke barely enough to fill the length of a pause – not that he minded. He dropped out of the conversation altogether eventually, content to listen from familiar comfort of Josuke’s shadow.

“So let me get this straight,” Rohan began. “You want me to use my stand to steal a kid’s jewelry, because you two are too spineless to do it yourselves.”

Josuke shifted his weight from one leg to the other, jutting out his lower lip as he tried to think up a plausible justification. “It’s not like you’d be taking it from her by force or anything.”

“No, you’re right. I’d just be altering her reality in order to brainwash her into doing my bidding. My mistake.”

“Listen asshole – .”

“You’re adults, aren’t you?” Rohan paused to frown. “Almost adults. Adult-er than a four year old, anyway. Somewhat. The point is: I’m sure you can figure out another way.”

“We already tried bribing her,” Okuyasu offered.

Rohan clucked his tongue. “Well, damn. There goes my idea. What did you bribe her with?”

“Gum.”

“Caffeine gum,” Josuke amended.

Rohan made an expression that looked like his face was attempting to pull itself in two different directions at once. “I used to chew the stuff when I first got started out. Late nights, deadlines, all that. It’s not bad as a palate cleanser, but that’s about it.”

Abandoning his sketchbook by the window seat, Rohan stood, stretching out his spine to its full length until he felt a pop in his vertebra, and the followed with his hands, holding his fingers out and rotating his wrists until they gave a satisfying crack. He’d spent the past several hours hunched like a gargoyle in the windowsill with his eyes squinting into the bright, clean morning sunlight. The transition from stone back into flesh always took a few minutes.
“I’ll make this simple for you,” Rohan said, rolling his head to one side to work out a crick in his neck. “Watch and learn.”

He slipped over to his desk, grabbing something from the top drawer and slipping it into his shirt pocket.

When he turned to Jolyne, she dropped her gaze and retreated further behind Okuyasu’s leg. Without his work in front of him, Rohan was just another adult. But Rohan Kishibe was not one to surrender at the first sign of defeat. He smiled wide for her, as he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a novelty pen shaped like a pink flamingo with a hooked beak.

“Hey,” Rohan said. He twirled the pen around his finger by the crook of the flamingo’s beak, capturing Jolyne’s attention so that she didn’t notice him draw closer until he was kneeling at her feet. “Have you ever seen a real mangaka at work?”

Despite his less-than-stellar history of interacting with kids, Rohan was generally amenable to children, when they weren’t trying to challenge him for superiority. They were so easy to awe, so eager to devour up any story they could get their hands on – unlike his grown-up audience, who received everything he gave them armed with cynicism, who demanded a bigger slice out of him with every issue.

“What’s a mangaka?” Jolyne asked. Her eyes circled round and round, following the motion of the pen.

“A comic artist, of a sort.”

“Like Disney!” Okuyasu interjected. He’d managed to follow along with the conversation, but only just.

For a moment, Jolyne lifted her gaze from the pen to inspect Rohan’s face. “Do you draw Spiderman?” she asked, as she made and discarded comparisons between Rohan and the handful of famous artists she could recognize on sight. She concluded that he was not Walt Disney, Stan Lee, or any one of the Ninja Turtles.

“No; I draw hard-hitting psychological horror stories,” Rohan said. “Noire crime re-invented for post-modern tastes.”

He flipped the pen one last time before catching it mid-air.

“I’ll tell you what,” he continued, inserting artificial delay into his speech in order to sound like he was taking his time thinking things over. “How about you leave your amulet with these Neanderthals while I gave you the grand tour of my studio? I could show you where I work. You could have a peak at some of my original pieces famous the world over.” Holding up his hands, he framed Jolyne in a rectangle between his thumbs and pointer fingers. “Who knows? Maybe I, Kishibe Rohan, will even give you the honour of being my next subject.”

“Just drawing, right?” Josuke asked. He didn’t even need to alter the tone of his voice – one look between him and Rohan was enough to convey the threat.

Rohan smirked. “Of course. I prefer to do all my observation firsthand these days. You can’t learn everything by reading about it in a book, after all.”

To Jolyne, he held out the pen, flamingo end pointed toward her. “What do you say? You’re not going to find this kind of offer at Disney World, I can tell you that much.”
The anticipation practically oozed from Rohan as Jolyne reached out and took the pen, so much so that Josuke realized that somewhere along the line, Rohan’s act had stopped being about doing him and Okuyasu a favour.

Jolyne turned the pen over in her hands, running a finger along the crook of its beak. A grin spread across her lips.

“Nah,” she said, before pocketing the pen.

Rohan had the look on his face of someone waiting to hear a punchline. Maybe Josuke felt sort of sorry for him, but for the most part, he’d used up his patience and pity for the day.

“Look,” he said, “This is a matter of life or death here. You gonna book her or not?”

Slowly, Rohan stood up and brushed off the knees of his pants. “Fine, Higashikata. We’ll do it your way.”

In a swirl of golden light, Heaven’s Door appeared. It hovered before Jolyne, one finger poised before her forehead.

And Jolyne, like the human actors from the commercial that morning, peered up at what to her should have been an empty space. “Hey, you’re the guy!” she exclaimed “From the commercial!”

Heaven’s Door recoiled with its user before fading altogether.

“Man, I didn’t know she was a stand user,” said Okuyasu.

“She’s not,” said Josuke. “I mean, I didn’t think she was.”

“What commercial?”

They almost didn’t hear Rohan’s question. His voice was no louder than a whisper. Rohan’s arms were boneless at his sides, and from one look at the expression on his face, Josuke knew he knew exactly what commercial they were talking about.

“Sorry,” was all Josuke could offer.

“They told me it was only going to be on the early morning slot. No one was going to see it.”

“We were up pretty early,” Okuyasu agreed.

Rohan balled his fists up, took a deep breath. Picture a balloon, the shrink had told him. Try to fill it up so it’s nice and round and then let the air out, slowly. He must have been doing a good job, because the sound that came out of his mouth sounded an awful lot like helium being let out of a balloon.

He felt a tug on his pant leg.

“Mister? Where did Pink Dark Boy Go? Make him come back!”

Jolyne was pouting at him, on the verge of calling out crocodile tears. Rohan felt jealousy rise up, like bile in his throat, toward his stand. But it was a familiar feeling, and he mastered it quickly. The way he saw it, creating characters that people loved more than you was a dilemma only great writers faced.

Besides: he had, he supposed, a civic duty to fulfill.
That didn’t stop him from feeling like he had a stone lodged between his ribs when he said: “How about we make a deal?”

***

The amulet glowed brighter outside in the sunlight than it had in the dingy, dirty light inside the Nijimura house. When Josuke fiddled with it, he discovered it opened up like a locket; there was a shard of the arrowhead inside, silver and hairline thin and sharp as any razor.

“You think Rohan’s gonna be alright with the kid?” Okuyasu asked.

“Sure,” Josuke answered.

He already sounded far-off. He was somewhere miles away, in the woods or by the cliffs maybe, if Okuyasu had to guess. Or maybe he was somewhere in the present, a few blocks down chasing up a plan that would work, that had to work.

Josuke snapped the amulet closed.

“Let’s go,” he said, the focus returning to his voice. “We’re going to need to make a stop at the bank.”

Chapter End Notes

I would like to apologize not only to God but also to Francis Ford Coppola.
Josuke took out fifteen-thousand yen at the bank. Fifteen one-thousand yen bills that Josuke counted out one by one, pausing to lick his thumb halfway through the stack. The paper was smooth and pearly to the touch – fresh off the press, never circulated money. Fifteen thousand yen didn’t seem like much when it was just a number on his bank statement, but sitting in his wallet that same amount felt impossibly heavy. He couldn’t shake off the feeling that because he knew the money was there, so did everyone else he passed in the streets.

By then, a pale grey cloud cover had crept up on the horizon. The blue sky above shrunk smaller and smaller until the whole town was covered in mute slate shade. The air was thick and stewing, pungent with the smell of ozone. Josuke wondered if a storm was coming – he kept his eyes on the sky as they walked, expecting to feel raindrops hit his face at any moment.

“Thought you said you weren’t gonna bribe no one with money,” Okuyasu mumbled. He’d watched as the teller handed Josuke the money – or at the very least he’d been there, looking away as money changed hands. He had, as many people accustomed to lack of money do, a tendency to feel flustered – embarrassed, even – by the presence of cash.

“I said I wasn’t going to bribe a kid with money,” Josuke informed him. He couldn’t stop sliding his hand into his pocket every minute or so, just to check that his wallet was still there. “It’s different with Yuya.”

“Fungami? What’s he got to do with anything?”

“We got the arrow, right? So all we gotta do is find the killer. And for that, we’re gonna need Highway Star.”

Okuyasu grunted and nodded, pretending this bit of information made perfect sense. He felt like Josuke was already several paces ahead of him; keeping up was a struggle. Everything he knew about Yuya came second-hand through either Josuke or Koichi, and even then the best to his knowledge was a collection of contrary assertions. Yuya was in the hospital because of a motorcycle
accident. Yuya was in the hospital because Josuke put him there. Yuya got out of the hospital because Josuke healed him. Yuya was an asshole. Yuya was a pretty alright guy.

When it came to people, Okuyasu was a quick judge of character. He chose his friends on gut feelings. For someone like him, gut feelings were usually the best thing he had to go on: people could forge words and rig actions, but instinct was hard to fool, and it took a lot of effort (and years, he’d learned) to convince someone that their feelings were imagined. But when it came to Yuya, Okuyasu wasn’t sure what to make of the guy – hadn’t shared oxygen with him long enough to make any solid call.

“I see. So – what? You think Highway Star can sniff ‘im out?”

“Here’s hoping. It’s like that one guy said, you know.”

“What guy?”

“You know. That one famous detective.”

Okuyasu cast a bucket down the well of his working knowledge of detective and forensic science. It hit bottom with a hollow, dusty sound. “…Sherlock Holmes?” he tried.

“What? No, like a real detective. Anyway – whatever his name was – he said – what was it? – that whatever a criminal leaves at a crime scene, he takes with him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The question had never occurred to Josuke before. He couldn’t remember where he’d even heard the adage, or who’d said it, but like most adages, it had a terseness to it that was easily confused with self-evident truth. After all: brevity doth a smaller target make.

“It’s like… you know,” Josuke said. “Fingerprints, for example. The guy leaves his fingerprints at the crime scene, but he’s still got his fingers on him when he leaves, right? Same with scents.”

Okuyasu bobbed his head. “Makes sense to me.”

“Thanks.”

“So, what about Yuya? Fifteen thou’, man… I don’t know. I mean, it’s a lotta money, but it’s not, you know, a lotta money.”

Josuke paused mid-step and turned, sidewalk scraping against the rubber soles of his sandals. “Jesus, dude, what do you think this is? This ain’t like some mafia shit. Besides, I bet Yuya will take what he can get. You know how expensive it is just to get a decent meal around here, and the guy’s got three girlfriends.”

Four, if you counted the motorbike.

Okuyasu had never given the financial aspect of relationships much thought. As far as he’d considered the matter – or had allowed himself to consider the matter – being in a relationship meant you got to call someone your boyfriend or girlfriend, and occasionally smooch and do other fun things (believe us, we’d rather not get into the specifics). The actual dating portion of dating was not something he’d ever considered, nor all the pomp and circumstance and expectation and money that went along with it. He felt his stomach begin to cramp up.

“Yeah,” said Okuyasu, mouth somehow dry despite the humidity. “Lucky guy.”
Since leaving the bank, Josuke hadn’t dropped a single hint about where they were going. Okuyasu’s mind had drifted off, lulled by the momentum of walking and conversation, but he began to pay attention to his surroundings again when he noticed they were leaving the downtown area of Morioh – if it could even be called as much – behind.

“What’re we doing, anyway?” Okuyasu asked.

“Dude. I just told you.”

“I mean what’re we doin’ here, in particular.”

He didn’t gesture, but only because there was no need to do so. Gone and out of sight were the houses and shops of Morioh. At their backs rose the Nankai memorial stadium, and before them squatted Morioh’s few chain box stores, long and flat and ugly and modern. Beyond that: the docks and warehouses. It was all parking lot as far as the eye could see.

Josuke sniffed and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “So, I got a theory.”

“Alright.”

“Yuya’s in a biker gang, some real *bosozoku* types, but the guy’s in high school so you figure he lives with his ‘rents and they probably aren’t too keen on the whole thing. ‘Specially after the accident. Here I am thinking: if I was a guy like that and I wanted to stash my bike, but home was out of the picture, where would I go? It’d have to be somewhere with enough space. Lots of people around, so no one would be tempted to jack your ride, but lots of cars too so no one would notice a motorbike parked there for days at a time.”


“Alright. But you only get one.” Josuke’s cheeks twitched with the effort not to smile. “We’re here.”

Without being conscious of it – without even realizing that there was a name for what he was doing – Josuke Higashikata was *flirting*. Of course: the only person more oblivious to this behaviour than Josuke, was Okuyasu.

“Can’t picture us findin’ Yuya in a place like this,” he remarked.

They were standing out front of a chain department store, one of the big generic-brand ones with red and yellow price tags and twenty-lane checkouts. In the overcast weather, the building’s corrugated metal siding looked dull and flat. The department store’s logo, in giant red neon letters each the size of a car, glowed with a cold, impersonal light. There was a dark spot in the midst of the logo where the ‘U’ had burnt out, so that the remaining letters read: ‘J NES’.

“I don’t know about Yuya,” Josuke said, “but it wouldn’t surprise me if we found his bike here.”

Josuke didn’t lead the way inside the store, as Okuyasu had expected. Instead, they wandered around back to the parking lot. It was only half-full. The morning rush had long siphoned off, and the after-work crowd was still a long ways coming. Noon had only just struck and the sky was already the blue-dark of post-sunset before night settles in. The lights had all come on in the parking lot, flickering and buzzing as if the streetlamps, too, were affected by the impending electrical discharge in the air.

They split up, Josuke taking one side of the parking lot and Okuyasu the other. Look for a motorcycle, Josuke said. Something tricked-out. But after methodically walking up and down half the airstrip-sized parking lot, the closest thing Okuyasu had come across to a *bosozoku* bike was a
‘73 Yamaha Zippy moped.

“Find anything?” Josuke asked, when they met again in the middle.

“Nah,” said Okuyasu. Though moped’s duct tape seats and rubber band handle grips were technically a form of vehicular modification, he didn’t think that was the kind of ‘tricked out’ Josuke had in mind.

“Same. Shit. Guess it’s over to plan B: going through the phone book.”

Looking through the phone book in the first place would have been the easier course of action – and the fastest, too. Even Josuke knew that. At the time, he’d discarded the idea under the excuse that most people weren’t even listed in the phone book. Standing in that parking lot, with a feeling he couldn’t yet formulate into words twisting and boring its hooks into his chest, he understood the real reason he’d dragged Okuyasu all the way to this part of town: because cracking open a phone book just wasn’t clever.

Then Okuyasu put a hand on his arm, a warm sun-chapped hand like soft old leather, and he said: “What’s that over there?”

He was pointing to the far end of the parking lot, on the side Josuke had searched. One of the streetlights had burnt out, which he supposed was how he’d missed the blue tarp beneath it that covered something roughly the size of a motorcycle, but all the wrong shape.

Josuke stared at the tarp, and for a moment a chill of recognition shot like a lightning bolt down his back; but then the moment passed.

“Let’s go,” he said.

As they approached the covered bike, they heard a sound coming from beneath the tarp: a mechanical, winding series of clicks. To Okuyasu, it sounded like a torque wrench. He exchanged a look with Josuke, who gave a silent nod. Without a word, they walked around to the other side of the motorcycle. There, a pair of shoes was sticking out from under the tarp, one toe tapping an unheard melody into the air while a muffled voice in an off-key baritone crooned:

“Well, my hands are shaky and my knees are weak. I can't seem to stand on my own two feet. Who do you think of when you have such luck? I'm in love – I'm all shook up!”

Josuke cleared his throat. “Yuya?”

When the singing continued, Josuke repeated the name, louder this time. The wagging feet stopped, and so did the singing. There was a ripple of disturbance across the surface of the tarp. Josuke and Okuyasu stood out of the way as a pair of legs wiggled out, followed by a torso, arms, and a head. Eventually, the whole man stood fully assembled before them.

“You scared the fuckin’ shit out of me,” Yuya growled. He took a rag out from his pocket, unfurling it with a snap before dabbing his forehead with it. In place of his school uniform, he wore an old washed-out pair of jeans and a t-shirt that was more holes than it was shirt. He was up to the elbows in motor oil stains, and there was an impossible black smudge on his forehead.

“Hey, man, it’s not like I coulda knocked,” Josuke protested.

Yuya wrung the rag through his hands, leaving greasy motor oil streaks behind. From the looks of it, the rag had been used and washed numerous times before – it was already covered in grease stains, some more faded than others.
“How’d you even find me?”

“The shoes are a bit of a giveaway.”

Okuyasu stole a second glance at Yuya’s feet: he was wearing his school loafers, only they’d been dip-dyed indigo blue, and studded at the heels with silver stars. He wondered if the shoes were a natural extension of the motorcycle. That if you started taking apart and rebuilding one thing, you wouldn’t be happy with anything else unless you left your own mark on it too.

Yuya, too, did a quick double-take of his shoes – even though they were the same shoes he’d been wearing all year, even though he distinctly remembered putting them on that morning. Then he threw his rag over the back of his shoulder and said to Josuke:

“I’m kind of in the middle of something here.”

“That your bike there under the tarp?” Okuyasu asked before Josuke could retort.

The taught, pinched expression on Yuya’s face loosened up. Grinning, he laid one hand on top of the tarp. “Hell yeah, this here’s my baby girl.”

“Why do you have a tarp over it?” Josuke demanded.

“It’s calling for rain later. Can’t have her getting rusty on me.”

“Well it’s not raining now.”

“Come on, I wanna see,” said Okuyasu, who’d never been one to appreciate the art of suspense.

But Yuya only placed himself firmly between Okuyasu and the tarp.

“I’ve got her battery cover off and her air filter out – she might as well be naked under there. Have a little respect.”

“I’m sure the motorcycle cares,” said Josuke. “It’s not like we’re here to see it anyway.”

“Whatever it is you’re here for – Yuya Fungami is back on top of his game. You’ve got nothing to offer.”

“Unless I beat the shit outta you again.”

There was a humorless calm to Josuke’s voice as he said this. Okuyasu had always been jealous of that: unless his hair was somehow involved, Josuke Higashikata had a firm handle on his anger. He got pissed, he was a master at it, but he never lost his cool. Rage, for Josuke, was something to be channeled, wielded as a deterrent or a threat and vented in a controlled outpouring, and turned off again at will. Not like Okuyasu. He didn’t get mad nearly as much as Josuke, but when he did, it was a slippery thing and trying to hold onto it only made him lose his grip all the quicker. In the moment, he couldn’t focus on anything outside of his own head, couldn’t think about how he’d react later, when he was no longer raw and on edge.

Yuya’s whole body flinched at the phantom memory of bygone broken bones and stitches. “Hey, relax. I was only joking. What’s up?”

“You hear about this morning?” Josuke asked. “They found some kid dead at the square. Murdered.”

For a moment, Yuya reached up like he was going to grab something – the rag, maybe – before dropping his hand back down to his side. “The fuck’s that gotta do with me?”
“We need your help. We need to catch the guy who did it, and we need to do it before the trail goes cold.”

“Isn’t that what the cops get paid to do?”

“He ain’t no regular killer,” Okuyasu interjected. “They guy – he’s got – killer ghosts or something he’s working with.”

“There’s been a bunch of murders over the past while we think might all be related,” explained Josuke. “Seems there’s been some kinda entity, like a stand, that’s been convincing freak shows to go around killing people.”

He expected an explanation like that was bound to raise a few questions, but Yuya only glanced over his shoulder before turning back to the pair of them and saying: “Whatever it is, count me out.”

“Yeah? Then how ‘bout we make a trade.”

From his pocket, Josuke pulled out his wallet. Yuya watched, his eyes growing rounder by the second, as Josuke thumbed through the fifteen one-thousand yen bills and counted the total under his breath.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“It’s simple. You come with us to the spot where the body got dumped, sniff the place out, and I treat you and your girls to a nice dinner.”

“No way.”

The response was immediate. No sign of hesitation or deliberation. Josuke was taken off guard – the way Yuya had looked at the money, he was sure it was a sealed deal.

“The fuck’s your problem?” Okuyasu erupted. He had not realized, until that moment, the little worm of anger that had been burrowing its way inside him. And now it was everywhere, crawling under every inch of his skin. People were dead, and here was this asshole. Probably cared more about his bike and his clown shoes.

Josuke placed a hand on his shoulder, anchoring him, and suddenly the rage didn’t feel so overwhelming anymore.

“Don’t you have some kind of cred to keep up?” Josuke asked Yuya. “It’d look bad if you were scared off by some kiddie killer.”

A touch of color crept into Yuya’s face. Okuyasu could see his jaw tighten where he clenched his teeth together.

“Look, I can’t help you, alright?”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Josuke asked.

“I can’t.”

Josuke folded his arms. “Let’s have it.”

“I just can’t do it. There’s no point. All those people walking through the square – if the scent was there, I sure as hell won’t be able to pick it up.”
“Josuke said you’re like a bloodhound or somethin’,” said Okuyasu.

“Yeah, well, this bloodhound’s got his limits.”

“You sure changed your tune,” Josuke remarked.

“Just drop it alright?”

“Only if you tell us the real reason you can’t do it.”

This time, when Yuya glanced over his shoulder, he touched his chin – two fingers lightly resting on the ‘H’ tattooed there. Like most fear-tells, it was the subconscious by-product of a conscious process. He had a habit of masking the fear by trying to think his way out of situations. People tended to trust you more if you could keep a cool head when things got hot. That was why people trusted Josuke – why Yuya trusted Josuke. Only in Yuya’s case, he could never manage more than the semblance. A rambling string of deductive reasoning thrown to the wind at a moment’s panic. A thoughtful touch on the chin.

“It’s the cops, alright?” Yuya said. “They got me pinned. Can’t lift a goddamn finger.”

“Thought that was how you guys operated,” said Okuyasu. “You know – flying under the radar, all that shit.”

“That’s different.” To Josuke, Yuya raised his eyes – a supplicant giving his plea. “Last night, me and the gang were out riding – just cruising, making the bikes sing. We happened to be riding rings around Kame square – it’s fun, you know? Get up to speed and you get real dizzy. But I guess that was just before the body got dumped. Or maybe just after – it’s not like we were paying attention to the fucking fountain.”

Josuke smoothed a hand over his hair. A few strands were in the process of making a break for it amid all the humidity. “And someone saw you, right?”

Yuya bobbed his head. “The police must have fuckin’ jizzed themselves when they found out. They rounded us all up in a nice row this morning, made us recite our ABCs and all that bullshit.”

“They think you guys did it?” asked Okuyasu.

“They didn’t come right out and say it. They were all tight-lipped when they weren’t asking questions. That’s how they operate. Keep you in the dark until they’ve got enough to press charges. Tell you that you’re not under arrest so they don’t gotta read you your rights, pretend like you can leave any time when you both know it’ll come back and bite you up the ass if you do.” A grin tugged at the corners of Yuya’s mouth, despite the sheen of cold sweat to his skin, pooling into little beads in the cleft above his lips. “And I’m like the handsome leader, y’know? So they drilled me hard. They must have had me in that room for over an hour. There’s no way I can be seen poking around Kame Square for the next while.”

“What about the kid?” Josuke asked.

“Forget it. It’s not my problem.”

When Okuyasu uncurled his fists and grabbed hold of the front of Yuya’s shirt, there were red marks on the inside of his palms – crescent-shaped, nearly deep enough to draw blood. “How ‘bout I make it your problem?” he snapped.

“Okuyasu.”
There was all the firmness in Josuke’s voice of an unspoken command. In the heat of embarrassment, all that vitriol evaporated from Okuyasu’s blood. He was left with his hands awkwardly resting on Yuya’s shoulders, ashamed and frustrated and feeling like his own skin was too tight on him.

“You’re right. It’s not your problem,” Josuke was saying. Yuya turned his head to look at him, throat bobbing as he swallowed. “We knew there was someone going around doing this kind of shit. We should’ve done something sooner. We should’ve been looking harder. You’d think we would’ve learned last time, right?”

Last time. Okuyasu let his gaze drop, and tried to focus on a fixed point on the ground. Last time had names and faces – he’d even been there to bury one of them.

“I don’t wanna be the type of person who can hear about people getting hurt and not let it bother them ‘cause it’s not their problem. But there’s not a damn thing I can do about it on my own. My power – it’s not worth shit to that kid. I can’t bring people back. I can’t fix Morioh. That’s why I need your help.”

Yuya’s tongue darted out, licking the salt-sweat taste from his lips. He could feel the humid wind at the back of his neck, cold where it cut through the damp collar of his t-shirt.

“You’re on your own, man,” he said. “I can’t afford to get tangled up in all this.”

This time, Josuke’s hand was on Okuyasu’s shoulder before he could react. He shrugged it away, but remained where he stood, shoving his hands into his pockets as if to remove the temptation as far as possible.

“I get it,” Josuke said. “Sorry to bother you.”

“What’re we doing?” Okuyasu hissed, when they weren’t quite out of earshot. “Thought you said we needed him.”

But Josuke just kept on walking. Only once they were actually out of earshot – so that not even Okuyasu’s stage whispering could reach Yuya – he nudged him in the ribs and whispered: “Just wait.”

Okuyasu wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be waiting for. Then, just as they’d reach the other end of the parking lot, Yuya’s voice called after them: “Wait!”

They turned, and there was Yuya: halfway between them and the tarp-covered bike at the other side of the lot, chest heaving like he’d just run half a mile and not half a dozen parking spaces. For a moment, Okuyasu thought he saw Josuke’s lips curl in a grin – only to be replaced by a frown as he turned around to face down Yuya.

“What do you want?” Josuke shouted back.

Yuya didn’t answer right away. He walked the rest of the length of the parking lot, until the three of them stood toe-to-toe outside the rear entrance to the department store. People passed around them in a broad stream. Click-click-clack went the wheels of the shopping carts as they skipped over the asphalt.

“You just need me to scope out the square, right?” Yuya asked. “Pick up the guy’s scent, point you in the right direction – that’s all?”

“That was the deal.”
“Good.”

Yuya turned and began walking back toward the blue tarp at the other side of the parking lot. Okuyasu shot Josuke a look, trying to gauge his reaction, looking for any sign of reassurance before Yuya called over his shoulder: “Come on. We can take my bike.”

When the tarp came off, Josuke and Okuyasu discovered that the bike in question was a motorcycle only in the sense that it had two wheels and was powered by a motor. By all other criteria, the bike looked nothing like the motorcycles you could drive off any Honda or Kawasaki lot. It’d been painted electric purple, with chrome fenders and exhaust pipes and billeted battery covers. The motorcycle’s fairing had a dramatic convex shape like the head of a torpedo, and Yuya had it mounted high. High enough that Josuke didn’t understand, on looking at the thing, how anyone was supposed to see over it. But what he noticed first was not the fairing or the battery covers or even the color of the bike, but the seat: a white, diamond-upholstered take on the classic king-and-queen high-back seat, only in this case the high-back was over three feet tall, and the seat in question was less of a king-and-queen and more of a king-and-queen-and-queen-and-queen.

“Can you actually get four people on that thing?” Okuyasu asked dubiously.

“Sure can.” Yuya paused to give both boys a once-over. “…Gotta say though, you guys are a whole lot bigger than my girls.”

Josuke took another look at the four-seater motorcycle. Judging by the spacing of the queen-and-queen-and-queen seats, they were design to fit the type of ass that belonged to teenage girls fueled purely by rage and vitamin water.

“No fucking way I’m getting on that thing.”

Shrugging, Yuya popped his pinky finger into his ear. “What was that you said again?” he said, He twisted his pinky around, like he was digging for the memory. “You wished you could’ve done something sooner, right? Look, man – there’s nothing ‘sooner’ about walking all the fucking way to Kame Square.”

“If it’s all the same,” Okuyasu said, “mind if I take the back?”

“Dibs,” said Josuke.

“Dude, you can’t call dibs on the back!”

“Why not?”

“I jus’ asked if I could have it!”

“Exactly. You didn’t call dibs, so it’s still up for grabs.”

“Hey, you two,” Yuya cut in, “not for nothing, but I wouldn’t take the back if I was either one of you. That’s the Jackhammer.”

“The what?” Josuke asked.

“The Jackhammer – the girls only fight over that spot whenever they’re trying to show off or look tough.”

“I can take it.” He tossed his head over his shoulder, throwing a nod in okuyasu’s direction. “You up front with Yuya or in back with me?”
Okuyasu looked at Josuke like he’d just asked him to stick his hand into a bag of live scorpions. “Uh…”

“Better get up front with me,” said Yuya, as he shoved a black helmet into Okuyasu’s hands. The helmet had a skull with a big pink bow printed above the visor. When he went to put it on the inside smelt like girly shampoo – coconut and passionfruit laced with notes of hibiscus. “I don’t want the two of you assclowns putting all that drag on the rear wheel.”

“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Josuke asked.

“Just put the helmet on already.”

Josuke squawked when Yuya tried to shove a helmet over top of his head. “Easy around the hair!”

“You wanna get on my bike, then you gotta follow my rules, and my rules are: follow my rules, and safety first.”

Josuke yanked the helmet away and glared down at it. It was covered in glitter, and had the words ‘Bad Bitch’ written on it.

“Dude,” he said. “You’ve literally tried to kill me before.”

“So has half this fuckin’ town. Besides – I figure it’s good keeping you in one piece in case I ever need my beautiful face patched up again.”

“Glad to know I’m needed,” Josuke mumbled.

When Yuya flipped over the engine, he was almost glad for all those layers of polystyrene around his ears. The engine didn’t purr or rumble; it wasn’t a tame thing that gave over easy if you just handled it the right way. It was a jungle cat, a roar in the asphalt wilds, the angry buzz of a hundred wasps jacked up on gasoline and amped up to eleven. Josuke knew, the moment he heard that engine start, that there was no way Yuya’s muffler was street-legal.

Nothing about the bike was.

Yuya put his weight down on the brake and gave the throttle a few twists. The bike responded with a high, nasally hum.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s hit the road.”

***

There were still children at the playground when he lead Jotaro around the back of the school – kids with their parents, mostly; kids who’d been brought there so they’d wear themselves down, fall asleep easy with their dirty knees leaving streaks on the sheets and their palms burning from holding onto the monkey bars. By then, it was nearly seven o’clock. The sky was violet and dusty rose, criss-crossed by the pale scars of vapor trails. Josuke could hear the swing set squeak and whine, squeak and whine in alternating succession as rusted iron pivots made the swings go up and down, up and down.

Jotaro followed along the perimeter of the fence and Josuke trailed after, dragging his hand along the chain link and listening to the metallic rattle of the wire.

“Where’d you hear it?” Jotaro asked. “Around here?”
“Yeah.”

In front of him, Jotaro stopped. He turned, but with the sun to his back, Josuke could only see him in silhouette. There was just the faint suggestion of the whites of his eyes – enough that Josuke could tell he was being looked at. Even without seeing the expression on Jotaro’s face, however, he could still feel the intensity of his gaze in the negative space between the whites of Jotaro’s eyes. It was the unsettling gaze of a statue or a painting: you felt you were being watched, but only in an incidental, dispassionate sense.

“…A bit further ahead, actually,” Josuke amended. He felt like he was carrying a weight at the back of his throat; as he spoke, it sank further into his esophagus.

This answer seemed to satisfy Jotaro. He pulled a pen light out from his pocket and depressed the switch. As they walked along the fence, he shone the pen light through it, casting a tangle of shadows on the other side.

The other side of the fence looked as though it belong to somewhere else. Some other time, some other place. On their side of the fence was sunset and dust and trampled dead grass and the bright primary colors of the playground; on the other side was woods and shadows and night, low and still beneath the blackout tangle of branches where it huddled prematurely in wait. When the sun set and the children with their parents left, night would creep out from the woods and through the chain link fence, and ooze into the playground and breathe its cold damp breath on the hot tin slide.

“What’d it sound like?” Jotaro asked, as he weaved his head from side to side, peering through the fence.

“Bad.”

The pen light shut off with a click. Jotaro tucked it back into his pocket before crouching down in front of Josuke.

“A voice can’t be ‘bad’, Josuke,” he explained. “It can be loud. It can be soft or deep. It can even be dry, husky, or nasally. But it can’t be ‘bad’. So try again. Did it sound like someone you know?”

“No…”

Josuke gnawed on his lip. He couldn’t look Jotaro in the eyes, so he stared down at the ground instead. There was a bald patch of sand in the grass at his feet; hundreds of bulbous, black-bodied ants scurried industriously around it, in the process of dragging a jewel-armored beetle back to their nest. One ant crawled over Josuke’s shoe, its antennae waving blindly from side to side. He couldn’t bring himself to shake it off.

“Then what’d it sound like?”

“He sounded mean,” Josuke said. When the hard line of Jotaro’s mouth didn’t change, he added: “Nasally, I guess.”

He wasn’t sure what the word meant; he read it back to Jotaro with the same inconsequential feeling of an echo.

An echo seemed to be all Jotaro wanted. He took the penlight out again, holding it between his teeth as he grabbed hold of the fence and swung his legs over the top. Then fence rattled under his weight – and then Jotaro was on the other side, flashlight sweeping the ground beneath his feet. Josuke edged closer to the fence, pressing his face against it, fingers curling around the chain links.
“You’re not gonna go far, are you?” he asked.

“No, Jotaro said, but he continued to edge his way further into the woods regardless.

Jotaro went slow, but his body was big and clumsy and not built to move quietly in tight spaces. Even when he’d disappeared from sight, Josuke could still hear him: the dried leaves making a hushing sound underfoot, the low branches snapping as he pushed his weight through them.

“I don’t think you’re gonna find anything,” Josuke called out. “I didn’t even see ‘im.”

“Wherever someone goes, they leave some form of witness behind,” Jotaro said from somewhere within the trees.

The penlight beam was pointed in Josuke’s face. He squinted and held up an arm to shield his eyes, the fence’s shadow falling in criss-cross patterns on his skin.

“Fingerprints, footprints,” Jotaro’s voice continued from the other side of the light, “broken glass, scratched paint, DNA evidence – it’s there if you look for it. And they always take something with them, too. Mud. Fibers from the scene. The material doesn’t get confused or change its story. You just need to find it.”

“I was there,” Josuke insisted.

He peeked out from behind his arm, trying to get a glimpse of Jotaro, but there was only the light in his eyes: blinding, all-encompassing.

“Human witness is subjective,” Jotaro continued. He spoke in a flat, clipped voice: like he was repeating something he’d read or heard. “In situations of heightened stress, the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus shut down. Those are the parts of your brain responsible for processing what’s happening and for turning short term memories into long term ones. What you end up with is a fragmentary recollection.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The burning light on the inside of his eyelids went out. When he opened his eyes, there was nothing but night under the cover of the woods again. Jotaro sank down beside him, his back resting against the fence.

“It means the short end of the stick. Remembering the stuff that doesn’t matter, and none of the stuff that does.”

Ants scurried in frenetic directions over Jotaro’s legs, but he didn’t seem to notice. He was too busy staring at the ant hill, where the ants and the beetle were struggling together in the sand, the beetle’s long, barbed legs twitching in the air in a last-ditch effort to get away. Without taking his eyes off the ants, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette and his zippo.

There was no one left on the playground. The parents and their kids had all gone home. A wind blew and picked up the empty swings; Josuke could hear the hollow squeak of the pivots and the rattle of chains from across the field. He thought it was a lonely sound. He imagined the swings rocking back and forth by themselves in the dead of night with no around to play in them.

When Jotaro was through with his cigarette, he buried the butt in the ant hill. It smoldered for a moment, a burning red mote in the darkness at their feet, until Jotaro gave the hill a kick and sparks and sand rained across the grass.
Josuke knew better than to ask what he’d found.

***

The Jackhammer, Josuke discovered, did not refer to the back seat of Yuya’s motorcycle, but to the person unfortunate enough to be stuck in it. With the seat being just above the rear wheel, every bump, ever dip, every pebble in the road went straight to his ass. There wasn’t a bone in his body that wasn’t jostled. By the end of the short drive to Kame Square, he felt like he’d ground a few millimetres off his teeth and sabotaged any and all chances of passing on his genes.

Thankfully – it was midafternoon by then, and that in combination with the threat of rain had all but emptied the square of pedestrians. The only person around to witness Josuke Higashikata duck-step his way between the parked bike and the fountain was a uniformed police officer, but even then said officer was too busy speaking to someone over his two-way radio to notice.

“You think this is gonna work?” Okuyasu asked. “I dunno if there’d still be any, like, DNA or whatever around.”

“Keep it down,” Yuya hissed. He was sitting at the fountain’s edge, pressing a fist to his lips as his eyes scanned the concrete at his feet. “You want me to do this, you can’t act like we’re fuckin’ snooping around or anything, got that?”

Josuke kicked a pebble across the sidewalk. The ground was still gritty underfoot with the leftover sand that’d been laid down. At first glance, there was no sign there’d ever been blood on the pavement in the first place, but he noticed, when he’d looked long enough, that there were dark patches in the receded cracks and crevices of the sidewalk, places where the blood had gotten down into the teeth of the concrete dried up there.

“What’s the verdict?” he asked.

Closing his eyes, Yuya took a deep breath. His chest swelled, like he was taking all the scents of the square into his lungs. When he opened his eyes again, there was a smirk on his lips.

“You two are damn lucky.”

“Why’s that?”

“They didn’t turn the fountain on this morning.”

“They probably wanted to drain it out and clean it up first,” Okuyasu said. “Since it had a corpse floatin’ in it.”

Yuya held up a finger. “You know how in movies, when the crook’s on the run they always make for the river?”

“Yeah,” said Josuke, “they head upstream to throw off the bloodhounds. What about it?”

“Just making conversation. Anyway: the thing about water is it doesn’t actually mask scents. In fact, you’re more likely to have a smell linger in stagnant water than you are on dry ground.”

For a split second, a twin image appeared over Yuya’s shoulder, as translucent and indistinct as a long exposure. Yuya paid no notice; as Highway Star’s footprints disappeared down the street, he kept his eyes on the other side of the square, where the cop had moved on to chatting up the owner of a newsstand.
Josuke cleared his throat. “So, you’re saying a bloodhound could pick up a crook’s scent from
the fountain?”

“Not a crook, no; but if a body had been soaking in it for a good hour or so, he sure as hell could
sniff it out.”

Okuyasu glanced between the two of them. “What the fuck are you guys talking about?”

With the way Josuke had spoken about Yuya – the smug satisfaction he’d worn like a badge when
he bragged about the way he’d put the bastard back in the hospital again – Okuyasu had assumed
that he and Josuke were about as different as two people could get. But when they both turned and
looked at him like he’d just given away the punchline of a joke, he realized that he’d gotten it all
backward.

On the other side of the street, the cop had finished up with his business at the newsstand and was
looking in their direction – or at least, in the direction of the electric-purple four-seater motorcycle
that was illegally parked on the sidewalk next to the water fountain.

Yuya stood up slowly, making a show of pretending not to notice the police officer.

“How about we go for a ride?” he asked.

***

Earlier that morning – around the same time Jotaro Kujo dropped his daughter off on the Nijimura’s
front step – an ’81 beige Corona rolled up to a three-way intersection on the outskirts of Morioh. One
road lead back into town, another toward the old highway, and another still turned into a dirt road
that headed north. There were no other cars in sight that early in the morning; nonetheless, the car
came to a full idling stop at the intersection, blinker flashing, before turning down the dirt road.
Rocks crunched beneath the wheels. The car kicked up a cloud of dirt behind it, but the humidity
pulled down the dust as soon as it was air-born. Moments later, there was no trace of the car.

The road had been laid down in the early 19th century, when Morioh was still mostly farmland, and
there was still a samurai house at the top of the hill. When acre by acre the farmland was bought up
by the Japanese government after the Second World War (so as to drive up the price of rice), the
town of Morioh ceased the upkeep of the road. Maintenance fell into the hands of the few private
residents who still lived along it. The driver of the beige Corona was one of them.

His name was Sato Fujimoto. He was a working man, not elderly by any means but old enough to
have liver spots on the backs of his hands. If you were to ask him his age, he could tell you, but only
after doing the math. He’d been born in the spring of 1948; everything else was a matter of
subtraction.

The sun was rising over the mountains. As he passed by the sunflower fields, the flowers’ yellow
heads were backlight, petals blazing like tongues of flame. Sato had the window rolled down. He could
smell the damp dust, and the green scent of the sunflowers, and the strong waft of ammonia from the
car’s backseat.

His house was the last along the dirt road, a stone’s throw from the train tracks. He’d bought it for a
bargain twenty years ago, when the owner’s four-hundred acres of farmland were bought up to make
way for the planned rail line into S City, and the farm itself was forced to foreclose. When Sato
restored it, he’d tried to keep the old farmhouse’s charm intact – with the modern addition of a large
two-door garage.
Ever since he’d retired from the repair shop downtown, he’d run his own practice out of the garage. It wasn’t the kind of place people went when they wanted bells and whistles or work done for cheap. Sato’s clientele went to him for craftsmanship – the same type of people who went to a barber when they wanted a good shave.

In the garage, he changed the Corona’s plate back. Everything else had already been taken care of: the odds and ends had been scattered across various dumpsters throughout town, and he’d stopped in a gas station bathroom to clean himself up.

As he waited in the kitchen for the milk to heat up over the stove, Sato inspected his hands. The pads of his fingers were pruny and pale from wearing the latex gloves for so long. His skin looked like wet, wrinkled paper – like you could tear it with a credit card. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together and made a face, the deep lines at the corners of his mouth tightening. He never liked working with gloves, even when he was back at the garage. Aside from how clammy his skin got while he wore them, there was just something about seeing his own hands in gloves that made him feel like they were someone else’s hands. He didn’t trust them to do what he wanted. But going without wasn’t always practical.

A ripple hiccuped across the surface of the milk. He heard the plates and glasses in the cabinet begin to rattle moments before he felt the vibrations himself, traveling up through the soles of his feet until he could feel them in his chest. The kitchen filled with the deafening, muffled rumble of continuously rolling thunder. Cabinets shuddered and cupboard drawers banged, and the pot rattled on the burner. He laid a hand on the countertop, feeling the resonance of thousands of pounds of steel screaming by the house at three-hundred kilometres an hour – and then, the train passed on.

The countertop went still beneath his hand. He could hearing the ticking of the clock, a sound he only ever noticed in the silence that followed whenever the bullet train went by.

Sato washed out the pot and wiped down the counter when he was done. Clean as you go, that was his philosophy: the kind of Zen mantra you could fit on a bumper sticker. You never had to worry about the future if you never put anything off until tomorrow.

By the time he sat down on the recliner, he’d stopped hearing the sound of the clock. He took his glasses off and pulled a quilt over his lap, and held the mug of warm milk between his hands as he waited for the soothing feeling of blankness to come over him.

The feeling never came.

He drank his milk and dozed on and off in the chair. Ever since his asthma started acting up again, he found couldn’t sleep unless he was upright. It’d been at least a year since he’d lain in his own bed; the chair was where he slept best. But his mind would not stop racing, and even when he dozed the scenes continued to play in his head: things that had happened, things that had not happened, things that had happened, but at another time or in another place. In sleep the fictions contaminated the realities. He thought he was still in the woods. He thought he was still in the car. He thought he’d been caught. He thought he’d shot her. He thought he was in her room, strangling her in her bed. He thought – in a moment of accompanying panic that jolted him from his light, listless sleep – that he’d dumped the body in broad daylight, with people surrounding the square, watching.

Outside, he heard the squeal of tires. For a beat, his heart tripped over itself; then the last of the sleep-fog cleared, and he remembered he was not the type of person who’d dump a body in plain sight. Not the type of person who’d get caught. That was for people who killed in fits of passion: family, lovers, the first ones to get picked out in a lineup. Not him.

Footsteps carried up the porch. Something landed against the door with a muffled thud. After, the
footsteps retreated, and then the sound of the car’s engine started up again and faded in the distance. Sato unfolded himself from his chair, hugging the quilt close around his shoulders, and shuffled to the front door.

There was a newspaper waiting, shoved into a transparent blue bag in anticipation of the rain that was to come. Sato tore into the bag there on the porch. His hands shook as they unfolded the newspaper; his eyes scanned the headline in a delirium, seeing the words but unable to process them. Out of habit, his gaze was drawn to the last paragraph:

‘A representative of Morioh’s police force reported that despite ongoing investigations, he expects Kame Square will re-open early this morning. Anyone with information regarding the incident is urged to come forward.’

He paced the length of the living room, reading and re-reading the article until he’d sapped every sentence of its meaning, and there was nothing left on the page but empty husks of words.

Reading the paper was as much an exercise of curiosity as it was one of vanity. To him, people were… not difficult, perhaps, but opaque. As machines went they were simple enough. Sato didn’t need to be a mechanic to figure out what made them work. But it was hard to tell how people felt, really felt, beneath the structure of expectations and normalcies they built around themselves. To an outsider, Sato Fujimoto might have come across as a man who’d never been comfortable a day in his life, a recluse mechanic who felt more at home taking an engine apart than enjoying the company of others. If he was uncomfortable, it was only because he could never tell if he was speaking to a face or a mask. People were like rocks: you had to turn them over before you could expose what lay beneath.

Growing up – not in Morioh, but in a town far away where they’d long forgotten his name – Sato had a friend whose mother would invite him over for tea after school. She was a woman who could smile the clouds away, who was always asking about his own parents, who was always sending him home with sweets, who told him, more than once, that he was as welcome in her house as family. Every time he went over, there would always be a ceramic cat on the coffee table. His friend’s mother had told him, as she smiled fondly and thumbed at its smooth white paw, how her mother had bought it when they went shopping together in the city, when she was just a little girl. Every time Sato saw the ceramic cat, he wondered what would happen if he threw it against the coffee table and smashed it to pieces. He didn’t have any particular interest in the cat itself – he just wanted to see how she would react, and whether he still be allowed in that house, and treated all the same.

The reason he took the young ones had nothing to do with any kind of perversion or sexual proclivity. He took the young ones because children were off-limits: pretty, sentimental things that someone somewhere had affixed an artificial value to. Here in the local paper, he could see the outrage printed in ink, in words like “shocked” and “heartbroken”: the anger, the revulsion, the fear, all those feelings tucked neatly away in the chests of people who’d smiled at him and shook his hand and paid him money to fix their cars.

This, of course, only describes the process by which Fujimoto selected his victims. A profile – to use the correct forensic term. Why Sato Fujimoto would kill anyone in the first place is a matter of debate. Serial killers do not make for great villains: they have no lofty goals or compelling motivations. They are random acts of violence, having more in common with a hurricane than your stock Mafioso or evil genius. People might study serial killers, chart out their patterns and describe their characteristics in terms of a narcissistic personality disorder, a troubled childhood, brain damage, but in the end best guesses are just that. You could spend all day coming up with new theories on what made Sato Fujimoto the sort of man he was, but as for us: we choose to believe it had something to do with the house he lived in, on the far reaches of town just beside the train tracks,
where the sunflowers grew and where for years and years the Wall Eyes stood as a warning and a reminder before machines rolled in from S City and tore them down.

His legs felt like someone had put metal splints in them. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t sit down. And so, after a brief deliberation, he put on his glasses and ambled back out into the garage. There, he pulled on his olive wellingtons, zipped up his blue nylon windbreaker, and turned over the ’81 Corona’s engine. There was a voice in his head, telling him to go back to the woods. His asthma had been giving him spells lately, another walk and another dose of fresh air would help – but mostly, he just wanted to go back to the spot. He would stand in that place and feel the weight of the earth beneath his feet, and the lingering strains of adrenaline and ecstasy would be stoked back into something that was real, something more than just a memory. He wasn’t worried about getting caught or leaving evidence behind. If there was one thing he was good at, it was doing a job right. That’s what he told people, all those years he’d spent working at the garage – and at moments like these, a voice in his head repeated the reassurance back to him.

Sato didn’t think much about the voice. It entered into his thoughts unobtrusively, and spoke in the same pitch and timber as his voice – not as others heard it, but as he heard it, muffled by the meat and marrow of his skull and the vibrations of his inner ear. If you were to ask Sato to whom the voice belong, he would have told you it was his own.

***

The second time on the bike, Josuke rode behind Okuyasu. He didn’t say why – didn’t even declare his intentions, until Okuyasu was already settled behind Yuya and he felt a pair of arms wrap hesitantly around his middle. Okuyasu didn’t have much time to speculate; they were already moving, slow at first but accelerating once they were out of the square and out of sight of the policeman. The burst of speed gave enough of a kickback that the force felt like a shove to the chest. Out of instinct, Okuyasu clamped his legs together, gripping the seat between his thighs to keep from sliding back. At the same time, the hands around his waist tightened.

Even though he wasn’t the one with his hand on the throttle, Okuyasu, out of force of habit, nearly mumbled “sorry” under his breath. He only managed to bite back his tongue at the last second when he remembered how Josuke had told him off the last time he’d apologized at the library.

When they came to a stop at a set of lights, the momentum carried their weight forward this time, so that he felt Josuke’s chest briefly press against his back. This was it, he thought. Helmet or no helmet, his was how he, Okuyasu Nijimura, was going to die: in a high-speed motorcycle accident, reduced to a smear of sexually frustrated roadkill.

Truth be told, Okuyasu hadn’t been on a motorcycle since Chili Peppers trashed his ride. Being back in the seat took getting used to. As he unclenched his legs, his thighs and sitting bones ached from bearing his weight. He felt like he’d spent the last ten minutes sitting on his balls. Despite the pain, though, he missed it. The exhilaration, the wind in his face and in his lungs, stealing his breath away – but most of all, he missed the things he’d never had the chance to experience, like taking Josuke out on his bike like this, the way he only realized he wanted to do long after his own bike had been busted up and striped down for parts.

The red light held on. In front of him, Yuya slipped off his helmet.

“Looks like HS is headed for the old highway,” he remarked.

On the other side of the intersection, Okuyasu could see the footprints circling back around. They seemed to be getting impatient. He recognized the place: the phone booth with dirt-streaked windows, the rows of crooked telephone poles that gradually shrunk until they receded into the
horizon, the sky that seemed so much bigger when it loomed above the open road, without the houses and trees and cars to get in the way.

“It’s probably leading us to the woods,” he heard Josuke mumble behind him.

“How do you know that?” Yuya asked.

“Got a tip from a friend of mine.”

Overhead, the traffic light turned from red to green.

“Dude,” said Okuyasu.

“Yeah, I know.”

The driver behind them blared on the horn. Yuya turned around, giving the driver the one-fingered wave-on.

“Go right ahead, asshole!” he yelled.

The horn wailed once more as the car jerked around them and screeched through the intersection, tires squealing over the hot asphalt.

Yuya leaned forward, resting his elbows against the handlebars. “Not like he had two thirds of the fuckin’ road or anything,” he mumbled.

By then, Okuyasu was starting to get a better handle on Yuya. Maybe he had ESP like Yukako said – or maybe it was because there were only so many reasons why someone would keep their bike parked on a green light – but he had the feeling that there was something on Yuya’s mind.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I wanna know what you guys are gonna do if you find the real killer.”

“It’s not like I’ve got it all planned out,” said Josuke. “You want me to draw an ‘x’ on the ground and get him to stand on it or something?”

“You know what I mean – if it turns into a you or him type of deal. You think you can handle something like that?”

“We handled it just fine last time.”

“Really? Because, see, I heard tha was an accident.”

There was something Yuya said, or more specifically in the way he said it, that scraped an exposed wire under Okuyasu’s skin and set off sparks.

“How’d you know? You weren’t there.”

“Okuyasu.” Josuke’s fingers squeezed his sides – fine-boned fingers that held onto you like hooks.

A thought flickered across Okuyasu’s mind, something Josuke had said once, but he couldn’t remember what it was.

“I’ll do whatever I gotta do,” Josuke told Yuya. “I just don’t want to think about it right now. I saw a guy’s head get crushed by an ambulance. Maybe he deserved it, but it didn’t feel good.”
Okuyasu had never heard Josuke directly reference Kira’s death before. He had also – he realized – never asked Josuke about it. Since Josuke never said anything, he’d just assumed that he was okay. As if he was the only one who shoveled his problems into the drawer by the kitchen sink and did his best to forget about them.

Yuya puffed out his cheeks before making a long, loud exhale. “I’ve seen my share of accidents on the road before. Guys eating pavement. Guys going under the wheel. It’s rough, even when they’re not part of your gang.”

Then, just when Yuya seemed on the verge of straying into sentimental territory, he glanced up and yelled: “Oh for fuck’s sake!”

They’d been so long at the traffic light that it had turned red again.

“There’s no one else around,” Josuke pointed out. “Can’t you just gun it?”

All four roads – behind, before, and on either side – were completely devoid of traffic. The only vehicle in sight was the station wagon parked at the gas station across the street from the payphone. There was a ‘FOR SALE’ sign with a phone number hand-written in the space beneath taped to the inside of the windshield.

“Hey man, you never know who’s watching!” Yuya exclaimed.

“But – .”

“Just stuff it until we’re on the highway, alright? You’re going to distract me, then we’ll be stuck here for another red.”

And so they waited. Just when Okuyasu was starting to think that the sensors weren’t picking up the motorcycle (four seats does not a car make), the light, at last, turned green.

“Alright,” said Josuke when they were moving again, “I’ll bite. The stuff with the murder, I get. But since when does a boso care about running a red?”

Yuya had to yell to make himself heard over the wind and the sound of modified muffler: “Look. I’m just trying to think ahead, you feel me?”

“You don’t wanna be a biker when you grow up?” Okuyasu asked.

He had yet to fully accept that “grown up” was a rapidly approaching paradigm, and that the things any one of them could be when they reached it was a shrinking list. None of them were, for instance, going to be astronauts – or the next prime minister of Japan, for that matter.

“It’s not that. Being in the hospital, I couldn’t even take my own dick out when I had to take a piss. After the first couple nights I was ready to about rip the casts off myself, except I wouldn’t have gotten far. Sure, people come to see you the first couple days, out of pity – but then it stops. People don’t wanna hang around you when you’re just going to depress them, and after a while they forget about you. Living trapped like that in wheelchair, or in prison if I get busted – that’s not gonna be me.”

“Why not just quit?” Josuke shouted.

“Why would I? All my buddies ride. I’m going to see them anyway, and no way in hell am I going to give up riding, so I might as well ride with them.”
“That’s up to you.”

“I just don’t want to screw myself over. That’s the worst part, you know? Worrying that ten, twenty years out I’m going to be kicking myself over one stupid thing I did. I don’t want to have any regrets.”

Josuke hesitated, before saying: “That friend of mine I mentioned? He had the same kind of problem.”

Even though he was talking about Daisuke, Okuyasu thought the conversation might as well have been about him. He knew how Yuya was feeling, because he’d been struggling with the same feeling all summer long, weighing the balance between wanting to tell Josuke everything and wanting to keep it all to himself. There were regrets on either side – could-have-beens on one and what he stood to lose on the other – but it was hard to guess the outcome just from eyeballing it. Damned if he did, damned if he didn’t.

“Yeah?” Yuya said. “So what’d your friend end up doing about it?”

“It’s a little too late –,” Okuyasu began to say.

“It doesn’t matter,” Josuke interrupted. Those fine-boned fingers dug into Okuyasu with a touch more force than their current speed required – and suddenly, Okuyasu remembered where he’d heard Josuke describe that grip before. “You gotta do you, man.”

Yuya snorted. “You suck at this whole advice thing, don’t you?”

“Look. I don’t know the future. I can’t tell you, ‘do whatever you’ll regret less’, because no matter what you do there’s no telling how it’ll turn out. Whatever happens, happens. You’ve just got to accept it.”

When they got home, Josuke’s mom was stretched out on a bath towel on the front lawn. She wasn’t one for sunbathing – or at least, she complained that it gave her freckles – and she wasn’t even dressed the part. She still had her work uniform on, the smart purple pantsuit and yellow neckerchief she wore when she was selling mascara and Chanel rouge to elderly ladies.

Josuke knew at once his mother had been waiting for him.

Tomoko gave Jotaro a polite nod. “How’s it going?” she asked.

In reply, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and mumbled, “Alright.”

Josuke hoped he could get away with slipping inside and staving off whatever conversation awaited him for later, but Tomoko had already grabbed hold of his wrist. Hers was a grip of iron, a strength that to a six year old like Josuke seemed no different than his grandfather’s or even Jotaro’s.

“Hey, kiddo! How was your day?” And then: “How about spending a little quality time with your mamma, hunh?”

He tried to cast a look in Jotaro’s direction, but his nephew just paused a moment before closing the front door behind him. He could only give in and let Tomoko drag him down onto the towel beside her.

For the first few minutes, all she did was ask him about his day and fuss over his half-unfurled pompadour. She always kept a stash of bobby pins in her pocket; these she took out and stuck in her mouth. As she spoke (and he, when required, made the minimal effort to reply), she tugged and
yanked at his hair, and jabbed him with bobby pins in an effort to tame his fly-aways. He only
winced a little – he was used to it by then. The poking and prodding was part of a daily routine. His
mother could whip up a stellar updo in a pinch, but she never had a hairdresser’s touch to go with
it.

In the middle of pulling a few loose strands of hair back from Josuke’s face, Tomoko said, “I think
Jotaro should go home.”

When Josuke turned to look at his mother, she had a weary expression on her face, as though she
was already braced for an argument “Why?”

“Josuke, it’s been nice having Jotaro around. I like him, don’t get me wrong. But he was only
supposed to be here for a couple of weeks. You’ve had fun, right?”

“What if he doesn’t wanna go?”

Tomoko clucked her tongue. From her mouth she removed the last few bobby pins and slipped them
back into her pocket. “Sounds to me like he’s not the one who doesn’t want him to go.”

“But he promised!” Josuke’s voice cracked around the last word.

Reaching down, she pulled Josuke into her lap. Though he squirmed and complained, she held him
tight and planted her chin on top of his hair.

“Mo-om!”

“Can’t I have a moment here? Look.”

With a sigh, she pushed the hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear. She’d never been one
for high-maintenance haircare the way Josuke was. From childhood on she’d worn her hair short
and straight. She hadn’t even known the difference between a rat tail comb and a wide tooth comb
until she’d spent the whole night at the library pouring over back-editions of Popeye magazine.

“Sometimes,” she said, “people make promises they can’t keep. They might not do it to hurt you on
purpose, it’s just…” She paused, brushing her thumb over her bare ring finger. “…When you love
someone, it’s hard letting them down,”

“You don’t understand!” Josuke protested.

Tomoko snorted and ruffled his hair. “I’m sure I don’t. But I was talking with Jotaro’s mom and we
both agree – it’s for the best. She misses him too, y’know?”

When Josuke didn’t answer, Tomoko bent her head down and kissed him on the cheek.

“Hey,” she said. She didn’t bother to soften her voice – and he was glad she didn’t. “Let’s make a
deal, alright? You can be upset about it for the next ten seconds, but after that, I want you to cheer
up. Sound good?”

Without looking at her, Josuke nodded.

“Alright. I’m going to start counting now. One… two… three…”

They drove on. With no one else around, Yuya let the bike drift toward the center of the road. The
pavement sped toward them; the broken yellow line reeled up beneath the bike’s front wheel. Yuya
stood up on the pegs to stretch his legs before dropping back down and giving the throttle a hard
enough kick that, for a split second, the front wheel caught air. Okuyasu felt his stomach lurch up into his throat. Behind him, Josuke gave a yelp.

“Watch it, asshole!” Okuyasu barked.

Yuya let out a laugh. “That’s nothing. You should see my backstitch!”

“What’s a backstitch?”

He immediately regretted asking.

Nudging on the handlebars, Yuya threw his body into a lean. They weaved from one side of the road to the other, threading the spaces between the breaks in the center line. Though he was scared shitless, Okuyasu couldn’t say he minded. Josuke’s arms were tight around him and Yuya had a big grin on his face, like he was riding – really riding – for the very first time.

***

“Whatcha doing?” Josuke asked, looking up from the controller.

Jotaro was pacing the length of the basement, foot-over-foot like a tightrope walker.

“Preparing,” Jotaro mumbled. In his hand he held a watch. When he reached the far wall, he pressed a button on the watch’s side. “If the other stand user spoke to you on the playground, he must already be onto us. Chances are, he’s feeling cornered, otherwise he wouldn’t have pulled a move like that – he’ll come looking for us. Try to get to us before we can get to him.”

At the other end of the basement, Jotaro pressed the button on the watch again. He squinted at the tiny digital screen, made a tch sound, and then started the process all over again – from the top. As Josuke watched, he felt himself growing annoyed. Ellay’s upbeat, marching-band tune continued to play away in the background, beckoning him to pick up the controller again, but it was hard to get anything done with someone else in the room who refused to sit still.

“There’s why you’re still here,” said Josuke. “If the killer comes around, you can beat him up!”

“Waiting isn’t enough. Here – hold this.”

He passed Josuke the watch. It was an old man’s watch, black and clunky with frayed Velcro wrist straps. Josuke held it at arm’s length by one of the straps, like he was expecting it to bite him.

“See that button on the side? On my word, I want you to press it.”

“You said you were gonna help me get through Ellay today!”

Jotaro took off his hat and mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. There was a sheen of sweat on him, despite the cool humidity of the basement.

“I’ll help you fight the dragon later,” he said. “Promise.”

Josuke gave a squawk of protest when the hat was shoved onto his head and pulled down over his eyes.

“Hey!”

“Shut up. Get ready – on my word, got it?”
After a moment of fumbling, Josuke managed to lift the hat’s brim from his eyes – just in time to watch Jotaro place his back against the wall.

What happened next was something he’d only ever seen in movies. One moment, Jotaro was standing at the wall; the next, he was halfway across the room. Movie magic: as if someone had stopped recording long enough to move the actors around. There was a brief, glowing purple afterimage of Jotaro’s stand – a stage hand that didn’t quite move out of the frame in time for the shot to resume – but that was all. Time had passed, just not on film.

Jotaro was panting in pained, ragged breaths. The front of his t-shirt was soaked.

“Push it,” Jotaro rasped. “Now.”

Josuke did as he was told. As he depressed the button, the watch beeped – and then the digits on the screen flashed zero and began to count up. Jotaro turned and walked back toward the wall he’d started at.

“Stop. What’s it say?”

“Uh. Two-dot-four.” He was sitting cross-legged on the couch. As he read the numbers off, he jiggled one leg. “What’s the watch for?” he asked.

“There’s no real way of measuring time when it’s stopped. You could count out the seconds, but that’s unreliable – so I’ve come up with a different method. That’s where you come in. I can’t time how long it takes me to move in time stop, but I can time how long it takes me to return to my original position.”

They repeated the exercise several more times. To Josuke, it was fun at first – getting to use the stopwatch, waiting to see where Jotaro would end up when time resumed. But in the end, even with the ability to rend apart the known mechanics of the universe, all Jotaro was really doing was moving from one side of the room to the other. Josuke wasn’t sure he saw the point: it didn’t seem any more convenient than walking. If nothing else, Jotaro was more worn down than he would have been doing just that. And after a while, Josuke grew bored.

“This lady’s asking if I want a drink,” Josuke drawled. He was slumped back down in the couch, controller in hand, the watch discarded on the couch beside him. “Should I say yes?”

“Sure,” Jotaro said. “And – stop!”

“Uh, looks like a policeman showed up.”

“Josuke.”

“Sorry!”

Fumbling for the watch, Josuke pushed the button. “It says five even.”

“You delayed pressing the button for at least two seconds.”

Josuke groaned and threw down the controller. Turning, he flung his arms over the back of the couch and regarded Jotaro with a moody glower. “Can’t you put it up for now?”

“I’m still only hitting three seconds,” said Jotaro.

Nonetheless, he climbed over the back of the sofa and sank down beside Josuke. There was a sour
reek to him of perspiration and unwashed skin. If he was sweating before he was drenched now:
fever-wet, with the glazed eyes and shivers to match.

From his pockets, Jotaro produced the little amber bottle, his lighter, and a package of cigarettes. 
After popping a pill under his tongue, he snapped back the lighter’s cap and rolled his thumb over 
the flint wheel – but the lighter wouldn’t catch.

“Is it outta fuel?” Josuke asked.

Jotaro set the lighter down on his lap, but he didn’t put it – or the box of cigarettes – away. “Must
be.”

Josuke went back to his game. He beat up a few members of the B.B. gang, bought his weapon 
back, and bought himself another ticket to the Live House. When the song routine onstage dragged 
on longer than his attention span allowed, he set the controller down and noticed that Jotaro was no 
longer on the couch beside him. Josuke hadn’t heard him get up or felt the couch shift. Jotaro was 
standing over by the tiny basement window, which he’d cracked open. There was a lit cigarette in 
one of his hands, and in the other, the mangled remains of something that might have once been a 
watch

Highway Star led them, as Josuke had guessed, to the edge of the woods, a ten minute’s drive up the 
road. They pulled over, leaving the bike propped up against the embankment in a ditch so no one 
would be able to spot it from the road. Then they walked the rest of the way, automatically falling 
into the same order they’d ridden there in: Yuya and Highway Start leading the way, pausing every 
now and then to argue over the direction the scent was leading them (tracking was a two-person 
effort, Yuya said); Okuyasu trailing after him, asking Yuya all sorts of questions about his 
motorcycle, where he’d got the parts and how much they’d cost; and, bringing up the rear, Josuke.

Rain appeared to have already fallen there the night before. The ground was squishy underfoot; peat-
brown mud oozed up between the fallen leaves with every step Josuke took. The woods smelled of 
wet bark, and clean green leaves and rotting vegetation, and the pungent, decaying soil. The thick 
humidity had at last won the battle with his hair product. The wreckage of his pompadour hung in his 
face, a lost cause that not even his mother and her arsenal of bobby pins could salvage.

He thought, coming back here, that he would feel some sense of familiarity. But the woods 
surrounding them was only about as familiar as any other he’d ever seen – they all shared the same 
ideal of forest-ness, the same way you could walk into any clothing store on the planet and 
immediately recognize it by what it was selling.

He tried to remember; he tried to picture the forest around them at night and place himself in it, but 
the only memories that came to him were the same he’d recalled the first time Okuyasu asked him 
about what happened that night in the woods.

When he threw back his head and looked up, the trees stretched tall and long above him, 
disappearing where the shadow-shapes of leaves choked out the sky. As he moved he kept his head 
tilted back, and the trees moved with him, turning slowly above like the spokes of a wheel. The wind 
rose and fell through the canopy above, leaves rustling against one another with a sound like 
cascading water.

“Josuke!”

When he shook himself from the memory, he noticed that he was alone, hemmed in on all sides by
tall, naked tree trunks and full, scrubby underbrush. The voice came again; this time, he recognized it as Okuyasu’s.

“Josuke!”

There was a note of distress in the voice that hit Josuke like a punch to the gut. He crashed through the brush toward the sound, branches tangling in his hair and catching his arms, his stand already out and ready. There was a pounding in his head, on the sides of his skull right above his ears, a pain that he saw in red and tasted at the back of his throat.

He broke through the treeline into a clearing. Yuya and Okuyasu were there, standing over something on the ground – Yuya seemed to have already dismissed Highway Star.

Josuke jogged up to them. “What’d you find?” he asked.

“This was where it happened,” Yuya mumbled.

There were rust-colored smears on the damp, trampled grass, which at first Josuke mistook for mud. Then he saw the bloated blowflies creeping over the ground, and the deep gouges in the earth that looked like they were made with someone’s fingernails.

“…S’cuse me,” Okuyasu mumbled. “I gotta…”

Josuke didn’t catch the rest. Okuyasu pushed past him, staggering back in the direction they’d came.

Yuya, meanwhile, had one fist pressed to his forehead – the expression on his face made it look like he was fighting off a bad headache. “Sorry, man,” he mumbled. “The guy didn’t leave much of a scent. Highway Star tracked it back to the main road, but – that’s as far as it goes. He must have come here in his car and left in it.”

“I mean – what we got, that’s something, right?”

Yuya didn’t reply.

When Josuke knelt over the bloodstained ground, Yuya did the same.

“Should we…” Yuya began to ask.

“I dunno if we should touch any of this. I mean, it’s technically a crime scene.”

Despite saying this, Josuke dug his fingers into the ground. He closed his fist around the dirt, earth-blackened fingernails digging into the meat of his palm.

“Whatever a criminal leaves at the crime scene, he takes with him,” Josuke mumbled.

“Who said that?”

“Some detective. Dead guy, probably.”

“Probably.”

They found Okuyasu thirty feet or so away, sitting on the one dry spot he could find: a raised tree root. When he heard Josuke and Yuya coming toward him, he stood up, awkwardly shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he wrung his hands together.

“Didja find anything?” he asked.
“Not much.”

“We have to tell someone,” Yuya muttered. “We have to tell the police about this spot.”

Josuke was used to Yuya changing his tune, but what he was singing just now was a whole other song entirely. “Are you crazy? Returning to the scene of the crime is the first thing the perp always does! The cops are gonna fry you if they find out you were here.”

Grinning, Yuya wiped a thumb across his chin. “Look, I know what you said and all, but if that guy gets away – if he hurts someone, one of my pals or my little sis or one of my girls – that’s the one regret I don’t think I could live with.”

“We could tell ‘em,” Okuyasu suggested. “The police don’t gotta know you were here with us.”

“He’s right. Between me and Okuyasu, we can pretty well fix up or erase any evidence you were ever here.”

The smile slipped from Yuya’s face, but his thumb remained where it was, prodding at his chin. “I don’t know…”

“Look – quit trying to play the hero already. Last thing we need is you making the two of us look bad.”

At last, Yuya let his body relax. There was a look of genuine relief on his face. “Hey, it’s not like I want to jump on a chance to check out the prison food any time soon. Thanks, man.” He gave Okuyasu a nudge. “You and me should go for a ride sometime.”

“Can’t,” Okuyasu mumbled. “Don’t got a bike.”

“Well, mine’s got plenty of extra seats if you ever change your mind. You guys need a ride back into town?”

“Nah, we’ll figure something out,” said Josuke. “Catch you later.”

“See you around.”

Once Yuya was gone, Okuyasu sat back down, and Josuke sat down with him. In the canopy above them, he could hear the sound of tapping against the leaves. The rain was finally starting, and soon enough it would trickle down to them.

“You going to be alright?” he asked.

Okuyasu dipped his head, a lump rolling down his throat. “Yeah, I just…”

“S’fine, I get it.”

They were silent for a moment, before Okuyasu asked: “So, what now?”

“Now, I figure we wait a few, go out to the highway, flag down a car, and tell whoever’s driving that we found a bunch of blood out in the woods and we need to call the police.”

“That it?”

Josuke ran a hand through his hair, making a face at the sticky pomade residue. “I mean – we’ll have to make up some kind of story. Tell them we were out hiking, maybe.”
Okuyasu closed his eyes and nodded. “We should get some beers.”

“Dude, why the fuck are you thinking about beer? Since when do you even drink?”

“Nah, I mean…” Okuyasu gestured with both hands as he laboured with the intricacies of phrasing. “If it were me, I don’t think I’d buy the hiking story, yeah? But if we tell ‘em we were out in the woods drinkin’, I betcha they’d believe it.”

“Hey, that’s actually pretty good! …Though I don’t think we’re gonna find beer anywhere around here.”

“Shit, I know, I just – it was a good idea, that’s all.”

“Yeah. It was.”

Okuyasu shifted, slipping his hands back into his pockets. “So,” he began, “is being out here joggin’ yer memory at all?”

“Not really? I mean – I remember shit, but it’s the same stuff I already told you.”

Pressing his lips together, Okuyasu considered this for a moment. He didn’t know much about how memory worked, but he’d had one or two conversations with Yukako about memory retrieval since the hypnosis incident. He tried to remember some of the techniques she’d told him about.

“Instead of tryna remember, try, I dunno, imagining you’re in the memory,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Like – try lookin’ around or walkin’ in it, or something.”

“This is stupid,” Josuke said – but he closed his eyes all the same.

Pale birch trunks like long white fingers emerged and vanished in the beam of his flashlight. The beam that trembled and swung wide, like a living thrashing through the underbrush. Beneath his feet the soil felt too soft, decades of decaying leaf giving way beneath the soles of his shoes and walking through it his legs felt heavy and boneless. All around him rose up the viperous rattle of cicadas, near and visceral in the thick summer air.

He tried to feel the thickness of the mud under his feet and hear the sound of the cicadas all around him. He concentrated, and imagined himself taking a step.

To his right, he heard footsteps echo his own. But when he tried to look in that direction, his body refused to move.

Josuke blinked his eyes open with a growl. “I’m telling you man – I can’t do it.”

“What happened?”

“There was someone with me. Jotaro, probably. But I already told you that.”

“Can you see ‘im?”

“No.” He rubbed his fingers together, feeling the dirt between them. One or two raindrops dripped down from the canopy above, leaving dark, wet spots on his jeans. “I tried, but it’s like something’s keeping me from looking.”
Okuyasu crossed his arms. “Maybe it’s like what Yukako was talkin’ about. The memory’s all there, but you don’t wanna remember it.”

“I told you – I tried to turn around and see him, but I couldn’t move,” Josuke muttered.

“But it’s all in your head, right? So you should be able to do whatever ya wanna do.”

To his right, he heard footsteps echo his own. But when he tried to look in that direction, his body refused to move.

It’s all in your head, Josuke reminded himself. You can do whatever you want. It doesn’t matter what you find here. Whatever it is, it already happened. It can’t hurt just to look.

And so he looked.

Beside him, Okuyasu gave a jump. “Jesus!”

“What’s up?” Josuke asked.

There was a man standing some fifteen feet or so away, in rain boots and a windbreaker. He was carrying a walking stick.

When he noticed them, the man reached up to adjust his glasses. Raindrops were already beginning to collect on the lenses. The glasses were round, small, and impossibly thick – with the way the light glanced off them, it was impossible to read the man’s expression.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

The flashlight beam hit the man in the eyes, taking him by surprise. He held one hand up to shield his face – the other tightened its grip on the handle of the axe. It was a stranger’s face, half shadow, half menace; and then Josuke dropped the flashlight, and the face and the axe were gone.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious: the guy Jotaro is quoting (and Josuke is butchering) is Paul L. Kirk, who is in turn paraphrasing Dr. Edmund Locard's exchange principal. This entire chapter was basically one long game of telephone.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

*crawls out from shallow grave with chapter clutched in trembling hand* y-yooooo

First off: I am so grateful for all the wonderful comments you folks have left on this and other fics while I was gone. I was pretty low for a while there so being able to read what you guys wrote was a nice pick-me-up. I'm sorry I haven't had the energy to reply to anyone -- just know that I really appreciate all the support!

Second: I went back and made a couple of minor changes. The only really noteworthy one is that the conversation Josuke has about Vox over the phone after the extended nightmare scene now has Koichi on the other end of the line instead of Daisuke. This doesn't affect anything in the story up until this point; I just realized, on looking over my notes, that I would have screwed myself over in the long-run in a bad way. Serves me right for not reading over my outlines more often!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“What’s it like when you stop time?”

Jotaro clasped his hands together in his lap. As he spoke, he rolled his thumb around the joint of his first finger. “It’s like going back,” he said.

“Going back where?” Josuke asked.

“Not to a place, but to a moment.”

Perhaps if Jotaro’s power had been to turn back time, Josuke might have been able to make sense of this claim; but it was not, and so he said: “I don’t get it.”

“Right now – all this – is time standing still,” Jotaro explained. “And when I activate my stand, time resumes. And everything that was waiting for me is still there.”

Much to Josuke’s disappointment, when he looked up, the flock of seagulls out over the ocean were not frozen midair as he’d hoped. Some bobbed like toy boats over the waves while others dove for their dinner, feet first, wings flapping in a clumsy endeavour to slow the act of falling. The water swelled into rippling wakes and valleys, living and perpetual. Everything seemed like it was moving except for Jotaro and him.

“Time don’t look stopped to me,” he complained.

“Maybe stopped’s not the right word,” mumbled Jotaro. He didn’t have the sort of mind that thought in abstraction; he could only form metaphors when he wasn’t thinking too hard about what he way saying. The moment he took a closer look, the imagery fell flat: mountains painted on cardboard cut-outs, as if accuracy were the only thing that mattered.

“What’s waiting for you?” Josuke asked.

Jotaro unwound his fists. He lay his hands flat on either side of him, fingers splayed out across the
concrete barrier at the dock’s edge. “Never mind.”

“Aw, come one!”

“You’re being a pain in the ass,” Jotaro said. “From now on, you only get three questions a day. And you’ve already used up your three.”

“Why only three?”

Jotaro glared at him.

Silence passed. Josuke chewed his lip, and tried to think of a way to initiate the conversation again without asking a question.

“I didn’t mean to bug you,” he murmured at last. He stared at this hands as he said this, at the warm pink glow between his fingers where the sunlight spilled through his skin.

Jotaro lifted a hand to adjust the brim of his hat, forgetting he wasn’t wearing it. For a moment his hand hung in front of his forehead – and then he dropped it back down, fingers gripping his knees with a bruising ferocity that suggested he was afraid his hands would float back up if he let go again. “Look. It’s fine. Ask – fuck – ask whatever you want. I don’t care. Just not about that.”

“What?”

“Stopping time.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” Then, when Josuke was on the cusp of asking yet another question, Jotaro added: “It’s a secret. If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

This threat phased Josuke far less than being allowed only three questions a day. “Is it ‘cause you’re like a magician? If you told everyone your secret, they’d be able to stop time too?”

Jotaro shook his head and said: “Stands don’t work that way.”

Nonetheless, Josuke wasn’t dissuaded. “Will you tell me when I’m older, then?” he asked. “Please?”

“Sure,” Jotaro said – in a tone that suggested the answer would have been the same regardless of what Josuke asked.

Josuke closed his fist, feeling the warmth trapped beneath his skin radiate in the palm of his hand, and he imagined it was the sunlight he was holding.

Down below the pier, the waves thrashed and roiled. There were days when the water sat flat calm that Josuke could see through to the bottom, to the crabs marching sideways over the rocky harbour bed and the small dark fish he didn’t know the names of darting between pier’s rotting wooden supports. But not today.

***

Josuke felt like he, too, had stepped into a moment frozen in time. He was back in the woods on that night years ago, flashlight beams and suggestive shadows and the smell of damp earth. Despite the shabby, second-hand daylight leeching through the treeline, despite the stranger holding nothing more than a walking stick, he felt the same way he had when he was two feet shorter, and the world
loomed over him.

“Good afternoon,” said the man, in the forced polite tone people use when they are unwillingly thrust into company.

“Hey,” Okuyasu said – a response so automatic he didn’t realize he’d made it until the word was already out of his mouth. But that was as far as the conditioning went. The next thing he said was: “The hell are ya doing out here?”

The man – whose name was Sato Fujimoto, who lived at the last stop along a road where dreams and livelihoods had been bought and burned – leaned heavily on his walking stick, his hands folded neatly over the handle’s crook. Only those hands, with their big knuckles and sinews like steel cables, gave any suggestion of strength to the tired, stooped man who owned them. In a way, he reminded Okuyasu of his father. His old man was easy to pity, with his wheezing and deformed trachea and the damaged nerves that made him prone to hurting himself. It was only when he’d reach out to take Okuyasu’s hand and Okuyasu felt the strength in that grip that he would remember what his father had been willing and capable of before a little clump of cells in his forehead took those parts of his father away.

“Just out for a walk,” said Sato. He spoke slowly, taking sharp breaths through his nose in between.

Keeping a close watch on Sato’s expression, Josuke said: “Sorry if we’re a little jumpy. It’s just – we found something odd on the ground back there. Kinda looked like blood, but you know.” A hiss of air through his parted lips, the closest thing he could manage to a laugh. “Probably just paint or something, right?”

Sato glanced in the direction Josuke indicated with a jab of his thumb, before bringing his gaze back to settle on the boys. His expression remained even, eyes fastened forward like they’d been painted on. He looked by moving his head.

“Might’ve been a fox,” Sato offered. He hadn’t looked at the spot for very long. Josuke couldn’t imagine he’d had time to see the blood. “You get them coming down from the mountains around here. Lots of small birds and the like in the woods.”

Another sharp intake of breath. Sato’s nostrils flared. One hand scratched slowly at his collarbone; his fingers had a slight curl to them, as if age was slowly calcifying his hands into fists.

He asked: “You boys out looking for foxes?”

“We were drinking,” said Okuyasu, because Josuke had told him it was a good idea, until he remembered why it was not.

Instead of commenting on this – or on the lack of alcohol present – Sato let out what sounded like an old grizzly bear’s groan and sank down onto the raised root where they’d been sitting moments ago. Even seated, he was still breathing heavily. Shallow, slow breaths that reminded Okuyasu of astronauts and space suits and the whoosh of air in and out of an oxygen tank. Each breath strained the muscles of Sato’s neck, exposing the hollow at his clavicle.

The strain, coupled with the sound, ticked off one or two boxes in Okuyasu’s head.

“Hey, uh,” he stammered. “You alright?”

“M’ fine,” Sato rasped, pulling his knapsack onto his knees and zipping it open.

Seeing Sato’s hand slip into his bag kicked Josuke’s heart rate into gear. “Hey! Whaddya think
you’re doing?” he snapped, suddenly conscious of the way nervousness plucked at his vocal chords like they were bowstrings, pulling a vibrato straight from his lungs.

Sato regarded Josuke coolly as he pulled a blue inhaler from his bag. Whatever else had been on the tip of Josuke’s tongue slunk back down his throat with its tail between its legs.

“Is there a problem?” Sato demanded.

“No, sir.”

While Sato shook out his puffer and raised it to his lips, Josuke tried to sneak a glance at Okuyasu. Finding the blood, and then having this stranger show up – it lined up too nicely to be coincidence. He had to warn Okuyasu to be ready for anything. But trying to do so with Sato sitting less than a meter away was tricky. He found himself thinking back to the hypnosis session with Yukako where she’d declared Okuyasu an empath. He hoped that meant Okuyasu was at least a little bit psychic.

“You hike here often?” Josuke ventured to ask, when Sato’s breathing had returned to normal.

“I hike all over the place. It’s good for you.”

Josuke nodded at Sato’s wellingtons. “Smart wearing the rain boots. Looks like it poured out here last night, hunh? And I just bought these shoes.”

The rain was coming down steadily now, striking the leaves above in solitary precision drops: pit, pit, pit. Sato glanced up, one hand rubbing his throat – and when he did, Okuyasu finally looked Josuke’s way. The whites of his eyes were wide with expectation. He was looking to him for a signal, Josuke realized.

Maybe Yuyako was right about the whole empath thing. Or maybe Josuke wasn’t the only one catching vibes from the stranger.

Sato was reaching into his bag again.

“What’re you looking at me like that for?” he asked, when Josuke and Okuyasu jerked away. He was holding a pack of cigarettes – unopened but bent out of shape, dented at the corners like it’d spent the better part of the past decade knocking about at the bottom of Sato’s knapsack.

“It’s nothing,” said Josuke.

In the reflections in Sato’s glasses, he could see the glowing figures of his and Okuyasu’s stands, but if Sato could see them, he made no show of it.

Sato shook a cigarette out into his palm. He rolled it between his fingers, the tight, papery sound audible in the speechless silence the boys made. “Got a light?” he asked.

“Should ya really be smokin’ that?” Okuyasu blurted.

Wedging the cigarette between the knuckles of his ring and index finger, Sato jabbed it at Okuyasu. “I’ve been smoking since I was half your height, you know.”

“But – .”

“We used to have cigarettes for asthma. Cigarettes for colds, cigarettes for sore throats. That was just the way things were. Can’t be helped if one day everyone woke and changed their mind about the thing.”
"I don’t – ."

"And anyway, couldn’t quit now if I wanted to," Sato concluded. “Old habits, you know.” He fished around in his bag until he found a book of safety matches in the same dog-eared condition as the pack of cigarettes. “You wait until you’re my age and people start telling you what to do.”

The match head scraped across the striking surface before igniting with a *hiss*. With the cigarette still wedged between his knuckles, Sato raised it to his lips and took a drag, his rough, lined cheeks hollowing inward. He let his mouth hang open, smoke curling languidly over the aged ivories of his teeth. Josuke caught himself staring at the stranger’s molars.

"You boys look too young to drive," Sato remarked.

"Excuse me?" asked Josuke.

"We’re a long ways from town, out here."

"We hiked."

Sato cast his gaze down to Josuke’s feet, at the white sneakers with their red trainspotting stripes. “Those’re some fancy shoes for hiking.”

"Hey man,” there was a waver to Okuyasu’s voice. Subtext had a way of making him uncomfortable. “What’re ya gettin’ at?"

"Nothing.” Sato brought the cigarette up to his lips, took another long bite. By then, half the cigarette was reduced to a grey cylinder of ash; when Sato inhaled, red flecks of flame lit the ash from within. “Did you hear about this morning?”

Blood prickled hot at the back of Josuke’s neck. “What about this morning?” he asked, though he already knew the conversation was headed.

“They found a body at the town square. In the fountain. I heard someone say they saw some kids your age hanging around on bikes there.”

Sato turned his head to one side and let out a volley of wet coughs. One hand rubbed gingerly at his trachea.

“I’m sure,” he began again, “the police would be interested in the blood you boys found back there.”

“You’re not – fuck!” Josuke spun around, took two steps, then turned back “Look,” he said, jabbing a finger inches from Sato’s chest, “we don’t even own a bike, alright? You said it yourself. Probably just a fox.”

The lines around Sato’s mouth set in. He tapped his cigarette. The column of ash disintegrated and fell onto the cuff of Josuke’s jacket.

“Then how’d you get here?” he asked.

The answer was on Josuke’s next breath, but then he remembered his promise to Yuya. He exhaled, letting the truth slip soundless from his lungs.

“We walked,” he mumbled.

“From the bus stop,” Okuyasu helpfully contributed. Unfortunately, he was an even worse liar than Josuke.
Sato bent his head. A rivulet of rain streamed down the hood of his windbreaker. The smoke was
suspended in a blue cirrus clouds around his head, unperturbed by the rainfall. Beneath the smell of
tobacco and ash, there was a warm, nutty trace of toasted corn – different from the cigarettes
Josuke’s mother used to smoke, or the cigarettes he’d stolen from a vending machine one time. Like
a chemical reaction, dormant memories reactivated: blinding magnesium flashes that built up pressure
behind his eyes, recollections of the sun warming his skin and grass-painted knees and heavy
textured cloth that carried the smell of toasted, unfiltered cigarette around with it. The telephone
receiver in his hand; a crushing weight against his brittle bird’s chest, suffocating him with its
conviction.

But then Sato’s voice brought him back: “Tell you what. How about I finish this cigarette, and then
you boys can come with me to tell them about your fox at the station?”

Now: there was a part of Josuke that wondered if he should just knock the stranger’s lights out. He
imagined that was exactly what Jotaro would do in the given situation. But Josuke wasn’t Jotaro, and
maybe Jotaro had the lead in his stomach and the steel in his blood to live with being the first to land
a blow and make the wrong choice, but not Josuke. There was something about that you had to
admire – being able to make the call, damn the consequences – and maybe Josuke’s slowness in this
regard meant he couldn’t measure up to Jotaro, or his grandfather, or even his own father. Maybe
there was a touch too much mercy in to Josuke, that made him unsuited to the biological destiny of
the men come before him – but that was the way it had to be.

What was left, then, was the matter of catching a killer. On his own terms, holding the defensive until
the fight came to him.

The problem was, Josuke’s terms of ensnarement had a way of seeming deliberated and calculated
from a distance. Looking back, he had a hard time remembering how he’d done it before, how he’d
clevered his way into decisions that had been nothing more than heat-of-the-moment. He couldn’t
remember his thought process fighting Kira, or Akira, because there was no process to remember.

In his mind, he tried to re-create the crime scene at the fountain and back further in the woods. He
mentally combed over cement and grass, searching for clues he couldn’t possibly remember, for any
shred of evidence to convince himself that the man crouched in front of him was the same man they
were looking for. His eyes strayed to Sato’s wellingtons. Big, sturdy, rubber whaleskin thick. They
might have been decades old from the look of them, worn frequently and cleaned and buffered and
shined just as often. Josuke was a shoes man. He knew, for instance, without looking at the tag that
the man’s boots were twenty-nine centimeters, maybe twenty-nine and half if you were generous
about the thickness.

That gave him an idea.

“Hey,” he said all of a sudden. “Those are Hunters, right? Size twenty-nine?”

“No point changing the subject,” said Sato. He didn’t bother looking down.

“I’m just saying – the footprints we found back there with the blood looked like they were made by a
pair of Hunters.”

Beside him, Okuyasu’s brow furrowed. He opened his mouth into a small ‘o’ – but before he could
say anything, Josuke added: “They looked like they were around a size twenty-nine, right
Okuyasu?”

Okuyasu was quick on the uptake.
“Hey man, don’t ask me,” he stammered, looking not at Josuke but at the space in front of him. “I couldn’t tell the size just by lookin’ at ’em. They mighta been twenty-niners, I guess.”

Sato tossed his cigarette butt onto the ground, where it sizzled out in the wet leaves. There was a drastic change in his expression. He sucked in his lower lip, fingers knotted together, bones at the backs of his hands showing through the taught pull of muscles and skin.

“There were no tracks,” Sato insisted, in a voice that carried the suggestion of a threat.

Got you, Josuke thought.

“How do you know that?” he asked. He had to tighten his jaw to keep the corners of his mouth from slipping up into a grin. “You haven’t seen the site yet.”

“You’re making that up.”

“Come on, man, this is a dead kid we’re talking about. You think I’d make shit up about something like that?” He knew it was a risky move, but all the same he added: “We can take a walk if you don’t believe me. I know I’d sure as hell like to see if those boots of yours match.”

Whatever cloud of emotion he’d seen in the stranger’s expression and body language passed. Sato, as calm as you please, said: “I think I’d like that.”

Already Josuke was scrambling for an excuse for the footprints they wouldn’t find. He’d gotten too cocky again, the way he always did, betting everything on his wits without a backup plan.

But as he was turning his feet in the direction of the blood in the clearing, The Hand materialized into focus beside him. Josuke found himself caught mid-motion, staring, as The Hand made a blink of a movement, a gesture barely more than the slight curl of its fingers. An insignificant amount of space disappeared with a pop.

Okuyasu was saying something. Josuke only became aware of this when The Hand faded away.

“…Not the only thing we found. There was a zip on the ground too. Looked like one of the ones off your windbreaker.”

“Couldn’t have been one of mine,” Sato insisted.

Nonetheless, Josuke noticed Sato’s hands fumble for his zipper pull, and them for the pulls at his pockets – freezing, when he ran a hand over the zipper of his left pocket and found nothing.

The Hand was not, as Yukako pointed out, a precision tool. But Okuyasu had been practicing. To Josuke, it was the best damn magic trick in the world.

Sato bent over in another coughing fit. Throat muscles spasming, chest heaving. He shoved a hand into his knapsack, a long string of spit and phlegm hanging from his egg tooth.

“You said you wanted to go down and talk to the police earlier, right?” Josuke ventured. “There’s a payphone down the road. We can walk down and give them a ring – how ‘bout that?”

The stranger tried to say something, but it came out as a long, shallow wheeze. Josuke edged closer, all that cockiness from moments ago suddenly drained away. He wasn’t used to being up against people who took sudden asthma attacks and nearly stopped breathing. Seeing Sato slumped over made him feel uncomfortable.
“What was that?” he asked.

Sato jerked toward him – and Josuke, only because he’d been conditioned to do so, took half a step back, putting just enough space between them to be out of the way, but not quite out of the way enough.

With trembling hands, Sato removed his glasses. He held them tight enough to crack the lenses. Raindrops and flecks of blood bled into the hairline fractures.

“I said,” Sato repeated, the breathlessness gone from his voice, “you’re lying.”

We’ve mentioned before that Sato Fujimoto was a craftsman. He wasn’t showy but he took pride in his work – a tuner of instruments, rather than a player of them. The difference between his garage and any old chop shop in Morioh was that when you gave Sato a job, he always took care of the details.

Josuke and Okuyasu had just become details.

As for Josuke: he felt like someone had shoved his head underwater. There was a ringing in his ears, and a voice: muffled, distant. His body felt numb, feet and hands tingling. There was an acute, needle sensation in his side. He touched it, and felt something much bigger than a needle.

Then, he broke surface. Okuyasu’s shouts emerged loud and clear, and Josuke realized he was calling his name – around the same time he noticed that there was a hunting knife embedded in his side.

***

The first thing Jotaro did whenever he stopped time was wiggle his fingers.

The nanosecond between time halting and him wiggling his fingers was always the worst part. He wasn’t the first to inherit the world of silence and stillness. A foreigner there, he tread warily. There was no telling if next time, he’d be welcome back and allowed to stroll about and do as he pleased. So he wiggled his fingers, and hoped he still could.

He belonged in stopped time like he belonged on the moon. Therein lay the difference between him and his power’s original proprietor. He wasn’t supposed to conquer this world, extending his reach until time was an hourglass he could keep in his coat pocket that he could turn over and resume at his whim. Regardless of the effort on his part, there was only so much capacity to his lungs, and when he was gulping down panic and letting it fill his chest, his air supply depleted all the quicker. There was a part of him, detached from everything else – a piece of Jotaro Kujo born and disowned in a stranger city’s streets – and when time stopped that was the person he became again, all that fear and anger, the smell of dust and blood and day-warmed garbage and the glint of grinning knives as real as if it was all really there, even in the innocuous sunny streets and lanes of Morioh.

At first, he almost didn’t recognize the voice on the phone. It was somehow smaller; he could hear the distance in it.

Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, Jotaro stuck his head around the corner, only to confirm that Josuke wasn’t there.

“Josuke? What do you want?”

On the other end of the line, Josuke drew a breath. Jotaro could hear the tremor. “He wants you to meet him on the cliffs at noon.”
Jotaro took a minute to process this. By the time he opened his mouth, half-formulated questions rising all at once – the line went dead with a click. He was left holding the ridiculous yellow telephone in his hands, and all at once, the bright kitchen felt wrong. When he tried to slip the phone back onto the cradle it fell; dangling by its cord, it turning in slow circles with the residual momentum, the drone of the dial tone filling his ears.

He hadn’t stopped time but stillness crept in all the same: a crouching feline prowl whose yellow eyes he could feel at his back. In the long stretch of time that seemed to pass as he stood alone in the kitchen, everything he’d left behind in the place where time didn’t move came back to him. The expectation. The responsibility too heavy to wear comfortably on his shoulders.

The bottle of pills found its way into his hand. He shook the bottle’s contents into his palm without looking – judging not by count but by the feel of the tiny white pills in his hand. The weight of them felt just too much to be enough.

By the time he stepped out the door, the pills were already dissolving under his tongue, leaving a chalky, bitter taste on his palate.

***

As much as we would have loved to see it, Okuyasu’s first reaction to watching Josuke getting stabbed was not to summon The Hand and use it to summarily erase Sato Fujimoto from existence.

He’d only been a stand user for six months. But he’d been in possession of two fists for sixteen years. As a matter of reflex, it all came down to what he knew.

Even in a blind rage, he managed to be surprised when Sato caught his punch. The older man tightened his grip. Okuyasu could feel his knuckles creak, and it only then occurred to him that he’d placed himself in a dangerous position.

But that was as far as his analysis got before Sato’s free fist struck his jaw in a left hook.

The blow landed just shy of his temple, at the ridge of his eye socket. He heard the solid thunk of bone connect. The shock of contact lingered a moment, so that he didn’t realize he was dizzy until his knees buckled and nearly gave out.

Then Sato grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled Okuyasu toward him, burying a knee in his stomach. Down Okuyasu went. He opened his mouth and tried to suck down a breath, but his ribs felt like they had caved in on his lungs. He lay on the ground, hiccupping on the stillborn breaths that refused to be.

Turning his back on Okuyasu, Sato bent over and picked up his walking stick. He paused a moment, head tilted to one side and a look of concentration on his face, like he was listening very closely to something. Then he dove out of the way, just as Crazy Diamond rearranged the space where he’d been.

It was a fluke, thought Josuke. It had to be. He’d been watching Sato the whole time – there was no way he could see their stands. But when Josuke swung at Sato again with Crazy Diamond, he yet again moved out of the way – somehow without looking at his stand or acknowledging it in any way. As if, in the face of all probability, his second avoidance was merely incidental.

Josuke had gambled too much on that fluke. In the next moment, the walking stick clotheslined him across the throat.

Sato turned his attention back to Okuyasu. Hooking the walking stick under Okuyasu’s jaw, Sato
hauled him up until Okuyasu’s feet were dangling above the ground. He kicked and thrashed, hands coming up to claw at the walking stick, but it remained embedded in his jugular, the muscles of his neck bulging out around it. He could feel his fists connect with Sato’s arms and Sato’s jaw, but nothing seemed to move the man. It was about as effective as punching a brick wall.

For a man who walked with a stick and got out of breath after a hike, Sato had incredible strength. It was not a young man's strength, like Josuke and Okuyasu’s was, all energy and new muscle. His was a grizzled strength, the endurance of years and years, muscles and joints that had learned to tolerate pain, and a mind trained to numb it. Few sensations were new or shocking to him. It was bones that had calcified into stones – a person hardened into fossil and brute force. His was the desperation of a man with no alternatives left, for whom ghosts awaited on the other side, for whom, at his age, a life sentence meant exactly what it said on the label.

When Crazy Diamond came at him again, Sato swung around, putting Okuyasu between him and the stand. The ground just in front of him exploded in a flurry of dead leaves and mud, as the roots rose from the ground, gnarled in shapes of rage and contusion – but they stopped just shy of Okuyasu. Sato, however, wasn’t looking at Crazy Diamond, but at Josuke.

“Don’t know what you two are,” he said. “But whatever you’ve got hiding, you can be damn sure I’ll drag it out of you.”

“Fuck you,” Josuke spat. His fingers glanced against the handle of the hunting knife in his side. Briefly, he considered pulling it out, but decided against it – if only so as not to give the bastard the satisfaction of getting his knife back. If he wanted it, he could take it.

Behind Sato, The Hand materialized. He dropped the walking stick, dove. Getting out of the way just in time to avoid disembodiment.

Okuyasu rolled over onto his elbows. He was gasping, rubbing at his neck. An angry red mark slashed his throat horizontally where the walking cane had been. It looked like it would molder into a bruise if left alone.

Josuke’s first instinct was to get to Okuyasu as quickly as possible and patch him up, a feeling so consuming it nearly drove him to act to the exclusion of everything else – but he swallowed the feeling back, all that blind desperation and singular sense of responsibility, and he forced himself to remember that the killer was wide open.

Into existence Crazy Diamond burst. It swung at Sato, a volley of punches and a battle cry.

Then, behind him, Josuke heard Okuyasu wail – a pained animal sound strangled out at the end by a wet gurgle.

It was happening again: and the rain was still falling, this time as it had the last, the fetid living smells that had been trapped in the earth coming loose and mixing with his sweat and adrenaline in a black fever-dream. He was too late. Just like last time.

He was aware, only dimly, that he was shouting as he turned. Memories floated up before his eyes like reverse sunspots: Okuyasu lying twisted in a flowerbed, hole gaping in his side; the apathetic surroundings, flowers and iron gate and darkened windows. The cliffs and the cormorant-thing that heaved in swells on the beach.

And, when he turned, that was what he thought he saw at first: the body in the garden. But Okuyasu was blinking at him, broken jaw askew but his person otherwise intact.
“What’re ya lookin’ at?” Okuyasu rasped. His vocal chords sounded like they’d been subjected to a meat grinder.

“The fuck was that just now?!” Josuke snapped. Now that his panic had a chance to dissolve, anger raced in to take its place. “Way you screamed, I thought…”

That was all he had the chance to say, before he felt a rush of air hit his eardrum. Josuke jerked his head away – just enough to avoid Sato’s walking cane cracking aslant his head. It struck the side of his neck instead. Another jab – with the end of the cane to the stomach this time. Winded, he went down, and Sato followed up. The kick landed squarely in his sternum.

Onto his stomach Josuke rolled, one arm wrapped around his middle. His forehead pressed into the mud as he grit his teeth through the burning flash of pain that uncurled in his guts.

Behind him, Sato’s voice: “Had enough yet?”

A flash of light, a blur of movement. The ground warped and puckered at the origin of the voice, but there was no one there.

Another jab of pain, concentrated and loud enough to drown out every other sensation, when Sato grabbed the handle of the hunting knife in Josuke’s side and gave it a tug.

“Can’t let you keep that,” he said.

The knife came out, shlick, and blood followed.

Sato grimaced at the mess that clung to the knife. He wiped the blade on Josuke’s jacket, flipped the knife around, and did the same with the other side.

Once again, Okuyasu lurched for him. Out came The Hand. He didn’t bother with the magic tricks this time, just went right for the punch. Sato stepped out of the way without appearing to see his stand. In the process, The Hand clipped him, hard, in the shoulder. Okuyasu could feel the impact through his stand, the solid contact of flesh and bone against his own knuckles – but it was only enough to stagger Sato. All the same, he held back – clutching his arm in one hand, chest heaving. He was started to run out of breath, by the look of it.

“S’goin’ on?” Okuyasu hissed. He shrugged off his jacket, and used it to apply pressure to the gash in Josuke’s side. “I didn’t think the sunuvabitch had a stand.”

“It’s not that,” Josuke mumbled as Okuyasu yoked his arm over his shoulder and pulled them both to their feet. “The voice, Vox – it’s here.”

“What’dya mean?” asked Okuyasu.

He glanced down, and saw that Josuke had pulled the amulet from his pocket. He had it clasped tight in his fist like a lucky talisman. There was a look in his eyes that Okuyasu recognized by then – like he was fixing to do something stupid.

“You heard it too, right?” Josuke asked. He flicked open the amulets cover, took out the arrow shard and held it pinched between his thumb and his first knuckle.

“Sorry, man,” Okuyasu offered. “I ain’t heard nothin’.”

“Just listen.”
He did, they both did. Overhead the rain pattered against the leaves in a drum roll. The stand of ferns surrounding them quivered in the weather, ragged fronds inverted by the wind.

It was there, he could feel it – Vox, the murmur in the dark spaces between where the trees stood, heard but never seen. In his mind, he dared it to try him, to imitate Okuyasu or the stranger again.

And then, the voice spoke:

“They say there’s a monster in Morioh. It copies other peoples’ voices and pretends to be them.”

The voice was small and spoke in a mumble. He recognized it, its drawled lisp and its permanent petulant edge, and he stopped hearing the rain and the wind. The world around him moved, silent.

“Hear anything?” Okuyasu asked.

Josuke opened his mouth, tried to answer – but there was a strain in his throat that hadn’t been there before, and no sooner was his mouth opened the voice spoke again:

“Actually, one of my classmates said she was walking home across the bridge yesterday, and she heard a kid crying below, saying he was stuck.”

“When I was on the playground at school today, I heard someone talking to me through the fence… You don’t think it could be the murderer, do ya?”

“He wants you to meet him on the cliffs at noon.”

Okuyasu was shouting and when Josuke looked down, he was no longer holding the arrow shard. While the voice had spoken to him, Sato had closed the distance between them. He stood in front of Josuke, holding something closed in his fist. Blood spilled from between his fingers. Sato stared at the blood with a perplexed expression, as if just seeing the color of it for the first time.

Josuke, in the clouded piece of his consciousness that was still in the present, knew this wasn’t how things were supposed to have turned out, that something had gone horribly wrong. Everything was moving slowly, in a series of stop-frames. He summoned Crazy Diamond. Sato glanced up just in time to take a punch right to the kisser. He flew backward like he was being pulled along on a string: hit the ground, lay there, and didn’t move again.

But it didn’t matter, because suddenly everything was falling into place. There had been a sort of logic to the events of that summer when he’d told them to Okuyasu – partly supplied by Josuke’s extrapolation, partly supplied by the gaps in his memory. The things he said as a child made sense, when Josuke was repeating them back in the same confident, assertive voice of Josuke the almost-adult.

Actually hearing those things, in the voice he’d first said them in, something was off. Josuke recognized what it was right away. The tension, the tightness in his throat – it dropped until it was coiled around his chest.

Where Sato lay, the thing Josuke had left behind in the labyrinth of his childhood was starting to take shape.

***

He hadn’t expected much trouble from the kids. They looked like tough ones by the height and cut of them, sure, and maybe they’d do alright knuckles-to-knuckles with some other boys their age, but in the end they were just puffed-up high schoolers. There was a million more like them across the
country. But, best as Sato figured, the number of people who could draw a life out of someone were in the hundreds, thousands at best. Either one of those boys could land Sato with a broken bone or two, but when you were dealing with someone trying to kill you, broken bones weren’t enough. Determination, that’s all it was. The bumps and bruises didn’t matter when it was your life up for the taking.

Carrying around a hunting knife didn’t hurt either.

He hadn’t planned on killing them, when he first came across them in the woods. There was a certain murder-per-capita threshold everywhere you went, and even if that threshold was higher than usual in a place like Morioh, you did well all the same to toe your way carefully around it. A person turns up dead or missing every now and then, you’ve got yourself a tragedy. People start dying in multiples – well. Then you have an epidemic on your hands, and then the witch hunts start. The police stop treating each case individually and start looking for patterns. And that was the last thing Sato wanted.

He hadn’t planned on killing the boys – but they’d pushed and pushed him, playing their deadly game of junior detective and if there was one thing Sato couldn’t stand, it was the insinuation that he was sloppy. Two more bodies would mean twice the trouble, especially so close to where he’d killed the first, but loose ends were loose ends and you didn’t last long doing what he did if you allowed yourself to get lazy.

The first one had gone into shock when Sato stuck him, and that suited him just fine. Gave him time to make quick work of the other one. But then a voice in his head – what voice? His voice, the same voice as always – had urged him to move move move…

And he hadn’t understood why, at first. Then he’d seen the ground crack open in front of him and the roots twist and gnarl out from it like they had a mind of their own.

Now he stood, panting, under the crashing rain. The air in his lungs felt thin – he wondered how much longer he could go without his inhaler. Over the course of the fight he’d lost track of his knapsack. When he looked around and he couldn’t find it. In the shadows and cloud cover the forest was nearly night-dark. Above the treeline bowed and rose in the churning wind, shadow outlines of leaves fluttering against the sky like a chattering mass of blackbird wings. All around them he heard the whistling rush of wind, flowing and obstructed, shrieks and whispers and low moans – ghosts of human voices, all sound without words.

The boys, too, had paused to listen. When Sato looked closer, he saw the silver gleam of an edge, sharp and pale in the dim mist that wafted off the warm, composting forest floor. Whatever the boy was holding was too small to be a knife; a razor-blade, maybe.

There had always been a desire in him to see the way people reacted to the unexpected: a broken keepsake, a murdered child. There was so little holding back regular people from doing the unspeakable. Really: the whole thing was held together with what equated to little more than string and pieces of tape.

Usually, Sato just had to look at something to feel the pull. Objects and people would present themselves to him with an irrepressible attraction. That was what he felt looking at the little sliver of blade just then – it was calling out for him to take it.

And so he did.

***
The stand was a Rorschach blob: you made your own meaning out of what you were looking at.

Okuyasu looked at it, and didn’t see much at all. It was all dark silhouette, vaguely humanoid but nondescript down to the numbers. It might’ve been on person or ten – his mind couldn’t seem to decide.

He scratched his head. Looked at Sato, then at the forming stand, then back at Sato, then at Josuke.

“You think he’s dead?” he asked. Then: “But even if he’s just out cold: he shouldn’t be able to use his stand, right?”

Josuke didn’t reply. When he looked at the stand, he saw only one thing: a figure crawling on its belly, dragging heavy chains along the ground and leaving trails of blood that vanished a few feet behind it.

Shhhshh, drag, jingle, squeak, thump, drag, shhhhhshhh, squeak, scratch, jangle.

In his head, the voice said: “They were only stories.”

And: “I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone.”

The smell of windblown dust at the top of the cliffs near the cape, the chill at the back of his neck where, a few steps back, the vertical drop lay open to him, a shout’s fall from a fingernail strip of beach and scree when the tide was low and a turbulent chase for waves when the tide was high. In his chest his tiny, hummingbird heart was going, going. His voice rose and died in his throat. The shadow on the ground grew shorter and shorter as he backed away on trembling legs, closer and closer to the cliff’s edge. He felt sick and hot all over and just then he thought: so this is what it was like to be afraid.

“Where is he?” Jotaro growled.

He was swaying heavily on his feet, eyes flashing everywhere like they were searching for someplace to land. In his hand, he held a pill bottle. It was empty; as he spoke, he tapped it irritably against his thigh.

“Where is he?” Jotaro repeated, stepping closer, the hostility flat in his voice, and it was the voice and the cold pierce of his stare that made Josuke realize that no matter who was standing in front of him, he was talking to a stranger.

“I don’t know who you mean,” Josuke managed at last.

He played dumb with the instinct other animals played dead.

Over his shoulder, Jotaro glanced. He passed his knuckles across his mouth; the shakes had spread from his fingers to the marked-up undersides of his wrists. “The killer’s listening to us right now, isn’t he?”

And then, Josuke felt several dampened bursts of pain hit his chest at once, as if someone was dropping three-pound weights on him from ten feet up.

Okuyasu had gone ahead and sent The Hand after the new stand. The barrage of punches didn’t seem to do much to the mass of shadows; Josuke, on the other hand, felt every blow. Exactly like whenever Crazy Diamond took a hit in a fight.

Whatever fog he’d been in, the renewed wave of pain snapped him out of it.
“Cut it out!” he hollered.

By the time Okuyasu stopped, Josuke was doubled over, a fresh rivulet of blood dripping down his chin.

“Shit, dude!” mumbled Okuyasu.

“Guess this asshole and I are connected,” Josuke mumbled.

He wasn’t all that surprised – from what Rohan had told him of his experience with Cheap Trick, he knew it was possible for a stand to swap hosts, even when the new host already had a stand. What was strange was that he’d expected there to be some kind of gimmick involved. Cheap Trick had to get onto your back to take effect. With this stand, all he’d done was…

“Careful if you hear any voices,” said Josuke.

“What?”

“I think that’s how it works. You need to listen to it for it to do its thing.”

Okuyasu ducked his head. “Sorry, dude. Still not hearing anything. Not that I don’t believe ya.”

“Just saying.”

“So what’re we gonna do? Go after the user?”

Josuke lowered his gaze to the ground, and Okuyasu followed. Two decrepit yellow teeth winked out at them from the vegetation.

“Oh,” said Josuke, “guy’s definitely out cold.”

Sato’s stand, while it was still taking shape, had moved slowly. By now it had graduated to walking speed. Okuyasu wasn’t sure what its powers were yet, but he wasn’t willing to sit on his ass and find out.

He took several steps back, and Josuke did the same.

“You know,” Josuke was saying, “we still got one trick up our sleeves.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s an old Joestar secret family technique.”

Okuyasu remembered Mr. Joestar telling them about the Ripple. How the Joestar men had once been able to channel their breathing into pure energy. “You don’t mean – ?” he began.

Before he could finish, Josuke grabbed his hand and shouted, “Run!”

His legs were moving before he could even register the word. They stumbled into the brush, and the thing followed after with an insidious, unbroken sound that reminded him of the movement of a snake.

Without warning, Josuke let go of his hand. “Just a minute!”

Where you going?!” Okuyasu called out.
Over his shoulder, he saw the stand lunge for Josuke. Crazy Diamond appeared at Josuke’s side. Up from the ground burst a dirt barrier, in time for the stranger’s stand to hurtle itself against it. Josuke ducked beneath the barrier and wove his way past the stand – then he was out of sight, a crashing sound in the obfuscated part of the forest.

Okuyasu expected the stand to follow him. Instead, it turned around and went after Josuke.

He stopped, The Hand materializing at his side. “Hey asshole!” he shouted – remembering only at the last second that erasing the stranger’s stand would erase Josuke too.

To his left, the bushes exploded in cacophony. Josuke nearly ran into him – and then he kept on running.

“Dude,” Okuyasu panted. “What was that about?”

“Had to go back for the arrow,” Josuke explained. “And that guy’s wallet.”

He held up a plain brown leather wallet before shoving it back in his pocket.

“Whatever’s in that wallet can’t be worth that much,” Okuyasu complained.

“I wasn’t thinking about that. I wanted the guy’s ID in case we gotta find him again.”

As they ran, the rain stung Okuyasu’s eyes and made the grass and ferns and dead leaves slippery underfoot. He could hear their pursuer. The loud crash of the forest making way for it. Just how big was the thing? He tried to glance back, but even what he could see of it didn’t resembled anything in particular, and when he turned around he almost immediately forgot what it looked like.

Josuke didn’t forget. He didn’t look back.

“This ain’t workin’!” Okuyasu shouted.

“There. Up ahead.”

Okuyasu didn’t see anything at first. But then he lifted his eyes and spied, skimming just above the treeline, the tip of a tall metal structure.

“That’s – .”

“I knew it was around here somewhere.” Josuke let out a ragged breath. “…It’s further away than I thought, though,” he admitted.

“I got an idea. You think you could buy me a minute?”

No sooner had he asked, Josuke spun around, called out Crazy Diamond, and got down to work. The trees behind them bowered over, their branches weaving together, roots rising to bar the path.

When Josuke was done, Okuyasu grabbed him by the sleeve and hauled him close.

“Hold on,” he gave by word of warning, one arm tightening hesitantly around Josuke’s waist.

He was a bit nervous about the trajectory of the thing, but he told himself that was something he could worry about later, when all was said and done. His stand appeared in his line of sight. Okuyasu took a deep breath – and then his stand took over.

In the normal course of using its powers, The Hand was slow. It had a baseball player’s windup and
it threw like a big man with muscle and bulk to hold it back. But now the arc of its swipe wasn’t just slow – it was a fight, its fingers clenched and a strain Okuyasu could feel down his wrist, like it was trying to tear space from its seams.

Behind them, tree branches groaned and broke with a series of snaps. The thing was wailing, horrible and wounded and bordering on grief-stricken, and this time Josuke wasn’t the only one to hear it. Sweat prickled on Okuyasu’s face under the cold sheath of rain. Down and down came The Hand, space tearing and curling away under its fingers –

Something gave way.

The effect of removing all that space at once, Okuyasu learned, was a bit like being shot out of a gun. Suddenly the tower was hurtling toward him – he had only a fraction of a second to turn them around so Josuke’s body was shielded by his own, then impact.

Where they landed left a dent in the wide flange beam. Down they tumbled two beams more, hitting both on the way, before Josuke was able to call out Crazy Diamond to stop their fall.

There were dark spots swimming in front of Okuyasu’s eyes. He felt like he needed to throw up, but oddly enough he didn’t feel any pain. Not that there was much to feel – though he could still see his body (arms and legs twisted at wrong angles), when he tried to wiggle his fingers and toes they refused to respond. A snapped spinal cord, probably. He tried to take a breath but something wet and viscous filled his throat a lungs. Internal bleeding too, then. Through the thick fog that cottoned in his head, he attempted to work out how long it’d take him to die in his current condition. A best guess gave him a matter of minutes.

Then Josuke bent over him, hands cradling the sides of Okuyasu’s head – “Idiot,” he muttered – and, just as easily as that, Okuyasu was fine again.

“I didn’t even know you could do that,” Josuke complained.

Okuyasu sat up and ran a hand down his spine where his vertebrae had been shattered to dust. He never got used to the feeling.

“I didn’t neither,” he admitted.

From above, they heard a voice call out: “You two!”

Two beams up across from them was a shelter made of a clear plastic tarp hung from the beam above. Toyohiro stood beneath it in a fluffy blue bathrobe, holding a cup of tea.

“You’re lucky you landed at an angle,” Toyohiro continued to shout. “With force like that, the recoil could kill somebody!”

Sure enough, they could still hear the force of the impact booming through Superfly’s structure. Toyohiro paused to listen, then stepped aside. The teacup in his hands shattered.

“Now you’ve done it. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get teacups out here?”

“Sorry!” Okuyasu shouted.

“Okuyasu.”

When Josuke spoke his name, the first ‘u’ came out slurred. Ok-uuaa-ya-su.
“I need you to get Toyohiro out of here.”

Okuyasu studied Josuke’s face carefully. There was an unfocused look to his eyes. He scrambled to think back and remember if he’d hit his head at any point during their fall.

“Okuyasu,” Josuke repeated. “I’m the one that thing’s attached to. It’s gonna come after me. You can’t stay here.”

Okuyasu huffed, nostrils flaring. “M not goin’ anywhere.”

Down below, the treeline shuddered. A flock of birds burst into the air, cackling, wings snapping together in the high winds. Josuke put on a smile and slung an arm around Okuyasu’s neck, trapping him in a headlock.

“I got a plan, alright?” he chided. “You sticking around’ll just fuck it up.”

“A’ight, a’ght,” Okuyasu grumbled. “But you better not kick the bucket or anything.”

The moment he turned his back, the smile on Josuke’s face slipped away.

Already the rain was starting to slow. A film of water held together by surface tension hung over the flat surfaces of the flange beams. The sky, in its huge stacked columns of cloud, shimmered underfoot as Josuke crossed over the beam and dropped down onto the one below and then the one below that, the soles of his sneakers making a *plip, plip, plip* sound as he walked. He could hear Okuyasu argue with Toyohiro, but by the retreating volume of their voices he guessed that Okuyasu had things handled.

He was on auto-pilot, only registering he was on the ground when the hardness of steel beneath his feet gave way to the softness of mud.

Usually, this would be his moment to shine. But he just couldn’t get into it. He’d hit his head when he and Okuyasu collided with Superfly, and now there was a pressure building in his skull, growing and growing until he was sure his head would pop like a balloon.

And then there were the voices. He’d tried to compartmentalize those, and the things they’d made him remember. Lock them away for now, because he couldn’t afford to deal with them at a time like this.

On the other side of the clearing, Sato’s stand broke from the treeline. By then, it was nearly the size of a bus. It was still crawling, its impossibly long, thin arms bent at right angles, its body lashing from side to side as it bore down on him at locomotive speed, chains railing and snapping around it. A ringing sounded in Josuke’s ears, quiet at first but by the time the stand reached him it was *all* he heard – the shadow thing moved in perfect quiet, the earth shattering soundlessly beneath it.

Then it was inside the tower with him, and its voice was unbroken clear above the ringing, but he scrunched his eyes shut and paid the words no attention. He already knew them anyway.

As he watched, a silver spot formed on the stand’s forehead, spreading into seamlines and rivets until the entire head was encased in metal. The stand reeled back with a shriek, resolving into shadow, before lunging again to the same result. Josuke stood back outside the tower and watched with half-lidded eyes as the stand’s body exploded outward to fill the transmission tower’s frame, sending furniture and personal effects flying, then it retracted, and expanded again, and changed its configuration and shape over and over to no avail.

At last, the stand shrunk down again, until it was the size and shape of a person. It stood at the center
of the ground beneath the tower’s shade, and though it didn’t have eyes Josuke could feel its stare on him – accusing, hateful, and he swallowed back the conviction that maybe it had the right to look at him that way.

He heard Okuyasu let out a whoop. Somewhere beneath him, what felt like five miles away, his legs moved by their own accord.

A confusion of voices followed – Toyohiro, picking a shattered plate up off the ground and complaining about the state of his living situation, Okuyasu asking him questions.

“What happened to you back there? In the woods – you kinda scared me a moment.”

The question stood out in focus to him amid all the other background murmur of conversation. Josuke blinked, stars shooting in front of his eyes. Okuyasu’s face looked like it was spinning: round and round in interrupted circles.

“There was no voice in the dark,” Josuke mumbled. In his state, this sounded to him like a perfectly comprehensible answer.

His legs felt weak. The voices were fading out again, distant and damped like he was hearing them through the wrong end of a megaphone.

Okuyasu said something – asked another question, maybe. Then his face whirled away, and Josuke found himself gazing up at the sky. For a moment he was afraid he was drifting upward with no way of getting back down. But the sky, too, swung away. Grass and mud filled his vision, and he felt like he was falling out of his own body – just before everything went dark.

***

“What killer?”

“No use pretending. I don’t care if he knows I’m here.”

“I’m not pretending!” Josuke edged away, arms bent and close to his sides. Every joint in his body felt like it was in the process of seizing up.

Jotaro grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose, rocking slowly from one foot to the other. He seemed to be having trouble thinking.

“Maybe that wasn’t you over the phone,” he muttered after a delay. His voice was quiet, dragging over vowels and snagging on the consonants. “He could have called me. Pretended to be you. This could all be a trap.”

“That was me. That stuff ‘bout the killer wanting to meet you, I... It wasn’t serious.”

“You heard the voice. Your classmate heard it. That’s what you told me.”

There it was again: fear that beat its fists against Josuke’s chest. As he opened his mouth, he was shaken by the certainty that the world was ending – his shame and humiliation so eclipsing that he couldn’t possibly imagine anything coming after this. It was the kind of extreme moral anxiety only children are capable of feeling.

“They were just stories. That’s all.”
Despite Josuke’s cataclysmic fears, the world carried on. The surf thundered against the shore below; the wind whipped the dirt and sand into eddies and whorls. Jotaro continued to stare down at him, the straight black lines of his jacket at the cut of his shoulders as imposing and immovable as the day they’d met.

And Josuke, gazing up at the cold steady set of Jotaro’s eyes, couldn’t understand why Jotaro had ever believed him in the first place. Josuke was a decent fibber for his age, but his stories were still just that—cobbled-together fictions grafted a little from local lore, a little from the truth. Even as he’d told them, the lies had sounded incredulous, the way he stammered through them and pantomimed the way a six year old thought a grown up would act in the given situation. If it’d been his mother, she’d have caught on in an instant. She always did.

But Jotaro was different. The types of stories Josuke told were the types of stories he’d spent the last eight months reliving. He’d been waiting, ever since then—waiting through sleepless nights, waiting through dreams that woke him up drenched in sweat, waiting through the drugs that never seemed like enough to keep the racing heart and the tension and the irritated edge away. To him, Josuke’s stories about another stand user murdering people in Morioh weren’t just believable; they were expected.

“Those kids in the paper,” Jotaro said. “They died.”

“I know.”

“Those weren’t just stories.”

“I know,” Josuke choked out a second time.

Tears were starting to well up in his eyes. It wasn’t fair, he thought. It wasn’t his fault those kids were dead.

“So what is it, then?” Jotaro asked. “He got you possessed or something?”

When Jotaro grabbed Josuke’s wrist, he let out a shriek.

“Stop it!” He tried to pull away, but Jotaro just tightened his grip until his could feel his hand lose circulation. “What’s wrong with you?!”

When Jotaro narrowed his eyes, a cold pang of fear sank into Josuke’s belly. It was the same feeling he’d had when it was him and Jotaro out on train tracks, and Jotaro had told him he would have to go home alone: he’d been convinced to a degree of certainty that he’d done something wrong, all from the conviction that adults like Jotaro did not make mistakes, did not second guess themselves, did not say things in the heat of the moment that they didn’t really mean.

“I’m trying to protect you,” Jotaro growled.

“Who says I wanted you to protect me?” Josuke snapped. “I don’t—.” Josuke squirmed. “—Need—.” He kicked uselessly at Jotaro’s knees. “—You!”

The change in Jotaro’s expression was just subtle enough to almost go unnoticed: a slight slackening of his jaw, a shallow crease forming between his eyebrows. His grip loosened just enough for Josuke’s wrist to pop free when he pulled with all his might. The leftover momentum carried him back one step, two steps—

His foot met with nothing, and the rest of him followed.
There was a moment, while Josuke’s brain tried to compensate for the lack of ground it expected to feel beneath him, that he saw the sky swing up into view and felt the wind cradle him on his back, and he thought, for just that moment, that he was falling upward into the burning blue sash above. And then he remembered the cliffs and the edge behind him and a mix of terror and adrenaline flooded his veins.

All this took place in less than a second. Then he was rolling across the ground at the top of the cliffs, the rocks and the dirt digging into him until he at last came to a stop.

He’d seen time stopped, but he’d never experienced the before and after first-hand. Confusion followed, as his mind tried and failed to bridge the gap between point A and point B. Two to three seconds isn’t much; most people experience longer bouts of amnesia walking from one room to the next, but when it made the difference between life and death, two to three seconds was a lot to process.

He was in pain. That was the first thing to register. His palms felt scraped and raw, and there was an ugly gouge on one knee that was already welling up with fat red droplets of blood. Josuke sat on the ground, holding his knee, and he cried and he cried: all snot and ugly tears. Fear had chased all the anger and shame and resentment out of him. He wanted Jotaro to apologize. He wanted to be comforted. But eventually his tears dried up, and still no one came to check on him.

When Josuke finally looked up, no one was there. Just him and the empty cliff’s edge, and the wind that rose up over it.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't written in months and I'm super off my game, which is bad timing because this chapter was probably one of the toughest ones I've had to write. I hope it's okay!

Fun fact: the conclusion of the last scene of this chapter was given away in an Easter egg in chapter 5.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings for this chapter; somewhat graphic descriptions of DIY oral surgery. Thank you, random stranger on youtube, for teaching me how to wire someone's jaw shut.

In other news: I finally started watching Twin Peaks: The Return. I'm up to about episode 12. If anyone wants to yell incoherently about The Return with me in the comments I'm totally down because MAN what a ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He left the door at the top of the steps open just a crack. The light from upstairs spilled down the wooden steps in a jagged line, dust winking on and off in the light’s path like static noise. In the dim blue darkness of the basement below, Josuke could make out the shapes of television, couch, cot, washing machine, storage rack. The low light erased the details from the furnishings, making them look like they’d been draped over in dust sheets. At a glance, the basement resembled a mausoleum: stale air, shrouded shapes, the reek of damp and moldering that, in a few years, would be buried along with the rest of the basement.

When he was not so much younger than he was then, Josuke was afraid to go down into the basement. The basement itself he didn’t mind – but he’d rush up and down the steps as fast as he could, sometimes taking them two at a time. The stairs were without risers; he was afraid of a hand reaching out from between the steps and grabbing him by the ankle, despite knowing that there was nothing under the stairs more sinister than his mother’s childhood toys and what was left of his grandmother’s belongings – lifetimes come and gone before Josuke, unnoticed and unremarked by him.

Josuke wasn’t afraid of the basement or the steps anymore. But he left the door open just a crack nonetheless.

Upstairs, he heard a doorknob turn and the front door swing open with a creak. He held his breath, fingers tightening around his knees. Then his mother’s voice rang out, loud like the crack of a whip, calling his name. The door slammed shut. Josuke stayed quiet. His mother’s footsteps travelled down the hall toward him, thudding softly over the carpet runner. He could tell when she’d crossed over into the kitchen by the way the sound of her footsteps changed to the full-bodied click of her high heels over linoleum. The faucet turned on with a squeak. He heard, above the hiss of water and the clatter of pots and pans, the barely audible sound of his mother murmur the chorus of a song to herself in a thin, reedy voice. For someone who spoke as loudly as she did, who made no distinction between indoor and outdoor voices, his mother always sang quietly – even now, when she was alone in the kitchen with no one listening.

Something about hearing his mother sing made the grief in him smart all over again. He bent over, the columns of his ribcage trembling until, at last, the cavern of his chest collapsed and he was gulping, and sobbing, the tears hot and sticky against his arms when he buried his head in them to muffle the sound. Upstairs, the singing stopped. Josuke sniffed. He dragged the back of his arm over his grubby face and smeared the tears away, tightening his throat to choke down the hiccupping
cries that came to him in aftershocks.

Footsteps cut across the floor at a hurried walk. The basement door opened with a rusty wail.

“There you are,” his mother said. “What do you think you’re doing sitting around in the dark?”

Before Josuke could make up an excuse, she asked: “Where’s Jotaro?”

“Out,” mumbled Josuke.

He was too afraid to turn around, but he could hear the restraint in the way his mother sighed.

“You know I like Jotaro,” she began – but she cut herself off before she could get any further.

On his head, he felt her hand rest. His hair was still warm from the sun.

“Supper’ll be ready soon,” she said. “If you’re going to be down here, you should put on a light – your eyes are gonna fall out from squinting in the dark like that, kiddo.”

“Ok.”

As she traipsed back upstairs, his mother pulled the door shut behind her. The beam of light running down the stairs narrowed and narrowed.

And with a click of the door nudging shut, Josuke was plunged into darkness.

***

The first thing Josuke noticed when he came around was that someone had put an ice pack on his forehead.

His head was in a haze, limbs heavy as though he’d just woken from a long sleep. Groaning, he rolled onto his side, wondering where he was and how he’d gotten there – and then he felt the bite of dirt and gravel press into his cheek.

When his eyes snapped open, he had only a moment to take in the view of the sunken marshlands and the woods huddled all around them, before the light pierced his vision. He could feel the harsh jab of it clean through to the back of his skull, where the pain was radiating forth in throbbing waves that made Josuke scrunch his eyes shut and grit his teeth. To his forehead, he lifted a hand –

– Only to discovered that the ice pack on his forehead had fingers.

A voice behind him said: “You should, ah, take it easy there dude. Okuyasu said no moving around.”

Josuke covered his face with both hands. His eyes were still ringed in a burning scarlet halo, but by making a pinhole through his fingers, he was able to block the sun out enough to peer up at the hunched form of Daisuke hovering over him. His face loomed large in the space between Josuke’s fingers, like he was looking at the ghost through a pair of binoculars.

“What’re you doing here?” Josuke mumbled.

Daisuke made a sweeping gesture with one hand. “Bound ghost, remember? I, uh, don’t got much of a choice.”

Josuke squinted at the wetlands and the woods again, before rolling over onto his other side. Shading
his eyes, he took in the flat, baked stretch of asphalt, and the power lines drooping overhead.

Oh, he thought. Right.

“Alright,” he said slowly. “Let me rephrase that. What am I doing here?”

Daisuke gave him a pointed looked, the hint of a wrinkle taking shape between his eyebrows.

“…What?” Josuke asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Daisuke replied, a touch too breezily. His grimace smoothed over, leaving his expression as flat and transparent as a pond on a windless day. “Okuyasu dragged you out here earlier. From the woods.”

“And he just happened to run into you.”

“Sort of. He, ah, stood in the middle of the road. Yelling. Until I showed up.”

Despite himself, a smirk worked its way onto Josuke’s lips. Standing in the middle of the highway and yelling at the top of his lungs seemed like a very Okuyasu thing to do.

“Where is Okuyasu anyway?” Josuke asked.

He tried to sit up, but when he did so he felt a sharp tug in his side. On lifting his shirt, he discovered that the gash in his side from Sato’s hunting knife had been sutured shut with thick black thread.

“He ran off to make a call,” Daisuke explained. Gently – almost as if he was hoping Josuke wouldn’t notice – he pushed against Josuke’s shoulders until he was once again lying on his back. “I’m supposed to be keeping you from moving around too much, and – you know.” Holding up his hands, he wiggled his fingers. “…Keep the swelling down.”

Josuke groaned. “That’s just great.”

He was almost afraid to assess the damage. After a long hesitation, he gingerly brushed his fingers over the crown of his head. Sure enough, just past his hairline, he felt a knuckle-sized welt. When he pushed his fingers against it, pain throbbed against the backs of his eyes.

“You alright?”

“Don’t sweat it,” Josuke grit out. “I’ve had worse.”

‘Worse’ being several pieces of staircase embedded in his body and twelve hours of surgery. Becoming a stand user apparently enforces some alarmingly low standards for physical wellbeing.

Ignoring this remark – and the strain in Josuke’s voice when he made it – Daisuke settled his hands on Josuke’s forehead. Despite the break in the rain, the impending threat of storm still hung in the atmosphere. The air was thick and swampy, hot and drawing a sweat everywhere it touched Josuke’s body. Between the heat and the nausea and the pressure behind his eyes, he was starting to feel sick. The cool pressure on his forehead was a relief, even if it made his teeth chatter and sent cold, wet shivers down the back of his neck.

They lapsed into silence. The rain seemed to have driven all the cicadas away; there was no sound along the highway but the wind rustling through the grass, and the hum of the wires overhead. The hands on his forehead were still and innate, without so much as a pulse. Josuke closed his eyes, vaguely aware that he was drifting on the edge of consciousness, the sounds around him and the
ground beneath him fading in and out of his perception so that he sometimes felt like he was floating in a void.

What might have been minutes or hours later, Daisuke cleared his throat.

“So,” he began.

Josuke already knew what was coming. He’d felt it in the steady drop in temperature around him.

“Look,” said Josuke. “I know you tried warning us about Vox. And we – I – should have listened.”

The hand on his forehead tensed – before relaxing again.

“It’s fine. I mean. It wasn’t fair, you know? – Expecting you not to do anything. If it was me, I woulda gone after him too.”

The temperature, however, did not rise.

“What’s on your mind,?” Josuke asked.

“Sorry?”

Josuke gave an exasperated sigh. “Okay. No offense, dude, but the weird ghost shit you have going on makes it pretty fucking easy to tell when you’re upset.”

“Oh.”

Josuke waited. He was on the verge of giving up and prodding Daisuke again when:

“It’s just… this reminds me a lot of last time, you know?”

For a moment, Josuke’s brain floundered to figure out what Daisuke meant by ‘last time’. Then, the memory came back to him all at once: his small shadow long in the sunset, his missing socks, the cool grass against the backs of his legs when he’d sat down on the embankment and cried.

“Shit.” When Josuke drew a deep breath, his ribs hurt. “Shit,” he repeated, “I’m such an asshole. You’d think I’d learn the first time, right?”

“Hey, come on now. You were just a kid back then. It’s not like you understood what you were getting into.”

“That thing – Vox – it acted like I had a target on my ass. I must’ve had a run in with it in the woods last time too. Nice to know it remembers me.”

For several seconds, no response. Just the air around him getting colder, until his was shivering, his own breath warm against his lips.

“Oh yeah?” Daisuke said at last. “That’s wild.”

His words, just then, sounded distant and vacant – like they’d been rehashed from memories of speech and how it was supposed to sound, rather than spoken directly.

And that was when Josuke realized what had been bothering him since he’d woken up. In the normal course of conversing with someone, there were always subtle sounds interjected between dialogue: breathing, sniffling, shifting, a thousand minuscule mechanical responses that all made for a personal presence that was more than just words.
All these tiny sounds were as absent from Daisuke as his pulse.

“What happened back then anyway?” Josuke ventured to ask.

The hands on his forehead slipped away. When Josuke opened his eyes, Daisuke was kneeling beside him, hands in his lap, eyes boring holes in the ground. Against the lush green of the rain-swelled wetlands, he was eerily colorless.

“Gosh,” he mumbled. “That was so long ago, y’know?”

“You said yourself not a lot’s happened since then.”

“Sorry, dude – I only know what happens along the highway.” Daisuke offered him a consoling smile, as he tugged his jacket tighter around his shoulders. It was too big on him, the cuffs hanging down past his wrists – and Josuke, only after noticing the broaches pinned at both lapels, recognized the jacket as the one he’d given Daisuke the last time they met. “You’re fine, though, and last I heard the girl was fine, so everything must’ve turned out okay.”

“What about the killer?”

“Couldn’t say.”

“You said something about Vox’s last host being dead though, right?”

“That’s what I heard from Watch, anyway. They love to gossip.”

Do not.

“Do too,” Daisuke retorted.

“What was that?”

Daisuke waved a hand. “Sorry. Inside joke.”

Josuke wasn’t about to question a dead man’s sense of humor.

“Alright. But getting back to that night. I’d have to have ended up back along the highway at some point, right?”

“Hey, if you did, then I definitely would’ve remembered.”

Something about this – his somehow getting home without ending up on the highway again – didn’t seem right. He couldn’t quite pin the feeling down. In his current state, his thoughts slipped through his brain like oil through water.

In the distance: shouts. The gunshot echoes of shoes snapping against pavement.

By the time he reached them, Okuyasu’s face was lit up red. He slowed to a jog, cheeks blown-up with each deep gulping breath of air.

“You’re – awake – ,” he managed to get out, punctuating each syllable with a gasp.

“Are you alright?” Daisuke asked. Josuke’s jacket seemed too bright, too solid on him just then – wearing him, more than him wearing it.

“Yeah, sure,” Okuyasu mumbled. As he said this, his eyes never once moved from where they’d
locked themselves on Josuke.

“Dude, I’m fine,” Josuke insisted. “Where the hell did Toyohiro disappear to? I thought he’d be with you.”

“Beats me, he took off around the same time you passed out. Ya sure you’re fine? How’s yer vision? Your hearing? Do ya feel dizzy?”


“I called someone to come get us,” said Okuyasu. “We can take a stop by the hospital.”

“I said I’m fine, alright? Look, I already got stitches and everything.” Josuke demonstrated by lifting up the corner of his shirt. “That was you, right?”

Okuyasu ducked his head, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. “S’just temporary,” he mumbled.

“How’d you even manage that, anyway?”

From his pants pocket, Okuyasu pulled a plastic Ziploc bag. He tossed it at Josuke. It landed on his chest. The plastic was crinkled and clouded from being carried around in Okuyasu’s pocket. Nonetheless: Josuke could still make out gauze, tweezers, scissors, cleansing wipes, antiseptic cream, Band-Aids, painkillers, and, of course, a miniature suture kit.

“How long’ve you been carrying this around?” Josuke asked.

“Kira. Maybe earlier. Anyway: it ain’t the stitches I’m worried about. Think that hit to the head might’a given you a concussion.”

“Knock it off. It’s just a bump.”

“I ain’t gonna knock it off! We’re talkin’ brain trauma, dude.”

“Come on,” Josuke growled, casting his gaze over to Daisuke in hopes of a second opinion.

“He’s right,” said Daisuke. “You gotta be more careful. I’m not hurting that bad for company.”

Groaning, Josuke let his head drop back down to the ground. Big mistake – white splinters of pain erupted in front of his eyes.

“That’s just great. I got a bump on my head and all we managed to do was give that asshole a stand.”

Daisuke frowned. “You mean like a music stand, or – ?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Josuke mumbled, waving a hand without opening his eyes.

“I just can’t believe Koichi sold us out like that,” Okuyasu complained.

Try as it might, Josuke’s brain could not make the connection between Koichi Hirose and their current situation. “The hell’re you talking about?”

“Ya said the arrow was all his idea, right?”

Overhead, the powerlines swayed in the wind: black, bowed spines, sagging under their own weight. The current crackled in the humidity. As Josuke gazed up at the powerlines where they bisected the sky, the first fully-formed, lucid thought came to him since being stabbed with the hunting knife.
“That wasn’t Koichi over the phone,” he said.

“Whaddya mean?”

“You know Koichi. If it was something that important, he would have called us all together and told us in person. He wouldn’t just ring me up in the middle of the night and take off to Hawaii the next day. He gets so goddamn hooked on this mystery shit.”

The light on the telephone pole above them flickered briefly – enough to cast a weak circle of light on the overcast asphalt. Both Josuke and Okuyasu turned their heads at once to look at Daisuke.

“You know,” he mumbled, rubbing at his wrist, trying to push back the jacket cuffs that refused to remain in place. “I get the feeling I’m missing a whole lotta context here, but – getting a call, hearing a voice – that all sounds a lot like – .”

“– The Voice in the Dark,” Josuke concluded.

From down the road, they heard a sound that could only be compared to an industrial-strength trash compactor. It did not sound so much like a car, but like the death of a car.

Okuyasu leaned forward, neck stretching taught as he peered down the road, the serious turn of conversation temporarily forgotten. “That’ll be our ride,” he said.

“Guess I’d better split,” said Daisuke. He gazed down, wrung his hands together, and suddenly the chill that had been in the process of dissipating was back. “I’m – I’m sorry you had to get hurt.”

Josuke wasn’t sure how to take this remark. His expression settled into the stiff smile he usually put on when dealing with an uncomfortable social situation. “Hey man. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

Daisuke opened his mouth, as if to say something – but then the distant engine gave another growl, and he was gone.

Shading his eyes, Josuke lifted his head until his chin was pressed into his chest, and squinted down the highway. Two headlights and a whole lot of chrome and lumber were barrelling toward them.

“…Who’d you call, anyway?” he asked Okuyasu. “I thought you were gonna get Yuuya to pick us up.”

For a moment, the car looked as though it was going to bomb right on past them. Then, the wheels locked with the screech of asphalt tearing strips of rubber. The car’s body carried on a split second longer than the chassis – before the halting momentum caught up with it, and it rocked back with a squeak.

When the driver-side door opened, it opened slightly askew. Inside, Tamami Kobayashi put his seat up and leaned forward, elbows resting on the steering wheel. Despite being the length of a modest-sized fishing skiff, the station wagon had only two doors.

“All right,” he said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the narrow gap between his seat and the car door. “Hop in.”

***

A word regarding Tamami Kobayashi’s car.
But first: we suppose we ought to explain the circumstances leading to his acquisition of the vehicle.

At one point, Tamami had told Koichi Hirose that he’d gone the way of the straight and narrow. A job as a debt collector, for a legitimate cause. And for a while, this had been true. But people like Tamami Kobayashi were not cut out for regular work. He’d mooched and scraped and bullied his way through life up until then. While he’d undergone a change of heart after meeting Mr. Hirose, the decision to turn one’s life around does not the foundation of a reliable employee make. A legitimate job meant keeping certain hours, meant being in a certain place at a certain time, meant following certain protocol and keeping out of the way of workplace politics.

It wasn’t as though Tamami hadn’t tried. But one morning, he’d woken up and gotten on his scooter and prepared to drive to work, and it was while pulling out onto the road that he’d seen the next fifty years of his life laid out cleanly before him: the routine and inevitability of it all, promotions and desks and collared shirts that fit too tight around the thick trunk of his neck. He pulled into a Doutor Coffee, with the thought of grabbing a cuppa on his way to meet with a client – but after sitting in the parking lot for half an hour with his knuckles tight on the handlebars, he’d turned his scooter around and went home.

Thus ended a short but profitable career.

After, Tamami had what one might diagnose as a midlife crisis, only it came approximately twenty years too early to be called that. He’d sold his house and his scooter and taken up a new gambit panhandling on the streets in S City, and though it didn’t pay so well as extortion or debt collection, with his stand he could make to the tune of 6,000 yen a day, and that was enough to feed and clothe himself and pay for his gas – and that, by Tamami’s measure, wasn’t bad for a day of wandering the city as he pleased and getting good use out of his posterior.

Of course, this new career required certain lifestyle changes, namely in his mode of transportation. He could not, after all, be seen getting on and off the bullet train every day and still maintain what amounted to his profession’s version of credibility. And so, with some of the money he’d earned off his house and his scooter, he’d bought himself a car.

This car was what he drove to S City every morning. At the break of dawn, he’d leave it in the shadow of some alley or stash in the corner of a warehouse lot – out of sight, and far from his stomping grounds.

Which brings us to the business of the car itself. Of all the vehicles Kobayashi could have ended up with, he somehow fell into possession of a 1972 Ford Malibu station wagon: forest-green body, wood panelling, the whole dreadful package. How the American car had ended up in Japan, let alone Morioh, was a mystery – and it was American, right down to the steering wheel being on the wrong side. The story Tamami had heard from the woman he’d bought it from was that the car had originally been brought overseas as a sample in an ill-fated attempt by Ford to expand into Asian markets. A conflicting local legend held that the car had gone over the side of a cargo ship bound for Australia during a storm, and that it’d washed ashore in Morioh.

Either way: the only thing that kept Tamami’s Malibu from the junk yard all those years were strict municipal laws surrounding the disposal of hazardous waste. The car was so rusted that its floor carpets in certain spots had a give to them. The engine light hadn’t turned off once in over a decade. The foot brakes had long given out; stopping required use of the emergency brake. We can only speculate that the reason the car still ran at all was that being in Morioh had allowed the Malibu’s ghost to linger in its valves and pistons the same way human souls linger in the town. Perhaps the station wagon’s spirit carried on after death in hopes of t-boning a Toyota.

One of the car’s back seats had been folded down to make way for a futon. On this futon, Josuke
was currently stretched. His feet were in the backseat; his head, in the trunk. The hatch window was so thoroughly dirt-streaked that it was impossible to see a thing through it. He did, however, have an excellent view of the clear plastic storage containers stacked up against the upright back seat, filled with packaged food and clothes and paper dishware and an odd self-help book or two thrown in for good measure. When Josuke tilted his head forward, he noticed a wire snaking over the center console from the front of the car, where it was hooked up through a number of converters and adapters and similar apparatus to the Malibu’s cigarette lighter. On the other end of the wire, nestled next to Okuyasu’s thigh, was an electric kettle.

Josuke realized, with a growing sense of discomfort, that he was being whisked down the highway in the equivalent of someone else’s bedroom.

“I’m not saying it’s a con or anything,” he overheard Tamami say. He’d taken it upon himself, without being asked, to describe the specifics of his new way of life.

Okuyasu had his head down, arms folded across his chest. His eyes were closed; if it weren’t for the hard set of the grimace on his face, he might have been mistaken for asleep. “I dunno,” he muttered. “Sure sounds like a scam to me. Pretending to be poor and all.”

Reaching up, Tamami banged a fist against the car’s roof. It echoed with a hollow, tinny thud. “You seen this hunk of junk I’m driving? Guys like me’s got’s to eat. But anyway – what I was trying to say – is this begging business isn’t a con or anything, but if it was, it’d be the best fucking con in the world. You follow me?”

“He’s talking outta his ass, Okuyasu,” Josuke grumbled. He was not in a particularly generous mood.

Okuyasu swung around, eyes wide with surprise and concern and Josuke was already beginning to wish he hadn’t said anything.

In the rear-view mirror, he could see Tamami’s eyes flicker up to meet his reflection. “Well look who’s still awake.”

“I’ve been awake.”

“You sure are being quiet.”

Ignoring him, Josuke pressed onward: “You watch the news lately? You got guys out there hauling in millions breaking into banks and running pyramid schemes and shit. What’s so great about a handful of pocket change?”

“It’s not about the money,” Tamami insisted. “You know what a great con is?”

“Sure I do.”

But Tamami steamrollered on, and Josuke got the notion the question was intended to be rhetorical. “A great con,” Tamami said, “is one where the people getting duped come out of it without feeling like they’ve been conned. It’s kind of like in nature, you following me? – not like a parasitic relationship, but the other kind – what’s it called?”

“Symbiotic?” Okuyasu offered.

Tamami snapped his fingers. “That’s the one! See: good cons, they just benefit the perp. Great cons are the ones both the perp and the mark can walk away from feeling like they’ve gained something.”
“How do ya figure that?”

Against the steering wheel, Tamami drummed his fingers. The whole time Josuke and Okuyasu had been in the car, he’d been driving with a light hand. On a straight road, all he had to do was point the Malibu in the right direction and keep his foot on the gas. The wheels didn’t tend to drift much for all the rust. It was corners that were the problem.

“Put it this way: it’s a lot easier for me to convince people to part ways with their money with my stand, right? The weight of guilt, wages of sin, whatever you want to call it. But I’m not the only one in business. There’s people like me living by the palm and they don’t know anything about stands and shit. Most don’t got a choice. They wouldn’t get by if it was just a matter of making people feel guilty. What makes it all work is that the people giving away their money feel **good** about themselves when they do.”

“Maybe some people just like helping out,” Josuke retorted.

“Come on, Josuke, you don’t gotta pretend with the goody two-shoes act,” said Tamami. “It’s like this, see: I can’t put a lock on something that’s not there. You got people out there who wonder about whether or not they’re a good person, and believe me, they’ll be quick to go on the defensive if you try to tell them they’re not. People who try not to think too hard about why they’ve got a job and a roof over their heads and other people don’t. Me? My lock didn’t invent any of that. It was already there. A hundred yen or so to shove that big ugly question into a corner for a while sounds like a good bargain, right?”

“I don’t think those guys you see walking around with designer-name suits and one-hundred thousand yen shoes feel all that guilty about it,” said Josuke.

“Here’s the thing about guilt, though – people got a kind of fight-or-hide reaction to it.”

“Ya mean fight-or-flight?” Okuyasu asked.

“Sure. What I’m getting at is, people either try to appease the beast, or they bury it. Sometimes both. The guys you mentioned, the ones too stinkin’ cheap to spare a sucker like me a hundred yen? They’re going to pretend they didn’t see me.”

Slinging an arm around the back seat, Tamami turned and regarded the boys with a tight pull at one corner of his mouth. “Hey. You know the reason? – Why humans, you know, evolved to feel guilt?”

Okuyasu regarded him blankly. Both he and Josuke were covered head to toe in mud, clothes torn. There was a bloodstain on Josuke’s shirt the size of a dinner plate.

Tamami sniffed and turned back to face the front. Gripping the wheel, he rolled his shoulders. “Me neither,” he admitted. “Probably something to do with keeping cavemen from beating each other to death with sticks.”

***

*His heart was still hammering by the time he got home.*

*He’d rode the bus at the back, trembling knees knocking together, the underside of his arms wet with perspiration where they rested against the sticky vinyl seats. The bus driver’s eyes had strayed to him in the rear view mirror again and again. He nearly missed his stop. The bus rattled up onto the curb with a lurch, door whooshing open onto the dusty sidewalk; the bus driver’s impersonal voice yelled after him as Josuke stumbled out the bus, reminding him to pull the cord earlier next time.*
The time and distance between the bus stop and the kitchen somehow melted away. The rhythmic swaying of his footsteps gave way to him standing on his tiptoes to take the phone down off its cradle. He held the receiver in both hands. A deep drone issued from the perforated surface of the earpiece; an impatient, insistent noise that played background to his indecision.

Unable to make up his mind, he hung up the phone and paced around the house. On his second turn through the kitchen, he snatched the phone up again and dialled 119 – only to hang up on the first ring.

He considered his options. There was the police – but he thought of his grandfather, and thought better of it. He tried dialing his mother’s work. Instead of his mother, he ended up on the line with a lady from the sporting goods department who insisted he had the wrong number, and patched him through to the national call center when he protested. He hung up again.

And so it went, back and forth, for another hour or so: alternating between sitting on the basement steps and standing at the phone, humming and hawing, telling himself he needed more time and convinced he had more time to spare. Then his mother got home, and he stayed put on the steps, trapped by her presence in the kitchen where the phone hung. By the time dinner was finished, the police would be at their door.

In ten years’ time, an acquaintance would explain guilt to Josuke in terms of a fight or flight reaction. And maybe, from the outset, what he’d done looked a lot like running, but for him it had been about fear as much as it had been about guilt. Making the call would have meant acknowledging whatever had happened on the cliffs. Some part of his brain was clinging onto the notion that he’d been tricked; that any minute, Jotaro was going to walk through the door and chew him out for lying earlier.

He was at an age where he’d been taught that ghost and monsters were only real if he believed in them. So he let the cliffs slip from his mind, pretending and hoping it hadn’t happened, until he was standing in his own hallway in a blue and red carousel of light, hearing the ghosts and the monster rattle their fangs at him. Even after Jotaro got out of the hospital, the crumpled black thing on the beach remained fixed there in Josuke’s mind, all ghoulish tatters and eyes glowing with accusation, until he grew up and memory erected a maze of walls around it.

***

They were just pulling into the Nijimura’s driveway when Josuke bolted upright and grasped Okuyasu’s shoulder.

“Jolyne,” he mumbled.

“Whaddabout her?” Okuyasu asked. Then his lips softened into an ‘o’. He turned, throat bobbing, and stammered, “Uh, excuse me? Tamami?”

“Yeah?”

“You think you could drop us at Mr. Rohan’s place?”

“Whatever, man, I’m not in a rush to get anywhere.”

In a complicated-looking series of manoeuvres, Tamami shifted gears into reverse, lifted the emergence brake, allowed the car to coast backward down the driveway, put the emergency brake on again to keep them from backing into oncoming traffic, then threw the car into first gear, lifted the emergency brake again, and drove away.
At Rohan’s, Josuke slid out from the car and stood swaying for a moment on his own two feet. The ground beneath him felt like it was moving, as if he’d just gotten off a boat.

“Thanks for the lift,” he said to Tamami, who was leaning forward on the steering wheel again, one elbow folded and dangling out the open window.

Tamami raised a hand. “Hey. I owe Koichi one. Besides – I had to drive back from town anyway. Might as well keep things interesting.”

On their way up the stairs, Josuke watched over his shoulder as Tamami’s Malibu peeled off down the road. The car made a noise that sounded suspiciously like metal grinding on metal; a trail of sparks proceeded in its wake. We have to admit: the Malibu made for quite the pyrotechnics show going a hundred down the old highway at nights.

Okuyasu rang the doorbell. No one answered.

Josuke and Okuyasu exchanged glances. Okuyasu was the first to break eye contact. Turning, he squared his feet to the door. But before he could get any further, Josuke laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait,” he said. “Let me do this.”

Moments later, they stepped single-file into Rohan’s foyer, the enormous hole in the front door closing seamlessly behind them. By the door, the dull green digital display on a home security monitor continued to tick off the seconds uncomplaining; the padlocks and deadbolts and chain locks on the door all intact and undisturbed, not a screw or cylinder out of place.

From upstairs, they heard an argument – or at the very least, one half of an argument. Rohan’s voice was there, every word clear from the bottom of the steps:

“But don’t you see? It’s a metaphor.”

“It’s a bit like saying something but meaning something else.”

“Because then it would be just telling the reader what do think. I want to create a dialogue.”

“A dialogue? It’s – never mind. What I’m trying to say is, that when Ishihara wakes up inside the fishbowl on his desk, what’s actually happening is that he feels trapped by his performance career and the inescapability of the public eye.”

“The fish has nothing to do with it.”

“Look. Let’s just say they traded places and the fish is in Ishihara’s bed now.”

“No it’s not going to die.”

“Yes I’m aware fish can’t breathe out of water. Everyone knows that.”

Then, as they reached the top of the steps and crept around the corner, Josuke was finally able to pick of a second voice: thin, lilting, quiet as an afterthought beneath the brash certainty of Rohan’s clarion.

“Papa said there’s...” Jolyne paused. “Two-eight-zero-zero-zero different kinds of fish.” The way she hesitated between each number – Josuke could practically hear her counting them out in her head, brow furrowed, eyes rolled up in concentration.

“I already knew that,” said Rohan, with the kind of insistence only used by people who did not, in
fact, already know that.

“Why was his mom in the radiator?”

“Of course he’d be thinking about his mother.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“How’d they fit a stage in the radiator?”

“To begin, the important question is not how they fit a stage in the radiator, but what the stage represents —.”

“Thanks for gettin’ the door,” Okuyasu cut in.

Rohan glanced up from his bureau – over which was spread the comic book Jolyne was in the process of scrutinizing – to see two sets of broad, boyish shoulders eclipsing the doorway.

“You should have knocked,” he huffed.

“We rang the doorbell!” Josuke exclaimed.

“Oh, the doorbell’s just for show. It’s not hooked up to anything. As far as I’m concerned: if someone wishes to speak to the great Rohan Kishibe, they can call ahead and make an appointment.”

At Josuke, Jolyne waved. “Hi, uncle Josuke.”

“Hey,” mumbled Josuke, in aside. Then Rohan: “Why the hell would you have a doorbell if it doesn’t work?”

“Why not? Otherwise, people would just knock on my door. Do you know how hard it is to concentrate when someone is knocking on the door every hour?”

Okuyasu’s meaty hand closed around Josuke’s elbow.

“Dude,” he rasped, “you hearin’ her?”

“Hearing what?” asked Josuke.

And then he noticed the way Jolyne was watching him and following his every word, and realization sunk down over him.

Rohan didn’t have time to stand up. Josuke was already on him, grabbing him by the collar and hauling him clear from his chair. He dangled like a wet sheet on a wire, the tiptoes of his ridiculous striped cashmere socks only just skimming the floor.

“What,” Josuke began, “the fuck did you do.”

This, while phrased like a question, did not carry the intonation of one.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“Tell him, Okuyasu.”

“Why’s Josuke’s great-grand-nice talkin’ Japanese for?” Okuyasu growled, shouldering his way next
to Josuke.

Rohan’s eyes slid from one boy to the other, half-lidded with an expression teetering on the edge of boredom. “She’s on an educational vacation, right? I don’t see the trouble with teaching her a few words of Japanese.”

“Few words my ass!”

Clearing his throat, Rohan reached up and gingerly unfolded Josuke’s fingers from his collar one-by-one until he was flat on his feet again. “Alright. So I may have dabbled a little in her book. So what?”

“You weren’t gonna do it earlier,” Josuke reminded him. “You know? When I said it was a matter of life and death?”

“This is different. She said she wanted to read my work – .”

“I like comics,” Jolyne asserted. To her, any combination of text and images was by definition comics.

Josuke had to admit: he liked the kid, but he liked her a lot better when she didn’t understand a word he said. Having to actually watch his language around children was a whole new level of responsibility he wasn’t sure he was prepared for.

“You mind standing outside a minute, kiddo?” Josuke asked, and when she folded her arms together he added: “You want your amulet back, right?”

Once Jolyne was (begrudgingly, making a show of stomping her feet the whole way) out of the room, Josuke turned back to Rohan and said: “You gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“Listen. You don’t know the half of it. I don’t own any of the English translations for a reason. They’re awful. Grainy scans, cut-off panels… they didn’t even translate the name of the town right.”

Okuyasu craned his neck in order to get a better view of the comic book on the desk. “Hey, I know this one,” he mumbled, tapping two fingers against the opened page. “This the one where the guy cuts his agent’s head off, ain’t it? Koichi told me about that one.”

“You let her read that?” Josuke demanded.

“It’s art,” Rohan insisted. “If I’d taken her to a museum to see a Francisco Goya exhibit, you wouldn’t be complaining, would you?”

Josuke – who knew nothing about Goya, but was immediately suspicious by the context – followed this up by asking: “The fuck am I gonna say to Jotaro when she starts telling him all about Pink Dark Boy in Japanese?”

All three glanced over to the doorway, where Jolyne had her fingers dug into the narrow ledges of the door casing, both feet wedged up against the jamb with her full weight thrown back, so that the line from her heels to the nape of her neck was one long acute angle from the floor. When she noticed them staring she stood up straight and let go of the door casing, turning her head so she could pretend she hadn’t seen them. The whiteness of her scalp showed at the seam of her head where her hair had been parted into pigtails.

Without taking his eyes off Jolyne, Rohan said: “I wouldn’t worry too much. You know how kids are – always repeating every word they hear. Jotaro probably won’t even notice.”
Josuke’s faith in Rohan’s assertion that Jotaro wouldn’t notice his daughter’s sudden linguistic prodigy began to waver when, and hour later, Jolyne was avidly repeating every line from the *Super Sentai* movie Okuyasu had put on. She was at an age where she wanted to emulate everything she saw, and while this supported Rohan’s theory that kids repeated everything, Josuke didn’t think mimicry could possibly account for perfect pronunciation of Japanese vowels.

At Okuyasu’s insistence, they’d made a detour to Budogaoka General to have Josuke checked out. He’d been sent on his way with fresh stitches and prescription painkillers. Now they were back at Okuyasu’s place, where they’d started out that morning. By then the sun had already taken its leave.

According to Rohan, he’d already gotten in touch with Koichi and Yukako, and the pair were on their way back to Morioh. Jotaro – insofar as Josuke understood his vague verbal instructions – was supposed to return the next day. With that thing trapped in Superfly and Josuke out of commission, waiting around was about all they could do.

At first, Josuke could tell Okuyasu was putting effort into distracting him. Ordering a pizza, digging out some old movies, running through with scripted precision exactly the kind of conversation they might be expected to have (“school’s starting soon”, “can you believe how fast summer went by?”, “maybe we’ll be in the same class this year”). But toward the end of the night Okuyasu’s enthusiasm wavered and Josuke’s responses grew more and more offhand, until they lapsed into a silence that the movie soundtrack and Jolyne’s chatter filled up. Okuyasu pretended to be interested in the monster-of-the-week plot; Josuke crumbled a couple of painkillers over a slice of pepperoni pizza and tucked in.

He was glad to have Okuyasu there. That wasn’t the issue. But people – even people hopelessly in love – are bound to get sick of one another after so many consecutive hours in one another’s presence. Especially when dealing with serial killers, enemy stands, and babysitting. He was tired in ways he couldn’t begin to describe. Every moment that passed he felt himself sink a little deeper into the couch, slowly erasing himself until he was no longer a part of the scene but a spectator – an empty space wedged between Jolyne and Okuyasu’s dad.

“Ya feelin’ alright?” Okuyasu asked when Josuke got to his feet.

“Sure,” said Josuke, feeling the sluggish weight of his tongue. “Just gotta stretch my legs.”

He ascended the stairs, leaving Okuyasu on the couch with Mr. Nijimura, Jolyne, and Stray Cat. The blue light of the television screen cast Josuke’s flickering shadow long and tall across the wall.

By the time he hit the landing, the sound from downstairs had already faded, and it was like he was standing in a different house: long bare halls, rooms lit second-hand by the streetlamps outside the windows. Josuke glided like a ghost in and out of doors, feeling curiously uninhibited as he strolled through Okuyasu’s tucked-away oasis of a room, the room with an east-facing window where Mr. Nijimura slept, rooms that belonged to nobody and were occupied by nothing but empty cardboard boxes that had once held sentiment, until sentiment was sold to pay for the mortgage.

Finally: a room at the end of the hall, posters on the wall and tall bookcases and a bed with pressed sheets folded in precise hospital corners. The room looked like it had not been touched since Keicho’s death. Josuke wondered if Okuyasu had even been in it.

In one corner of the room was a stack of records and a turntable. Josuke picked a record from the top of the pile and slid it out from its sleeve. He didn’t recognize the artist. He wondered if he should.
That was something that always scared him: the thought that everyone else but him seemed to have well-rounded tastes and approximate knowledge and things that enthralled them, books and movies and sports and vinyl records. He wondered if he was doing something wrong; worried about what would be left of him, take away the flashy clothes and the haircut and his stand.

He put the record on. A pair of dusty speakers hummed to life. The needle wasn’t quite in the right place; when the turntable spun up, the song had already started. A drawn-out note of music warbled out as the record player got up to speed. The music kicked off with the sharp rap of a snare drum, a slow-decaying reverb, the high-pitched wailing of a male singer. Eighties glitz rolled off in synth waves through the screech of the lead guitar.

Josuke sat on the floor, the back of his head flat to the wall, listening to the music and letting it close in over him, until the room and everything beyond it ceased to exist. But while trying to decide how he felt about the song – and whether or not it was the kind of music he could envision himself listening to – the smell of sun-baked earth and sea brine and the raw chaffing of the wind at backs of his neck came back to him.

When he opened his eyes, he was still in Keicho’s old room and nothing had changed. And yet, the room felt strange to him. As if he could not process that what had happened at the cliffs all those years ago and what was happening now could co-exist in his experience.

The problem with trauma is not one of memory loss. Every day the living sip a little of the River Lethe. Forgetting is a natural condition, a necessary mercy, without which people would find it hard to move on with their lives, agonizing over every wrong they commit and resenting every wrong done to them. Time may not heal all wounds but forgetfulness is a close placebo.

Trauma is not memory forgotten but memory unnaturally preserved – ghoulsh details casked in formaldehyde: snippets of smells and sounds and feeling. Especially feeling. The mind cannot forget and so it hides; where most people have patches of fog in their histories, people with repressed memories have black boxes. Obstructions created specifically to fill Lethe’s role.

Josuke was finding all this out the hard way. Now that he’d had one of those black boxes pried open for him, he found it impossible to close it again. All he could do was try to put distance between himself and the boy on the cliffs. He hadn’t known better back then. He couldn’t have realized what he’d been doing. He wasn’t like that now.

He thought of that summer. All the stories he’d told Okuyasu – sincere stories, stories he’d thought were true – but all the while he’d been spinning a thread around his best friend, holding him fast with every loose end and unfinished twist. Keeping him close, giving him reason to come back for more. The power of being the storyteller was addictive. Once he had that gaze on him he didn’t want to let it go.

In the crossfade between one song and the next, he heard the shuffle of feet outside the door. A sound halfway between a cough and someone clearing their throat. In the window above, Josuke could see the ethereal outline of Okuyasu framed by the doorway, and he braced himself for whatever question was coming next.

Instead, the footsteps carried on down the hall, and the space where Okuyasu’s phantasmal shape had occupied in the windowpane darkened.

He waited a minute or two, only to find he could no longer concentrate on the music. All that gated reverb and synth were reduced to noise. And so he rose, and padded down the hall, and stuck his head through Okuyasu’s door. But Okuyasu wasn’t there.
He wasn’t on the couch either when Josuke returned downstairs. Jolyne had since fallen asleep. She had her arms wrapped around Stray Cat’s pot – the cat plant was asleep too, or as near to being asleep as something like that could be, its petals furled closed for the night. Only Mr. Nijimura was still awake. He appeared to be more interested in a mosquito that had latched on to his arm than in the movie.

“You know where Okuyasu went?” Josuke asked.

Okuyasu’s dad blinked at him. Tearing his eyes away from the insect, he raised one fleshy paw, a crooked webbed finger pointing up the staircase where Josuke had just come from.

“Uh, thanks,” said Josuke. “I guess.”

Back upstairs he went. Once more he drifted from room to room, in the same pattern as before – dust and empty boxes and untouched bedsheets – until he was standing in Okuyasu’s room again.

Just as he was on the point of leaving, he felt a draft on the back of his neck. There was an empty coffee canister on the windowsill, keeping the window propped open. Carefully, trying to make as little noise as possible, Josuke raised the sash, and pulled his body through the open window.

***

The last thing Okuyasu had expected when he passed by Keicho’s room was to hear his brother’s old records playing.

Growing up, there’d never been much to do by himself with only so much money to go around. He’d had a school friend or two, sure. But as with many things during that period of his life, his friendships began when he arrived at school and ended the moment the last bell rang. He was expected to be home by supper – under the omnipresent threat of or else – even though supper was rarely more than what he could scrounge up for himself from the cupboards or the deep freeze. And once home, he’d be trapped there with his loneliness and boredom until sundown and sleep carried him away.

Keicho had worked odd jobs under the table as far back as Okuyasu could remember. He used the extra money to buy himself records and CDs. Whenever Keicho retreated to his room, whether he was reading or doing his homework or a puzzle, there’d always be music, and where there was music Okuyasu would be too, crouching on the floor and twisting his dirty hands in the fabric of his shirt as he listened. He wasn’t allowed to touch the records or pick the songs, but that never bothered him. Despite Keicho insisting that Okuyasu didn’t get the music because he couldn’t name the bands or the albums and he knew nothing about instruments or chord progressions, sometimes he felt that the music got him, and that was what kept him coming back. Maybe the musicians weren’t anything like him and the lyrics were nothing like the scenes from his own life, but the music itself plucked at emotions that normally sat untouched within him – a nostalgia for city lights and balmy nights and whirlwind romances he’d never experienced, for sweeping vistas and open roads he’d never traveled.

Now Keicho was gone and the music was gone and the only sound that ever filled the house was the sound of his own voice and the voices on the television downstairs. Boredom didn’t creep in the way it used to, with his job and his father to take care of and friends that demanded his time outside of the classroom. Nonetheless: he felt there was a void at the center of his personality, something he should have been working to fill in if everything else weren’t conspiring to keep him busy.

The sound of music coming from his brother’s room had stopped him in the doorway. He forgot why he’d come looking for Josuke – forgot, even that Keicho was gone. For a moment, he was a child
again standing barefoot in the threshold, the door closed to him but the music seeping through the
cracks, so that he had only to press his ear to the door to hear it. Never, in all the time Keicho had
been dead, had it occurred to Okuyasu that there was nothing preventing him now from coming and
going as he pleased, from putting on a record for himself, any record.

In the window glass, he’d seen the whites of Josuke’s eyes flash up to meet him. The words he’d
held onto, clenched tight in his wadded-up fists – they all slipped away, leaving him open-mouthed
and feeling stupid and embarrassed all at once.

That was how he’d ended up outside, on the flattened roof atop of one of house’s oriel windows.

Behind him, Okuyasu heard the squeak of the window sash lifting on its rails.

“Man, I’ve been looking all over for you,” Josuke complained as he lowered himself down from the
window’s ledge onto the roof. “I thought you might’ve used the Hand on yourself or something.” He
paused, brow flattening into a frown. “…You know, that sounded a whole lot better in my head.”

Okuyasu snorted. “Nah. I’m just hangin’.” And then, with a kick of adrenaline that went straight to
his heart, he added: “You wanna join?”

“Sure,” said Josuke, who remained pressed as close to the window ledge as physical possible.

Okuyasu hesitated, tongue poking out through one cheek. “You ain’t afraid of heights, are ya?”

“No way!”

To illustrate how unafraid of heights he was, Josuke lowered himself down on shaky knees, then
scooted on his butt until he was beside Okuyasu. His eyes were everywhere: on Okuyasu, the sky,
his own knees. Everywhere but the ground.

“You, uh, don’t mind being up here?” Josuke asked.

“What? Cause of the height?”

“Knock it off with the stuff about heights. I’m talking about falling.”

Okuyasu shrugged. “Guess I never think about it. I like it up here – reminds me of back in Tokyo.”

“Oh yeah?” he said, for a moment slipping back into acting like the old Josuke and trying to play it
cool. As soon as the words were past his lips, he grimaced at the disinterested sound of them.

Okuyasu didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah. Me an’ my family had an apartment up on the fifteenth or sixteenth storey or something.”
Leaning forward, Okuyasu spat over the side of the roof. “Course, this ain’t near tall as that.”

When Josuke didn’t say anything, Okuyasu – needing, as ever, to fill the silence – mumbled: “I used
to like lookin’ down at the other buildings and streets and stuff. You know? I’d always wonder what
kinda people lived there. Like if they went home and cooked supper and watched TV and all that.”

Josuke, at last, brought himself to look down. While the house, as Okuyasu said, was nowhere near
as tall as the buildings in Tokyo, it was still half a storey or so higher up than any other house in the
neighborhood. From this vantage, he could see down into the backyards of his neighbors, normally
secreted away behind fences: the weather-streaked foundations, flowerbeds bowed in shade, leftover
lumber from renovation projects stacked up and abandoned, toys scattered across lawns, the deep
sunken shadows of veranda overhangs, windowpanes lit by warm electric light that looked into dining rooms and bedrooms and drawn blinds. There was a voyeuristic thrill in gazing down over the private lives of his neighbors.

“Is that why you like coming up here?” Josuke asked. “The view?”

Okuyasu’s shoulders rose and feel in a slow, rolling shrug. “I started coming out here after we moved in. Keicho could never figure out where I went. Guess it made me feel better whenever I was pissed off at him.”

A thought occurred to Josuke. “Sorry for messing with your brother’s records,” he said. “I should’ve asked.”

“It’s cool. I’ve gotta figure out what I’m gonna do with all that stuff anyway.”

An expression came over Okuyasu’s face that Josuke didn’t like. He thought of all those stacks of empty boxes inside the house, and wondered how long it’d be until Keicho’s room looked like that.

Josuke changed the subject: “You had something you came up to ask me, right?”

Okuyasu studied him, tongue prodding at one corner of his lips, the way it did when he was trying to concentrate. Finally, he broke eye contact. He slouched forward, threading his fingers together.

“Doesn’t matter now,” he mumbled. “We already know who the murderer is, right? We even got his address.”

“Whatever you say, dude.”

He waited. Okuyasu rolled his thumbs together. At last he bit his lip and turned to Josuke and stammered: “Back when you were ‘bout to pass out, you said somethin’ about there being no Voice in the Dark. What’d ya mean by that? I mean – ya heard it, right?”

There it was. Josuke had been anticipating the question – all the same, his first instinct was to invent another story, slam that black box shut and forget about. Just like when he was a child, he found that the truth was more difficult to apply the further you got from it.

The worst part was: Okuyasu would have believed him. Josuke could tell by the way Okuyasu was looking at him with his hands grasped tight together. He wasn’t searching for the truth, the way Koichi and Yukako and Rohan were – he was looking for an answer. And it didn’t matter to him what it was, so long as Josuke was the one giving it.

“I mean, of course Vox is real,” he began. “I kind of got that. And yeah I’d heard stories about it as a kid.”

“So what, it was just the concussion talking?”

Josuke wavered. The lifeline was there, at arm’s length. It’d be so easy to reach out and grab it, to stick to the status quo they’d set all summer. But if the way he and Okuyasu had been dancing around one another had taught him anything, it was how exhausting status quos could be, how much stamina it took to carry a lie.

He said:

“No. I didn’t lie to Jotaro when I told him about the rumors of kids hearing voices. Stories like that were all over the playground. But the stuff about one of my classmates hearing a voice under the
bridge, and me hearing a voice on the playground, and the kidnapper using me as bait – when we were fighting Vox, I realized… none of that ever happened.”

“Hey, come on man. It’s been a long day – I’m not in the mood for this shit.”

“I’m not kidding around here.”

Okuyasu stared at him. Through his nose, he drew a long, deep breath. “So you saying you made it all up?”

“I didn’t! – I mean. I wasn’t *trying* to lie to you, I guess is what I’m saying. I just… remembered saying those things, and kinda took for granted they actually, you know, *happened*.”

“So the kidnapper getting you to call Jotaro and all that…”

“Never happen. At least not as far as I remember.”

“But Jotaro ended up in the hospital!”

“I know. That was me. Fuck.” Down his face, Josuke dragged his hands. “I kept telling him stories, got him chasing after ghosts.” He paused, fingertips touching his chin. “At the cliffs – he got hurt because he thought he was trying to protect me from something that didn’t exist.” He exhaled, letting out a shaky laugh. “There was no… fuck… big epic stand battle, any of that. He *fell*. That’s it. That’s the big fucking story. Some interesting, hunh?”

“Why make up all that shit?”

“I told you – it was true at first. You know how it is. I’d heard stories, I told those stories to Jotaro because I thought he’d be impressed. Then I realized he’d stay here in Morioh as long as he thought there was something here – a stand user, a murderer.”

“But why – .”

“Because I didn’t want to get left behind again!” Josuke snapped.

He said this before the words had even taken shape in his mind. Once they were out of his mouth he gazed, gaping, at the space between himself and Okuyasu, as if the words visibly hung in the air between them.

It made sense, hearing it aloud. Jotaro’s arrival in Morioh, how Josuke had been disappointed at first that he’d been the one to step off the boat.

“There’s gotta be more to it,” Okuyasu was saying. “That neighbour of yours really did disappear, right? And there’s gotta be a reason Vox has it out for ya.”

“I guess.”

Josuke rubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes, and there was something about the gesture, something about the level tone of his voice, that made Okuyasu finally snap.

“Look,” he growled. “Whatever happened, beatin’ yourself up now ain’t gonna fix it.”

Josuke’s hand fell way. “What’d you say?”

“You said you remembered all this when we were fighting that creep, yeah?”
“Sort of. I heard a voice that sounded like me when I was kid, saying all that shit I’d made up.”

“Probably ‘cause it wanted you to feel – whatever you’re feeling now. Yer givin’ it just what it wants, sittin’ around feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Man, fuck off.”

There was glisten forming at the waterlines of Josuke’s eyes, and a hard line to his mouth like he was trying to keep his expression from cracking to pieces – seeing this, a lump dropped in Okuyasu’s throat.

Out of instinct, he reached up and brushed the pad of his thumb over Josuke’s cheek, smudging a tear away.

“Hey,” he said – softer this time. “Sorry, I shouldn’t ‘a yelled at you. I know it ain’t easy – it’s one thing to say all that about not being able to go back and change anything – .”

Josuke’s shoulders gave a jerk. Okuyasu pulled back, terrified he’d pushed it too far this time – fucked things up the way he always managed to fuck things up whenever he opened his mouth.

Then he saw the grin split Josuke’s face, heard the rasping laughter and saw the way it shook his whole body.

“Sorry,” Josuke managed to say. “I just – when you put it that way, some of the things Vox repeated back to me were pretty silly. Like, ‘meet me at the cliffs at noon’ – I bet I lifted that line from one of mom’s soaps or something.”

The tears hadn’t stopped. Finally being able to talk to Okuyasu felt like it had unstoppered something – everything held back was pouring out in a rush of emotion that left him drained and elated all at once.

“Sounds that way,” Okuyasu admitted.

“Man, can you believe Jotaro bought that shit?”

“That does seem kinda dumb.”

“Pretty dumb,” Josuke agreed.

Josuke braced himself against Okuyasu’s shoulders, cheek warm and wet against Okuyasu’s neck as the tears and laughter faded to a tremor. All at once those feelings from their first time together at the beach were surging back. The starlight above them, the neighbourhood spread out down below, the isolation all alone up on the roof – all of it made Okuyasu want to take the other boy’s hand in his own the way he’d wanted to since long before he’d been able to put the feeling into words.

He got as far as laying a hand on the back of Josuke’s neck, feeling the sweat beneath his shirt collar and the warm peach fuzz at his nape.

Behind them, he heard a crash and what sounded like several tiles skittering down the roof’s incline. Josuke wrenched free from Okuyasu, Crazy Diamond at the ready, and shouted: “Who’s there?!”

From behind the chimney, a familiar, lanky shape emerged, arms raised in the air.

“It’s just me!” Toyohiro called out.
“The fuck are you doing on my roof?” Okuyasu demanded.

Crazy Diamond vanished. Toyohiro – not without some hesitation – lowered his arms.

“Sorry. Ever since that thing you two trapped in Superfly evicted me, I’ve been looking for someplace to crash. There’s not a whole lot of transmission towers up for rent around Morioh, you know.”

Against the roof, Toyohiro tapped his foot. “Now this, *this* is nice. Lots of climbing space, out of the wind, plenty of gutters for catching rainwater, empty lot in the back to start up a self-sufficient garden… you wouldn’t mind if I stayed here for a bit, would you?”

“No!” both Josuke and Okuyasu exclaimed in unison.

“Alright. Jesus.” Toyohiro lifted his head, eyes drifting past them to the road below. “Are you expecting company?”

A taxi was in the process of pulling into the driveway. It stopped short of the gate, headlights casting foggy wedges of light through the bars. From the roof, they heard the sound of a car door slamming shut.

“Looks like the lovebirds are back,” Josuke remarked.

***

A ring of pinkish water circled the sink drain. Sato gazed at it ruefully, before bending over and spitting. A long string of drool the same color as the water splattered onto the porcelain.

The bathroom’s garbage can was filled with cotton balls soaked in isopropyl and blood. After cleaning out the worst of the wounds he could finally assess the damage. He was missing four teeth – all from the front, three from the top row and one from the bottom. His nose was swollen and turning a grotesque violet color. Abrasions to his pallet were beginning to bead blood again; the area surrounding them bruised and darkening like rotten fruit. His gums were pulpy and dark red. The set of his jaw was all wrong: it hung loosely and off kilter. He knew, even before prodding it with his fingers, that it was fractured.

The hospital was not an option. Those two kids from earlier had been in rough shape. They would have ended up in the hospital when they made it back to town, and the staff would already be on the lookout for someone matching his description. And even if they hadn’t made it back to town – injuries like his were bound to raise questions. People didn’t just go around accidentally getting punched in the face.

At least he was prepared for the present situation. Amid the barebones collection of books on his shelf was a medical textbook or two, purchased second-hand from a garage sale what felt like lifetimes ago. He vaguely recalled a section on oral surgery.

Collecting his concentration together through the constant buzz of pain, Sato staggered out into the living room. He pulled one book down off the shelf and then another, tearing through the pages until he found what he was looking for.

On his way to the kitchen he scanned the relevant passage, picking out words for the various materials used in the procedure. He continued to read, book held in the crook of one elbow, as he filled a pot with water and put it on the stove to boil. Then, he set the book aside and went to the garage.
From his toolbox, he grabbed a hank of twenty-six gauge wire, wire cutters, forceps, and pliers. The one thing he didn’t have that the textbook mentioned was a set of arch bars. After some deliberation, he decided on cutting two small strips out of a sheet of galvanized metal that he’d previously used to repair a client’s damaged fender. It was a crude approximation, but he supposed it was the function of the thing that mattered.

By the time he returned to the kitchen, the water on the stove was already boiling. He stoppered the drain, set the wiring and tools in the sink, and poured the pot of boiling water into the basin. As an afterthought, he fished a half-empty bottle of bleach from beneath the sink and added a capful to the steaming water.

As his implements steeped, Sato emptied half an ice tray into a dishtowel, took a seat at the kitchen table, and set about studying the passage on inter-maxillary fixation in his textbook. On paper, the procedure didn’t seem hard. Experience, however, had taught him that it was difficult to gauge exactly how involved something was until put into practice.

When the water had sufficiently cooled, he rose and drained the sink, rinsing away the burning smell of bleach. Then he carried the wiring and tools to the washroom, where he laid the items out on a clean white towel on the counter, along with the textbook.

For a minute, he considered his reflection in the mirror. The dish towel of ice pressed firmly to his gums had dulled his nerve endings, but he knew it wouldn’t make much of a difference. Instead, he told himself that this, too, would pass – as everything else in his life had before it.

He cut the first length of wire. Taking a deep breath, he steadied his hand and passed one end of the strand through the embrasure of his first molar.

Blood dripped onto the porcelain from a cut where the wire had snagged on his gums. Hissing, Sato grabbed a hand towel off the rack and pressed it to his mouth to stem the bleeding. He kept the towel there, clenched between his teeth, as he passed the end of the wire back through the next embrasure, wrapping it around the tooth. With his forceps, he twisted the ends of the wire together to form a loose loop – leaving enough room for the arch bar to pass through.

And then he went on to the next tooth.

When he’d finished wrapping wires around his teeth, he slid a strip of metal through both sets of loops, top and bottom, before tightening up the wires until the arch bars were locked in place. Then he cut the wires and tied the ends off into rosettes.

His makeshift arch bars didn’t have lugs, so instead, he passed his fish loops under the metal strips themselves, snaking the wire through the narrow dips between his teeth. This time, as he tightened off the wires, he could feel his teeth being forced together.

The moment his jaw was wired shut, panic set in.

Breathing was hard enough before. With his mouth wired shut, he felt like he was suffocating. His lips curled back, shallow breaths whistling through the gaps in his teeth. His first instinct was to open his mouth and yank the wires out.

Instead, he threw open the medicine cabinet, grabbed his spare inhaler – and after a moment’s indecision, his spacer – and hurriedly put the two together before pressing the spacer’s opening to his lips. One pump of the inhaler and he closed his eyes, counted down from ten, and did his best to draw the medication down into his lungs.
Even after, even when Sato had calmed down enough to force himself to breathe through his nose, the deflated feeling in his lungs and the lightness in his head didn’t go away. He felt like he was in a state of suspension: suffocating, but getting just enough air to keep him conscious. Every moment felt like the tail end of a marathon. He kept trying to catch his breath only for it to slip away on him.

This too will pass, he reminded himself yet again.

With his jaw taken care of, at least, he could turn his attention to other things. Namely: that his wallet was missing, which meant one of the kids had taken it, which meant they’d know where he lived.

He threw his spare inhaler and spacer into his hiking pack, along with a roll of bills he kept hidden behind a stack of books on the bookshelf. Then, he took one last slow tour of the house. His eyes roved over the chair he’d slept in, his tool chest, his cassette rack – all the familiar comforts that had seemed as integral to his life as his own body – before he opened the front door, stepped out into the chilly pre-dawn darkness, and left home for the last time.

There was no use taking the car. The cops would trace it too easily. He had vague notions of hiking to S City. And then what? There was a good amount of money in his bag, maybe enough to buy his way out of the country – or at least enough to buy him a new start, another name in another town. So he set out walking in the direction he’d come from, back toward the woods, because as much as he knew it was a bad idea going back, staying out on the open road would be even worse.

He discovered he was able to do all this – pick up and leave everything behind – with near perfect calmness. He supposed it was all a matter of course. Survival depended on moving forward, and so he did, with all the numb mechanical response of a person who found themselves in the aftermath of an explosion or a hurricane.

Others might have seen his situation differently. They might have understood what was happening to Sato as the exaction of justice, instead of a random and apathetic act of violence. We might even be inclined to agree with them.

For Sato, however, the consequences of getting caught – life in prison, or more likely, the death penalty – seemed far out of proportion to the crime. He did not consider himself a bad person. He generally got on with people, paid his taxes, made little by way of ripples in the pond. He didn’t murder people out of hate, or spite, or perversion. There was only ever the detached curiosity – what if he wrapped his hands around that neck? What if he plunged his hunting knife into that belly? – and action followed after. The decision that hung the balance between life and death was a split-second choice, a shift in mood, a moment in his life so insignificant and forgettable that the very thought that he should spend whatever remained of his existence being punished for it seemed nothing short of absurd and cruel.

He was so bound up in this thought that he didn’t pay much attention to where he was going until he found himself standing in the shadow of a creaking old transmission tower. By then the sun was peaking over the treetops to the east, its clear gold light striking the structure at an angle. The wind shrieked through the tower’s metal skeleton, seeming to whisper to him.

There was something standing in the center of the tower, something more shadow than shape. It seemed to have long hair, and skirts that rustled around its ankles, but when Sato tried to get a closer look, whatever distinct features he thought he’d seen disappeared.

The voice that spoke to him was the same voice as always, only this time, it sounded nothing like himself.

“Oh, dear,” it sighed, with just enough concern and preoccupation dripping in its tone to grate a
nerve. “*Just look at what they’ve done to you.*”

Sato winced. It was a voice he remembered hearing before, in an age long buried under the dust and busyness of existing.

The thing took a step closer toward the edge of the tower, lifting a hand as if to touch his cheek. But it stopped short of doing so, hand raised, a foot back from where the tower ended and its shadow began.

“*Don’t worry,*” it said to him. “*Everything’s going to be alright. We’re going to get you out of this mess.*”

There should have been a part of him that was frightened by the voice and the thing in the tower. But that was a part of him Sato Fujimoto had discarded when he’d first listened to the voice and invited its suggestions.

And so instead he asked, in a voice rough with pain: “What do you need me to do?”

Chapter End Notes

Easter eggs for this chap:
* Spot the Lynch reference.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

It feels like it's been a long time since I've done a Johnny's scene. This is probably the last of them. As much as I enjoy thinking about what different characters would order, managing 10 characters in a single scene is a huge headache. The entire scene ended up being 6500 words -- much longer than I intended!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Alright, who’s got what?” Okuyasu asked.

Koichi folded his arms across his chest and let out a sigh. “We should’ve asked the waitress when she brought our order over…”

Across the ice cream shoppe, the waitress, without looking up from her Sodoku puzzle, flipped over the ‘Welcome!’ sign by her till. The other side read: ‘Back in 15 minutes!’

Rohan smirked. He leaned across the table, chin resting on one cocked wrist, and said: “What do you think? ESP? Or exceptional hearing?”

“I think she’s just on her break,” Yukako bit back, chin dimpling in displeasure.

“Don’t know about the rest of you, but I know which one’s got my name on it,” declared Tamami as he reached for a paper Dixie cup of water. He only ever set foot in a restaurant for one of two reasons: free ice water, or to restock his stash of single-serve condiments.

As he was lifting the paper cup to his lips, he caught sight of Mikitaka staring him down from across the table. “What’re you looking at?” he demanded.

“Pardon me,” said Mikitaka, “but are you going to eat those ice cubes?”

Tamami set the cup back down and slid it across the table with more force than necessary. Water sloshed over the rim, leaving a little reflective puddle on resin table surface. “Knock yourself out,” he grumbled.

While Mikitaka fished the ice cubes from Tamami’s cup with a plastic fork, Yukako considered the sundry lumps fried batter nestled in wax paper on the tray.

“I suppose this must be my iced sweet tea,” she conceded, reaching for the fried lump with a straw sticking out of it.

The night before, she and Koichi had flown back from Hawaii. By the time the cab had arrived at the Nijimuras’ home, it was just past one in the morning. Josuke and Okuyasu met them on the front step beneath the tarnished corona of the porch light, amid the chirping of crickets and the pinging of moth wings against the lamp overhead. A couple weeks in the central Pacific sun had transformed the couple: Koichi with a golden tan and wind-swept hair, the whites of his teeth bright and polished between his smile; Yukako’s cheeks peeling, pale circles around her eyes from the sunglasses she’d worn, her shoulders blushing red beneath the thin straps of her sax blue sundress. Between Koichi and Yukako’s jet lag and Josuke and Okuyasu’s exhaustion from the fight with Sato, they hadn’t
talked much – by two A.M., all four had fallen asleep on spare futons in the living room.

The impromptu gathering at Johnny’s American-style Ice Cream Shoppe was arranged the next morning. Koichi, unlike Josuke and Okuyasu, had enough sense to keep an address book with the phone numbers of Morioh’s stand users – or at the very least, the ones he was willing to put up with. Johnny’s wasn’t anyone’s first choice of location, but as they had a fussy four year old on hand, concessions had to be made. The ice cream shoppe had a special on: any menu item deep fried for an additional fifty yen surcharge.

Which brings us back to the present.

Josuke felt a tug on his shirt. Jolyne’s big dark eyes were fixed up at him, like she was waiting on him to do something.

“What?” he asked.

No response – just her tugging on his shirt again. When he ignored her, she made a sound like a high-pitched growl.

“What?” he repeated.

Then he remembered how Jolyne had acted the first time he’d met her at the docks. He’d been a stranger to her back then – and half the people at the table were strangers now.

Doing his best imitation of Jotaro (minus the constipated expression), Josuke stooped over until his ear was level to Jolyne’s mouth.

She leaned in and whispered: “I think you got mine.”

“Your what?” he asked – just before taking a bite of his deep fried dessert and getting a mouthful of chocolatey fudge banana flavour that was definitely not the double cherry pie sundae he’d ordered.

“Oh, sorry,” he mumbled. “Guess this is your deep fried ‘split, right?”

When he slid his dish over to Jolyne, she made a face before jabbing her spoon into the batter shell, keeping as far away as possible from where Josuke had taken a bit out of it.

Whatever Rohan had ordered came on a stick.

“What’d you get?” Josuke asked.


“Since when does an ice cream joint serve corn dogs?”

“It’s not an ice cream shoppe without corn dogs.”

“Says who?”

“The sign literally right in front of you. Honestly, I’m surprised you hadn’t noticed.”

Sure enough, on the wall right next to the cash was a sign that depicted an anthropomorphized corndog with great big cartoon eyes and rosy cheeks, alongside the slogan ‘It’s not an ice cream shoppe without corn dogs!’

“Hunh,” was all Josuke could manage by way of reaction.
“Rohan,” Koichi began, “you know corn dogs are already deep-fried, right?”

“Of course I know that.”

Rohan took a bite of his corn dog. As he chewed, the vindictive set of his eyebrows wavered in resolve, until there was nothing but a blank expression on his face.

“How is it?” asked Josuke.

“I’ll let you know when I find the meat.”

One of the girls in the booth behind them gave a shriek. Before Josuke could turn around to find out what was happening, Toyohiro stepped lightly over his shoulder and onto the table in front of him, narrowly avoiding putting his foot in Josuke’s deep-fried sundae in the process.

“I wasn’t aware we were playing ‘The Floor is Lava’,” Rohan remarked.

Before he could follow this comment up by taking a bite of his deep-fried corndog, it leapt free from his grip, skewer and all.

“Got you!” Toyohiro exclaimed, triumphantly holding up a length of fishing line that he’d spooled around the calluses on his hand. At the other end of the line, Rohan’s corndog dangled by a hook.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Rohan demanded.

“Scavenging.” Toyohiro took a bit of the corndog, lips curling in a sharp, wolfish grin. “You have to take what you can get where you can get it.”

“This ain’t a transmission tower!” Okuyasu exclaimed. “You can just go up to the counter an’ order if yer hungry.”

“The guy paid 100,000 yen for his pad,” said Josuke. “I don’t think he’s gonna take you up on that.”

“Heaven’s Door,” Rohan snapped.

By then, however, Toyohiro was already in the process of backflipping his way onto the next table over. The sound of shouts and the clatter of condiment racks and napkin dispensers jarring together followed in his wake. The cashier lifted her eyes from the puzzle in front of her and gave Toyohiro a meaningful look – but since he’d not yet crossed over the threshold by creating more of a hassle than getting up and asking him to stop would require, a meaningful look was all he got.

Tamami laid a hand on Rohan’s arm. “Hey, lay off the guy,” he said. “He hasn’t been on the ground in months. He’s going through what you and I would’s call an adjustment period.”

Rohan sunk back into a seat, but he kept his scowl engaged. “An adjustment period. Certainly. Just like when our ancestors first climbed down from the trees. There’s a late bloomer in every family.”

Meanwhile, Okuyasu noticed that Yuuya hadn’t touched the tray of food. He was stretched back in his seat with his arms folded behind him, his paper placemat vacant except for a crayon scribble he’d drawn of a dog wearing a cape.

“What’s the matter?” Okuyasu asked. “The waitress forget about ya?”

Yuuya twisted his head to one side. The vertebrae in his neck gave an audible pop. “Nah. I didn’t order anything. Mom always feeds us a huge breakfast. I’m talking natto, eggs, miso soup – the whole deal.”
Okuyasu whistled. “Must be nice. I’m jealous.”

“What about you? What’d you get?”

“Only the best ice cream: choco-strawberry.” He held up his ice cream cone. Nestled atop it was a perfect sphere of fried batter. “Guess it’s kinda hard to tell, hunh?”

“Don’t you ever feel like trying something different?” Koichi asked. “Like maybe a different flavour? – not that there’s anything wrong with choco-strawberry!”

“Why’d I wanna do that? I like choco-strawberry.”

“I know, but – don’t you worry you might miss out?”

“On what? Payin’ four hundred yen for somethin’ I don’t want?”


Josuke cleared his throat. “Anyway.”

The song playing over the boom box wound down. In the crossfade, the whole diner seemed to go quiet. He became aware that everyone in the room could hear him – not just his friends at the table but the other customers, the waitress, even the new guy out back. He’d spent so much time in the company of other stand users that he’d nearly forgotten that discussing ghosts, magical powers, and murder was usually the kind of thing that got people committed.

Josuke lowered his voice. “Anyway… what’re we gonna do about that thing in the tower?”

He’d already gotten the others up to speed while they were waiting for their order, albeit not without skimming here and there. Omitting, for instance, what had gone down at the cliffs, except that Jotaro had been injured. Even after getting the story off his chest to Okuyasu, it was hard to talk about. The feeling was like losing a limb. No matter how long ago it had happened, it didn’t get better. He hoped he’d at least learn to ignore it after a while.

“The problem,” said Koichi, “is that we don’t know much about the stand’s powers.”

“Sure we do. It can imitate voices. And attach itself to people, somehow.”

“Voices? Isn’t that Vox’s ability?”

“That’s what I’m getting at,” Josuke said, an edge of irritation rising in his voice. “That thing is Vox.”

“How’s that possible? You stabbed the murderer with the arrow, didn’t you?”

“I’m not saying I got any idea how it works.” As he spoke, Josuke jabbed his fork into his deep-fried double cherry pie sundae. Cherry-flavoured corn syrup oozed from the batter shell and filled the bottom of the clear plastic dish. “And for the record, I didn’t stab the guy. He did that himself.”

“Still – wouldn’t the killer’s stand be a manifestation of his soul?”

Josuke thought back to the conversation with Jotaro out on the oyster farm. What he could recall were snippets, juxtaposed with the memory of the bamboo raft being violently tossed along by the waves. “Jotaro said something about stands being a kinda antibody,” Josuke began. Just the mention of the word *antibody* was enough to stir a seasick feeling in his stomach. “Who knows how long Vox’s been knocking around inside the guy’s head. Maybe there wasn’t enough left of him to fight
the infection on his own. All I know is I could hear Vox in my head when it was inside Superfly with me.”

“That’s a good thing though, right?” Yuuya asked. “Now that it’s a stand, we can kick its ass.” When Jolyne glanced up from her deep-fried banana split, mouth agape, Yuuya hurried recanted: “Kick its butt. I meant its butt.”

“Great, except Okuyasu already tried that and he almost busted my ribs.”

“That almost sounds like the stand you encountered, doesn’t it?” Koichi asked, directing his question at Rohan.

Rohan – who’d been in the process of trying to one-up Yuuya’s placemat doodles with his own realistically-rendered Crayola masterpiece – lifted his head reluctantly from his work. “Cheap Trick? I suppose. If that’s the case,” here he jabbed the business end of his carnation pink crayon at Josuke, “there has to be some way it affixes itself to a ‘user’. Cheap trick rode on its victims’ backs. The Voice in the Dark…?”

“Beats me. I guess – it spoke to me.”

“About what?”

“None of your business.”

Rohan leaned back in his chair, teeth set together in a grin. “Nothing you’re too proud of, I take it.”

“Something like that,” Josuke mumbled.

Koichi frowned, one hand curling at his chest. “Maybe it feeds on the negative emotions of its victims? Like Enigma Boy, or the Lock.”

“It should get its own damn gimmick,” Tamami mumbled. “Last thing I need’s competition.”

Ignoring Tamami’s remark, Yukako said, “If that’s the case, Vox may be able to transfer to anyone at any time just by talking to them.”

“I could turn into ear plugs!” Mikitaka chimed in.

Josuke held up a hand. “Take it easy, dude. No one’s asking around for volunteers just yet.”

“What I want to know,” Koichi piped up, “is why Vox tricked you using my voice in the first place.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Rohan. “What better way to get a hold of the arrow than to have Josuke and Okuyasu bring it? You might as well have gift wrapped the thing.”

“You think that’s what Vox’s after?” asked Okuyasu.

Yukako shrugged her sunburnt shoulders. “Given the past interest in the bow and arrow, I wouldn’t be surprised either. Koichi and I had a theory about that – didn’t we, Koichi?”

When Koichi replied, there was an anxious rigidity to his voice, like he’d just been asked to solve a math equation in front of the class. “Oh, right! We, ah, think the arrow does more than just make stand users. With what we’ve seen so far, there’s something about it that appears to transmit the will of whoever wields the arrow onto the people it ‘infects’.”

“Which is why most of us at this table have tried to kill one another at some point,” Yukako added.
Her offhanded tone made it seem like attempted murder was the social equivalent of running into someone at the bank. “It wasn’t just magnetism between stand users. Someone wanted Josuke or Koichi or Kishibe dead, and our subconscious responded accordingly.”

“Except Shizuka,” Koichi pointed out. “Since she’s just a baby. And Mikitaka.” As he said this, Mikitaka was in the process of dipping an ice cube in mustard. No further explanation was required. “What we’re saying is that it’d make sense for Vox to go after the arrow, especially if it wanted to get rid of you.”

Smoothing a hand over his hair, Josuke mumbled, “Well, we still got the arrow, so it didn’t work. That’s one us, zero Vox.”

“I wouldn’t celebrate so soon,” said Rohan. “Let’s go over everything one last time, just so we’re so we’re crystal clear: we have an evil entity-of-unknown-origin-turned-stand stuck in a transmission tower, and no way of killing it without killing Higashikata. Did I miss anything?”

“Hey man,” Yuuya cut in, “calm down.”

For a moment, Rohan peered at Yuuya with a perplexed expression – then he burst out into a loud, barking laugh. “I’m calm. I’m having a great time. How many artists can say they’ve experienced what I have?” In front of him, he held his hands spaced shoulder-width apart. “That’s what I bring to the industry. That’s what I’m known for. A fresh perspective – and authenticity. And it doesn’t get much more authentic than being in a pinch. People like an underdog story.”

Koichi shot Rohan a warning look. Ten hours of trans-pacific flight hung in the bags beneath his eyes, and his patience was losing its shine. “Rohan,” he said, “this isn’t a good time to be thinking about your research.”

Rohan shut his mouth. His throat clicked when he swallowed.

In his seat, Okuyasu shifted. “There’s always the killer, y’know.”

Josuke snapped his fingers. “That’s right! I almost forgot.”

He pulled out a wallet and slid it face-up across the table, opened to the windowed pocket that held a driver’s licence. “The guy’s name is Sato Fujimoto. I don’t recognize the address but it looks like he lives here in Morioh.”

Yuuya leaned over, arms folded on the table, and gave a whistle. “I know this guy.”

“The hell – from where?”

Taking out his own wallet, Yuuya slipped a folded business card from the sleeve and flashed it at Josuke. “Fujimoto Automotive. He used to work in that big repair shop down by the dockyard before he opened up his own practice. I keep my bike in good shape, but when she needs real delicate work done, that Fujimoto guy’s usually who I go to.”

Tamami leaned over, fingers curled around the edges of the table. “Yeah, I know the guy too,” he mumbled, glaring down at the driver’s licence picture. “He wouldn’t even crack open the hood on my baby.”

“What’s he like?” Koichi asked.

“Hard to say.” Folding the business card, Yuuya slipped it back into his wallet. “We didn’t exactly talk much. He was all business – told you how it was, gave you the bill, didn’t try to stiff you or
nothing. Not much for small talk."

“One of those quiet types, is he? I’m not surprised,” Rohan mumbled. “People always say the same thing about guys like him – ‘They didn’t *seem* like a killer!'”

Once again, Josuke felt a tug on his sleeve. When he bent over, Jolyne whispered into his ear: “Who’re you talking about?”

Josuke winced. Being in the company of adults and other teens made it easy for him to forget the kid at the table. They were supposed to be keeping certain topics neutered around her, using code words and euphemisms, but so far it hadn’t panned out. They didn’t have much of a choice – as Rohan pointed out, there was no telling what erasing the knowledge of an entire language could do to a developing brain.

“He’s… just a character. In a show we all watch,” Josuke replied, loud enough for the others to hear. He did a quick visual scan of the table, eyes slipping from one person’s to the next with just enough ferocity and intent in his gaze to be a warning. “The series finale’s coming up soon. We’re trying to figure out how it’s all going to play out.”

Yukako took a slow, deep gulp of her sweet tea. Josuke watched, dangling onto the premonition that she was about to say something. And sure enough, when she’d set her deep-fried beverage aside, she asked:

“Are you sure Jolyne should be joining us for the big finale? I don’t know if the series is appropriate for someone her age.”

Jolyne flushed. “I’m old enough!” she exclaimed, forgetting in her fury to consult her interlocutor. “Mr. Rohan lets me read comics with killers ‘n stuff!”

When all eyes went to Rohan, he waved them off. “Let’s not get off track, here. *Josuke* was the one planning on bringing her along.”

“I wasn’t,” said Josuke. Across the table Koichi’s eyebrows disappeared up into his bangs; Yukako pretended to study the clock on the wall. “I *wasn’t*!” he insisted.

When the others didn’t respond, he slung an arm around Jolyne’s shoulders. “Hey kiddo, you don’t mind staying back at the house with Mr. Nijimura, do ya?”

Jolyne shrugged him off. “It’s boring there,” she complained.

“Aww c’mon, you can play with Stray Cat!”

“All he does is sleep.”

“I don’t think leavin’ her with dad’s such a good idea,” Okuyasu piped up. “Pops can’t even work a can opener by himself.”

Rohan let out a forceful sigh. “Look. How about I make it easy for the two of you?”

“Whaddya mean?” asked Okuyasu.

At Koichi, Rohan snapped his fingers. “Your address book.”

Koichi pulled out his address book, but kept it clutchted to his chest. “Gee, when you ask like that…”

“*Please,*” Rohan grit out.
At length, Koichi relented and slid the address book over to Rohan, then went back to nursing his deep-fried creamsicle.

Setting his leather folio bag on the table in front of him, Rohan took out a black device with a stubby antenna that Josuke mistook for a walkie-talkie at first. Only when he caught a glimpse of the number pad did he realize that he was looking at a cellphone.

Rohan skimmed through the address book (“I can’t believe you have Hazamada in here,” he remarked with a grimace), dialed a number, and waited. The cellphone was slightly too large to hold comfortably in one hand, so instead he wedged it between his ear and his shoulder.

“Hello.”

Josuke – along with the rest of the table – watched with anticipation as Rohan straightened out. “This is Rohan Kishibe, the manga artist.” The tone of his voice changed, rounding out at the edges. Whoever he was speaking to, he was making an obvious effort to be polite. “No, no, I’m not calling about that. I was hoping I could speak to – yes. Yes. That would be perfect, thank you. Thank you. No, that’s no problem at all. Thank you.”

A long pause ensued. Rohan rolled his eyes, lips silently moving in mimic of the unheard voice on the other end of the line.

The next time he spoke, the bite in Rohan’s voice had returned: “I need you to come to Johnny’s American Style Ice Cream Shoppe. Pronto.”

“You want the extra money, right?”

“Babysitting.”

“I don’t see why that matters. Money’s money.”

“Look, you owe me anyway. Will you be here, or not?”

“That was the answer I was looking for.”

“Whatever you do, don’t put me back on the line with – Hiiiiii again. I’m afraid I’m going to have to borrow him for today. Yes. Oh, not at all. Thanks again. You too. Of course. Buh-bye now.”

Rohan pressed the hang-up button on the phone. When he turned back to the others, there was no trace in his expression of the falsetto friendliness that had laced his voice moments ago. “That’s been taken care of. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“So it’s settled, then,” said Josuke. “Once your babysitter shows up, we pack up here and go after that mother –,” he sneaked a glance at Jolyne, “—loving jerk.”

“Nice save,” Rohan remarked.

Just as he was reaching for the napkin dispenser, Koichi paused, mouth falling open. “Guys,” he stammered, “I think we have a problem.”

Mounted high up on the wall in the corner of the ice cream parlour was a rabbit-eared television set. All morning long it had been playing the A.M. news on mute, blocky black-and-white subtitles scrolling by along the bottom of the screen. Just now, the news station was showing an aerial shot of a transmission tower. The subtitles, a skip behind, were still describing the scene of a fire from the last segment.
“Yo, Kanedaichi,” Okuyasu called out. “Ain’t that your house?”

“Hey, whatchit!” the cashier snapped when Toyohiro made a flying leap from a nearby table onto the front counter.

“Turn the volume on,” he demanded.

“…This morning a little under an hour ago,” the newscaster said, voice fading in as the cashier mashed the volume up button on the television remote. “The footage you are about to see may be disturbing to some viewers.”

The camera cut to a shot of the transmission tower from a different angle. There was a helicopter grounded on the field nearby, a group of rescue workers carrying a stretcher into the tower while police officers cordoned off the area in yellow ticker tape.

Another jump cut, to a close-up this time. Taken from inside the tower. Someone had tied a rope to one of the horizontal struts. Hanging upside down from the rope was a man tied at the feet, his body turning stiffly in the breeze, a grinning red slash at his neck like a lipstick smear, blood coating his face and the underside of his jaw.

Okuyasu lurched to his feet. The newscaster was still talking, but he couldn’t hear a word over the pounding of his pulse in his ears. There was an itch in his feet to do something and a phantom tug at his hands to make something disappear – and for one moment, the blood hot and quickened around his brain, he was sorry Sato Fujimoto wasn’t there in the flesh. There wasn’t much by way of commitment to the thought: it was sudden, brutal. The rapid congealing of whatever emotions were flowing through his head into something with substance.

Then Josuke’s hand closed around his wrist. “C’mon, man,” he said. “It’s not worth it.”

The anger bled out from Okuyasu. He dropped back town into his seat, hands heavy on his thighs. As they listened to the rest of the news segment, Josuke twinned their hands together.

“…Identified as a college student from S City whose name has not yet been released to the public. His body was discovered by an archeological surveyor, who’d been working at a nearby site at the time. Police are saying this is the fourteenth suspicious death in the town of Morioh within the past year.”

“You figure this means that stand of yours got out of the transmission tower?” Yuuya asked.

“It seems that way,” said Koichi. “Otherwise, it would have appeared on TV, right?”

Okuyasu rubbed a hand along his jaw, feeling the raw dryness of his skin leftover from shaving the night before. “It woulda taken, what? Ten minutes or somethin’ to bleed out like that. Vox would’ve had all kindsa time to get out.”

“What do you suppose is going to happen when those rescue workers try removing the body?” Rohan mused out loud.

“Obviously, one of them will have to stay behind,” Yukako responded.

Josuke groaned and pressed the pads of his fingers to his temples. While his headache had dulled since yesterday, the pain was still there, coming and going as day wore on, always a tension-threat in the margins of his vision. “Shit. I forgot about that.”

There was a loud crash as the table beside them snapped in two. Toyohiro – whose weight and the
travelling velocity thereof was responsible for the table’s demise – picked himself off the ground and staggered over to the group, body swaying like a pendulum.

“I’ll do it,” he declared, “I’ll go back.”

“You sure about that?” said Josuke. “I know you said all that about not wanting to leave the tower ‘cause you were scared, but I figured that was so I’d stop beating the shit out of you. I thought after being out and back in the real world again, you would’ve changed your mind.”

“You wouldn’t understand, man,” Toyohiro mumbled, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the television screen. “She needs me.”

“She?” Yukako asked, voice warped tight around barely-concealed offense.

“All those months up there on Superfly changed me. I’m talking connections between stand and user here. Me and her being apart is about as crazy as me being without both my arms.”

“Sounds more like Stockholm Syndrome to me,” Josuke mumbled, cutting his eyes at Yukako.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“I wasn’t looking at anyone!”

She eyed him carefully, grinding one end of her straw between her teeth, leaving impressions of her molars in the soft plastic.

As a child, Yukako Yamagishi and her mother had followed her father around the world. They’d stayed in hotel rooms and summer homes and second homes, captive to the walls around them and the invasive attention of the staff while her father locked himself away in his office or wined and dined clients and business partners out on the town. Yukako had not been allowed to leave the premises or her babysitter’s line of sight. She grew up watching her mother sit by the window, always, it seemed, with a new paperback at hand, another story that came and slipped from her imprisoned life with all the perishable effect of the stories before it, accumulating on bookshelves never to be read again, and later, accumulating in boxes for charity. By the time she was no longer a child, Yukako believed love was a gilded cage of kindness, and that her father’s firm grip on herself and her mother and the walls he built around both of them were his best qualities instead of his worst.

But that was a version of herself that had undergone renovation, and existed only in parts and pieces. A few left-behind furnishings and fixtures: stray gestures of possession and jealousy that caught her off guard every now and then. She knew it; Josuke knew it. From across the table, she watched the blood rush to Josuke’s face.

Koichi was the one who changed the subject. “So that solves the problem with Superfly… but what about Vox? And Sato?”

This time, when Josuke felt a tug at his shirt, he didn’t bother bending down.

“Can’t it wait a minute?” he asked Jolyne.

“I’m bored,” she declared. Her ability to sit still at a table only lasted as long as her food, and she had already finished her deep-fried banana split.

“We’re wrapping it up. We’ll be done in just a few.”

“I wanna ride the train,” Jolyne insisted.
Just outside the entrance to the ice cream shoppe was a coin-operated train ride. For a hundred yen, it would lurch back and forth for a few minutes while playing a Pat Metheny track. As far as rides went it was a bit of a buzzkill.

Jolyne, however, didn’t seem to care.

“I don’t have any money on me,” Josuke complained. “Okuyasu?”

“Don’t look at me!”

To Rohan, Yukako said: “Give her the money.”

Rohan snorted. “Why should I?”

“To buy us some time to discuss the series finale.”

Koichi gave a nervous laugh. “We wouldn’t want Jolyne to hear any spoilers, right?”

At Jolyne, Rohan stole a glance. She was regarding him with wide eyes, her mouth hanging slack.

“Very well,” he muttered. “How much for the ride?”

“A hundred dollars,” said Jolyne, whose acquired knowledge of Japanese did not come with a built-in currency converter.

“Ridiculous,” Rohan mumbled under his breath as he dug out his wallet. “That’s – what? – ten thousand yen… for that price you could just go to Disney World.”

For all his earthly materialism, however, Rohan was not the sort of person who felt compelled to worry about money. Money was not limited edition; money could not be put on the shelf and admired; money did not distinguish him at society parties. It was only good for spending. So without further complaint, he handed over a ten-thousand yen bill to Jolyne.

No one seemed to catch onto this except Koichi and Tamami. The latter gave Jolyne a knowing wink; the former began to say, “Rohan, I don’t think – .”

But Jolyne was already shimmying her way under the table. She emerged out from under the legs of Rohan’s chair, dashed toward the door, and was gone.

No sooner had the door swung shut behind her, Josuke said:

“We’ll have to split up.”

Yuuya clasped his hands together on the table in front of him. “I should be the one who goes after Sato,” he muttered.

“Why d’ya say it like that?” Okuyasu asked.

“It makes sense, alright? I know the guy’s last location.” Against the side of his nose, Yuuya tapped a finger. “And I can track him.”

“What if you have another run-in with the cops?”

“Let a guy worry about himself, alright? You just focus on catching that stand.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Rohan.
A grin slipped onto Yuuya’s face. “You’re Kishibe, right? Big-name manga artist? Reiko’s a fan. You should slip me an autograph sometime.”

“You find Fujimoto and you can have all the autographs you want. But what do you think you’re going to do when you do find him?”

“Well – .”

“See, that’s where I come in.” As he said this, Rohan’s lips sharpened into a self-satisfied smirk. “With Heaven’s Door, I can read Fujimoto’s book – and find out what he knows about The Voice in the Dark.”

Jolyne, meanwhile, had discovered that the coin-operated train ride was more than content to accept a thousand yen bill that had been folded and squished into the approximate shape of a wafer. Through the window, the others could see her seated on the train, her tiny body jerking back and forth with the momentum and an expression on her face like she couldn’t quite decide if she was having a good time or not. Over the track playing in Johnny’s (a hit by the Platters), the muffled sounds of a train whistle and a jazz fusion MIDI keyboard could be heard.

“Maybe you should go with them too,” Josuke said to Mikitaka.

Mikitaka beamed at him. “Of course. I wish to assist in any way I can.”

“That’s now what I meant, just – look. I don’t think you going after Vox when you can’t even see spirits is a good idea, alright? We don’t want you getting hurt out there.”

“On the contrary! Our last discussion had me thinking. After refurbishing some of the alien technology I brought to earth with me from my ship, I think I have come up with a solution for my object permanence problem.”

From his jacket pocket, Mikitaka produced the aforementioned solution. He set it before him on the table with reverent care, hands lingering for a few seconds before he hurriedly pulled them away and folded them neatly in his lap. All nine other persons at the table leaned in to scrutinize the object, which looked suspiciously like it was made from cardboard and plastic.

Okuyasu was the first to speak out. “Ain’t those just regular 3D glasses?”

“They sort of look like the ones they gave out in last year’s issue of National Geographic…” Koichi mused.

“Look, this is all beside the point,” said Rohan. “You can’t alter your sense of object permanence. Especially not with glasses.”

“Come on, he wants to go with you guys, alright?” said Josuke. “Just let him. It’s not a big deal.”

Rohan sat back in his chair, crossing his legs at the knees. “So I take it you’re going after Vox?”

“That’s the idea.” Josuke inclined his head at Okuyasu. “You coming?”

“Yeah, dude,” Okuyasu stammered. “You know it.”

“Count us in as well,” said Yukako.

She was by then in the habit of assuming that she and Koichi came as a packaged deal. In any case, Koichi did not object.
Rolling his eyes, Tamami put up his hand. “Guess I’m coming to,” he said. “I mean, I’m assuming you’re gonna need a drive.”

Koichi gave a sheepish grin. “Gosh, thank you! I was going to ask, but…”

“Don’t even worry about it. Anything for Mr. Hirose.”

The bell above the ice cream parlour’s door jingled. Jolyne padded in, followed by an older boy. He had what looked like a mole on one cheek; only when he turn his head a certain angle did the mole become a hole that glimpsed into nothing but yawning blackness.

“Mr. Rohan,” Jolyne drawled, “he says he wanna talk to you.”

“You know this kid?” Okuyasu asked.

Rohan cleared his throat. “Just ask Josuke.” To Josuke, he said: “I’m sure you recall when Shizuka went missing after I owned a kid at rock paper scissors?”

Josuke gazed at the kid, and he thought back to the phone call Rohan had made earlier, and realization crept up on him.

“No,” he said flatly.

A glint lit in Rohan’s eyes. “I’m glad you remembered. I’d like all of you to meet Ken Oyanagi. Ken, likewise.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind? We’re not leaving Jolyne with him!”

Ken sniffed and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “S’alright, mister,” he croaked. Puberty was wreaking havoc on his vocal chords; he sounded like he was trying to speak with his windpipe tied in a knot. “I watch my baby sister all the time.”

“How… old are you?” asked Koichi. The disbelief wavered in his voice.

“Twelve.”

“Look, kid, I don’t care how old you are,” said Josuke. He forced his tone to level out – after all, enemy stand user or not, he was still addressing a child. “How do I know you’re not gonna challenge Jolyne to a rock paper scissors battle for her soul?”

Rohan spoke up: “I can vouch for him. Besides – I’ve turned him on to other hobbies. Like…” Rohan frowned. He snapped his fingers a few times, trying to kick-start his brain. “Help me out here, kid.”

Ken shrugged. He did so by ducking his neck below his shoulders, instead of bringing his shoulders up above his neck. “I’m pretty into yo-yo.”

“See? There you go. It’s not even a two-person game.”

From his pocket, Ken pulled a neon-colored, light-up yo-yo. As he wound it up, he eyed Josuke. “You wanna see a cool trick?”

“I’m alright,” said Josuke.

As the party began to file from the booth, Jolyne caught Josuke by his pant leg. He stooped over obediently.
“What’s up?” he asked.

“You’re leaving again,” she mumbled, more accusation than a question.

“Only for a little bit.”

Folding her arms together, Jolyne rocked back on her heels and regarded him with a petulant jut to her lower lip. “Dad said you’d play with me.”

“I will, I promise! It’s just – something important came up that I gotta deal with.”

Jolyne didn’t budge. She kept her arms locked, stance wide. Something important was an excuse she’d heard before, over and over, until it lost all meaning. She wasn’t old enough to understand that there were things in the world more important than her feelings, and she was years away from learning to tell the genuine something importants apart from their counterfeits.

Josuke scrambled for something to say – only to be taken by surprise when his mouth moved quicker than his brain.

“I’ll take you to the beach!” he heard himself blurt. “We’ll go together when I get back. We can go swimming and build sand castles and catch fish and all that stuff.”

Jolyne pursed her lips together. “You can catch fish at the beach?” she asked.

“Sure you can,” said Josuke, who really wished he’d stopped at the part about the sandcastles.

For a minute Jolyne mulled this over, scrunching her face to the left and then to the right. At last, she raised her chin, looked Josuke dead in the eyes – and stuck out a hand.

Josuke stared at the offered hand in confusion. Then he chuckled, took her hand in his, and shook it.

Alright,” he said. “It’s a deal then.”

While Okuyasu and the others were waiting for Josuke, Yuuya, Rohan, and Mikitaka had already gone ahead and were just leaving through the front door.

“Did we decide how we’re getting there?” Rohan asked. “Not that I mind the exercise, but it’s a long walk from here.”

“We can take my motorbike,” Yuuya offered.

“Shotgun!” Mikitaka exclaimed. He did not know what a motorbike was, but he was already laboring under several misconceptions regarding the seating arrangements thereof.

“There’s three of us,” Rohan pointed out. “We’re not all going to fit on your motorcycle.”

Yuuya clucked his tongue. “Oh, don’t worry. I got plenty of room.”

***

After Okuyasu gave Ken directions to his house, the gang filed down through the narrow alley beside Johnny’s American-Style Ice Cream Shoppe and emerged out onto the road. By unspoken agreement, they gathered at the bus stop, the same place where they’d caught the bus out to the old highway the night they had set out to find Daisuke. There was an open dumpster by the ice cream shop’s emergency exit, an arm’s length from the bus stop. The warm, acrid reek of garbage lay heavy over the smell of sunbaked asphalt. Bloated flies mazed in inebriated circles around them. One
whined near Okuyasu’s ear. He jerked his head away and swatted at it. All the length of the road, not a single car in sight; nonetheless, the traffic lights continued to turn green to yellow, yellow to red, and red to green. The *tock tock tock* of the locator tone echoed rapt and hallow in the empty corridor of the road, the sound glancing off the surrounding buildings.

No one had said a word since they’d gotten up from the table. Okuyasu couldn’t stand it. He didn’t like the feeling of being left in the dark, like everyone else knew what they were doing except him. Maybe the others were clueless too, maybe they were just better at pretending – either way, he didn’t have the patience to wait around and find out.

“What’re we gonna do?” he blurted.

“Find Vox,” said Josuke. “That’s the plan.”

“An’ how’re we gonna do that?”

Josuke shifted his weight. “When we were in the woods, before Fujimoto showed up, I remembered –,” he paused, lips curling back in distaste, “*thought* I remembered being there before. I thought Jotaro would’ve been there too, but it’s starting to look like the part about him fighting a stand user in the woods was all just bullshit. There was someone else though – someone I didn’t recognize.”

“Vox’s previous host?” asked Koichi.

“Maybe. That’s the thing: when I heard the Voice in the Dark, it acted like it *knew* me. I got a feeling we’re not going to have to go looking for it, if you know what I mean.”

The others were silent for a moment. Okuyasu gazed down at his beat-up sneakers: holes in the toes, laces only done up halfway, tongues folded down.

Yukako clapped her hands together. “So we use Josuke as bait,” she declared. “That seems straightforward enough.”

“Thanks,” Josuke muttered.

“But what happens when it finds us?” Koichi asked. “Then what?”

No one answered. Josuke had been mulling over the question in his head when he looked up and noticed everyone was staring at him – except Tamami, who was squatting on the curb rolling himself a cigarette, and Toyohiro, who was just there to catch the bus.

A trap door opened under Josuke’s stomach. For the first time, he saw himself as others saw him: as someone to depend on, someone with all the answers. He couldn’t pinpoint when it’d started, or why. He’d always been the type to keep his head down, figuratively and literally – had started out the semester bowing to his upperclassmen because he didn’t want to pick a fight. When had all that changed?

The sensation of being placed beneath a spotlight left him speechless with something akin to stage fright.

“Maybe – we could –,” he crushed his eyes closed and shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted at last. “I was kinda hoping you guys might have some ideas.”

“Aside from destroying Vox and writing you off as collateral damage, not many, no,” said Yukako.

“Well,” Koichi began.
When all eyes jumped to him, a flush coloured Koichi’s face. He scratched his cheek and swallowed back his nerves before continuing: “Earlier, Rohan mentioned how Vox was sort of similar to Cheap Trick. And I was thinking… maybe they’re similar enough that we could defeat it the same way.”

“You mean like gettin’ those creepy things from Reimi’s alley to drag it away?” asked Okuyasu, who in our opinion had no business going around calling other people and/or spirit conglomerates ‘creepy’.

“Would the alley still be there with Reimi gone?” Yukako added.

“I can’t say for sure,” Koichi admitted. “As far as I know, no one’s been back there since. But… those spirits from the alley were there before Reimi. If they existed before she died, there’s a chance they could still be around.”

Okuyasu clapped Koichi on the shoulder – not hard, at least not intentionally, but it was enough all the same to make him take a stumbling step forward. “You’re a fuckin’ genius, dude!”

“I knew you had it in you,” Josuke agreed – unable to keep back the huge smile that spread across his lips.

“H-hey, we don’t even know if it’ll work yet or not!” Koichi stammered. “Besides – we still need to figure out where to start looking.”

“Vox doesn’t like getting too close to town, correct?” Yukako pointed out. “So I suggest we start near the woods.”

Grunting, Tamami rose to his feet and brushed the tobacco ash off his slacks. “Glad that’s all settled,” he muttered. “We better hit the road. It’ll take a few minutes to get the old girl warmed up.”

“It’s at least thirty degrees!” said Koichi.

“Sure, but that’s like five degrees if you’re a car.”

Okuyasu slapped his fist against his open palm. “It’s like dog years!” he exclaimed, beaming. “Exactly!”

“Don’t tease him, Kobayashi,” Yukako warned.

“I don’t know,” Koichi mused. “I’ve seen his car and… I’d almost believe it.”

Toyohiro, meanwhile, turned his back on watching for the bus. “You guys are leaving?” he asked, eyes following the others as they started off toward the car parked along the curb half a block ahead.

“Sorry, man,” Tamami called out over his shoulder. “I’d offer to give you a lift, but I don’t got the room, you know?”

“That’s fine,” said Toyohiro. “I’ll be alright. Good luck with your thing.”

No one acknowledged him.

“If Josuke is going to be the lure,” Koichi was saying, “maybe the rest of us should stay out of sight?”

“It’s the forest – should be easy, right?” Okuyasu pointed out.
“I think we would do better to find a high vantage point,” said Yukako.

From way down the road behind them, they heard the peppy hum of an engine gaining speed. Tamami glanced over his shoulder.

“Christ,” he said, “get a load of this asshole, just blew right through that red light.”

Josuke immediately recognized the cherry-red Daihatsu kei car zipping down the road toward them.

“Dude,” Okuyasu began, “isn’t that…?”

The car veered across the yellow line, nearly riding up onto the curb before it came to a rolling stop just behind them with a blare of its horn. Tomoko Higashikata stuck her head out the driver’s side window, one hand braced against the roof of the car, one hand on the wheel, one foot keeping the gas pedal engaged.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!” she hollered. Her face was nearly the same shade as the car, the vein at her forehead prominent from several feet away.

Josuke reached back into recent memory, trying to recall what he could possibly have done to be in trouble – much less the kind of trouble that necessitated his mother cruising around town on the hunt for him. What had he said to her the last time he’d seen her? He’d gotten the phone call from Okuyasu, told her he was going to go check up on him…

…and that had been nearly two days ago.

He remembered the way she’d looked when he left her: sitting at the kitchen table, tea in hand. The heaviness under her eyes, disheveled hair, the nervous way her manicured nails tapped without rhythm against the kitchen table. The housecoat pulled over her pyjamas. Every gesture, every misplaced marker of normalcy part of the routine she’d kept all those years whenever his grandfather was summoned in the middle of the night and she’d wait up by the phone for a call she hoped would never come.

He thought of her waiting up like that for him, and panic grabbed him by the throat.

“Shit, sorry!” he babbled. “I just got distracted.” When her expression didn’t budge, he hastily added: “I’ll give you a call tonight, alright?”

“What do you mean, give me a call? You’re not going anywhere tonight!”

“Just a sec – hey, guys,” Josuke said, turning to speak to the group behind him who, at present, were all lined up along the sidewalk watching the spectacle unfold. “You go on ahead, I’ll catch up.”

“It’s alright,” Koichi managed to say; regardless, no effort to go on ahead was forthcoming.

“Don’t you ‘just a sec’…”

Tomoko was cut off when she dipped back through the window and disappeared from view. Josuke leaned to one side, trying to catch a glimpse of his mother. The passenger door flew open. A glimpse of the pale underside of an arm through the window. Then Tomoko reappeared on the driver’s side of the car, a strand of hair trapped in her lips.

“Get in,” she growled.

“I can’t! I’m in the middle of something!” Josuke protested.
“I don’t want to hear it. Get in the car,” Tomoko repeated.

“But mom – .”

“Do you have any idea what the last couple days have been like for me? I heard –,” A hiss of air through her nose as she took a deep breath; then she lowered her voice and muttered, quick and clipped: “One of the girls at work called me yesterday, asked if I’d heard about the kid they found dead, and I thought – .”

This close, he could smell the nicotine on her. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her smoke.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. He didn’t even want to know what she’d say if she found out about the stitches or the concussion. “I wasn’t trying to make you worried, I swear! There’s just something I gotta do right now.”

“I’m trying to talk to you – don’t you walk away from me!” Tomoko hollered when Josuke showed her his back

“I’ll call you tonight!” he shouted back, hands cupped around his mouth.

The others gawked at Josuke as he trudged past, hands shoved into his pockets. “Let’s go,” he mumbled, without sparing them a glance.

Behind them the car’s horn blared, and continued to blare – one long unbroken consonant of a sound, as the red kei car slowly rolled along behind Josuke.

“I think your mother is trying to get your attention,” Yukako remarked, her voice somehow level despite having to compete with the horn.

“Cut it out!” Josuke shouted.

Tomoko took her hand off the horn long enough to shout right back: “You’ve got five seconds to get in this car or else! I’m counting ‘em!”

“Or else what? It’s not like you can make me get in the car.”

At last, her expression caved – the angles of her face inverting into an expression of helplessness. Josuke thought he had been talking big, running a bluff; he realized, only then, that he’d been telling the truth.

When he was little, any time his mother had taken his hand to cross the street or haul him away from distraction, he’d felt her strength as something infinitely vaster than his own. There’d been a time when she knew everything, could do everything, when she could send him scrambling up the stairs to his room just by raising her voice. But now he cast a shadow over her, kept secrets from her; the exhaustion and powerlessness in the worry lines trenched in her forehead just then was testament to empty threats being her best and only hold on him.

He felt Okuyasu’s shoulder bump against his own. He hadn’t noticed that he’d stopped walking.

“Maybe you should go, dude,” Okuyasu said.

“Are you nuts?” Josuke hissed.

“I jus’ think it might be a good idea – especially with, y’know.”
Okuyasu tapped his forehead. Frowning, Josuke copied the gesture – raising a hand to his head, feeling the bump that hadn’t yet gone down completely.

“What about the plan?”

Okuyasu snorted. “You act like we couldn’t live without ya for a day.”

Over Okuyasu’s shoulder, Koichi gave him a thumbs up. “We’ll figure something out. Just trust us!”

Josuke cast a helpless look in Yukako’s direction, hoping she’d be his voice of reason, but she only nodded at him. “You shouldn’t keep your mother waiting, Josuke,” she said.

Tomoko didn’t say anything when Josuke slid into the passenger’s seat and closed the door behind him. She put the gas pedal to the floor and then they were off in one smooth acceleration. In the rear-view mirror, Josuke watched the figures of his friends. He saw them walk together, gesturing in conversation, with a peculiar feeling he couldn’t place. He wasn’t used to watching things unfold in Morioh from left of stage. Maybe the others had reason to look at him like they were waiting on their next line after all, with his habit of inserting himself into the middle of every situation. He hadn’t meant to make it seem that way; he’d only been trying to help.

By the next intersection, the distant figures of his friends had disappeared from sight altogether.

***

At six A.M. earlier that morning, the old highway from S City stretched unto the horizon in quiet stillness. The street lights overhead glowed with singular phosphorescent intensity in the semi-dark; the deep blue sky tinged orange at the edges.

The extent of our perception, so far as it ranges along the highway, ends somewhere between Morioh and S City. At just after six, a car entered into what one might describe as our peripheral vision: we knew it was there, but we could not be certain of the specifics. As it got closer to Morioh, however, the details of car and driver came into focus.

His name was Tōru Nagano. He’d been on the road the last hour. His head buzzed with exhaustion, but he’d put on one of his mixed cassettes of thrasher metal and the adrenaline in the music had his blood pumping and it gave him a false sense of wakefulness. He made all his mixed tapes the same way – with a cassette recorder he kept handy by the radio for whenever he heard a song that caught his attention. The kind of song that walked into a crowded bar with a slinky black dress and smiled at him and asked what he was drinking. Every last track on Tōru’s mixed tapes was missing the first few seconds and sounded like it had been recorded with a potato. He had convinced himself that being recorded on magnetic tape gave music a warmth and character. To his friends, he described this quality as ‘raw’, or sometimes ‘scratchy’ – but in a good way.

To Tōru Nagano, Morioh was just another stop along the highway. A marker on a sign, a no-name town in a long string of no-name towns. His own no-name town was another hour down the coast. He was supposed to be visiting family. A nice quiet holiday from school, beaches and boredom and the scrutiny of relatives he hadn’t seen in nearly a year.

Then there was his girlfriend, who’d called the night before to tell him they needed to have a talk when he got back in town. Far as Tōru figured, that meant one of two things: she wanted to break up, or she was pregnant. He’d lain awake all night going over his options, but the closer he got to home, the more obvious the answer seemed: the moment he saw his girlfriend, he was going to break up with her. Get the jump on her, by way of speaking. After all – a couple semesters at university had broadened his perspective. Specifically, his perspective on women. He’d met more girls in the
run of a month while attending university in S city than he had in all his previous nineteen years. Sure, his hometown girlfriend was cute and all — but the way he saw it, he was still young. No point in tying himself down, limiting himself before he really got to live life to the fullest. If it was meant to be, it was meant to be, and she’d have no problem taking him back, but not until he’d had the chance to whet his whistle.

Even with his low beams running, Toru didn’t notice the man step out onto the road in front of him until the last moment.

Against the asphalt, the breaks squealed. He could smell the heated rubber through the car’s vents, feel the momentum lurch in his gut.

Tōru brushed the hair back from his face, feeling sweat prickle on his neck.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

The sunlight cresting to the east glinted in his eyes, making him squint. The idling engine growled in his ears. The world in the early hours of the morning seemed harsh — scratchy, but in a bad way. He felt wired. A nervous anxiety was roiling in his stomach. He thought he might throw up.

A knock on the window. Tōru pulled his hands from his face and drew a deep, palpitating breath through his nose. Leaning across the passenger’s seat, he rolled down the window.

“Sorry, man,” he said to the stranger. He was an older guy, Tōru noticed. Looked rough, homeless probably. “I wasn’t expecting to see anyone on the road out here,” he admitted.

The man didn’t seem interested in replying. “Are you going by Morioh?” he asked. His voice was muffled – despite the August heat, he was bundled up to the nose in a scarf.

“Morioh? Don’t know of it.”

“You sticking along the coast?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’re going by Morioh. Do you think you could give me a lift?”

Tōru hadn’t been planning on making any stops. There was still an hour of road to get under his wheels; but he wasn’t about to say no to a man he’d almost killed either.

“Get in,” he said as he bent over the console to turn down his music.

The old guy must’ve had a hell of a story. The most authentic books are found in the lives of others, he thought to himself, turning the sentence over in his head. He liked the way it sounded. He added another: Humanity is the greatest library of them all. He’d have to write both thoughts down later, he decided. They’d sound good in a book – clever, but down to earth.

Beside him, he heard the door open with a clunk.

“What’s your name?” he began to ask, as he took his hand off the volume dial.

Overhead, a flock of crows alit from the powerlines at the sound of the car’s horn. They wheeled through the air, black against the dark blue morning sky, voices crackling under the horn’s unbroken single-note shriek. The streetlights flickered for a moment, the whole line down the next mile winking on and off in alteration, before every last light went out. Though the sky had brightened, the
road was still dark in the mountain valley’s shadow. The mist over the marsh was rising, and already tendrils of fog were creeping over the dark asphalt and swirling in the car’s headlights.

Grunting, Sato shifted Tōru’s body. His head slipped from the steering wheel; the horn, at last, fell silent. When he pressed two fingers against the young man’s carotid artery, Sato felt the sluggish beat of a pulse. He hadn’t been sure if the blow to the head would kill him – human bodies could be unpredictable that way. Not that it particularly mattered to him – deadweight was deadweight – but his instructions had specified bringing someone alive, and Sato wasn’t one to neglect instructions. He preferred it that way. In an engine, every piece was important, but you might not know it if you were putting one together step-by-step.

Still. Deadweight had its own set of challenges. By the time he moved Tōru to the back seat and had taken his place at the wheel, Sato was out of breath. In the process of moving the unconscious man, he’d taken note of all the fast food wrappers in the car’s back seat, the half-empty pop bottles in the cup holders, the garbage shoved into the car door compartment. The oil pressure warning light came on when he started the engine back up. He could tell the car was new by its make and model, but its engine was already rattling and sputtering like a much older car’s. A bad timing chain, maybe. The way things were going, the car would’ve ended up scrapped in a few years.

Sato liked to keep a clean vehicle. Any car he drove always had a clear dash and a pack of wipes in the glove compartment. He had oil gauges installed because he couldn’t trust the instrument lights. He was fussy, he supposed. His mother had been the same way. She never liked having a house that looked lived in.

When was the last time he’d thought about his mother? It’d been years, probably. America had still been at war with Vietnam when she’d died. Ever since he’d set foot in the tower, flashes of his family and the house he’d grown up in had been coming back to him. How every time guests were expected, the house would transform into a storm of activity, his and his family’s lives uprooted and rearranged and made presentable. Those memories were like looking back into a forgotten family album. He knew the images belonged to his own experience, but the faces and objects in them were unfamiliar, almost unrecognizable – warped by time, and the strangeness of looking back through it.

Sato put the car in gear, flicked on his turn signal, and pulled out carefully onto the highway.

There was an old service road off the highway, nothing more than a one-car strip of gravel stamped into the ground. The road, along with the transmission towers it serviced, had been constructed during the post-war rebuilding of the 1950s. Now the road was more grass than gravel, but it got Sato most of the way to the tower, and the ridge that ran the length of the road concealed it from the traffic coming in and out of town.

The thing was waiting for him in the tower. By then Sato was wheezing, limbs burning under the stranger’s weight. He had to stop to take a pull from his inhaler. The wires in his mouth tugged at his gums, setting an ache in his teeth.

“There you are! I was starting to worry,” said the voice, bright and clear and nauseating.

There were times when he was a child that his mother’s dulcet voice would grow thorns, and she’d pry at his twisted shirt collar or measure the curve of his back at the table with a book’s spine, and he’d watch her fussing and picking from somewhere far away inside of himself, and wonder what she’d say if she knew that he’d thought about putting one of the kitchen knives through her chest. At the time, he’d been frightened. Horrified that those thoughts could have come from him. He loved his mother; he’d never wanted to hurt anyone before.

His mother had died of nothing more sinister that pneumonia, but he carried the guilt around long
after she was buried, right up until he moved to Morioh. Now the guilt was back – it stood in the
tower with him, its hands neatly folded in its apron and a smile frozen on its shifting shadow-face as
it watched Sato pull out his hunting knife.

“There’s no use pretending,” it said. “This is just the way you are.”

When he was ten, he’d thrown the family’s heirloom knives into a drainage ditch. His father had
beaten on him until he’d admitted it had been a prank and apologized. He hadn’t been able to
articulate why he’d really done it or the thing he’d really been afraid of.

Maybe there had been something there back then that wanted to fight against whatever was going on
in his head, or maybe the voice was right and he’d only been pretending. He supposed it didn’t
matter – the truth of the thing was unchanged one way or the other, and he’d accumulated the bodies
to prove it.

With a quick flick of his wrist, Sato dragged the hunting knife across the stranger’s throat. Just like
that, the boy came around – eyes wide, thrashing, hands grasping his blood-slick throat in an effort to
stem the pour. But a cut like that couldn’t be undone or mended. He’d bleed out for sure; it was only
a matter of time.

***

Returning to the forest proved futile. The rain had washed most of the evidence away, leaving the
scent of decay and a faint dry-down of blood and sweat and struggle. There was something about
fear that left its mark on a smell. Maybe it was the pheromones or adrenal glands – or maybe
Yuuya’s nose tended to infer from what his brain knew.

They visited the house next. The road took some pains to find. It wasn’t marked, or even paved –
they only located the intersection thanks to a gas station clerk who’d happened to grow up with
friends whose parents had farmland along the road, before the land got bought up and razed.

“You can see the transmission tower from here, you know,” Rohan remarked.

He was standing at the window, a medical textbook they’d found in the bathroom (along with half a
quart of blood) open in his hands. Thus far, he hadn’t made himself particularly useful. He kept
getting distracted – at the moment, he was skimming the chapter on performing emergency
caesarians. Whatever procedure Sato Fujimoto had done in the bathroom, Yuuya was convinced it
wasn’t a C section.

“Yeah, I noticed,” Yuuya mumbled.

There was something about the house that spooked him. The smell of it unfolded in layers: the blood
in the bathroom and oil from the garage settling on top, with the regular household smells beneath
that. Old upholstery, the loaf of bread going stale, dish soap, tea leaves fermenting in the garbage.
But the longer he stayed in the house, the more and more he could pick up of the base notes –
ammonia, lemon juice, baking soda, bleach. Someone had obviously gone to great lengths to conceal
something. Yuuya looked around at the rows of books and the handmade quilt thrown over the back
of the sofa and the neat rows of tea cups arranged in a glass display case, and he couldn’t fathom
how someone could live such a mundane, peaceful life in the same house where they’d carefully
laundered blood stains from their clothes.

In the kitchen, something fell with a thud.

“Find any ghosts in there yet?” Rohan called out. Yuuya glowered at him.
Mikitaka had been about as useful as Kishibe in terms of searching the house – but not for want of enthusiasm.

He appeared in the doorway wearing his 3D glasses. “Not yet!”

“Well, keep looking! I’m sure they’re here somewhere!”

“Knock it off, man,” Yuuya snapped.

“What? I’m just having fun.”

“Anyway, this isn’t getting anywhere. I’m sending out the big guns.”

At Yuuya’s side, Highway Star manifested. Mikitaka let out a gasp.

“I see one!” he exclaimed. “I see a ghost!”

“What?” Yuuya demanded. Beside him, Rohan snapped the textbook shut and tossed it onto the couch.

“Right behind you, Mr. Fungami! It looks just like you!” At his chest, Mikitaka laid a hand. “Yuuya – is that your grandpa?”

Yuuya glanced over his shoulder, but no one was there except his own stand. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, with both his grandfathers very much alive. “What? No – .”

– He began to say, but Mikitaka was already bowed at the waist. “Pleasure to meet you, sir,” he mumbled.

Rohan burst into laughter. Yuuya felt his cheeks heat up. “That’s Highway Star, my stand. And come on, have you seen this face? We don’t look anything alike.”

“A stand,” Mikitaka repeated, turning the word over like it was a stone in his mouth. “I suppose – depending on the calibrations – my object permanence corrective lenses might have – .”

“They are both spirits,” Rohan pointed out. “Though I’m still calling bullshit on your glasses.”

Yuuya waved a hand and Highway Star vanished. He could still sense it at the back of his mind, enough to have an idea of where it was and what it could smell. It took some getting used to, like being able to watch two movies at the same time, but by then he’d gotten good at knowing which parts to tune out from either input.

“Did you find anything in the kitchen?” he asked Mikitaka. “Anything besides ghosts?”

“Just a couple books! They were under the refrigerator. Does your species usually use refrigerators for book storage?”

Yuuya glanced up. Rohan had turned aside from the window, and was now giving Mikitaka his full attention – on finger crooked thoughtfully beneath his lips.

“What kind of books?” Rohan asked.

There were two books, it turned out. One was a yearbook from Budogaoka high. The other was a photo album whose sleeves were filled with a series of carefully laid out newspaper clippings.

“Shit,” Yuuya swore as he flipped through the yearbook. “This is just from last year. We’re all in it.
Me, Josuke, Okuyasu…”

“Speak for yourself,” Rohan mumbled. He was examining one of the clippings in the photo album. “I recognize some of these from Yukako’s scrapbook. Murders, abductions… here’s the article from just yesterday, about the girl they found in the fountain.”

As Rohan turned to the next page, he made a face. “Keeping his own clippings like this is almost as bad as getting his mother to hang them on the fridge.” When Yuuya raised an eyebrow, he added: “What? I’m just saying, it’s pretty tacky.”

Yuuya had been tuning out Highway Star’s activity while his stand did its initial sweep of Morioh, but just then a scent filtered through his and his stand’s shared perception that caught his attention. It was the same smell as the house – old upholstery, dish soap, motor oil.

“I got a hit on him,” said Yuuya.

“Where?”

Yuuya furrowed his brow. “It’s residential. Jouzenji Road, I think? – Hey, where’re you going?!”

Already, Rohan was on his feet. From the kitchen table, he grabbed the helmet Yuuya had lent him and pulled it over his head. “Forget the funny pages,” he said in a rush as he fumbled with the chin strap. When he pulled the helmet’s visor down, the words ‘BAD BITCH’ shaded his eyes. “We need to get back to town.”

Chapter End Notes

Easter Eggs/Trivia:
* Spot the reference to scene from Chinatown.
* Spot the bastardized version of a Twin Peaks standard.
* Spot the cheap shot at a certain JJBA outro.
* In keeping with JoJo tradition, this fic’s villain stand is named after a song -- Elvis Costello’s ‘A Voice in the Dark’!
* The issue of National Geographic mentioned is the 1998 August issue on Mars. I had a copy as a kid but completely forgot about it until I wrote this chapter -- I still remember looking at the pictures with the shitty blue/red 3D glasses.
* ...And lastly: yup, Rohan got stuck with the same helmet as Josuke.
Hi folks! I added a bunch of new links to the first chapter notes!

The first is some amazing art by notanotherjojoblog, please go check them out, they do some amazing work! https://notanotherjojoblog.tumblr.com/post/167278512803/man-fuck-off-another-fanart-piece-based-on-a

Next up is the fic playlist I finally got around to finishing. I hope you enjoy!:
https://open.spotify.com/user/pixelaced/playlist/2hLQ7d6yusNP6xQyPv475

And finally, the art I did for the playlist cover, since spotify really shrinks its images down: http://mori-hoe.tumblr.com/post/167181639981/i-figured-i-should-probably-finish-putting

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For better or for worse, the Nankai Memorial Stadium was an iconic feature in Morioh’s architectural landscape. The stadium was difficult to miss even at a distance, with its gleaming white concrete sides and its distinctive tubular steel overhang that rose and fell in a wave around the circumference of the stadium in a way that made it look like a rollercoaster track. In S City, the stadium might have been a beautiful building, but in a town like Morioh it was an eyesore: too big and awkward amid its low-rise neighbors, too polished and modern for a sleepy suburb that blended traditional Japanese design and Western period revival architecture.

When the town of Morioh erected the Nankai Memorial Stadium in the early nineties, its architects planned for a magnificent plaza to front the stadium: a broad, tree-boulevard that fed into the grand arched entryway, interactive modern sculptures, memorial plaques, fountains that lit up by night, a multi-level koi pond with red lacquer bridges. Where the baseball pavilion was secreted away within the stadium, the plaza would be a visible, public statement of the town of Morioh’s eagerness to embrace culture, progress, and the start of a new millennium.

The stadium’s investors, however, took a different view. Culture, modernity, and progress all came with a price tag, and you couldn’t sell tickets to something that was open to the public. So instead of sculptures, boulevards, and fountains, the Nankai Memorial Stadium got a dirt footpath and a duck pond.

The official reasoning behind the duck pond had something to do with contributing to the stadium’s family-friendly environment. The unofficial reasoning had something to do with the economy of an attraction that required only filling a hole with water and tossing bread into it every so often. The investors had a similar attitude toward ducks as they did the stadium’s customers: build it, and they will come.

Unfortunately, none of the persons involved in the duck pond’s construction had apparently ever met a duck. The problem was one of proximity. Whenever a game was on, and the stadium would erupt with roars from the crowd and the boom of loud speakers, all that noise and commotion would startle the ducks into flight, to the ruination of many a spectator and player’s hair or clothes. Locals had taken to bringing their umbrellas to the stadium, even on clear cloudless nights. Nor did the birds fare
much better from this arrangement. More than one were the ducks reduced to a gentle fall of down and a fine mist of blood by a fastball hit over the outfield wall.

Despite its notoriety, the duck pond was nonetheless a beloved installation in Morioh. The pond itself had a peculiar warping effect on memory. People visited the duck pond, people got bored and left, but on reminiscing later they would recall their visit as pleasant and charming. And so people continued to come back, and they brought their children with them, and the ducks came back too because there was bread for the offering and silty water to trawl and slimy reeds to lay their eggs among.

The rain waters from the day before had swollen the pond to its banks. The ducks were showing in droves. Children pressed around the pond’s edge to gawk at the birds as they snapped their yellow lacquered beaks and wagged their jeweled heads and bobbed end-up on the water to dive for minnows.

Amid the crowd on the footpath strolled a tall, broad-shouldered teenager. His hair was done up in a pompadour. A little girl walked alongside him hand-in-hand, her silky black hair tied in pigtails. Patent mary janes were strapped to her feet. She wore her school uniform out of season.

An old woman sharing a picnic blanket with her husband smiled at them and dipped her head as they went by.

“Lovely day out,” she said.

“Can you believe this weather?” the boy asked in reply.

“Especially after all that rain we got yesterday. But aren’t the ducks ever loving it!” Then, she asked the little girl: “Are you here to see the ducks?”

The little girl opened her mouth, but before she could say anything the older boy gave her hand a sharp tug. Neither the woman nor her husband saw anything: the boy was smiling at them, dazzlingly, showing off the perfect rows of his teeth, the handsome cut of his jaw.

“She sure is!” said the boy. “We better getting going – don’t want to miss the baby ducks, do ya?” he asked, swinging the girl’s hand between them.

The girl glared back at him. Once again, no one seemed to notice.

After the boy took his leave of the old couple, the smile remained fixed on his face. He found he quite liked the feel of it – it gave him a ventured sense of confidence just having it there.

“They seemed nice,” he remarked.

The girl kneed him in the shins.

The smile didn’t budge from the boy’s face as he watched her hop along on one foot beside him, rubbing her bruised knee and snarling blue curses under her breath.

“I’m telling ya, boss,” he said. “You never learn.”

“You yank on my fucking arm like that again,” Hazamada growled, “and I’m turning you into a box of toothpicks.”

“Fine, geez.”
Sniffing, Hazamada palmed at the back of his skirt, plucking loose a wedgie. “…Don’t see why I gotta wear this goddamn shitty disguise.”

“You gotta admit,” said Surface, “it’d be a little weird seeing you hold hands with Higashikata.”

“Why the fuck do we need to hold hands?”

“Cause your Josuke Higashikata’s niece, that’s why.”

“That was my whole argument in the first place, shithead!”

“Easy, boss – I’m just pulling your leg.”

They passed a group of high school girls. Surface puffed out its chest and waved at them. They coalesced into a circle, giggling, stealing glances at his stand, who’d taken on a broad stride, arms stiff at its sides, leading with its shoulders. Enjoying its present form a little too much for Hazamada’s tastes.

He tried to peak over his shoulder at the girls, but Surface gave another tug on his arm. Hazamada yowled.

“What’d I fucking tell you?”

“This,” said Surface, “is why I gotta hold your hand. Otherwise you’d be off spying on girls or kicking the ducks.” It let go of Hazamada’s hand – but only long enough to reach up and pinch his cheek. “S’not very becoming for a little girl, y’know?”

He batted his stand’s hand away. “Why do you care so much? And why the fuck are you acting like some kinda nice guy all of a sudden?”

“I’m trying to stay in character here,” Surface declared, stressing each syllable. “This is why we never had any luck axing off Kujo, y’know? All you had to do was play it straight, stick to the script, keep your eyes on the prize and alla that bullshit. But you just had to go out of your way and be a spiteful prick.”

Hazamada felt a tug at his chest – a defensive knee-jerk that in the scheme of fight-or-flight was the path of fight for the invertebrate and toothless. “Don’t blame me, idiot!” he snapped. “You were the one knocking heads in.”

“Just following orders, boss.”

He tried to come up with a good retort. But the conversation went stale and after walking in silence for a minute he was still empty-handed, so instead he licked his lips and said: “You know, there’s one upside to having to dress like this.”

Surface grimaced. “I really don’t wanna know.”

“The skirt leaves sooo much room for my balls to hang out.”

Groaning, his stand covered its eyes, as if to block out the image. “I told you, damn it – I don’t wanna know.”

“It’s like I’m walking around in public without pants on,” Hazamada added, with a gleeful note of triumph.

“Dude, knock it off. There’s kids around. They don’t need to know that shit.”
The crowds around them were beginning to thin. They had come to the end of the footpath; dirt gave way to asphalt as they stepped out onto the half-empty parking lot. Come nightfall it would swell to capacity with the masses come to catch the game, but for now, there were only a few dozen cars huddled together at the end of the lot closest to the stadium.

Somewhere between the parking lot and the stadium, Koichi Hirose, Okuyasu Nijimura, Tamami Kobayashi, and Yukako Yamagishi were spying on him from a distance while feigning an interest in aquatic poultry and trying to blend with the crowd.

He’d gotten the call sometime around noon. At first Hazamada hadn’t recognized Koichi’s voice. The polished tone of it made him think he was talking to a telemarketer, and Hazamada had nearly told him to fuck off and hung up. He should have known something didn’t sit pat when Koichi asked about his summer, what he’d been up to, because since when did Hirose give a shit about him? – but Hazamada had fallen for it nonetheless, had spilled his guts about a cool obscure series he’d gotten into recently, and Koichi had hummed and rolled the conversation along until he let the pretense drop and said, without further lead-in: “I need a favour.”

That was just how it went. In Hazamada’s ideal world, he would have given Koichi the telemarketer treatment and be done with it. Instead, he was stalking across a parking lot dressed as Jolyne Kujo, with Surface hamming it up beside him as Josuke Higashikata.

Until then, he’d spent the entirety of his summer sealed in his room, blackout curtains drawn, fan cranked up to the max, watching anime in nothing but his underwear. It’d been great the first week. But by week two he was counting down the days until school started up again. School was a festering stew of hormones and drama and he hated it and loved hating it in equal measure. School was full of shitheads to jeer at and suckers to shock, school was a constant stream of people all around him and the pretense power and satisfaction he got out of telling himself that he was better than them, above all their petty squabbles. But summer had come and all that had gone away.

From the parking lot, he and Surface passed down the street. A gas station loomed ahead at the corner of the intersection, pylon sign advertising the sale of cigarettes. Across the street from the gas station was a phone booth. The phone dangled off its hook, hanging dead still on a steel cord. There was nothing beyond the phone booth except a long stretch of highway, and the rolling fields and forests that marked the division between Morioh and the rest of the world.

He hadn’t agreed to go along with Koichi’s stupid plan because he was lonely. Even if Koichi was the first person to ring him up all summer. And he couldn’t care less about a dead kid or two. He was bored and needed a change. That’s all it was.

A beep. A muffled, garbled sound that was more static than anything. Surface’s hands leapt to its jacket, patting down its pockets. Hazamada let out a growl.

“It’s in – fuck, forget it, just hold still.”

Stepping around Surface, Hazamada pressed a thumb between its shoulder blades and a panel door in its back swung open. His stand yelped.

“Dude!” it bit out. “What’d I say about keeping your shit in there? My body is a temple.”

“Your body doesn’t have organs, shit-for-brains. I’m just making use of unused space.”

Shoving aside his collection of nearly-empty potato chips bags and dog-eared girlie magazines, he located the source of the sound.
Koichi’s voice crackled over the two-way radio: “Hazamada? Do you copy? Over.”

Hazamada held down the talk button. “Yeah, I copy.” When no response came, he rolled his eyes and added: “Over.”

“Good. We need you to continue straight along the highway. Keep an eye out. Over.”

By then, he’d already crossed the street, and was standing by the payphone. When he glanced back at the gas station, he could see Koichi, Yukako, Okuyasu, and Tamami through the window. They were all clustered around a display rack of cheap sunglasses. Koichi was watching him, a pair of mirrored wrap-arounds pulled down over his eyes.

Slowly, Hazamada lifted the radio to his lips. “ Couldn’t you have just crossed the street and told me that? Over.”

“We can’t risk being seen with you. We want the enemy stand to think you’re alone. We’ll be taking a right at the intersection – the roads should run parallel, at least until we reach the Grand Morioh Hotel. Over.”

“And how exactly are you going to be watching out for the murderer if we’re not even on the same street? – over.”

“I already sent out Act I. I’ll be able to see whatever it sees. Over.”

“Got ‘im, boss,” said Surface. “Three o’clock, on the power lines.”

Sure enough, Echoes was perched with its long tail wended around a telephone pole up ahead. When it noticed Hazamada looking at it, it scrambled out of sight with a side-winding, reptilian motion.

“Got’cha,” said Hazamada. “Er, over.”

“Just be careful. The stand we’re looking for is dangerous. Radio us if you see anything.”

A hiss of static – then silence when the connection dropped. Hazamada jammed a thumb down on the talk button. “You didn’t say ‘over’!” he snapped.

No reply.

“So how’s it feel being bait, boss?” Surface asked a minute later after they’d started down the highway once more.

“You’re the bait here,” Hazamada reminded him.

“I die, you die. Six one way, half a dozen the other.”

Hazamada snorted. “Like hell I’m worried about that. Making scary voices? That’s some amateur hour crap right there.”

***

They’d been on the road for nearly five minutes before Josuke noticed the smell inside the car. Deep red rose, powdery and antique, and soapy aldehydes beneath that, rounded out by a hint of incense. He knew the perfume. It’d been a favorite of his mother’s for the last couple years – a Guerlain scent he couldn’t remember the name of. He’d seen the bottle on her dresser countless times, and when he was a little younger he’d sometimes dispense a spritz or two into the air and sit in the thick cloud of
roses and purple incense until he went dizzy in the head. On his first outing with Okuyasu to Johnny’s, he’d even dabbed a little on his own skin, until embarrassment had made him think better of it and he’d scrubbed his wrists raw getting the stuff off.

The bottle of perfume was currently sitting in one of the car’s cup holders. In the other cup holder was a paper cup of coffee that had long gone lukewarm. The cup’s white plastic lid was stained with berry-coloured lip prints – the same shade his mother was wearing, hastily applied and smudged at the corners of her mouth.

He couldn’t figure out why she’d sprayed the inside of the car with Guerlain. Then he remembered the scent of nicotine on her clothes and he wondered if she’d been smoking in the car.

For the first five minutes, his mother didn’t say a word. She drove with the windows down, checked over her shoulder instead of using her mirrors, turned the wheel hand-over-hand with the sharp knobs of her wrist crooked at an angle. He didn’t think much of it. She’d driven that way for years. But then she pulled down their street and kept going past their house.

“Where’re we going?” he asked at last.

“For a drive,” she answered, and he jumped when he heard the curt tightness of her voice. He thought she had cooled down by then.

“Didn’t you wanna talk?” he asked.

He’d been hoping she would give him a quick dressing-down and leave it at that. Just then he wanted to be anywhere but the car – it was hard to sit still knowing that creep Fujimoto and his stand were out there somewhere.

His mother took a deep breath and spoke through the exhale, voice airy and raised by a pitch: “That’s the idea.”

A nervous smile tugged at Josuke’s lips. “It’s not so I don’t run away, is it?” he asked, only half joking.

Her eyes slid over to him. “Trust me, kiddo. What I need right now is something to distract me so I don’t have to think about how pissed off I am at you.”

Josuke was fairly certain that conversation was supposed to be the distraction from driving, and not the other way around, but he wasn’t about to tell his mother that.

Instead, he leaned back in his seat. The tiny kei car felt claustrophobic all at once – his knees jammed against the glove compartment, his mother’s voice too big for the car to hold. “Alright,” he said. “I forgot to call when I was at Okuyasu’s. It’s not a big deal, right?”

When he saw the way her fingers tightened around the wheel, the way the tendons at her wrist strained, he added: “I mean – it is, but…”

He trailed off. When it came to his mother, he could own up to his mistakes if he tried hard enough, but he was never sure how to make it up to her. Tomoko Higashikata always had a shrill temper but when she was angry, genuinely angry, she was hard to read. Sometimes she’d go quiet, like she did just then, and when she did speak it was with a tone of accusation, like he was still consciously making the decision to hurt her, like his fuck-ups were not singular incidents but ongoing dialogs.

“It’s not about not calling me,” she said. “Though, yes, you should have called. I’ve just been worried about you. And not just the past couple of days either.”
She lolled her head to one side, regarding him out of the corner of her eye. “Now – I’m not going to give you the usual mom bullshit about how you can tell me anything and I won’t get mad. I can’t guarantee that. But you can tell me anything, and if I get mad, who gives a fuck?”

“Mom!” Josuke blurted.

“Give me a break, Josuke. I’ve heard you swear before. You didn’t get it from your grandpa, that’s for sure.”

“I just don’t know what you’re so freaked out about.”

“Oh yeah? You want me to give you an example?”

A car pulled up past them before swerving abruptly into their lane. Tomoko slammed on the brake, one hand jamming down on the horn. “Asshole!” she hollered over the sound of the car’s horn.

“What was I saying?” she asked after the fact.

“Uh, about why you were worried. You said you were gonna give an example – .”

“—Right. Okay. Let’s take the gas explosion back in July.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m not in the mood for joking around, kiddo. I mean, I know you were trying to do the right thing, but you were stuck in the hospital for three days.”

He was about to admit he still had no idea what she was talking about when he recalled the briefing Jotaro had given him after their last encounter with Kira. He’d been floating on pain meds at the time, but he could remember, in sketched-out detail, Jotaro telling him how the Speedwagon Foundation had pulled a few strings, and that the scene of destruction at the stranger’s house would go on record as the result of a gas leak.

“If anyone asks what you or Kira were doing there,” Jotaro had said, “you were both nearby when the explosion happened, and you rushed in to save anyone who might have been in the house at the time.”

“Josuke. Hey. I’m talking to you, kiddo.”

Taking one hand off the wheel, Tomoko reached over and lightly rapped her knuckles against the side of his head. Pain burst in a white flash before his eyes – he crushed his eyelids shut and doubled over, trying to blot out the pain with darkness and vertigo.

“What gives?” he snapped, not thinking about how she couldn’t possibly have known about his concussion.

“Stop being so dramatic, I barely touched you.” She squeezed through an intersection on a stale yellow, ignoring the sharp punctuation of another car’s horn. “Anyway, I’m being serious. Two people died in that house. Doesn’t that bother you? Even just a little bit?”

“You make it sound like it should.”

“Look. I get it. I wasn’t there. Everyone deals with things differently. But you’re not the stoic, quiet type.” Her lips quirked up in a smile. “Remember? In the theatre that one time… you cried and held my hand when Cure came on. That was only a couple years ago.”
“It was a scary movie, alright?”

“It was just the trailer.” She sighed. “Now, if you’d been like that at the hospital – cried, wanted me to hold your hand – I’d at least know what was up.” A quick turn of her head – so quick he almost missed it – her eyes on him and then gone. “You were the same way when dad died. Never said a word, didn’t want to talk about it.”

A lump formed in Josuke’s throat. “I didn’t feel like talking,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, well. I did.”

He glanced over at her, but she had her head turned. She was leaning over the steering wheel, elbows folded, looking out the driver’s side window for any sign of traffic coming down the intersecting street before she gunned the gas and pulled on through.

He didn’t say sorry. He got the feeling she didn’t want him to. They were alike in that way; she’d told him before she didn’t like when people apologized to her.

“It makes me feel like I’m the bad guy,” she’d said.

More than anything, however, Tomoko hated running in the blind.

When her own mother had been alive, talk of work had been banned from the kitchen table. That’d been a lifetime ago, before Josuke had even been born. She’d been younger than he was now, and her father would come home from work, hang up his hat, and at dinner and all through the evening he wouldn’t breathe a word about his day. Her mother preferred it that way – the segregation between her husband and the man he became on the job – but not Tomoko. Each night, when her father tucked her into bed, he’d tell her about the criminals he’d caught and the people he’d helped. Early on these had been nothing more than bedtime fairy tales to her. He kept the details light as her age demanded. But as she grew older and she started paying attention to the news, and as she became aware of the gravity of her father’s position, her and her father’s nighttime routine became something of a comfort. She always knew what cases he was working on, how likely he was not to make it home on time tomorrow, how much she should worry. It was as close as she could come to a feeling of control in a situation she had no control over. The same was true when her mother died. Those last six months had been hell to live through, but the constant consultations with the doctor, the certainty of the prognosis, had allowed her to make peace with the inevitable. Her grief had been uncomplicated; it grew, organically, in pace with the cancer cells.

With Josuke, she just wanted to know what she was in for.

“We don’t –,” she began, then cleared her throat, then composed herself. “We don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to. I just need to know – are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I think.”

He felt he was back on the overstuffed oxblood sofa in Yukako’s sitting room: the weight of his limbs, his mother’s reaching him from what seemed like far away, as though he was sinking deeper and deeper into some space that sat neatly within him. Maybe this was the tunnel of memory Yukako had referred to during that failed hypnosis session; to Josuke, it felt like an open trap door.

There was a cold sweat at the back of his neck. A stale metallic taste gathering in his mouth.

“I was just…kinda freaked out,” he began. “After the accident.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw his mother shift, but she didn’t say a word.
He continued: “I thought I’d lost someone.”

“You mean the people living in the house?”

“No, like… someone I cared about.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Sorry, it’s… kinda hard to explain.”

People, after all, did not just die and come back to life. Especially not without the marks to show for it. So he was surprised when he heard his mother say:

“No, I think I get it.”

They were passing by the cemetery. In the early afternoon light, the stone monuments seemed washed out – diminished, in some way, of their sobriety. The lot was dwarfed by the surrounding hills, over which the shadows of clouds swept with monumental slowness. It was the hills and the woods beyond that seemed sombre and significant; the graveyard, with its low stone wall, seemed only sadly comical.

Tomoko pointed out the graveyard as they drove past. “I was here a few times when your grandparents were alive,” she said. “I had to go to the funerals for your grandfather’s colleagues. It never mattered who was in the coffin – I could only think, what if that was my dad? And I’d get so upset.” Here, she let out a laugh, short and sharp. “But you know what? When something bad happens, it’s normal to think about the people you’re afraid to lose.”

“Or – I don’t know,” she added. “Maybe that’s not how you feel at all.”

“Maybe? It’s hard to say.” Then, sweeping this admission away under a grin and a bright, brassy voice, he added: “But anyway, it doesn’t matter what I thought, right? – I mean, it all worked out in the end.”

Tomoko let out a huff.

“…What?” Josuke asked.

“It’s just funny when you say it that way. You have lousy luck when it comes to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, kiddo.”

“Like what?”

“Come on. The explosion. You taking off just before they found that kid. You know you did the exact same thing when you were little, right?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“The Imai family who used to live beside us – you know their daughter went missing one time, right?”

Josuke’s pulse quickened. The whole time he’d been telling Okuyasu about the summer of Yuki’s disappearance, he’d thought of the events that had transpired as exclusively his – existing in his memory, and only his memory.

“I remember that,” he said, his mouth going dry.

“Do you remember taking off right after she went missing? Your grandpa and I looked everywhere for you.”
When she glanced over, she saw the stupefied expression on his face. “Yeah, I didn’t think you’d remember. I got a call later. Turned out you’d decided to go, by yourself, to visit Jotaro in the hospital.” Against the steering wheel, she slapped her hands. “God, I was so pissed.”

The corridor stretched out before him at a tilt. Painted racing stripes rushed ahead, narrowing where perspective pinched the hallway together. Bumper handrails hugged the walls, so narrow he could barely squeeze his tiny fingers through the gap. Even bracing himself against the railing, the corridor’s angle didn’t fully correct itself. He felt as though some centripetal force was pulling his weight toward the center of the hallway, the gravity of it tugging at his grip on the handrail.

Though there were no windows in the hall, he could tell somehow that it was night. Not just because of the quiet; not just because of the fuzzy feeling of exhaustion that clouded his thoughts; something heavy seemed to settle over the halls, like a thick blanket of static, something he could not describe.

Underfoot, the hard linoleum floor was polish to a dull gloss. His dark, featureless reflection glided before him as he walked. Signs were posted everywhere: Wards 5a-6c, Radiology, Pathology, Ambulatory Care. Words he didn’t understand jumped out at him from everywhere, white characters like grinning bones on black signs, slender runes of arrows pointing down corridors each identical from the last.

“I don’t remember that,” Josuke stammered.

“See? Told ya.”

They were passing over one of the six bridges that straddled the Ichio River. Alongside them ran the trestle bridge over which the bullet train from S City came and went daily. Josuke stared at the tracks as they sped by, looking for any semblance of the unfinished skeleton structure he and Jotaro had visited in the dead of night when he was a kid.

“You’ve got what your grandmother would’ve called a selective memory,” Tomoko was saying. “Dad was like that. He could tell you who won the World Series any given year, but I don’t think he ever once remember me or mom’s birthdays.”

“Yuki went missing when Jotaro was in the hospital?”

She gave him an odd look. “Well, yeah.”

“You sure about that?”

“Oh, I remember alright. I was running around trying to figure out who’d look after you while I was at work.”

“You think she could have just wandered off?” his mother asked. “Kids do that all the time.”

“She could have,” his grandfather answered, voice strained under false optimism. “That’s what we’re hoping – but if that were the case, you’d think we’d have found her by now. A two year old can’t exactly move too fast, you know. But the whole thing – disappearing from a secure location while under close supervision – it fits the other cases we’ve seen.”

Josuke crept back downstairs. He lay down on the old couch. There were deep imprints in the cushions, left by a body much bigger than his own. The springs had long lost all semblance of firmness; the couch sagged around him, offering no resistance. Neither his mother nor his grandfather cared for the couch, except perhaps out of sentimental attachment – but he loved it, and the way it enveloped him. Grabbing a pillow, he hugged it close to his chest as tight as he could.
Upstairs, his mother and grandfather’s voices tapered off. He could hear the heavy thud of his grandfather’s footfalls down the hall and up the stairs, then back down again. He listened to the soles of his grandfather’s polished black shoes scrape against the tile floor in the entryway upstairs, followed shortly by the slam of the front door – and Josuke knew his grandfather had left for work.

A knock at the basement door. Before he could answer, the door swung open and his mother cantered down the steps.

“Josuke!” she called. “Are you down here?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, burying his face into the pillow. The smooth cotton cover felt cool against his skin.

Rising onto her tiptoes, she leaned over the couch’s back to peer at him. “Feeling alright, kiddo?” she asked.

“S’too hot.”

“Sure is.” Straightening up, she brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear and said: “Listen. Your grandpa had to go to work. And I need to leave soon too. Mrs. Imai isn’t around to look after you. If I leave you alone, are you going to be okay?”

“Sure.”

“You’ll have to keep the door locked. And I don’t want you opening it for anyone except me or your grandpa. Do you think you could do that?”

“Sure.”

“I can stay home if you want,” she offered. “They’ll live without me at work for one day.”

In the pillow, he buried his face. “Mo-oom!”

She pulled her hands away quick, holding them up at shoulder height like someone had pointed a gun at her. “Alright, don’t let me cramp your style.”

Once again, she dipped over the back of the couch – this time, to blow a wet raspberry against his cheek. Josuke let out an offended squawk and swung the pillow at her, but she was too quick.

At the bottom of the steps she turned back and called out to him: “There’s an extra packed lunch for you in the fridge. You can stay up until I get home if you want. Remember: doors locked. Stay inside. Keep the blinds drawn. Don’t open the door to anybody.”

“How long was she missing, anyway?” Josuke asked. He tried to choose his words carefully.

“Yuki? It wasn’t long. A day, maybe. I remember there was a police car in the driveway the next morning.”

“So what? Did they just find her hiding in the attic or something?”

“No – she turned up in S City, of all places.”

“Where in S City?”

“I don’t think your grandpa ever said where exactly, but – it makes you think, right? No way a two year old could have gotten there on her own; some sick creep must’ve – Asshole!”
She shouted this last word as she swerved to avoid a car that was backing out of a driveway. “Like, do these people not look where they’re going?!” she demanded to no one in particular, as she flipped off the car’s reflection in the rear view mirror.

Just then, Josuke wished Okuyasu were there in the car with him. Okuyasu was good at getting information out of people without putting them on edge. Not him. Josuke was clever; when he started asking questions, people naturally assumed he was up to something. And they’d be right, most of the time. With his mother it was even worse – talking to her was like talking to a polygraph.

In his head, he was trying to piece all this new information together in a way that made sense: his visit to the hospital, Jotaro being out of the picture while Yuki was missing. There was something he’d said to Okuyasu once, at the beginning of summer when all the talk about voices and children vanishing in plain sight had been a kind of game to them, that was starting to bother him. Something about the reason he’d told Jotaro about the murders and kidnappings after Yuki disappeared. He knew that initial account had been mostly untrue, that the stories he’d told had started long before his neighbor’s daughter went missing and his reasons for telling them had nothing to do with helping a little girl, but there was something he’d said back then, a word he’d used…

He was on the verge of giving up on trying to remember when the word flashed into his head with complete and utter clarity, so obvious to him then that he was surprised he’d had trouble recalling it in the first place:

Desperation.

“Remember: doors locked. Stay inside. Keep the blinds drawn. Don’t open the door to anybody.”

He sat up in time to watch his mother’s black pencil skirt and sheer stockings disappear at the top of the steps. Anger flared up in him, hot and quick and momentarily over with. There was something wrong about her getting dressed up and going to work as though nothing had happened. He didn’t understand how the disappearance of a kid like him was not enough to cause everyone to drop what they were doing, because in Josuke’s six year old mind, there was not a problem on earth that adults couldn’t solve if they only applied effort to it.

He wished Jotaro were there. His nephew had dealt with bad people before; in the stories he’d told Josuke, the villains were always soundly beaten – all the effort and drama and fear condensed away in Jotaro’s succinct recollections, leaving only the superhuman feats for Josuke to soak up. Jotaro would know exactly what to do in this situation. He’d be able to find Yuki in no time and get her home safe and sound. And the only reason Jotaro wasn’t there to do something – the only reason his neighbour’s daughter was in danger – was all because of him.

The possibility of Yuki never coming home was too much for him to process, so he instead thought of what Jotaro would do in his place.

By the time he heard his mother’s car pull out of the driveway, Josuke had reached a decision.

His mother hadn’t spoken since cussing out the other car. Then, while they were crossing the bridge back to the other side of the river, she said:

“There’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you about.”

He glanced over at her. From the height of the bridge, there was nothing to obscure his view of the ocean. The deep blue sky with its heavy-bottomed clouds filled the driver’s side window. His mother’s hair lashed wildly in the wind, her face softened in the natural light. He was used to seeing her indoors, where the florescent lights drew her features on harsh.
“What’s that?” he asked. He’d assumed his absence had been item number one on the agenda; he couldn’t think of anything that overshadowed it.

She drew a breath, as if to steel herself for whatever she was about to say next – but then changed her mind, and instead threw out, in a flippant tone: “So what was all that about the other night when you got a call from Okuyasu? You never did say.”

He hesitated. In some ways, he wished Tomoko knew about stands and ghosts and murderers, and everything else that had somehow become a routine part of his life. It’d certainly be easier on him if she did. Lying was exhausting. Whatever the truth, however, he knew it wasn’t the version she was looking for. If he told her about Vox, she’d just think he was trying to pull one over on her – hiding the facts she was after behind some kind of twisted joke.

She instead, Josuke said: “He was at Kame Square when the cops were taking away the body.” – and left it at that.

Tomoko swore under her breath. “Jesus. Is he alright?”

“I think so.”

“I’m glad. The poor guy’s been through enough.” She rolled her shoulders, adjusted her grip on the wheel. “You’re a good kid, you know that? I’m glad he’s got someone like you.”

Josuke wasn’t sure how to reply. “Thanks?” he ventured.

“He’s a good kid too. Sweet. Funny.”

She was watching him in the rear-view mirror. Josuke palmed the back of his neck, feeling self-conscious all of a sudden. “Uh, yeah.”

“You’ve been hanging out a lot this summer, hunh?”

“I don’t – .”

“I think it’s great. It’s just – I don’t think I’ve seen Hirose or any of your other friends around.”

A chill ran down Josuke’s spine. The wind coming in through the window felt too cool all of a sudden – or maybe his nerves were starting to get to him. He wasn’t sure he liked where the conversation was headed. “We hang out,” he insisted. “I see Koichi and Yukako all the time at Deux Magots.”

“Yes, but still – I’m just saying, you spend an awful lot of time at the Nijimuras’ house. I’ve met his dad, I know he’s up in his room most of the time. I bet it’s nice having the place to yourself.” When she glanced over at him, whatever expression she saw on his face made her snort. “Look. I used to sneak out of the house all the time when I was your age. And not to go to parties, either.”

He had a feeling he knew what she was talking about, and he wished he didn’t. There were certain things in his life he never wanted to picture, and his mother getting up to teenage hijinks was one of those things.

They came to a red light. By then, Josuke was shivering. He was nervous – he was only now just realizing that he wasn’t as low-key around Okuyasu as he thought, and though he’d done nothing wrong he felt like he’d been caught red-handed – but he was starting to think that wasn’t the cause of it. He was cold, actually cold, but as much as he wanted to tell his mother to close the window, he was afraid she’d accuse him of changing the subject if he did.
While they were stopped, Tomoko turned to him, leaning one elbow against the steering wheel, and asked: “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just because I’m your mother doesn’t mean I live under a rock. I’ve been on this earth longer than you have, kiddo. You learn a thing or two after a while.”

The light turned green. Tomoko straightened out, put her foot on the gas, but all the while she continued to speak: “It’s the same deal as before. I want you to be able to tell me anything. I can’t guarantee I’m always going to understand. Maybe some things I’ll need time to wrap my head around. But you’re my kid and I care about you, and nothing’s gonna change that. Alright?”

Unlike everything surrounding Vox, there was nothing preventing him from confiding in his mother about his crush, especially when she’d already done the bulk of the work for him. The secret was as good as halfway out. But the thing was: there was nothing to tell, not really. He and Okuyasu hadn’t engaged in all manner of hanky-panky at Okuyasu’s place as his mother seemed to think. They had not kissed before; they had not, for that matter, even confessed.

And – alright. So maybe he was embarrassed to talk to his mother for the same reason he felt uncomfortable at the thought of trying to pin down his sexual orientation or using the word ‘boyfriend’. Everything was still new to him. He wanted to ease into it, maybe get used to holding another boy’s hand without his palms breaking into a sweat before having a big dramatic heart-to-heart tell-all with his mother.

“Alright,” he stammered. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Up ahead, the traffic lights turned yellow. He wondered if he could get away with bolting when his mother stopped at the lights, but even if he did he wasn’t sure where he’d go.

“So that’s it, then?” his mother asked.

“I guess so.”

The chills kept getting worse. He wasn’t sure if it was his anxiousness or the breeze, but something was making the tips of his fingers go numb. He stuck his hands under his armpits, trying and failing to warm them.

When they rolled up to the red light, he took the opportunity to lurch forward and flip on the heat.

Tomoko raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re sure you’re feeling alright, kiddo? It’s like thirty degrees out.”

“How are you not cold?” he demanded. “I’m fuckin’ freezing.”

“Come on, quit exaggerating.”

He wasn’t.

Tomoko’s shoulders relaxed, but the worried set of her mouth remained.

“Just promise me one thing, okay?” she said. “If things change… with Okuyasu, or anything else … I don’t want to be the last to know.”

Josuke opened his mouth to reply. The breath on his lips came out in a silver fog.
Tomoko, thankfully, wasn’t looking at him. He covered his mouth with his hand, feeling the hotness of his breath against his frigid fingers.

“Josuke.” His mother turned again, eyes sharpening on him. “I’m trying to talk to you here.”

Something wasn’t right. Whatever it was, it didn’t feel like a stand attack. The tingling, burning sensation in his hands and feet felt remote, detached. Sort of like when Crazy Diamond took a hit in battle. Except Crazy Diamond was dormant at the back of his mind at the moment. Then there was Vox, of course. But that didn’t make sense either, unless Sato Fujimoto’s stand was in a deep freeze somewhere, or – .

“Whatever, let’s just go home,” Tomoko was saying. “We can order in, watch a movie. How’s that sound?”

Red turned to green. The car started to roll forward – then Josuke flung open the passenger side door and leapt out.

Unheeding of line of traffic backed up behind her, Tomoko stopped the car. By the time she’d rushed up onto the sidewalk, however, Josuke had already cleared the fence that blocked the alleyway’s entrance.

“Where do you think you’re going?!” she demanded, fingers curling around the chain link.

“Sorry!” Josuke called out without breaking his stride. “Something came up!”

Tomoko watched him disappear around a corner. Slowly, she turned back to the road – in time to see a van swerve around her car, horn blaring, taking out the driver’s side mirror in the process. The rest of the line of cars backed up at the lights followed after. One clipped her bumper.

Her underarms were sweating in her stiff purple blazer. Against her forehead, she pressed the heel of her palm. She could already feel a migraine coming on.

***

The knee-high socks, Hazamada decided, were a mistake.

His calves were itchy. And hot. Sweat was collecting under the cuffs of his socks, and had soaked through the soles so that his feet slipped around in his leather shoes. At his height he could smell the ripe odor of his hot, damp feet – and so could Surface, judging by the way it gagged and pinched its nostrils.

“No offense, boss,” it said, “but you smell like a wet sheep.”

“At least I don’t smell like a sawmill,” Hazamada retorted.

He was starting to wonder how long this whole getting kidnapped business was supposed to take. He’d been walking for what felt like hours and he was nearly at the point where the old highway and the coastal road would diverge. The insidious realization was dawning on him that however far he’d walked up until now, he’d have to walk the same distance going back.

The two-way radio in Surface’s pocket beeped. Hazamada grabbed it (“Getting a little handsy with the merchandise,” Surface chided) and jabbed his thumb down on the talk button.

“About time,” he growled into the mic. “The fuck’s taking so long?”
Static crackled over the channel. He heard a few blips that might’ve been distorted human voices, but he figured it was just some sonic artifacts (a term he’d heard once on television and used in excess of his understand of its meaning).

Just when he was on the verge of giving in and saying “over”, Koichi’s voice crackled to life through the speaker:

“Sorry about that. I guess you’re too out in the open.”

The condescending adult tone from earlier was gone. So Koichi had decided to drop the stiff upper lip and the game of radio tag. That was an improvement, at least.

Hazamada held down the talk button once more. “Oh yeah? And whaddya want me to do about it?” he asked.

He eased his thumb off the button without saying “over.” If Koichi had given up, so would he.

“To your, uh, left. Do you see a path there?”

Hazamada looked, but it took a minute to see what Koichi was talking about. Calling it a path was a stretch – it was little more than an overgrown causeway that ran across the bog, no more than a couple feet wide. As far as Hazamada could tell, it’d been part of a trail at some point, but it didn’t look like anyone had maintained it in years.

To his lips, Hazamada raised the two-way radio. “Yeah, I see it,” he said – only to realize he’d forgotten to press the talk button. He jabbed down the button and tried again: “I see it.”

“Great! …I guess, do you mind heading that way?”

He wanted to tell Koichi that there was a whole lot he’d minded in the past half hour, but Hazamada wrestled that urge back down. Somehow, Surface’s words had gotten stuck in his head; that everything that had gone wrong, had gone wrong because Hazamada was a vindictive piece of shit. Well, Hazamada wasn’t about to go and prove his stand right. He, Toshikazu Hazamada, was going to be perfectly fucking pleasant, and there was not a thing his stand could to about it.

“Alright, man, whatever you say.”

Toward the path he angled his feet, but before he could take that first step, he paused and spoke into the microphone: “What about you guys? Aren’t you s’posed to be watching my back?”

“Don’t worry about it – we’ll be right behind you! …W-well, after you’ve put enough distance between us, anyway!”

The radio went silent – once again transformed into an innate object in Hazamada’s hand.

Surface pulled and exaggerated bow, one arm sweeping out in the direction of the path.

“Ladies first,” it quipped, and though its pompadour was in the way of its face, Hazamada could hear the smirk in its tone.

“Thanks,” he grit out

Without looking back, he stepped down from the shoulder of the road and onto the causeway.
“You sure something’s not wrong with ‘em?” Okuyasu asked. “Like maybe he’s too far away, or all these wires ‘n shit’s messing with the signal?”

“The power lines didn’t seem to affect the radio signal back in town,” Yukako pointed out.

“Ya got any better ideas?”

“Maybe it’s the batteries,” Tamami suggested. “Lotsa companies these days are just selling you old batteries, probably don’t even have half a charge to them.”

He was currently following along on foot, a red Coleman cooler in hand, having left his car at the gas station parking lot (“My old lady’s not really one for the whole start-stop kinda driving,” he’d said. “I have to give her a few turn-overs every time I stop for a light.”)

The look of concentration on Koichi’s face deepened as the two-way radio cradled in his hands let out another burst of static, another string of garbled noise – and then, nothing.

“I don’t think it’s any of those things,” he said. “My dad and I have had these radios working at some pretty long distances before. Besides! – I know what they’re like when the batteries start to die. And it’s not like… this.”

Okuyasu made a low sound at the back of his throat. “Uh, not for nothin,’” he said, “but where’s Hazamada going?”

He had a pair of binoculars pointed out across the field. From where they were positioned, they could just make out the distant figures of Hazamada and Surface (well – mostly Surface) above the sea of grass.

Closing his eyes, Koichi concentrated on his connection with Echoes. Through its eyes, he peered down at the tops of Surface and Hazamada’s heads. The image was distorted by a heavy orange overlay, refracted many times over and warped by the multiple lenses of his stand’s eyes – nonetheless, he could still distinguish Hazamada walking out onto path that cut across the wetlands.

“He, uh, looks like he’s going down some kind of trail,” Koichi said.

Yukako glared down at the map in her hands. “There isn’t much around here,” she said. “The map mentions something about historical farmland – I suppose there could still be some remnants. Old timbers. Flagstones. The path might be part of that.”

Koichi snapped his fingers. “Hey, I read about something similar once! Sometimes, when a rice field is abandoned, it can develop into a wetland ecosystem over time.”

“So what’s Hazamada doing on some old farm road?” Okuyasu demanded.


More static. A garbled, alien sound. Then:

“Hey, what’s up?”

Hazamada’s voice sounded fuzzy through the two-way radio’s speakers.


“I’m not gonna take a leak in the middle of the road, if that’s what you’re asking. Over.”

“What’d he say?” Okuyasu asked. He was too preoccupied with binoculars to notice Yukako’s reaction.

Koichi ignored him. “Alright,” he said into the mic. “But be quick. We need you out on the road where we can see you in case something happens. Over.”

***

As Hazamada walked along the causeway, the long, willowy reeds on either side of him bowed in the breeze, creeping up over the path and dragging against his ankles. Once or twice, he heard a plonk in the water – only to turn a fraction too late and see the frenetic rings of ripples where some fish or tadpole had darted away. Beneath the network of broad lily pads that lay across the black water’s surface, large slabs of ancient hewn stone lay nestled in the sunless mire, wispy strands of green algae clinging to granite. Perhaps at one time the stones had been part of a well, or a shrine.

The whole place was giving Hazamada the creeps.

Static hummed over the two-way radio’s speaker, undercut by a weird, pitchy wine that reminded him of when he tried to listening to music on his radio at home and got stuck between stations. Sound cut in and out, but nothing he could make any sense of.

“You still there?” he demanded.

The static broke long enough for him to hear Koichi’s voice insist: “Right behind you!”

“Whatcha worried for, boss?” Surface chided.

“I’m not worried,” Hazamada grumbled.

All the same, he picked up his pace. Surface was ahead of him in less than two steps; no surprise, given Higashikata was all leg.

“If that creep shows up,” Surface drawled, pausing mid-sentence to flex, “I’ll use my Crazy Diamond to fix its face.”

“Nice try, but way out of character.”

“Aw, come on, I was close wasn’t I?”

Hazamada shoved his way past his stand and pushed on.

The moment he stepped into the shade just past the treeline, something in the atmosphere changed. Out on the bog there’d been a million miniscule sounds of life all around them – the whir of cicadas, the squeals and chirps of frogs, the whine of flies netted in the hot grass, the nasally cries of the crows circling overhead. He’d heard the wind rustle through the reeds and hiss over the flat surface of the bog. But under the cover of the trees, all that sound died away. Hazamada almost felt as though he’d stepped into another world.

Up ahead, the trees had grown up around the trail as though to snuff it out. Their top-heavy canopies bowered over the path and twined together, like two rows of dancers, arm-in-arm.

He twisted his head to peer behind him, expecting to see Echoes – but there was nothing there except the trees. The way he’d come looked choked-out, strangled by the tangled gnarls of branches, naked
ashen bark near the trees’ roots where the sun didn’t reach and the leaves didn’t grow.

***

“What’s taking so long? Over.”

“Would you hold on one minute? It’s hard to take a piss with you ringing every two seconds and making me nervous. Over.”

Releasing the talk button and covering the microphone with his hand, Koichi turned to the others. “Something’s wrong,” he hissed.

“Whaddya mean?” asked Okuyasu.

“For one: Hazamada going into the wood in the first place. He’s… w-well he’s not exactly modest, let’s put it that way. Two: I just have a bad feeling. He’s been out of sight for almost a full minute now.”

“Should I go get the old lady?” Tamami asked. He’d gotten tired of standing around and was perched atop his Coleman cooler, an open can of green tea in hand.

Yukako shook her head. “There’s no time. If we lose track of him now, we’ll be lucky to find him in pieces.”

“We’ll have to cut across,” Koichi decided.

Before the words had finished leaving his mouth, there was a whoosh and a path appeared in the grass before them. Okuyasu stepped lightly over the guardrail, cracking his knuckles, neck craned to one side.

“Let’s go,” he said. “I’ve been waitin’ all day to go round two with this jackass.”

***

Hazamada pressed the talk button on his two-way radio. “Where the hell does this path lead?” he asked.

“Not for nothing, boss,” said Surface, “but you sure this ain’t a prank?”

“Look, Koichi’s not that kinda guy.”

“Like you, you mean.”

Before Hazamada could retort, the two-way radio beeped and Koichi’s voice came on over the tinny speaker: “It doesn’t lead anywhere anymore.”

“What do you mean, anymore?”

“There used to be a farmhouse around here. There’s nothing left of it now, but it had a beautiful garden.”

“I don’t care about that nerdy history shit – I just don’t want to end up getting lost.”

“I think it’s really interesting. A family used that lived in the farmhouse, you know. They all died of some illness. There was a shrine dedicated to them for the longest time somewhere around here.”
There was a slight echo to Koichi’s voice. Hazamada held the radio out away from his ear. Sure enough, when Koichi began to speak again, he heard the distant sound of his voice – his real voice – a split second before his words reached the two-way radio’s speakers: “After they died, there was no one to look after the farm or gardens. Eventually a storm came through and leveled what was left of the place.”

So the bastard really was trying to sneak up on him. Hazamada wasn’t sure if he bought into the whole creepy abandoned farmhouse story either – it was awfully trite, even coming from someone like Koichi. Maybe Surface was right – this was all just a prank.

A stupid, pain-in-the ass prank that had convinced Hazamada to march his way out to the middle of nowhere in a schoolgirl uniform.

His stand had its head turned in the direction Koichi’s voice had come from. They locked eyes. Hazamada jerked his head to one side. A grin sheered its way across Surface’s face. It stepped off the path and into the woods, and Hazamada followed.

“When all that was gone,” Koichi continued, “people didn’t have any reason to come back to the shrine. It fell down brick by brick over time.”

“Alright. What’s that got to do with finding your stupid stand?” Hazamada asked. He wanted to keep Koichi talking, just long enough to track him down. He was going to teach that little twerp a lesson when he found him.

“Do you know what it’s like to be unremembered?” Koichi asked.

He sounded closer this time, the volume of his voice practically matching the volume of the speaker. Hazamada pressed forward. “Can’t say I do.”

“Think of every memory you have. Everything that’s ever made you laugh. Or cry. Think of all the thoughts you’ve ever had. All your hopes and dreams. Imagine if one day you woke up and those were all gone.”

Koichi sounded different. Sure, the voice was the same, but the inflection had shifted. It wasn’t his usual conversational tone, nor was it the adult tone he’d spoken in over the phone before. His voice seemed to be coming from the other side of a ridge just ahead. Over the ridge’s back a thick growth of bracken sprouted; the trees that grew along its side leaned at weird angles.

“Gotcha,” Surface hissed as it stumbled the last few paces to the ridge’s crest.

Hazamada watched his stand pause, arms going ridged at its side. “What?” he asked, half out of breath as he staggered to the top of the incline.

“The fuck did he go?” Surface mumbled.

It was gazing below at the empty ravine, into which the growth of bracken had overflown. Fallen trees spanned the gap, moldering with moss; Hazamada could smell the damp scent of wood rot.

The radio beeped. “That’s what it’s like to be forgotten. Whatever you’ve done with your life – whoever you were – it’s like it never mattered in the first place.”

Hazamada was having a hard time pinpointing the echo. It seemed to come from everywhere at once – the forest canopy, the ravine, the space at his back.

Into the radio’s microphone, he muttered, in a kind of shaky jab: “Good thing I’m not going to give a
shit about any of that stuff when I’m dead.”

Surface let out a yelp around the same time Hazamada felt the touch of something cold and ephemeral against the back of his neck.

The radio went dead. Koichi’s voice, from immediately behind him and much higher up than Koichi’s voice had any business being, said:

“You’d be surprised by the things you care about when you’re dead.”

***

When Josuke stepped out the front door, his stomach was light and tingly. He’d only snuck out once before, and that had been with Jotaro – whose participation and approval had, at least in part, sanctified the activity in Josuke’s conscious. This time he was alone.

The date was August 13th. A Sunday. The sidewalks were thronged with couples and families. Normally Josuke wouldn’t mind. He preferred going out by himself when there were people around – the presence of adults made him feel safe. Adults could hurt kids like him; he knew this, his grandfather and his mother had drilled it into his head over and over – but somehow, this thought never entered his mind before. He’d assumed he would know a bad person if he saw one. That people who looked and acted like his mother and grandfather and his family’s friends couldn’t possibly harm him.

Until that morning, however, bad people had existed only as characters in his stories. He spoke of murderers and kidnappers with the same ghastly glee as demons and spirits. Now the sight of adults walking in his direction made him nervous; he pulled the hem of his shirt lower over the waistband of his shorts, dipped his head, skirted to the far side of the sidewalk until he had both feet on the grass.

He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. Maybe to find the girl in a stranger’s arms, being carried away unbeknownst to everyone but him. And even if he’d found her, then what? – he’d hoped just shouting and hollering would be enough to startle the kidnapper into dropping the girl and running away. Or he’d hoped she really had just run off, and he’d find her tottering along the road or in the park and that would be the end of it.

Down one street, turn, down another. In the distance a dog’s bark echoed in the clear air, sharp and staccato and relentless. He tried to keep the directions straight in his head, worried he wouldn’t remember how to find his way back. Left, right, right. The streets were beginning to blur together, one by one, and he was feeling sick and feverish like he had the winter before, wrapped in a blanket in the backseat where his breath fogged the windows and filled the sealed-off air in the car with the sour smell of sick. He felt, as he did back then, that something inside him was tearing itself in two, splitting him apart at the fibers, but this time the feeling was only in his head. He couldn’t stop thinking about what would have happened if Jotaro hadn’t been in the hospital, if he had watched his step back at the cliffs, if he hadn’t told all those dumb stories in the first place… a whole diatribe of should and could haves that traced its fault back to him.

He lost track of where he was going. The next thing he knew, he was standing outside the gates of the public park, the late afternoon sun catching on the iron fence and trapping Josuke’s tiny figure in deep bars of shadow.

A woman stepped out through the front gates and swung around the corner, pushing a stroller in front of her. She nearly ran Josuke down – he stepped out of the way, back pressing up against the fence, a mumbled apology tapering off under his breath. When she glanced back at him he thought
he saw a scowl on her face; she locked her elbows at her sides and quickened her pace.

Josuke waited until she was out of sight before slipping through the gates.

Much to his dismay, there was no sign of Yuki on the playground. He loved going to the public playground – it was newer, cooler than the one at his school – but most of the kids there were younger than him, and he felt out of place. He could sense their parents’ eyes on him. Giving him the same look the woman with the stroller had given him. They seemed to be looking right through him in a way that made Josuke feel like he’d been turned inside out: everything that had been inside was now on the outside, exposed to view.

He skulked away from the playground, hands balled into soft fists.

“Hey. Are you lookin’ for someone?”

Fighting off the urge to bolt, Josuke turned. Standing beneath a tree was a boy his age, perhaps a little younger. He looked familiar, in a sort of vague way – Josuke thought he might’ve seen him at school somewhere, from another year or another class maybe. The tree he was standing under was garlanded in white Chrysanthemums. There was a teddy bear leaned up against the tree’s trunk, and a plastic dinosaur, and a model truck. As Josuke watched, the boy picked up the teddy bear and examined it, smoothing his thumb over the toy’s glass eyes.

Without thinking, Josuke blurted: “You can’t play with that.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re for a dead kid!”

The other boy gave him a strange look. Somewhere between horror and amusement. “It’s fine,” he said.

Stooping, he reached down and picked up the plastic dinosaur and held it out to Josuke. “Here. You wanna play too?”

Josuke shrunk away. “Mom says it’s bad to touch that stuff.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind sharing.”

The boy’s tone had a breezy confidence to it that struck Josuke as arrogant. Though he did not understand to its full extent the concept of justice, he had an adamant sense of fairness, which was the same thing as justice only insofar as a six year old could understand it. The only thing he hated more than kids who took kids’ toys were kids who did so and didn’t act the least bit sorry for it.

“I’m gonna tell my grandpa you were playing with those,” said Josuke. When the other boys’ expression didn’t waver, he added: “He’s a policeman.”

“You’re no fun,” the boy grumbled. He set the toy dinosaur back down. “An’ you never answered my question.”

“What?”

“I asked if you’re lookin’ for someone.”

“Why d’ya say that?”

“My friends told me.”
“What friends?” Josuke asked. He wondered if some of the other kids from school had seen him.

“I dunno their names. There’s like hundreds of ’em.”

This description sounded vague and hyperbolic enough that Josuke immediately dismissed it as a lie, in the same vein as his classmates who pretended their parents were famous actors or sports heroes.

“Yeah, right,” he said.

“My friends said you should check the highway that goes to the city.”

As he said this, however, Josuke was already walking away. The boy cupped his hands around his mouth and called out: “S’a little girl, right? I hope you find her!”

Josuke’s pulse kicked up, but he didn’t pause or turn around until he was back outside the park’s front gates. By then, he was already feeling sorry for threatening the other boy. Lying or not – he sounded genuine when he’d wished Josuke luck.

He hesitated, tapping the toe of his sneaker impatiently against the sidewalk. Then, he took off in a jog toward the highway.

***

By the time he reached the payphone at the other side of the intersection, Josuke had slowed to a walk. He waited until he was out of earshot of the gas station, then shouted, as loud as he could:

“Daisuke!”

Then, a little less loudly:

“You there, buddy?”

Twenty minutes later, Morioh had nearly sunken out of sight and he was still walking with nothing to show for it, the sweat drying and going cold on his back.

His body had been running hot ever since he’d made his big escape. He was just starting to think he’d been imagining things, when he heard a voice mumble:

“…Josuke?”

Daisuke was standing on the other side of the road. Dragging one hand over the back of his neck, Josuke crossed the sweltering asphalt. He could feel the sweat prickle up on his skin; the blacktop shivered like an oil slick in the heat.

“Jesus dude, don’t leave me hanging like that,” he complained. Then: “You didn’t happen to see the others around, didya? – Okuyasu, Koichi, Yukako, you’ve met them all before.”

“I mean, yeah – .”

“Are they okay?”

“Er, I think so – .”

“Where’d they go?” Josuke glanced about, as if expecting to see some sign of his friends’ whereabouts. “You’d know if they were still on the highway, right?”
He noticed, for the first time, the way Daisuke was staring at him. “What?” he asked.

Daisuke opened his mouth, moved it soundlessly a few times before the words seemed to catch up: “How did you… get away?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I saw you. That – that – that thing had you.”

“What thing?”

“That – ghost, I guess. I’ve never seen a ghost like it before, though! – I mean, I haven’t exactly seen many other ghosts all the way out here, but you get the picture.”

He must have been talking about Vox, Josuke realized. He wouldn’t have expected Daisuke to be able to see the stand, but then, dealing with a stand that also happened to be an evil spirit entity was new territory for just about all involve.

“When you say you saw it take me or whatever,” Josuke began, “what do you mean?”

“Well, it was you or someone who looked an awful lot like you! And there was a little girl with you – or whoever – too.”

“Little girl?” Josuke’s first thoughts flew to Jolyne, but he quickly dismissed the possibility. Then, a second thought emerged on its heels. “This girl, what’d she look like? Black hair? Short? Real homely looking?”

Daisuke rubbed at his wrist. “Gosh, you know, I wouldn’t say homely, maybe, but…”

Groaning, Josuke pressed his fist to his forehead. “Goddammit, I can’t believe they replaced me with Hazamada.”

“Who?”

“Nevermind. But that’s why you went full deep freeze, right? ‘Cause you thought me and that kid were in trouble?”

“How’d you know about that?” Daisuke stammered.

“Long story. Right now, I need to know where the others are.”

Suddenly, Daisuke’s body went rigid. Overhead, the humming of the powerlines grew louder.

“What’s up?” Josuke asked.

Daisuke’s eyes came back into focus. He glanced at Josuke, lips pressed together in a worried line. “There’s a car coming from Morioh. And it’s going fast.”

“It’s not a station wagon, is it? Or a four-seater motorbike?”

“Neither of those, sorry.”

It could’ve been anyone, and Josuke wouldn’t have worried if it weren’t for Sato Fujimoto still being unaccounted for.

“Hide,” said Josuke, waving his hands at Daisuke. “Or – I don’t know – make yourself invisible,
“whatever it is you do.”

“What’s going on?”

“I have a hunch, alright? Just lay low for a minute.”

Without another word, the ghost dissolved from his vision. By then Josuke could hear the car coming. He could almost feel the throaty growl of its engine through the soles of his sneakers.

Then it was on the horizon, growing bigger and bigger at an impossible rate – swearing, Josuke dove off the road and into the shallow ditch below. He lay flat on his stomach, the long blades of grass bending around him and cutting lines of shadow across his face, and he hoped the driver hadn’t seen him.

The car’s engine grew louder. It didn’t sound like it would slow down. The car flew past him, the wind off it rattling the stalks of grass and blowing dust in his face – then he heard the squeal of brakes.

The car backed up. Josuke braced himself, calling his stand to his side. A car door slammed. Footsteps crunched against gravel on the shoulder of the road. He tried to keep as still as he could, heart walloping in his chest as he waited for the car’s driver to come within strike range. Two meters was all he needed. He knew that distance like it was an extension of his own body; he could feel when something entered it, and when it left.

The footsteps stopped just short of that range.

“Josuke. What are you doing?”

Dismissing Crazy Diamond, Josuke pushed himself up onto his knees. He squinted, one hand raised above his eyes, shielding them from the sun.

Crouching on the shoulder of the road above him was Jotaro.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while since the tree at the park came up, so if you need a refresher, here's the relevant chapter: http://archiveofourown.org/works/7342399/chapters/19450333

Man it feels like forever since Jotaro's been in this fic outside of flashback stuff.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Sorry again for the delay! I was busy all December with making Christmas gifts + doing stuff with work & family.

This chapter was originally going to be much longer, but I got to 10k and still had a couple of loooooong scenes left and decided to chop it up. The good news is that means I have the first 1500 words of the next chapter written already :D

Pale birch trunks like long white fingers emerged and vanished in the beam of his flashlight. The beam that trembled and swung wide, like a living thing thrashing through the underbrush. Beneath his feet the soil felt too soft, decades of decaying leaf giving way beneath the soles of his shoes and walking through it his legs felt heavy and boneless. All around him rose up the viperous rattle of cicadas, near and visceral in the thick summer air. When he threw back his head and looked up, the trees stretched tall and long above him, disappearing where the shadow-shapes of leaves choked out the sky. As he moved he kept his head tilted back, and the trees moved with him, turning slowly above like the spokes of a wheel. The wind rose and fell through the canopy above, leaves rustling against one another with a sound like cascading water.

There was no path or trail to mark the way. He traversed where the lay of the land permit it, turning sideways to slide between thorny brambles, or crouching with the flashlight thrust under one armpit to crawl feet-first down an incline, moss slick under his hands. The worry of finding his way back did not cross his mind; if he’d taken the easy way into the woods, he figured taking the easy way out would lead him back the way he came. The only woods he’d set foot in before were at the park, and then no matter how lost he seemed to get he was only ever one turn away from emerging out onto the parking lot or the playground. A forest in his mind was something with an end. All the wild bits demarcated with a neat hedgerow of trees, as if forests were places besieged by civilization, and not the other way around. There was a vastness about nature he couldn’t grasp, not at first, but as he slipped deeper and deeper into the woods with no sign of the other side forthcoming, he realized his mistake.

The forest unraveled itself before him in layers. Trees emerged into the flashlight beam, plucked out from the dark in strong relief. Everything had a weight, a dimensionality to it that it did not have during the day. When he aimed the flashlight beam above him, the forest’s ceiling crouched low overhead. Claustrophobic. He kept his eyes directly in front of him, on the texture of the bark ringed in battery-light and the mosquitos wheeling through the thick blanket of mist that took solid shape in his flashlight’s beam. He was afraid to affix his sight further out, in the half-dark where the flashlight barely reached, for fear of catching sight of a thing half-seen. Shape without identity, human or animal, somehow more frightening than anything he could or couldn’t see.

To his right, he heard footsteps echo his own. He turned; his foot, then straddling a gnarled cedar root, slipped. The soil between the roots had eroded away. His leg fell through to the knee, where something sharp dug into him. A cry escaped him before he could stop it. His knee stung; he felt at once the hot wetness of blood.
Fumbling with the flashlight, his thumb scraped over the grooved surface of the switch and the beam cut out. Afterimages of light left pinholes in his vision.

For a moment, he stood quiet as he could, the sound of his own breath roaring in his ears, his pulse throbbing painfully inside his skull. The forest around him ceased to exist, reduced to weird dapplings of light that trembled and roved over the uneven terrain at his feet with the shifting of the trees overhead. Indistinct shapes rose up all around him that might have been trees or brush or human figures, and in his uncertainty the shapes seemed to alter and move by their own accord. Even the wind seemed to change its tune. It rasped through the branches and gasped in his ears and sighed as it shook out the leaves, and every breath of it made him jump and made his fingers twitch for the flashlight’s switch.

He had not been afraid of the dark in years. Just like the basement, it wasn’t the dark that frightened him. It was the unknown concealed in the dark. Though the flashlight gave the forest’s secrets away only ten feet at a time, that little radius of certainty was more comforting than nothing.

Somewhere neither close nor far away, a crash in the undergrowth. Moving slowly, ponderously, with more weight behind it than his quick, light, nervous steps. A displacement in the shadows, something moving, or being moved. A snap of a twig, closer. He pressed his thumb to the switch but didn’t push it. His breath warm and wet through his lips. Josuke closed his mouth and tried not to breathe.

Then a flashlight came on, casting a broken beam of light through the tangle of forest. It was not his.

***

“Josuke. What are you doing?”

“Uh. Hey,” said Josuke.

It occurred to him that he was kneeling in a ditch on the side of the highway like a lunatic. As casually as he could, he rose to his feet and dusted the dirt off his knees.

Jotaro’s expression didn’t change. Josuke’s greeting sloughed off him unechoed.

“Where’s Jolyne?” he demanded.

There was in his eyes just then a brightness like sharpened steel that Josuke was used to seeing, but only ever in a fight. “S-she’s at Okuyasu’s place,” Josuke stammered. Which was, technically, not a lie. If Jotaro took this to imply that Okuyasu was also at Okuyasu’s place, and that he was the one keeping an eye on Jolyne, far be it from Josuke to stop him.

“I’ve been to the Nijimura’s house already. No one came to the door.”

“They must be out somewhere,” said Josuke, with a strained note of annoyance. He’d told Ken to stay put at the house.

“Then why aren’t you with them?”

“Something came up.”

Into his pocket, Jotaro reached. Josuke’s eyes followed his hand. “What kind of ‘something’?”

“Just, y’know. Busy. I got a thing with the gang.”
“In the middle of nowhere. On the highway. In a ditch.”

He knew the ditch thing was going to come back and bite him.

“I was on my way to meet up with them,” Josuke tried.

Jotaro withdrew his hand from his pocket. Through his closed fingers, Josuke caught a glimpse of something silver. “After the Nijimura’s house,” he said, “I looked for you in town. I ran into your mother. She’d been involved in a traffic accident – .”

“Is she okay?!”

“She’s fine. Car got rear-ended while it was parked at a stoplight. One mirror missing. I’ve never seen her so pissed off, though. She said you jumped out of the car at an intersection and ran off.”

Josukegroaned and dragged a hand down his face. After all that heart-to-heart with Tomoko, it seemed he was back to occupying spot numero uno on his mother’s shit list.

But Jotaro wasn’t finished. “I followed in the direction she said you’d gone.” He gave his wrist a quick flick, and something made a snap. Open in his hand was a silver zippo, its flame white and pale in the daylight. As Jotaro spoke he snapped the zippo closed and twirled the lighter between his fingers. “I started asking around. At the duck pond by the Nankai Memorial Stadium, this old lady tells me she’s seen you and Jolyne headed for the highway.”

“Guess that’s where I come in, hunh?”

Over his knuckles, Jotaro bumped the zippo – and though his hands were busy and his gaze was elsewhere, Josuke could tell he was being observed.

“Where is she?” Jotaro asked.

“I said she was at Okuyasu’s place – that’s the best guess I got.”

“The lady at the park saw – .”

“That wasn’t me! The girl she saw? That was just that little creep Hazamada and his stand pretending to be me.”

These last remarks were not snapped out, but the heat was there all the same.

Jotaro held the zippo out before him, the flame still in the breathless summer air. It occurred to Josuke that he hadn’t seen Jotaro smoke in years. He wondered why he still carried around a lighter on him.

“Does Hazamada have anything to do with you being so busy?”

“No. A little. Okuyasu and the others asked him to help.”

The lighter snapped shut.

“I thought Okuyasu was with Jolyne.”

Josuke sucked the air through his teeth and jerked his head away like he’d been slapped across the face.

“I mean, I didn’t say that she was. All I said was that she was at the Nijimura’s house.”
“Josuke.”

“Relax. She’s with a babysitter. The guy’s practically a professional.”

Jotaro didn’t look impressed with these credentials. Into his pocket, he shoved the zippo. “I could have hired a babysitter myself. I asked you and Okuyasu specifically.”

“I told you – something came up.”

As he said this, Josuke realized he was stuck on repeat – rehashing the same excuses, the same obfuscations of the truth he’d repeated to his mother. Only this was Jotaro and there was no reason for doing so. There was no glass divide between the safe, sane, and normal and the dangerous, insane, and paranormal to maintain, yet he found himself falling back on the lies anyway, some hardcoded animal defense mechanism misfiring at the worst of times: a possum playing dead in front of an oncoming truck.

“I need you to be more specific.”

Josuke let out a growl of frustration. “It was a stand user, alright? The fuck else would it be?”

For a moment, Jotaro’s eyes bored into him. It was like playing a game of chicken – that stare barrelling down on him on a straight and narrow line, daring Josuke to blink or look away. Instead he held on. The moment passed; Jotaro turned and looked back at Morioh nestled in the distance. A shadow fell in diagonal across his face.

“Could the stand user have anything to do with Jolyne and the babysitter’s disappearance?”

“Doubt it,” said Josuke. “Ken probably just took her to the park or something.”

“Ken? Ken Oyanagi?” Jotaro swung around, his attention zeroing back in on Josuke. “Isn’t he twelve years old?”

Josuke quickly changed the subject: “Anyway, we know the stand’s out here somewhere, so wherever Jolyne went’s got nothing to do with it.”

There was something bothering him, though. What Jotaro had said about no one coming to the door. He couldn’t figure out why before – skipping out on spending all day in a dusty old house and dragging Jolyne to the arcade instead seemed like something Ken would do, after all. He thought back to all the times he’d gone over to the Nijimuras’ house during those long, dull couple of weeks when Okuyasu wasn’t picking up the phone and never seemed to be at home…

“Okay, random question,” he began, “but you said when you went to the Nijimuras’ house, no one answered the door, right?”

“Right.”

“What about Mr. Nijimura?”

By the look Jotaro gave him, he already knew the answer.

“Okay, look,” said Josuke. “Here’s the deal. This stand and its user, they work independent of each other, right? Rohan, Mikitaka, and Yuuya were supposed to be tracking down the user, but…”

“You haven’t heard from them,” Jotaro concluded. “And you have no idea where the user is.”

The good news was Jotaro was taking the whole situation better than expected. Or at least Josuke
thought he was, until Star Platinum appeared behind Jotaro.

“Who is this guy?” Jotaro asked. He didn’t seem to notice his stand’s sudden appearance. “Some leftover of Kira’s?”

Right there and then, Josuke knew, he should have been spilling his guts about Vox and Sato and the whole sinister phenomenon that had taken hold of Morioh as far back as anyone seemed to remember. If he had to guess, the only reason he hadn’t done so already was because it would mean brushing up against the events of that first summer they’d met. That was the ridiculous part – it wasn’t like there was anything to confess to. Jotaro had been there. He knew everything that happened that summer; and he’d been older, so he no doubt remembered it all much better than Josuke did.

When he admitted to Okuyasu that he’d lied about telling Jotaro about Vox, Okuyasu had asked if he was afraid to bring it up because Jotaro had gotten hurt back then. Maybe something like guilt had set down its roots in those memories – in any case, when Josuke opened his mouth, he could feel his throat constrict.

“I-I don’t think so,” Josuke stammered. While Jotaro’s expression was as unreadable as ever, the look on his stand’s face – teeth clenched together in a snarl – made it clear that he was ready to punch someone’s lights out.

“Then there may be another arrow in Morioh.”

“There’s not, okay? Just trust me on this one.”

The asphalt crackled under the soles of Jotaro’s shoes as he turned. Over his shoulder, Star Platinum vanished. “I remember now. You asked about the arrow on the oyster farm.”

“Yeah, about that.”

Bowing his head, Jotaro pinched the bridge of his nose. “You took it off Jolyne.”

“More like borrowed.”

“And where is it now?”

“On Jolyne.”

Jotaro let his hand drop. He curled his fingers into fists a few times. “How dangerous is the user?”

Sato Fujimoto was a goddamn child murderer. Josuke licked his lips. His mouth felt dry, like he’d been sucking on cotton. “Dangerous enough,” he replied.

Jotaro wasn’t the one he was trying to downplay the situation for.

“Dangerous enough,” Jotaro repeated. “And you gave him a stand.”

“C’mon! I’m not an idiot, it’s not like I stabbed the guy on purpose!”

Jotaro didn’t respond. He turned and started walking in the direction of the white sedan parked along the shoulder of the road. The car had left deep tire treads cut into the gravel behind it.

“Hey! What’s up?” Josuke asked as he scrambled after him.

“We need to find your stand user. Keep talking.”
“Wherever he is, Yuuya’s gonna find him, alright? Right now, we need to haul ass down the highway and catch up with that stand.”

“Not until you’ve explained what’s going on.”

As Josuke watched, Jotaro yanked open the driver’s side door. A trepidation came over him all at once – the sense that something, some opportune window of time was slowly closing in front of him. Hunting down Vox and Sato would turn into just another fight, just another scar committed to memory, and that summer all those years ago would go back to being something shoved away in a box somewhere. For one terrifying moment, he found himself gazing down into the future as if it were a hole and he was falling into it, the feeling of inevitability making him lightheaded with a kind of vertigo. He knew just then if he didn’t say something, he never would. He’d keep falling and falling, pulled by the gravity of time. There was no going back once he’d left that ledge.

And so he blurted: “Do you remember when I was kid? All that shit I told you about serial killers and kids hearin’ voices?”

The hand on the door handle fell away. From within the car, the door open signal continued to beep, but Jotaro ignored it.

“I remember,” he said. There was a hesitation to his tone – each syllable deeper than the last like the words were digging in their heels.

“People have been getting bumped off in Morioh lately, same story as before. Like, this one kid heard his sister’s voice out in the yard and she turned up dead the next day. So we looked into it, right? And it turns out, there’s this thing, this spirit in Morioh that’s been making people go fucking crazy and start killing and kidnapping and shit.”

He waited. The air in his lungs felt thin.

“This isn’t something you should joke about,” said Jotaro. He wore a scowl on his face.

“Why the hell would I be joking around? I’m not creative enough to come up with this kind of crap.”

“You didn’t seem to have any trouble with that before.”

The car door warning continued to beep away, like an insistent tap on the shoulder. Josuke wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, but the sound seemed to be picking up speed.

“That was different! I was a kid, I exaggerated. That’s normal kid stuff. We’re talking the real deal here.”

“Is that what all this is about?”

“About what?” Josuke asked.

Jotaro took a step away from the car toward him. There was nothing along the highway, nothing for miles. At his back the fields continued for half a mile, and the ocean somewhere beyond and just out of sight. You could almost see the way the curvature of the earth gently rounded off the horizon. There was nothing stopping Josuke in any direction he looked – yet, in the moment, he felt inextricably trapped. Instead of the ocean being a mile behind him, he felt it was two steps back, just as it had been before up on the cliffs with the ground shrinking at his heels. Not all that much had changed. Here it was a full ten years later and he’d lied and fibbed and well-intentioned his way into yet another disaster.
“I know, back then…” Jotaro paused, expression blank, like whatever he’d been about to say had wriggled off his line and gotten away on him. He had his thumb pressed against the second knuckle of his index finger, rubbing small tight circles around the joint. At last, he spoke up: “There are ways I could have handled the situation better. I wasn’t in an ideal mindset at the time.”

“C’mon, you don’t have to – .”

“Regardless.”

This last word forceful, like a command. But what tipped Josuke off wasn’t Jotaro’s voice, or even his expression – which was still, for the most part, as obtuse as ever. Perhaps it was intuition among stand users, or perhaps something corresponding in his blood, the same brutal rage, and his own sense of it gone quiet then like a canary in a coalmine. Whatever the cause, an animal fear was crawling all over him. It felt like his spine was trying to rip free from his back.

“I understand if you’re still angry with me,” Jotaro continued. “If whatever game you’re playing helps you feel like you can get even, don’t let me stop you. But do not bring my daughter into this.”

And there it was: the same expression Star Platinum had worn earlier. The snarl, the frightening focused clarity in the eyes. And Josuke, in that moment, recognized the thing he’d been afraid of, both now and when he was a kid. All that poking around in the dark had brought out something in his nephew. There was guilt on his part, sure, and remorse too, but mostly there was the memory of the figure looming over him on the cliffs, the disjointed shifts in his expression, the threatening disorder in his movements, the illusion of whatever Josuke had seen or had convinced himself he’d seen done away and leaving him with the realization that everything he thought he knew about a person could disappear at a moment’s notice.

“I’m trying to tell ya!” Josuke exclaimed. “All that about the stand and the user – I didn’t make any of that up. Why the fuck would I be trying to get back at you? That’s really messed up, you know that?”

“Stand user or not – you’re coming with me. We’re going to find Jolyne.”

He grabbed Josuke by the wrist. In the background, the car door warning wailed away, frantic, like the bleating of a railway signal, and just at that moment Josuke felt like there may as well have been a train barrelling down on him. There was a pressure in his head, the taste of dust chalky at the back of his mouth, the roar of the ocean pounding against his eardrums from somewhere inside his head.

“If anything happened to her,” Jotaro began.

There was a soft thumping sound that reminded Josuke of shovel striking wet earth. The grip around his wrist went slack. Down Jotaro went, falling forward – and Josuke, too shocked to think to grab him, stepped out of the way just before he hit the ground.

“Alright,” said Daisuke. “That should keep him down for a couple minutes, but no guarantees. I figure by the time he’s up we can get the car down to the payphone and be clear-free.”

The ghost was standing exactly where Jotaro had stood a moment ago, with a hubcap hefted in both hands.

Josuke stared at the hubcap, then he stared at Jotaro’s unconscious body, and he said: “Dude! The fuck’re you doing?!”

“Hey, don’t worry about it! I noticed you were in a pinch. You can thank me later – come on, you’re not going to want to be around when he wakes up!”
Daisuke was already sliding into the driver’s seat. The car door shut; the beeping stopped. Tongue poking out at one corner of his lips, Daisuke leaned out the window to adjust the mirror, his eyes drifting up to Josuke’s face in the process.

“Well?” he asked. “What’re you waiting for?”

At that moment, Josuke took a step back and tried to picture how the scenario would have looked from an outsider’s perspective. Here was this random adult that stopped in the middle of the highway to get out of his car, yell at a kid, grab said kid’s wrist, and threaten him while trying to force him to get into his car and – alright, so maybe he could see where Daisuke was coming from.

“He wasn’t trying to threaten me!” Josuke insisted. “That’s just kinda how he rolls.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“He’s my *nephew*.”

Daisuke took one look at the unconscious man lying on the side of the road and let out a whistle.

“Aw jeez,” he said.

“I don’t got time for this. I need to get him in the car so we can catch up with the others and try to figure out what the hell is going on.”

Kneeling at Jotaro’s side, he called forth Crazy Diamond. His stand made a quick pass of Jotaro’s head (the last thing they needed, Josuke decided, were a matching set of concussions), but still the man didn’t wake up. Crazy Diamond couldn’t fix loss of consciousness, he supposed.

“You say you can drive this thing?” he asked, grunting as he rose to his knees. He had Jotaro draped over his back, fireman-style. The other man carried about as well as a sack of bricks.

“Sure! …I mean I can, up until the turn. I can’t stick around after that.”

“Shit, I forgot about that. What a pain in the ass.”

“You can’t drive?” Daisuke asked.

He reached back and popped the rear door for Josuke, who kicked it the rest of the way open before sliding Jotaro into the back seat. Getting the door shut again required creatively folding his nephew’s body this way and that so that it fit the width of the back seat, a process that ended up resembling trying to put a tent back in its bag: in the end, he gave up trying to make neat about it and went the route of force.

“Nah,” he said as he was doing this. “I’m not old enough to get my licence.”

“Well. Who knows? Maybe he’ll be up and about by the time we’re at the turn-off!”

As Josuke slid into the passenger’s seat, he got an idea.

“Hey,” he said, turning to Daisuke, “how long do you think it would take to teach me to drive this thing?”

***

On his first drive-by through the neighborhood, Sato coaxed the car along at a crawl. A crumpled slip of paper lay open on the passenger’s seat beside him. An address was written on it.
He made note of the house as he drove past it. A low gate. Older house, probably had older locks to go with it.

He kept going, doing a full turn of the block, but hardly anyone seemed to be around. No patrols, no neighbours out for a stroll. The second time he passed the house, he gently rolled up onto the curb, grabbed his hiking pack, and slipped out of the car.

The house was on a corner lot. He skirted around the side of the house, one hand trailing along the brick wall that marked the edge of the property, the grit and texture nipping at his fingertips. The wall was perhaps six feet in height, giving him decent glimpse of the backyard when he stood up on the tips of his toes. Mature trees choked out the gutted remnants of what might at one time have been a garden – now there was just a scar in the ground where the wildflowers grew tall and thick, and where a few limp fingerling vines dangled from a wire trellis. Wrapped around the back of the house was a porch. By then, the afternoon sun had risen to its apex, casting the porch in deep, luxuriating shade.

He tossed his knapsack over the wall first and then followed after, pulling his weight up and over with an ease and grace that seemed at odds with his large frame. For all his bulk and sinew, Sato had soft feet. He skulked through the shade of the backyard, crouched low, the only sound the hiss of his trouser legs chaffing together as he moved.

He approached the house the same way he had the neighbourhood: circling slowly once to get his bearings. Keeping close to the wall, he made checks on each of the windows. The living room windows were thrown open. Inside he could hear the blare of the television. He kept going. Soon he was around back once more, where he crept lightly up onto the porch. The wood steps bent with a give beneath his weight but held on.

Then he was standing beneath the porch overhang, the shade cool on his neck. There was a single door and window looking out onto the porch. The window was wide open, a potted houseplant set out on the sill. Stealing a glance through the window, he could see a kitchen. Mildewed tiles, water dripping steadily from a faucet. He contemplated the window a moment longer before deciding to try the door first. Less noise and fuss that way, especially not knowing what lay directly beneath the window.

Sneaking into houses was not part of his usual repertoire. Breaking and entering complicated the secrecy of murder. It left behind fingerprints and fibers and countless other minutiae of forensic evidence that would lead the police right back to him if they knew what to look for. He was not by nature the type of criminal who dismembered reality to suit his desires. Every last one of his victims came to him, stumbling, as if drawn by a lure he himself could not see. He acted on opportunity, on the narrow edge where fate and his impulses mercurially aligned.

Others like him got caught because they lacked humility. They acted instead of waiting, and then they got desperate. Men and women like that were dangerous animals with short lifespans. Killing that college kid and breaking in like he was doing now went against every principle Sato had ever designed for himself, but he didn’t have much of a choice – he’d been a dead man walking ever since he’d met the two boys in the woods.

From his jacket pocket, he pulled out an unfamiliar vinyl wallet. Candy-apple red, flashy – the very last thing Sato would have ever picked out for himself. His own wallet had been missing ever since he’d woken up face-down on the forest floor the night prior.

In between the door and the frame he wedged Tōru Nagano’s driver’s licence. When he felt the card nudge of against the spring latch, he wiggled it a few times until the latch gave. The door creaked open, unoiled hinges letting out a long, drawn-out wail.
As the door opened, the kitchen swung into view before him. In the corner, across from the center island, another door stood closed. Through it, he could hear the muffled sounds of the television in the next room over. Distorted voices. Gunshot sounds effects, the ones they used in old Westerns – with a cartoonish *zing* on the ricochet.

A kid. A Girl. That’s all he’d been told. He had no idea if there’d be any adults at home with her. He would go slow, listen at the door for voices –

Sato’s foot snagged on something, and he went down hard.

He’d been keeping an eye on the door across the room, so that while creeping around the island he hadn’t been paying attention to what was directly in front of his feet. He landed on something large and springy.

A word of explanation:

At that time of day, the sun was at the perfect angle to cast a sunspot on the kitchen floor. From the windowsill, it stretched all the way down to the narrow strip of floor between the counter and the kitchen island. In this small patch of sun-warmed oasis, Mr. Nijimura was in the process of taking his afternoon nap until Sato Fujimoto tripped over him.

At first, Sato couldn’t make sense of what he was looking at. Then the pulpy green mass of flesh under him began to move, and the thing slowly blinked its pink-rimmed eyes at him. As soon as he saw the spark of acknowledgment in the thing’s eyes and heard it gurgle, Sato scrambled for his knapsack, pulled out his hunting knife, and went for the throat. He threw his full weight behind the strike; the knife went in clean, arteries puncturing and giving way beneath the blade.

To his feet, Sato staggered. There was green slime on his hands and green slime spraying in an arc from the puncture wound in the (man? Creature?) thing’s neck. Over the past few days, however, he’d seen stranger sights – and in any case, whatever it was, it was dead. He stooped, yanked the knife free (the same green slime-blood bubbling at the open gash), and wiped it on his jacket as he stepped lightly over the body.

Something latched around Sato’s ankle.

Glancing down, he saw a thick green paw gripping him about the leg. The creature was looking up at him, its puffy, glistening lips opening and closing like a gutted fish. Unnerved, he shook his leg free, thinking the action had just been a last gasp, or a post-mortem firing of the nerves.

And then the creature got back on its feet.

The lunge came in slow motion, as though the man-or-not-man’s flesh hung like ballasts from its body. Most of Mr. Nijimura’s nerve endings that hadn’t worked in years. He had trouble telling where his hands and feet were at any given moment, the same way he had trouble feeling pain or touch. He could slice himself open on a knife or break a loved one’s rib in a hug and in neither case notice anything amiss. And so, body-blind, he lurched in Sato’s direction, and though he could see the man in front of him, without looking down at his hands he was left to grasp after a memory.

Sato slipped easily out of the way and inserted his knife into Mr. Nijimura’s shoulder.

The blow was deep. He expected a jolt in his elbow from the knife striking bone, but the jolt never came. The knife kept going. A second later, the other man’s arm sheared off completely and landed on the floor with a wet *thud*.

There was no bone. There was not even blood or muscle or flesh. The man’s body was like a
porous, saturated sponge – once severed, the same green slime as before oozed slowly from the disembodied arm.

If the man was phased by his sudden loss of appendage, he didn’t show it. He turned and gazed out the window, lips slack and a vacant look in his eyes. A string of drool clung to his chin.

Then Sato heard the growl.

He followed the other man’s gaze to the window, expecting to see an animal outside on the porch, but nothing was there except the potted plant from before. The plant stirred, its leaves coming unfurled as if to take in the sunlight. The plant’s flower, too, rustled open, and amid its bloom Sato swore he saw two petals that looked exactly like pale yellow eyes.

He saw those petals only a moment, then the flower snapped shut again. It drooped over, the head of its corolla pointed at him.

Something struck Sato square in the chest. He stumbled back against the island, wheezing, a bruised feeling against his sternum like someone had winded him with a punch. The other man was lunging for him again, so he ducked out of the way – in time to feel something brush past his ear where he’d been standing. Behind him, there was a bang and suddenly a crater appeared in the wall.

Tracing the trajectory between himself and the hole in the wall, Sato he found himself gazing at the potted plant on the windowsill.

Grabbing Mr. Nijimura by his shirt collar (his arm, Sato noticed, was already beginning to regrow – an atrophied limp alien thing sprouting from the stump at his shoulder), he hauled the other man around, placing him between himself and the plant. Its petals unfurled, and the thing glared at him – and it was indeed a glare, and the thing indeed had eyes, or something close enough to them.

Sato slung the other man up against the sink and scrambled over the island, dropping to the floor just in time to miss another boom and another dent in the wall.

The thing in the tower had warned him about people with strange and powerful abilities. He’d seen such abilities in action before in the woods, when the boy had warped the earth in front of him. He wasn’t sure if the strange man was controlling the plant or if there was some other explanation, but he could deduce that the thing needed a clear shot, that its attacks were invisible (using air, perhaps?), and that it did not seem to want to hurt the other man.

With some effort, Mr. Nijimura managed to pick himself back up. He stumbled for the island, but forgot his footing and tripped. From the windowsill, Sato heard a sound like the snap of a tarp. Behind him a cabinet exploded into a shower of splinters. Instinct brought his arms up to shield his head before he could process what was happening. A sharp jab of pain in his thigh and shoulder. He grit his teeth, fighting against the burning light on the inside of his eyelids that threatened to swallow him up.

Slipping the knapsack from his back, Sato reached in and grabbed the first thing he could find – a bottle of insect repellent. He lurched to his feet and whipped it over the kitchen island at the potted plant on the windowsill.

The bottle sailed true. Then, just as it was about to collide with the plant, Sato watch it glance off to one side, almost as though it had hit a wall. He dropped back down to the ground a split second before yet another cabinet exploded.

As a test, he tried again, this time with a half-empty canteen. He lobbed the canteen through the open
window above the plant. It sailed on unabated, and he heard it clatter on the porch outside. So – a shield of some sort, he figured. Localized to the plant. Invisible, just like its attacks.

Sato had never gone on to high school after junior high, so the technical jargon of physics went over his head, but the years he’d spent working as a mechanic had nonetheless provided him a rudimentary education on the subject. He’d seen the aftermath of physics rolled or towed into his shop time and time again. He knew, for instance, that a car that collided with a wall tended to look the same as two cars involved in a head-on collision at the same speed. Though he knew nothing about Newton’s third law or the principles of energy, mass, or acceleration, he knew that cars were made to crumple for a reason, and that not everything unbreakable was necessarily immovable.

There was a cabinet beneath the island. He wrenched it open, wincing as the splinters in his body shifted with the movement. His hands settled on the handle of a heavy cast-iron wok.

Lifting the wok, he could feel the weight of it pull at his arms. He swung wide, letting the momentum rip it from his hands. Once again, the plant’s shield deflected the projectile and the wok crashed down into the sink below with a clamour. This time, however, the mass was enough that although the flower was unscathed, the energy pushed back against it and its shield enough to push it over the edge of the windowsill. Sato watched its eyes go wide and its petals shape themselves in an expression of dismay – before the whole thing, pot in all, disappeared over the ledge. There was a yowl, followed by the sound of pottery shattering.

Mr. Nijimura, too, let out a wail. Sato had been so distracted by the plant he hadn’t notice the other man stumble his way to the other side of the island. He grabbed for his knife, holding it out before him as the other man threw his weight at him, but this proved no more effective than before. This time, Mr. Nijimura had him pinned – there was little margin for error, few ways for his numbed, clumsy limbs to go awry. He pressed forward, and as he did Sato toppled backwards and landed with his spine pressed to the island’s surface, and Mr. Nijimura went down after him.

Where Mr. Nijimura lacked in coordination, he made up in sheer bulk. Sato writhed, trying to get a hold on his knife, but his hand was pinned between their bodies. He could feel the knife’s handle pressing into his stomach through his jacket. Though he didn’t seem to know what he was doing, Mr. Nijimura was doing it with the utmost enthusiasm. His hands were on Sato’s neck, Sato’s face, trying to strangle him or perhaps smother him and Sato couldn’t tell which. From an outside perspective, the positions of the two men and the frantic, hurried movements as they grappled with one another seemed almost intimate. Like the world’s most awkward, ill-advised porno. Sato’s face was pressing into the spongy flesh of the other man’s chest; he could taste the acrid sweat, his mouth filled the overripe mildew scent gathered at the man’s neck. The weight of the body on top of him was enough to cause one of his glasses’ lenses to crack.

Sato’s free hand crept over the island’s edge. Against his hiking pack, his fingers brushed. Nylon whispered beneath his skin. He was getting short of breath. The constricted feeling in his lungs that he’d been trying to ignore ever since wiring his jaw shut was emerging in the forefront of his mind. He managed to wriggle his head free from under the other man, and he thought he might be able to shove him off, but his energy was waning. One last push – that was all he’d be able to muster, then how long until the man caught up with him again? Slicing off Mr. Nijimura’s arm hadn’t killed him; from the way he’d howled when Sato dispatched with the plant, he got the impression the other man wasn’t going to let him go easily.

Rolling his head to one side, he made a frantic scan of the kitchen, trying to take stock of anything that might be useful. To his right was the sink and the open window. The counter wrapped around the wall in an L-shape. Across from where his feet dangled over the edge of the island, the countertop terminated with a gas stove range.
Canting his hips up, he aimed a kick at the gas line’s valve. The first time, nothing happened. Nothing again the second time. But on the third time, the valve came off and went skittering across the stove’s surface, and under the glare of television in the next room over, Sato heard a quiet *hiss*. The rotten-egg smell of mercaptan filled the kitchen.

After pausing a moment to catch his breath, Sato dug his heels into the edge of the island and threw his weight upward. Mr. Nijimura lifted just enough for him to roll off the island’s countertop. He landed hard on the kitchen floor. Being pinned to the countertop had driven the splinters deeper into his body. There was one in his shoulder about the size of a pencil that was poking through the other side.

As he ripped open his bag in search of his matchbook, the thought occurred to him that what he was doing was likely an awful idea. If the stove range used propane instead of natural gas, the gas would sink instead of rise, and he was as good as dead. Neither gas had a smell or a taste of its own; the mercaptan could have indicated either.

Even as he had these thoughts, however, he found himself pulling out the matchbook and striking a match. Into the air he tossed it, then he hit the ground, arms thrown over his head, cheek crushed against the hardwood floor.

Had Sato been looking, he would have seen the air five feet above him ignite. It started with ghostly blue wisps where the gas achieved complete combustion, then as the oxygen burned away, a yellow fireball formed over the kitchen island. The oxygen depleted so quickly that the open window created a backdraft. Flames shot out the window and out the door as the kitchen turned into a vacuum. Dishes and cutlery lifted up into the air; cabinet doors were sheered away; glass shattered.

All this, of course, could only be witnessed in slow motion. The whole event, in real time, looked something like a cork bursting from a champagne bottle, if that cork were the Nijimuras’ kitchen. The sound of it, too, almost like a *pop*, only louder, and deeper.

Leaning his weight against the island, Sato staggered to his feet. Plaster from the ceiling had fallen on him during the explosion; as he stood, it rained off him with a *hiss*. His knapsack was torn and mangled, the back of his rain jacket hood was singed, but the gas stove had not been propane after all, so he was more or less in one piece.

He stepped over to the other side of the island, glass crunching under his boots. There wasn’t much sign of burning or charring in the kitchen – the explosion had been small, localized, instantaneous. Mr. Nijimura was nowhere to be seen, but the knife that had been in his stomach was lying in the sink beneath the window. The window was gone, as was the door. For that matter, most of the rear wall was missing. The porch had been transformed into an open-air extension of the kitchen, which would have been a great deal more appealing in practice if the lawn weren’t littered in debris.

As Sato collected his knife, he noticed among the debris on the lawn a green, misshapen mass the size of a basketball. As he watched, the mass shuddered and seemed to sprout new lumps and knobs. Back into the kitchen he staggered, toward the door in the corner – still shut, somehow – without once looking back at the thing in the process of re-assembling itself on the lawn. It didn’t matter anyway. The neighbours must have heard the explosion. He had about a five minute window before the police arrived. By the time the other man showed himself again – if he wasn’t dead – he hoped to be gone.

Quietly, he eased open the door. From the other side, he heard sounds. Voices. He paused and listened, but he realized it was only the noise of the television.
Into the room he slipped. The television was turned away from him, but he could hear two men arguing about a suitcase, their voices rushed and tripping over one another. Both thought the other was supposed to bring the suitcase. Neither had it.

He rounded the television stand and stood in front of the lit-up screen, his shadow stretched long over the lumpy old couch.

It was empty.

The men’s voices on the television got louder. They’d both pulled a gun and were now in a standoff. Reaching back, Sato blindly felt for the power switch and pressed it. The television shut off, the sound cut out with a residual crackle of static.

He listened. From somewhere nearby, he heard breathing. Wet, sighing breaths – the kind young children made when they had a proclivity for leaving their mouths hanging open.

He checked the back of the sofa. Sure enough, a small sandaled foot was sticking out under the sofa skirt. As soon as Sato saw it, the foot retracted.

Turning, he strolled around the front of the sofa, making sure his footsteps could be heard. Better to flush the kid out if he could. He was getting to old to be crawling around on his hands and knees trying to fish a child out from under the furniture.

Nothing happened.

He was preparing to give up and kick the sofa over when a blur shot out from under the skirt behind him, quick as a cat. Arms closed like a vice around Sato’s knee.

“Die!” the feral thing around his leg screeched before sinking its teeth into his calve.

Bending at the waist, he peered down between his legs and saw a little girl latched onto him, dark-haired, in the process of trying to gnaw through his pant leg. He grabbed her by the back of her shirt and lifted her with ease until she was at eye-level. The girl thrashed and kicked her legs and tried to scratch him, but at arm’s length she was too far away to accomplish anything of value.

“I’m gonna kick your butt!” she hollered, face red and contorted with anger.

Sato watched her squirm, feeling nothing but a creeping sense of weariness. The kid had quite the mouth on her – he wondered what sort of people had brought her up that way.

Across the room, he heard a door creak open.

“Let her go,” a small voice warbled.

Beneath the staircase was what appeared to be a small closet. A boy peered out from inside it, his hand resting hesitantly on the doorknob. He was several years older than the girl, with a huge dark mark that dominated his face. Over his shoulder a translucent figure lurked; it looked intimidating at first with its body of gleaming steel, but on closer inspection, it resembled a small child in a suit of armor.

Sato considered the figure over the boy’s shoulder. Under his arm he tucked the girl, who continued to scream vacant threats at him and bite and claw at whatever she could reach, and strode toward the boy. The apparition made no move to attack him. The thing in the tower had told him not all abilities were made to fight – maybe this apparition was one of those.
“I challenge you to a game of rock paper scissors!” the boy declared, the quiver in his voice subsiding momentarily. “If you win, you can have her; if I win, you have to leave us alone!”

From his belt, Sato pulled out his hunting knife. The boy eyed it as he made a fist in front of him.

“Rock,” said the boy, raising his fist. The uncertainty was back; it pinched his vocal chords tight. “Paper.”

The thing in the tower hadn’t told him about the boy. Sato wasn’t under any obligation to kill him or keep him alive. He weighed his options, shifting the knife’s grip to a more comfortable position in his hands.

“Sciss – .”

The knife plunged for the boy’s throat. He yelped as the blade made contact with his skin – but went no further.

Reaching up, Sato ripped the scarf away from his face. His lips were peeled back, revealing the twisted lengths of wire that encased his mouth like a wicked steel trap. In the fight with Mr. Nijimura, the wounds to his gums had reopened; blood streaked his chin and collected at the corners of his lips, rushing to fill in the heavy-carved lines of his face so that the wrinkles around his mouth were encrusted with blood.

“Let’s play a different game,” Sato said, putting just enough pressure on the knife for the kid to get the picture. “If you don’t want to lose, you keep your mouth shut and do what I say.”

***

As he pulled up to the intersection, Josuke checked and double-checked his rear-view mirror for any sign of another car lurking at his tail, primed and ready to rear-end him. The road, of course, was empty – but from the depths of the dark leather upholstery in the backseat, he saw Jotaro staring back at him.

Yelping, Josuke slammed on the brakes. The car rocked forward, and his shoulders with it.

“Man, you scared the hell out of me!” he remarked, turning. Around the back of the driver’s seat, he flung an arm. “You awake?”

The question, of course, was redundant.

Grunting, Jotaro sat up. He rubbed the back of his head, where an enormous goose-egg would have been in the process of forming if it weren’t for Crazy Diamond’s intervention.

“Josuke. Are we under attack?”

“That was a friend of mine. He didn’t know you were with me.”

“What friend – .”

“Anyway, Crazy Diamond patched you up. How’re you feeling? Not too shabby, right?”

Jotaro leaned forward, resting one hand against the center console. “Since when do you know how to drive a car?” he asked.

“Like, five minutes tops?” said Josuke, neglecting to mention that he’d received his driver’s education at the instruction of a ghost, nor that said ghost had apparently never driven a standard.
("I don’t think shifting gears is all that important," Daisuke had attempted to reassure him. “Like, you only need the other gears if you wanna go really fast. Or to back up. Or park.")

Over the console, Jotaro swung a leg. Josuke made a sound of protest, pressing himself to one side as the rest of his nephew followed thereafter. Jotaro settled in the passenger seat, back rigid, arms folded at his chest. His hat sat askew on top of his head (Josuke had shoved it on in a hurry while hefting the unconscious man into the car), one eye squinting in the sunlight. Tension corded up his body – he’d always reminded Josuke of a compressed spring – but all that anger from before, that spitting snarl shared by stand and user and the way his eyes widened in fury, all that was gone.

Across his face, Jotaro dragged a hand. His eyes were squeezed shut. “Those things I said to you back there,” he began – the tone of his voice strange, soft and oddly private – but then he cut himself off with a deep breath and started from the top: “I didn’t think you remembered what happened that summer.” The unfamiliar private voice was gone, replaced by the old Jotaro he knew: he had a way of talking that made you feel like you were being held out at arm’s length. “You acted like you didn’t recognize me when we met again this spring.”

“I mean. I didn’t remember at first. Then it all started coming back to me, but I thought it would’ve been weird if I – shit!”

Josuke slammed on the brakes just short of another stop sign. The car jerked to a halt.

“God damn it!” he hissed. “These stops just keep popping up out of nowhere – how the hell do they expect people to see ’em?”

Jotaro had been trying to say something. Maybe he’d been going about it in his own roundabout Jotaro way, but he’d been trying to say it nevertheless – but by the time he’d run out of curses to shout Josuke had already forgotten. He was great at carrying a conversation; not so great at picking it up from others.

As the car started rolling again, Josuke shifted, loosening his death grip on the steering wheel. The leather cover was damp beneath his touch.

“I know everything’s kinda a mess right now,” he said. “I meant to say something sooner.”

“How long have you known?”

“Not that long! I mean, a few weeks. Maybe.”

When Jotaro didn’t reply, Josuke continued: “Anyway, the point I’m trying to make is that I’m not going to let anything happen to those kids. Whatever it takes, I’m gonna catch that motherfucker.”

Without looking, he could feel Jotaro’s eyes on him – then the feeling passed. He glanced over and saw him surveying the scenery that was crawling by the passenger-side window. They were passing through a neighbourhood on the outskirts of town. Some tabloid celebrities and wealthy businessmen and lawyers from S City kept summer homes there. The houses were grand, with neatly trimmed lawns and the empty quality of a magazine picture. Each had two or more acres of buffer between itself and its nearest neighbour. Not once on the drive had they come across another person.

“Do you know where you’re headed?” Jotaro asked.

“I got a pretty good idea where the stand’s going to be. We find it, we might find the user too.” He found himself watching Jotaro in the rear-view mirror, waiting for a reaction he knew wouldn’t come. “Voice in the Dark is an independent stand, meaning we can’t beat it by taking out the user. We need to lure it into town. If we can trick it into strolling down the alley by Owson’s, those creepy
alley ghosts will drag it away. Problem solved.”

After pausing a moment, he added: “The stand works by using voices to trick people, so whatever you do, don’t listen to anyone unless you can see them standing right in front of you.”

This explanation wasn’t on the level of a nuanced understanding of rat biology or prey animal instinct, but Josuke polished off the sentence nonetheless with an inward grin. For how shaky the whole plan seemed in his head, the ease with which he found himself repeating it out loud fortified his confidence. If there was one thing he envied about Jotaro, it was how the man always seemed to know what was going on, like he was watching a chess game and seeing the moves two turns before they happened. Something about that banked certainty seemed so adult, because even at sixteen Josuke was used to thinking about adults as people who had (for lack of a better expression) their shit together. At times like these, he felt a strange sense of elation, the excitement of something becoming; if he tried hard enough he could see in glimpses the fully-formed person he was shaping into, in the gestures he performed and expressions he uttered that reminded him of his mother and his grandfather and Jotaro and the other adults whose mannerisms had once seemed so foreign.

Then Josuke proceeded to punctuate this line of thought by pulling into a turn, only to take it too wide. He stopped, backed up, and by the time he was on the road again the simple right turn had somehow morphed into a three-point fiasco, and whatever semblance of maturity he thought he’d been in the process of undergoing was long gone.

Jotaro cleared his throat.

“You’re thinking too hard,” he said.

“I’ve got this.”

“I thought you’d driven a motorcycle before.”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

Josuke grit his teeth. “With a bike, it’s like, you lean and it leans with you.” Into the car’s roof he drove his fist, and it answered with a dampened metallic rumble. “Feels like I’m steering around a giant metal death trap in this thing.”

“It doesn’t have a mind of its own, Josuke. It’s only going to go where you want it to go. Just remember that you’re in control.”

Another bend in the road swerved into view up ahead. Jotaro leaned forward in his seat, eyes narrowing.

“First of all,” he said, “you’re not going to want to gear down gradually as you slow to make the turn. Instead get down to speed first, then switch gears – second should do it.”

“Alright –.”

“—And go light on the brakes. Ease off the gas instead to slow down. Now when we get to the turn, keep your eyes ahead on where you want to go.”

“Can we go now?” Josuke demanded, stretching his vowels in a long unbroken wine.

*Jotaro cracked an eye open and glared at him. “Five minutes,” he grumbled.*
“But we’re gonna miss the previews!”

“Whatever. They’re just commercials.”

The previews, to Josuke, were one of the best parts of seeing a movie. Even if the movies they advertised didn’t always live up to the hype, there was something about hearing a sweeping, epic score paired perfectly with explosions, panoramic shots, or even just an actor breaking down into tears that made his heart race every time. Even the gimmicky voice-overs got to him. He could practically feel the goosebumps every time a booming voice came on over a black screen – the anticipation eating away at him for that first shot to appear.

“Okay,” he mumbled, before taking off upstairs.

He pulled on his shoes and hurried back downstairs (his mother and grandfather, thankfully, weren’t around to catch him traipsing through the house with his shoes on), where he parked himself on the bottom step and waited. He wanted to be ready to go the moment Jotaro rose from the sofa. Maybe if they hurried, they’d make the last couple of previews.

Five minutes passed. Josuke reminded Jotaro again.

“We’ve got plenty of time,” he was told.

Another five minutes. He stopped worrying about catching the last of the previews and started worrying about missing the beginning of the movie.

He moved over to the sofa and sat by Jotaro’s feet. Another ten minutes passed. The movie would have started by then. They were supposed to sitting in the theatre watching the opening of Majo no Takkyūbin – Josuke had told Jotaro all about the preview he’d seen on television the day before. He’d been enchanted by the sight of the heroine soaring through the air on her broomstick – the way he sometimes pictured himself doing, minus the broomstick of course.

Against Jotaro’s knee, Josuke tapped a finger. “Movie’s starting,” he said.

Jotaro let out a grunt and buried his head in the pillow. “I’ll take you some other time,” came his muffled reply.

“You promised!”

Onto his back, Jotaro rolled. He had an arm strewn over his forehead – beneath it, his eyes peered up at Josuke.

“My suitcase. There’s a lighter. Bring it over here.”

“Get it yourself,” Josuke grumbled, but he stomped over to the suitcase and retrieved the lighter regardless.

He handed the zippo over to Jotaro, thinking he just wanted to light up a cigarette, but instead Jotaro held the lighter up in front of him and said: “I’m going to teach you a trick. Watch.”

And Josuke did watch, enthralled, as Jotaro flipped open the lighter, lit the flint, and cut his hand across the flame, extinguishing it. A second later, he snapped his fingers and as if by magic, the flame relit.

“How’d you do that?” Josuke asked.
“Magic. You know – like that bitch with the broomstick. Want to try?”

“Y-yeah!” Josuke exclaimed, but then he paused and rubbed his hands together. “It doesn’t hurt does it?”

“Not if you do it quick enough. The trick is not to think too hard or to hesitate.”

“How do I make the flame come back?”

“Just snap your fingers. You have to do it quick, though – or that magic won’t work.”

Josuke lowered his head, cheeks lighting up. “I dunno how to snap my fingers,” he admitted.

“It’s easy. Press your thumb and middle finger together – like that.” To illustrate, he reached out and took Josuke’s hand and prodded his fingers into the correct position. “Now slide them together in opposite directions…”

In the past, Josuke had tried countless times to snap his fingers, so he was surprised when he pushed his thumb and middle finger together and they made a sound. It wasn’t much of a sound – more of a snip than a snap – but it was sound no less, and he felt a fierce sense of big-kid pride hearing it.

After much hesitation and coaxing, he finally passed a hand over the zippo lighter’s flame. He did it quickly, and though there was heat it didn’t hurt. Then he snapped his fingers, and at the barely-there sound the light flared back to life.

Jotaro held up his up hands in front of him, grasping an invisible steering wheel. “It’s the same with riding a motorcycle – wherever you’re looking, your body is naturally going to move in that direction. Whether it’s in the way you lean your body or the way your hands turn the wheel.” As he spoke his hands moved, turning the invisible steering wheel. “If you focus on the turn itself, you’re going to end up oversteering. Don’t try to steer with the turn. Keep your eye on the road up ahead and steer toward that.”

To Josuke, this advice all sounded somewhat abstract and obtuse, but he did as he was told and looked ahead. His hands moved on the steering wheel. And slowly – at no more than a crawl – the car turned the corner.

He felt Jotaro’s hand grip the corner of his seat. “When the engine starts to sound like it’s working hard, that’s when you’ll want to shift up. Hear it?”

The whine of the engine’s rev grew louder. The car started to rattle – Josuke’s foot fumbled at the clutch and he yanked the stick into third gear.

“Good. Don’t be afraid to put more weight on the gas. Try getting up to fifth gear.”

“You sure you don’t wanna drive?” Josuke asked. He was doing a solid seventy clicks now – he wasn’t sure he was even supposed to be going that fast in a residential area.

Jotaro slumped back in his seat. There was a little more curve to his spine this time. “You’re doing fine,” he said.

To the right of the car, the ground beyond the guardrail gave away and in its place appeared a thin stretch of beach that rushed down to meet the ocean. Up ahead, a shelf of land extended out over the water – the grey cliff face straight and sheer, like it had been carved out with a razor.
“You don’t get out of town much on that contraption, do you?”

From somewhere beneath the motorbike, Yuuya grunted. “I don’t need to.”

“Usually,” Rohan corrected him.

The clanging and tinkering sounds stopped. Yuuya wriggled out from under the bike, hips rolling from side to side until his arms got free. He stood, grabbing the cloth off one of the bike’s seats, and proceeded to wipe down his hands with more force than necessary.

“There’s nothing usually about going around chasing some psychopath,” he muttered.

He tossed the cloth a Rohan, who side-stepped out of the way with all the appropriate disgust of someone who’d just been asked to hold a dead, decomposing animal.

The situation was this: on their way into town from Fujimoto’s place, Yuuya noticed the ride was rougher than usual. If Rohan’s account was anything to go by, even the Jackhammer had gotten more bone-crushingly painful. They’d reached the Nijimuras’ place in time to see a white sedan leave and had left in time to watch two police cars pull in behind them in the side mirrors. A block later, what was left of the back wheel finally shredded away and all three passengers were thrown to the curb.

From what Yuuya could tell, the wheel had been punctured somewhere along the dirt road headed out to Fujimoto’s. His were street tires. Not meant for gravel roads; especially not meant for gravel roads while bearing the weight of three passengers.

“I got nothing,” Yuuya admitted, giving the bare rim a good kick.

“Now what?” asked Rohan.

“Now we call a call a cab or something I guess. This thing’s not moving again until I get a new tire on her.”

“All you need is a tire?”

For the past quarter of an hour, Mikitaka had been so quiet that Yuuya had almost forgotten he was there. Now the other boy was standing directly behind him – uncomfortably close, even – with his hands clasped behind his back and a frozen smile pinned to his face.

“Why didn’t you just say so!” Mikitaka exclaimed, and already Yuuya didn’t like where this was headed.

The guy looked way too eager. People who looked that eager were either trying to screw you over or they had no idea what they were doing. Yuuya wasn’t sure which of these descriptions fit Mikitaka, but he wasn’t thrilled to find out.

***

The bell above the door chimed.

“Come in,” called the florist without looking up. He was intent on trimming the dead heads off a particularly stubborn African Violet.

He did look up, however, when he heard a wet gurgling sound. Standing in front of the counter was a man whose complexion had skipped right over jaundiced and gone straight on to verdant. He had a
paint can hugged close to his chest. Leading the man by the arm was a young woman in a lab coat.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I’m a technician at the veterinary clinic down the road. This man came in looking for assistance, but I think he got the wrong place. Do you think you could help him?”

The florist cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, I don’t deal too much with eukaryotics. Especially the, ah.” He paused, eyes narrowing in on a particularly large boil on the side of the man’s neck. “… Pathogenic kind.”

“I think he just wants someone to look at his houseplant.”

“Alright. Let’s see, then.”

At the man, he wagged two fingers. The man shambled forward, placed the paint can on the counter, and took a step back.

The bottom of the paint can had been filled with dirt. Nestled inside was a dilapidated-looking flower. The florist clucked his tongue.

“And then the house plant reared up and bit him.

Chapter End Notes

The zippo trick, for the curious, is this one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmYiiSmAJ2U.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Sorry again for being late! I haven’t been feeling super great this month. Also these scenes with like a dozen characters running around take a while to coordinate LOL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everything Okuyasu knew about the situation was gathered from half-glimpses, misheard shouts, and the speculation that had gone on back and forth between Koichi and Yukako over the last hour or so. He wasn’t one to extrapolate his way to conclusions; his mind could meander from association to association with ease, cobbling together images, words, and memories that to someone else might not seem to have anything to do with each other, but where logic was concerned, Okuyasu’s jumping distance was slight. He did not so much leap over logical gaps as he stepped over them without noticing, and in doing so, smack headlong into conclusions.

It happened like this:

He, Koichi, and Yukako had rushed into the woods after Hazamada stopped answering over the radio. They’d heard his screams, even glimpsed him through the trees – him, Surface, and something else without a distinct shape of its own that they could only assume was Sato Fujimoto’s stand – but even with Echoes scouting ahead, they just couldn’t keep up. Along the highway, they’d caught sight of Hazamada again before he’d been dragged from the road and down into the field. Same story out by Yukako’s place.

“I wonder where it’s trying to lure us,” Koichi mused out loud.

Only then did the logical gap Okuyasu was facing down narrow, forcing two and two together.

“You think this is some kinda trap?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t think Vox would keep letting us catch up like this if it wasn’t.”

“I don’t imagine Hazamada would still be alive right now either if he weren’t being used as bait,” Yukako pointed out.

“If there’s going’s to be traps, I’m sittin’ this one out,” Tamami declared. “I just signed on to be the designated driver – that’s it, full stop.”

Down the road, they heard the growl of an engine. Koichi turned, blinking in quick succession, one hand raised above his eyes to cut out the glare from the asphalt.

“I think that’s the first car we’ve seen all afternoon,” he murmured.

Okuyasu immediately recognized the white sedan that pulled up behind them. Onto the shoulder of the road the car rumbled – slowly, almost timidly – before the engine cut out with a sputter.

The driver’s side door swung open, and out stepped Josuke.

All the ride over, a knot had been forming in Josuke’s diaphragm: a tiny, hard pebble of pain he felt
with every breath. He wasn’t sure when it had started, but lately, whenever stand-related stuff was
going down and his friends were involved, he was paranoid that something horrible was going to
happen if he wasn’t around. The only thing that scared him more than the thought of losing someone
else was the thought of losing someone he could have saved. On seeing Okuyasu and the others, that
knot of worry finally came undone and he drew the first deep breath he’d taken all afternoon –
rattling, shaky, exhaled through his nose. Josuke gripped the door frame, anchoring himself, letting
that line between the car and his shoulder tether him from rushing over to the others. Instead, he
settled on a smile that made his jaw hurt.

“You came back!” Koichi exclaimed.

“Didja give your mom the slip?” Okuyasu asked.

He was wearing the same smile as Josuke, but it fell away when he saw Jotaro emerge from the car’s
passenger side. The older man gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

When Okuyasu aimed a look in his direction, Josuke held up his hands. “It’s alright, he knows! I
filled him in.”

‘Filled in’ was a generous way of describing Jotaro’s knowledge of the present situation. An optimist
might have deemed him half-filled in; a pessimist, half-empty.

“You guys haven’t heard from Rohan and Yuuya, have you?” Josuke asked.

“Nah. You?”

He realized immediately how silly the question sounded. Of course Josuke hadn’t heard from Yuuya;
he wouldn’t have asked otherwise.

But Josuke just shook his head and mumbled, “Nah. I think that Fujimoto guy might’ve gotten away
on them.”

When Josuke turned his head, Okuyasu followed his gaze and found himself staring at Jotaro, who
rolled his shoulders in a shrug.

“I stopped by the Nijimuras’ home,” he explained, as though Okuyasu weren’t standing right in front
of him. He got the feeling Jotaro didn’t realize he was doing it – he’d been around the man enough to
recognize he had a way of stepping on toes and striking nerves without noticing or meaning to do so.
“Ken and Jolyne weren’t there. When I knocked, Mr. Nijimura didn’t come to the door.”

“So you think Fujimoto is responsible,” Koichi concluded.

“Maybe.”

Josuke, meanwhile, had fixed his eyes on Okuyasu and hadn’t moved them since Jotaro had spoken
up.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” he said.

The ‘they’ Josuke was referring to, Okuyasu knew, did not mean Ken and Jolyne.

“I ain’t worried about dad,” Okuyasu mumbled. “He’s pretty unkillable, y’know?”

And he wasn’t worried, in the sense that he wasn’t afraid of his father dying. But there was a
heaviness that settled in the pipework of his throat regardless. The feeling was too passive to be
anger, too outside of himself to be upset; he didn’t have a word for the emotion, but he used to get it all the time whenever Keicho set out to ‘fix’ their father. He knew Keicho wouldn’t succeed and he knew his old man wouldn’t feel much pain. All the same, some aspect of his father had cared about him once, and however much Okuyasu hated his father at times, none of his hate or anger made him care for his father any less – it bothered him knowing the sorts of things that were happening to his dad, even if those things were of no consequence.

Josuke held his gaze a moment longer, before standing up on the balls of his feet to peer over Okuyasu and the others’ shoulders. He was frowning. “What about Vox? You guys lose him?”

“We’re still on its tail. Sort of,” Koichi offered. “We, uh, got Hazamada to use his stand to imitate you –.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

“Who –?”

“These guys got’s us walking right into a trap,” Tamami interrupted before Koichi could finish his question.

“What kind of trap?” Jotaro demanded.

Yukako, without looking up from the patch of peeling skin on her arm she was in the process of picking at, replied: “It probably wants to kill us all at once. We’re a threat now that we know its user’s identity.”

“But why would Fujimoto take the kids?” asked Koichi.

“That’s easy, darling – collateral, in case Vox’s plan doesn’t work.”

Grunting, Okuyasu scuffed a pebble under the toe of his shoe. “If it’s tryna lure us somewhere, you think it’d be more, ya know, obvious. I haven’t seen Vox or Hazamada in like twenty minutes; who knows where the hell they went?”

“This is gonna sound crazy,” said Josuke, “but I think I know where Vox’s headed.”

“Do tell,” Yukako coaxed, her sing-song voice like satin covering a knife.

Over his shoulder, Josuke jabbed a thumb. “Over there.”

Fifty meters ahead where Josuke was pointing, the shoulder of the road widened out into a gravel parking lot. ‘Parking lot’ was perhaps a bit of a stretch – the space had, at most, a five-car capacity. Beyond that: wooden fence posts, a sign too far away for any of them to read, a dirt path stamped into the grass.

“That leads to the cape!” Koichi stammered.

Jotaro tugged on the brim of his hat. “I’ll go ahead and park the car,” he said. “Josuke.”

“Yeah?”

“The keys.”

“Oh, right!”

From the ignition, Josuke grabbed the keys and tossed them over the hood of the car. Jotaro caught
them.

Tamami took the opportunity to clear his throat. “I can take care of the wheels for you,” he offered. One of the first lessons he’d learned as a con artist was to make his marks feel like he was doing them a favour.

By way of response, Jotaro slammed the door shut and turned over the engine.

As they watched the sedan accelerate down the road, Koichi shifted his stance from one foot to the other.

“So… the cliffs?”

Josuke turned his palms up in a shallow shrug. “When I was inside Superfly with Vox, the last thing it showed me was a memory of the cliffs. I haven’t been able to get that shit outta my head since. It was like it was trying to tell me something, y’know?”

“We are in the neighbourhood,” Yukako pointed out.

Okuyasu took a step toward Josuke. He thought about putting a hand on his shoulder, but both hands remained firmly rooted in his pockets, like he didn’t trust himself to take them out. “You sure you’re up for this, dude?” Okuyasu demanded. “You can chill out in the parking lot if you want.”

“You guys act like you’re trying to get rid of me or something,” Josuke remarked. He was wearing a grin, but his pupils were set small in his eyes, his brow creased in the middle. “C’mon. This isn’t the first time I’ve squared up.”

Something about Josuke’s indifference was making Okuyasu nervous. He remembered how he’d rushed after Red Hot Chili Peppers the first chance he got, back when he’d let grief and rage do the thinking. Josuke didn’t seem upset, but then it could be hard to tell with him sometimes. He could never hide when he was excited or bursting with joy, but when sorrow crept along, he became another person altogether: lips pressed tight, expression hardened, trying to bear his grief with more maturity than his age allowed.

Up ahead, Yukako stopped. One leg settled gracefully into place beside its twin. When she spun around, her hair moved with her. “Have any of you actually thought about how we’re going to get Vox back into town?”

“We got the car, yeah?” said Okuyasu. “We can just, I dunno… maybe drive back into town with Josuke in the car so Vox’ll chase it. Ya know, like puttin’ a carrot in front of a horse.”

Josuke let out a squawk. “Who said anything about me being a carrot?”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Koichi piped up. “We know stands can only move up to a certain speed. If we can keep in front of it…”

“Hey, let’s not get ahead of the problem, alright? Don’t worry about it,” said Josuke. He tapped the unconcussed side of his head. “I’ll come up with something.”

When Josuke turned away, Okuyasu caught Koichi glancing in his direction. It was the kind of look people gave each other after they’d heard a scary story or watched a horror movie – searching for reassurance and normalcy in a familiar face. Okuyasu wasn’t sure what kind of reassurance Koichi was looking for, but he got the feeling it had to do with him being the person in their group that everyone assumed Josuke was closest to. He glanced away, the curve of his slouch deepening as he made a conspicuous effort not to meet Koichi’s stare.
By the time they reached the parking lot, Jotaro had already parked the car and was standing in front of the sign. They joined him in a line, and for a moment, all six read in silence. The sign contained a number of iconographic representations of skulls and crossbones, crumbling rocks, and persons falling, coupled with the frequent uses of the expressions “DANGER!”, “at own risk”, and “littering prohibited”.

“The hell kind of place is this?” Tamami asked.

“Darwinism in action,” a voice replied.

Everyone but Tamami moved at once. Stands manifested, hair writhed, stances widened. The sign, from behind which the voice had emanated, was blasted away and landed, posts and all, twenty meters away in a field – though it was not exactly clear who was responsible.

Cowering on the ground where the sign had stood with his arms raised over his head was Josuke. Another one.

“Christ, relax!” he snapped. He lowered his arms so that they could all see the screw in his forehead. “It’s just me.”

When Josuke made a move like he was about to lurch, Surface yelped and covered itself once more. “Hey hey HEY! You can move, can’t you? I’m not up to anything, I swear.”

“Where’s your user?” Jotaro demanded.

“I was just about to get to that, thanks. Your mouth breather friend snatched us. It sent me here to meet you guys, said it’d be curtains for Toshikazu if I didn’t bring you back with me.”

“So Vox is here?” Koichi asked.

“Look, can we do the thing with the questions later? That chatter box’s gonna break my user’s neck if I stand around yapping all day.” To emphasize, Surface wrapped its hands around its neck and made a gagging sound. “Might come as a shock to you, but I kinda like the little twerp. Or at least, I like being alive enough to like him.”

“What should we do?” Koichi asked. Much to Josuke’s annoyance, he was looking at Jotaro when he said this. Where authority was concerned, Koichi Hirose had an ingrained habit of deferring to age over loyalty.

At Josuke, Jotaro inclined his head. “Your stand user, your call.”

“We’re here to find Vox anyway, right?” said Josuke. “Might as well.”

Surface rolled its head back in a gesture that implied an eye roll would have been too understated. “Gee, that’s real sweet of you. Glad you jumped on the whole not letting us get killed thing so fast. Assclown.”

After that remark, Okuyasu expected Josuke to rearrange Surface into decorative sawhorse, or at least come back with a retort, but Josuke only made a tch sound and said: “Better start walking.”

***

The original proposal for the cove trail had included provisions for guard rails, benches, and a spacious parking lot. All the accoutrements one might expect from a modern suburban park. The neighbours, however, had complained that the project would ruin the area’s natural beauty, and since
those neighbours made up Morioh’s wealthiest – whose property taxes were subsequently responsible for lining the pockets of Morioh’s municipal government – the town council agreed to a compromise. Instead of a bustling park, the town received a precariously narrow path along the cliffs, without a single safety feature in sight to mar the location’s so-called natural beauty.

Not even a hundred meters down the trail, the landscape was already beginning to change. Dirt gave way to coarse sand that rose and fell in grass-covered dunes all around the trail like the long, humped backs of sea waves. Ahead, the great cobalt canopy of the ocean gradually lifted into view. The waves, indistinguishable at a distance, snapped and spurred, marbling the water with white veins. Seeing the ocean ahead had a kind of hypnotic effect on those who walked the path – Okuyasu was so busy staring at it that when he happened to glance to his right, he was shocked to see the ground a meter from the trail fall away. Down below, flowers sprouting from cracks or ledges huddled in the cliff face’s narrow shelter, and below that the waves gnashed their teeth hungrily on the black, water-smoothed rocks.

There was not a single railing or rope in sight. Okuyasu was not in any danger of falling at that very moment, but all the same – he felt a chill at the thought that at any point his feet could have drifted from the path without his noticing and in that case, he’d be down below too right now, those same waves scooping his brains out of his skull until the inside of his head was as smooth and featureless as the rocks.

The whole time they were on the trail, Josuke kept ahead of the group. Even Surface dawdled along behind him – though if Josuke was going in the wrong direction, it didn’t say anything. There was a vigor and bounce to Josuke’s step that struck Okuyasu as incongruous for someone knowingly walking into a trap; then again, maybe it was just the adrenaline in his blood making him restless.

For a while, Okuyasu walked in step with Koichi and Yukako. The two were arguing about Vox’s powers: whether its abilities were to emulate voices, or just produce an auditory hallucination of voices (“All sound is just the brain interpreting vibrations,” Yukako pointed out, “So, really – it’s all in our heads to begin with.”). They tried to include Okuyasu whenever they could – or Koichi did, at least (“Then why did bystanders like that girl’s brother hear the voices too? Okuyasu, you remember that article too, right?”) – but he still found himself gradually tuning the both of them out. He wasn’t like Tamami, who could nod and say, “Sure, sure” over and over again without really paying attention. So instead, he gradually withdrew from the conversation and fell back, and somehow, despite slouching along at his own pace, he ended up neck-and-neck with Jotaro.

For a man with a stride distance that equated the height of a small child, Jotaro sure wasn’t putting it to use at the moment. He gave off the impression that he wasn’t sure he was supposed to be there: his head kept swiveling every which way, and every now and then he stopped to stare at some nondescript point in the distance, acting like the tourists who stumbled and floundering their way through Morioh every summer. Just watching him was making Okuyasu anxious.

“Have we been here before?” Jotaro asked, causing Okuyasu to nearly jump out of his skin. Josuke’s nephew wasn’t one for preamble.

“Nah. Maybe? Path leads out to the cape. Josuke was tellin’ me about the place. Y’know – how he came here as a kid.”

“I see.”

They walked on, only now Jotaro didn’t bother to look around.

Okuyasu caught himself staring at Josuke’s back. From a distance, he looked small enough to pinch between two fingers; the shift of his shoulders beneath his thin t-shirt as he walked just barely visible.
There it was again: that tugging on Okuyasu’s chest, the feeling that a chasm was opening up between him and Josuke. Whatever headspace he was in right now, Okuyasu couldn’t reach. Even if he ran just then, even if he caught up so they were side-by-side and shoulder-to-shoulder, the distance between them wouldn’t get any smaller. Like two spokes on a wheel – they could spend all day chasing one another.

And maybe it was that helplessness that made Okuyasu blurt: “He’s been talking about that summer a lot lately. All that stuff about searchin’ along the riverbank and busting into the police station.”

“I can imagine,” said Jotaro. He didn’t bother looking at Okuyasu as he spoke. “It must make for quite the story.”

“It ain’t funny!”

That got Jotaro looking his way.

“People have died. I’m aware of that,” he said. “I understand the seriousness of the situation.”

“That’s s’not what I mean! ‘Course it’s serious! I mean Josuke doesn’t think it’s funny.”

“How so?”

Okuyasu hesitated. He’d spoken to Jotaro before, sure, but they’d never had what one might call a personal conversation. Especially not one involving Josuke. He felt he was, in some way, betraying his best friend. At times like these, he could picture his brother standing over his shoulder, chewing him out for not keeping his mouth shut. Josuke would be pissed if he knew Okuyasu blabbed to Jotaro about him. Hell, Okuyasu would be pissed too if he found out one of his friends played psychiatrist with Ms. Higashikata or Mr. Trussardi over his personal problems.

Still: he couldn’t keep himself from blabbing: “He’s been beating himself up ever since he remember the shit he said to you when he was a kid.” As they walked and talked, Okuyasu swung his arms wide at his sides, imagining he could feel the tension leave his fingertips. He wasn’t sure where he’d gotten the idea from – Yukako, maybe. “I think he blames himself, y’know? For you gettin’ hurt. And fer the neighbour’s girl going missing.”

“Why would he feel guilty? What happened wasn’t his fault.”

The way Jotaro replied immediately – the pragmatic tone he took – as though Okuyasu had just told him the earth was flat. If he weren’t so worried and so caught up in his own head, Okuyasu might’ve been insulted.

“You didn’t say nothin’ to him, didja?” he demanded.

Jotaro made a sound at the back of his throat like a cough cut short. He eased up the brim of his hat, letting a breeze flow over the top of his head. His short hair felt damp and clotted in the heat; the cool wind made his scalp tingle.

“I wasn’t impressed when Jolyne wasn’t with either of you,” he admitted at last.

“Buy ya didn’t say anything about… you-know-what?”

When Jotaro just stared at him like he’d let out a sneeze, Okuyasu decided: screw it. Subtlety had never been his strong suit anyway. And so, he rephrased his question: “Didja say anything about the time you almost died?”
“I was pissed off.”

Okuyasu groaned and raised a fist to his forehead. “Man.”

“He knows I didn’t mean it,” Jotaro continued.

“How d’you figure that?”

“He was just a kid. It’s not like he knew any better.”

“Didja tell him that?”

“I didn’t feel the need.”

Maybe that empathetic nature Yukako had told him about was riled up, or maybe the day had dragged on too long, or maybe news about the kids and his dad had him on a wire already – or maybe there was just something familiar about Jotaro’s admission, something like listening to his own voice played back on a recording. Like he was hearing for the first time how ridiculous he sounded. Whatever the case, something in Okuyasu flared up, filling him from his head down to his toes, until he burst out: “How’s he supposed to know how you feel if ya don’t tell ‘im?!”

Once the words were out, he felt himself deflate, until there was no trace of whatever emotion had been there moments ago. Before he had the opportunity to process what he’d said or to stick his foot in his mouth – which was, admittedly, not a part of the human anatomy Okuyasu’s foot was terribly familiar with – he sensed something eclipse his peripheral vision. What got his attention wasn’t something he could see, rather an absence of something: like passing under a shadow on a summer’s day, all that light and warmth vanishing in an instant.

Over the course of speaking with Jotaro, he hadn’t noticed their little group gradually drift back together. Yukako, Koichi, and Tamami were right in front of him; five or ten paces ahead, Josuke stopped, the toe of one shoe lifted off the ground.

To their right, an observation deck had been built into the side of the cliff. It stuck out from the sheer ledge like the brim of a hat. If you were to lie on your stomach on the deck and peer between the wood slats, you would be able to see the roiling ocean below. Through that narrow pinhole space between the deck’s planks the waves might have seemed close, but they were actually far enough down that a fall into the water from the platform would feel like hitting asphalt – and that was when the tide was high. Despite being suspended eighty feet above certain death or bodily injury, the deck was the safest portion of the trail, on account of having handrails.

The deck was a recent addition. Ten years ago, Josuke Higashikata had stood on the exact spot, his heels mere centimeters from where the platform now began, but at the time there’d been nothing at his back except the wind. He didn’t even recognize the location.

The first feature of the deck they all noticed was Hazamada. At present, he was difficult to miss with his pleated skirt riding high and his scrawny chicken thighs kicking out from underneath him. Up close, he was all spite and sinew. If you made a meal of him (that is, if you were cannibalistically inclined), he looked like he’d just end up getting stuck between your teeth.

Then, each in turn noticed the thing that had Hazamada by the neck.

To most of the group, the Voice in the Dark seemed human in the same way a figure in a cubist painting seemed human. Were any of the persons present more familiar with art history, they might have likened the stand’s appearance to *Nude Descending a Staircase*, for it gave the impression of many figures compounded into one, or a series of movements flattened into a single moment in time.
Unfortunately, as Mr. Rohan Kishibe was not present, the closest any of them could come to describing the thing was shadowy, and kind of fuzzy around the edges, so that when it moved it left its afterimage in its wake. Vox’s human-ness was vague enough to seem oddly familiar, like a feeling of déjà vu. You could project almost any trait onto it. If you had a certain person on your mind, you might start to see the shape of their nose or the dimple of their chin in all that shadow.

For Josuke, on the other hand, there was nothing indistinct about Vox. The chains, the hat, the shadow formed about it like a coat. If anything, the proximity to the cliffs had caused its features to sharpen and further define themselves: a pale face had taken shape, complete with the sketched suggestions of a straight, unbending line of a mouth, and two glowing coin pieces of light in the shadows above its cheeks that might have been eyes.

“Hangin’ in there, boss?” Surface called out. Given the context, ‘hanging’ may have been an insensitive choice of word.

“Don’t – fucking – stand there!” Hazamada bit. He was starting to get a little purple about the face.

“Right. Here’s the deal,” said Surface, turning to face the group, “our pal here wants to perform an exchange. Real simple. But if any a’ you calls out your stand, my user gets it.”

As if on cue, Hazamada let out a melodramatic choking sound and clawed at the non-being gripping his throat. Koichi let out a gasp, but Yukako remained unmoved. She narrowed her eyes at Hazamada, who went still and gagged once more – albeit, quieter, and with less drama this time.

“Why the hell ain’t it telling us any of this?” Okuyasu demanded, gesturing to the shadow-shape on the observation deck. “I thought talking was its thing.”

Surface snapped its fingers together. “You gonna listen to the terms or not? Christ, it’s almost like you want the poor kid to get his bucket kicked.”

“No one wants to see that!” Koichi interjected.

“I don’t know, I’m kinda curious,” said Tamami.

“Like I was saying – .”

All of a sudden, the word seemed to shift. Hazamada landed on the deck with a thud. Okuyasu found himself looking at Star Platinum, its fist snapping back mid-recoil from landing a blow, which made no sense because Jotaro was right there beside him – until he happened to turn and notice Jotaro was no longer there.

Vox crashed into the railing hard enough to split it. From where he stood, Okuyasu could hear the crack of wood splintering. The railing, however, held on. The stand let out what might have been a shriek, but it was too hollow and metallic to be a human cry – instead, it sounded more like a train coming to a stop, steel wheels on steel track in a shower of sparks and screech of friction. The noise bypassed Okuyasu’s ears and went straight through to his brain, raking the inside of his skull like a red-hot nail.

“Josuke!”

That was Koichi’s voice, skipped up an octave or so. Josuke staggered back, one arm wrapped around his middle. When he doubled over and spat on the ground, his saliva was tinged with pink.

He’d filled Jotaro in on Vox, that’s what he said – but Okuyasu couldn’t understand why he’d skimmed over the little detail of their connection. That seemed like an important thing to overlook.
Then Jotaro swung around, mouth parting just enough that Okuyasu could see his teeth clenched, and he understood. Of course Josuke hadn’t told him. It was just like him not to. He wasn’t the type of guy who wanted other people to worry about him.

In the first moments following the time stop, everything seemed to move slowly, as if time needed to get up to speed again. Those first moments passed. The world was spurred into motion all at once. The shadows slumped against the railing regrouped and lunged; Jotaro’s head whipped around; Echoes and Crazy Diamond appeared; Star Platinum raised its arms in front of it to block the impending blow; Surface dashed out onto the observation deck; Jotaro slid back until his feet left the deck and his heels dug into dirt; and Hazamada, sporting a single disheveled pigtail and an expression that could kill, rose to his feet and screeched:

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!”

At Jotaro, he jabbed a finger. “You. You got your ears blocked up or something? Didn’t you hear the bit about me dying if anyone tried anything? You trying to get me killed? – What’s wrong with you?!”

“We’re trying to save you, asshole!” Josuke retorted.

He lurched forward, as if to make a grab for Hazamada – but before he could take a step, his fist changed course and made a one-way trip directly into Koichi’s jaw. A shocked expression blossomed across the smaller boy’s face as he went down, arms pinwheeling in confusion, but not nearly as shocked as the expression on Josuke’s face.

With a sound like chains clinking and dragging over the deck’s wood planks, Vox slid forward until it was hovering at Hazamada’s side. It made no effort to grab him; it just floated there, as if waiting for something to happen. At Hazamada’s other side, Surface was grinning, one closed fist raised in front of it.

Hazamada cocked his head. A vertebra shifted with a pop. “I’ll teach you to risk my neck like that,” he declared.

***

Before you get any ideas about Toshikazu Hazamada being some kind of evil mastermind, let us take a step back to explain the circumstances leading up to the present. You will recall we last left Hazamada and his stand at the edge of a ravine, where a voice hovering over them said:

“You’d be surprised by the things you care about when you’re dead.”

Then something foisted Hazamada into the air. He found himself staring at a shadowy specter that, if he let his eyes go out of focus, look like a series of overlapping human figures.

“Do something!” he hissed to Surface, whose feet had also been lifted off the ground – though, given the height difference, his feet were significantly less off the ground than Hazamada’s.

“No can do, boss,” Surface grit out as it pawed at the tendril around its neck in an effort to break free. “I’m a method actor, yeah? I gotta have something physical to work with. This shit – this shit ain’t physical.”

“Josuke Higashikata,” the Voice in the Dark boomed. It had dropped the pretense of imitating Koichi’s voice. Now its voice was loud and discordant, with a slight echo – like dozens of voice near perfectly overlapped with one another.
“Hey, man, you got the wrong guy. Watch.”

To illustrate, Surface let its present form dissolve. Briefly, it appeared as wooden manikin, before its body began to shrink and shift until the shadows were left gripping Koichi Hirose.

“See?” Surface prompted. It changed again, this time into Hazamada’s classmate, Junko.

Vox’s being suddenly rippled, as if it were made of water and someone had thrown a stone into it. Then the voice was everywhere, so loud that Hazamada could feel a pressure inside his skull. For a moment, he thought his eyeballs were going to burst.

“YOU… TRICKED… ME.”

“No way!” Hazamada squawked. “You’re the one who grabbed us. We did dick-all!”

“What my good pal here is trying to say,” Surface interjected, “is that it was all an honest misunderstanding. So how about you let us go and, ah, good luck with the Higashikata thing. We’ll be here rooting for yah.”

When the voice came again it had shrunk to a whisper, so that Hazamada had to strain to hear it:

“There's always room for one more forgotten ghost in the woods.”

At that point, Hazamada was starting to freak out. He knew, philosophically speaking, that he was going to die someday – he just hadn’t pictured it happening so soon. Or happening because of Josuke Higashikata. He wasn’t sure which was worse: the possibility that his body would never be found and no one would ever know what became of him, or the possibility that some creepy hiker or snot-nosed kid would come across his asphyxiated corpse in a school girl’s uniform in the middle of the woods. If it was the latter, his classmates were all going to think he was into some freaky shit. Maybe they’d put it on his memorial: Here are buried the remains of Toshikazu Hazamada. Died doing what he loved: some freaky shit.

Like hell he was going to let that happen, he thought. Like hell he was going to die like an idiot so he could say he took one for the team.

“You’re after Higashikata, right?” he said. “Happens I got a chip on my shoulder with the same name. Maybe you and I could help each other out.”

The mass of shadows wasn’t saying anything, and Hazamada was too nervous to shut his mouth by that point, so he kept rolling with it: “I’m practically best friends with Higashikata and all those other guys. I know everything about their stands. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

From Hazamada’s perspective, Vox had nothing so much resembling eyes, but all the same, he felt its focus lift from him, as though someone had removed a weight from his chest. Beside him, Surface squirmed.

“And you?” asked the voice.

“Me and him come as a packaged deal,” Surface quipped. “Right, boss?”

“Hey, I’m not part of a packaged anything.”

“Boss.”

“Alright, alright already!” It pissed him off when people begged – as if that would ever make him
change his mind – but Surface was his stand, and even if he wouldn’t get hurt if it got smashed, finding another life-sized wood manikin would be a pain, and no stand and no manikin meant forfeiting his only avenue of getting laid in the foreseeable future. To Vox, he said: “He’s with me. You can use him to control people like puppets, so, you know. Probably good to have around.”

“I do weddings and birthday parties too.”

The pressure around Hazamada’s neck slackened. To the forest floor he dropped. As he knelt gasping for air, he heard Vox say:

“You’re friends with Higashikata.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Hazamada, rubbing his throat. “We’re all buddy-buddy.”

Calling Josuke his friend made him want to throw up in his mouth a little, but he wasn’t about to correct the shadowy entity that had just decided not to kill him.

“Then he’ll come for you. Make sure he doesn’t get away.”

That was the gist of the conversation. Short and sweet. At the time, Hazamada didn’t reflect on a single word that came out of his mouth – it was all survival instinct. He would’ve promised the moon if he thought it might have saved his neck. But somewhere between being dragged screaming across a two-lane highway and a field and the backyards of some rich folks’ summer homes, the idea of stabbing his friends in the back started to grow on Hazamada. He was tired of always having to be on his best behavior, and besides – he still had a few weeks’ stint in the hospital to thank Higashikata for. And the more he thought about it, the more he couldn’t wait to see the looks on the others’ faces when he turned traitor on them. He bet that would give them something to chew on. For once, Toshikazu Hazamada was not going to be the one-line villain-of-the-week. For once, he was going to be the big damn plot twist.

Everything started to unravel when no one bothered to act surprised at this sudden betrayal, except Higashikata himself, and that was more on account of his involuntarily punching Hirose in the face.

Hazamada elbowed Surface in the ribs. “Look at them! They have no idea how to react. I bet it’ll take a minute for the shock to set in.”

Side-eyeing the group, Surface scratched its neck. “I dunno, boss,” it said. “I think you’re gonna be waiting a while.”

As she helped Koichi to his feet, Yukako narrowed her eyes at Hazamada. She, too, had been equally melodramatic at one point – in retrospect, it was embarrassing.

“Hazamada,” muttered Koichi. He spoke the name like a reproach.

“A’ight. So we can’t lay a finger on Vox,” Okuyasu growled. He rubbed his hands together, feeling his chapped, dry palms chaff together. “But I don’t see what’s keepin’ me from putting a foot up your ass.”

“Go ahead and try it,” Hazamada sneered, “except – .”

“Except you might want to take a look through those binoculars over there,” Surface butt in, sweeping a hand out dramatically in the direction of a row of coin-operated binoculars on the observation deck. Koichi was once again knocked over when Josuke’s own arm flailed out in pantomime.
“Knock it off!” Josuke snapped. Then to Koichi: “You alright, man?”

Koichi pulled a face. Curling back his lips, he passed his tongue over his bloodied teeth. “I’m fine.”

“You taking a peak through those binocs or not?” Hazamada demanded.

“I, uh,” Okuyasu stammered.

He’d always struggled with making decisions. If he had no choice or if someone else chose for him, he felt he had a way out. A bind he could resist or push back against if he wanted to. But making a decision on his own meant – at least for him – committing to a choice. Suddenly, he couldn’t just back away whenever he wanted. And when he was asked to make a decision on the spot, well…

“Just do it,” Yukako snapped.

If Yukako was going to make up his mind for him, Okuyasu wasn’t about to protest.

As he stepped out onto the deck, it creaked beneath his weight. He kept wide of Hazamada and Surface and kept his eyes pinned to the ground, away from Vox and the uneasy vagueness of its shape. From somewhere in the depths of his pockets, he managed to fish out a fifty yen piece. Jamming the coin into the slot, he bent over and lowered his face until his eyes were enclosed in the hooded darkness of the binoculars’ hooded sockets.

At first, he saw nothing except the ruled edge where ocean and sky met, blue-on-blue.

“To the left,” Surface instructed, so Okuyasu grabbed the knobs on either side of the viewer and pivoted it accordingly.

For a moment, everything was erased in a blur. Then his eyes adjusted. The cliffs past the deck curved inland around the mouth of a small cove; on the other side of the cove, a hundred feet or so away, he saw a car parked. The driver’s side door was open. To the right, Okuyasu nudged the viewer. Near the cliff’s edge stood a familiar man in a blue nylon windbreaker. In one hand he held something that glinted in the sun, throwing a wedge of light on the ground at his feet. A knife, Okuyasu realized. A hunting knife, the same he’d stabbed Josuke with the day before. Sato’s other arm was locked around Ken, whose neck was pinned at the crook of his elbow. The back of Jolyne’s t-shirt was bunched up in his hand, holding her aloft. Okuyasu watched her face pinch up in concentration as she squirmed and kicked the man. She couldn’t understand why her efforts weren’t paying off – whenever she tried the same tactics on her father, he’d invariably crumple to the ground in a feigned state of unconsciousness.

Something inside the viewer’s machinery jangled. The binocular lenses were shuttered, leaving Okuyasu staring at an empty darkness.

His father hadn’t been there. Not with Sato and not in the car either. He didn’t have any reason to worry about his old man; he felt awful that his father was the first thing that came to his mind when those kids were in trouble. But there it was all the same.

As he stumbled back toward the others, he could tell by their expressions that they’d spotted Sato in the distance. Jotaro was gazing out across the cove; Okuyasu could see his hands curled into fists, skin flushed white at the knuckles.

“I wouldn’t try it, if I were you.”

That was Surface. It had its arms folded, a smirk on its face.
“Just now – you were thinking about stopping time, right?”

“That’s not going to work,” Hazamada interrupted, the words tumbling from his mouth in a rush, like he was afraid he was going to get cut off again at any moment. “Because – .”

“Because even if you stop time for four or five seconds, you’re limited by how far you can move in that time,” Surface concluded. “You’re in pretty good shape, right? Maybe you can run twenty-two feet in a second. Five seconds, that’s 110 feet. It’s more than that to the other side. You get halfway there, time resumes – our buddy slits the kiddies’ throats.” For emphasis, Surface slashed a finger across its throat, and Josuke, who was forced to mirror the action, swallowed when he felt the light, tickling pressure against his windpipe. “Stopping time’s pretty tough. But the one thing that can go toe-to-toe with time is space.”

“I was just about to say that,” Hazamada grumbled. His attempt to turn major antagonist was going poorly enough without his stand stealing all the good dramatic speeches.


It let out a laugh and Josuke grit his teeth as he took a step forward against his will. He tried to lock up his muscles, to tense himself against the urge to move, but to no avail. His legs lifted just as easily as if he’d willed them to do so himself.

He wasn’t thinking about what awaited him on the other side of his ten-step walk. He wasn’t looking at the shadow-shapes that awaited him on the observation deck; he wasn’t paying attention to the long bending dunes or the dust that grit beneath his feet or the clean heady smell of the ocean, all familiar to him in the same way a forgotten dream was familiar. Though details were scarce at a distance, he couldn’t tear his eyes off Sato and the kids. He didn’t need to see the details to know the knife under Jolyne’s jaw was probably the same hunting knife from before. He could still remember the way it looked: the beveled edge that tapered to a needle point, the underbelly of the blade toothed like a saw. The knife was designed to tear and rip flesh – deer or rabbits had probably been the original intention, but a knife did not discriminate. Maybe it was close enough that Jolyne could smell the sharp bite of stainless steel beneath her nose.

For a moment, the flashlight beam lingered in place. Josuke’s blood burned electric-hot beneath his skin. In his chest he could feel the muscles of his heart give a painful squeeze. He was certain he’d been spotted. But then the light veered away. In its absence, squiggles of light floated in his vision.

His eyes took a few moments to readjust. The flashlight was pointed elsewhere, catching on the low-hanging branches and casting a wide aura in the thick, soupy air that hung everywhere in the forest like a living breath. In that aura of light, Josuke could make out the silhouette of a man. Tall, lean, broad shoulders. The sliver of an ear, skin bunched together at the back of his neck when he raised his head.

From the man’s direction, he heard a whimper. Josuke’s body gave a jerk of alarm. He thought at first the sound had come from the man – there was something jarring, something wrong about the juxtaposition. But then the whimper shuddered and splintered into a wailing cry. A child’s cry, one he’d heard before while playing in the backyard whenever the neighbour’s window happened to be left open. He remembered peering up through the same window and seeing Mrs. Imai pace by, bouncing the baby in her arms, shushing and murmuring words he couldn’t hear, words without meaning.

The man turned, and his silhouette turned with him. Only then, with his figure in profile, did the shape of the axe slung over his shoulder separate itself from his shadow.
The inside of Josuke’s palms prickled.

There it was again – that same flutttery, helpless feeling pinballing around in his chest. He thought he’d outgrown the feeling, the same way he’d conquered his fear of the dark and his fear of heights and his fear of riding his bike without training wheels.

He only snapped out of it when he felt something brush against his side. He and Surface were shoulder-to-shoulder, feet pointed in opposite directions. The halfway mark, at the very edge of the observation deck. Surface turned its head to look at him, and Josuke found himself doing the same.


“You better hope your new friend kills me or I’m hunting you down and lighting a bonfire with your ass.”

“You use that line on all the girls or is it just me?”

“The hell you want with Josuke anyway?!”

That was Okuyasu’s voice. Surface turned its head, and Josuke did the same. He was left staring at Vox’s silent, waiting figure, but he could still picture Okuyasu behind him: the tension in his jaw he could almost hear, his quick-bitten fingernails folded away in his fists. It was thinking about those blunted, chewed-up fingertips that Josuke finally paused to process what he was doing. Until then he’d been so fixated on the memories, on the kids, on not f**king things up again that he’d brushed away everything else with a kind of indifferent serenity. Now he was jolted by the realization that he did not want to die.

Surface opened its mouth, but Hazamada beat him to the point. “Classic revenge shit, something about Josuke killing it, yadda yadda,” he said. “Why don’t you ask Josuke yourself?”

“Smooth, boss. You really nailed that delivery.”

“What’re you talking about? Killed who?” Josuked demanded. He tried to turn his head, but his body refused to yield to his brain’s signals.

Up ahead, Vox hadn’t moved. Its pinhole eyes were fixed in his direction, but not quite on him. If he focused long enough on it – let his eyes relax, let his mind wander – then he thought he could hear a susurration of whispers from somewhere so close that it seemed to come from inside his head. He couldn’t be sure if it was just his imagination playing tricks on him, the way it sometimes did when he was in a quiet room by himself and his brain invented sounds to fill the quiet: rustles, snatches of non-existent conversations.

Vox’s reaction was starting to freak him out. Right around now would usually be the point when the bad guy would taunt him or explain their plan or their philosophy. Elation tended to turn people chatty. But there was no reaction in its ashen face, no mocking words on its lips. There was not, for that matter, any light of recognition in its eyes – as if the stand were just a hollow puppet, without sentience.

Hazamada was just trying to fuck with him about the revenge thing, Josuke figured. From what he knew, Vox had been around far longer than he had, so he couldn’t possibly have been responsible for its death – if it really was a normal ghost to start off with. For all Josuke knew, it was pissed off about Kira or Angelo, or maybe it really did just want to get a hold of the arrow; whatever the case, he doubted Hazamada knew either.

Into Josuke’s ribcage, Surface drove an elbow.
“Hey!” it snapped. “Quit stalling – let’s go!”

Pain needled up Josuke’s side. He winced, nearly biting his tongue in the process. He was out of time, he realized. Vox was going to kill him, and Sato was going to kill the kids, because even if they cooperated, he got the impression last time in the woods that Fujimoto wasn’t the type to let loose ends go.

His mind turned over. He needed a plan. Alright: step one, he had to get the kids away from Sato. Between the six of them, they could deal with Vox and Hazamada, but he needed to get the kids out of the equation before they could do so. Fujimoto was far enough away to put him out of even Echoes’ range. There was the Hand, but it was too slow. The hunting knife would take less time to cut a throat than Okuyasu’s stand would take to cut that much space.

The crying didn’t let up.

“Shut up!” Josuke heard the man hiss.

He held out something at arm’s length. A little mint-green onesie, the soft curve of a chubby knee. Josuke couldn’t see much of Yuki’s face, but he recognized her all the same. The front of her snapsuit was bunched up in the man’s hand. As Josuke watched, the man knelt until only the top of his head was visible above the scrub. When he rose again, he was no longer holding Yuki or the axe or the flashlight. The light struck him from below, filling in the undersides of his cheeks, the arches of his brows.

The man was muttering something under his breath. He crushed his hands through his hair, twisting loose strands through his fingers and yanking at them. He bored the heels of his hands into his eye sockets and slapped his open palm against his forehead again and again, his movements jerky and clipped in the half-light, almost unnatural. Yuki’s crying broke off in hitched breath before starting up again. The man went still. He bent, picked something up off the ground, then raised his arms up high. Above his head, in the blackness outside the halo formed by the flashlight, a silver crescent gleamed – hairline thin, slight enough that Josuke nearly missed it. He realized he was looking at the head of the axe.

He knew he needed to act, but his body felt like it was paralyzed. He wished his grandfather was there. His grandfather would have known what to do. He used to tell Josuke that if he was ever in trouble, he should yell and make lots of noise so the adults around would know something was wrong and would come to his rescue. The urge to shout and holler bubbled up in Josuke’s throat but he swallowed it back down. In Morioh, someone was always within earshot. But not here. Not in the woods.

The crescent of light seemed to hang in the air for an eternity, but now it was moving again. The light slid away as the blade descended, coming down like a vertical pendulum.

Do something, Josuke told himself, his grip on his own flashlight tightening. Do something!

Once again, he felt his legs move by their own accord. Another step passed beneath him. He was standing on the observation deck now. Only a few more steps. The pain in his side flared up with every tiny movement. The punch to the gut from Star Platinum via Vox earlier must have reopened his stitches. Blood had clotted and dried in the suturing, sticking to his skin so that any sudden shift made him feel the cinch.

Just then, he caught Hazamada’s eyes and grinned at him. “Hey. You ever hear that one quote – about how whatever a criminal leaves at a crime scene, they take with them?”
“Yeah I know it,” Hazamada retorted. “You’re not even paraphrasing it right, shithead. It’s something like… every crime leaves trace evidence behind.”

“That was Locard!” Koichi piped up behind them.

Hazamada snapped his fingers. “Locard, that’s it! It was on the tip of my tongue. You’re a flippin’ genius, Koichi!”

Despite the murderous glare Yukako was sending Hazamada’s way, Kochi went pink in the cheeks. “You think so?”

“Look,” said Josuke, “I don’t care what the guy’s name was. Point is, it made me think of this magic trick Okuyasu was supposed to show me and Jolyne earlier.”

With Surface’s attention elsewhere, he managed to turn his head. Enough to glance back at Okuyasu over his shoulder, the way people did when they were saying goodbye, so that when Josuke called out, “Don’t you think she’d like to see that trick?” – it sounded like a farewell.

All the same, Okuyasu didn’t process what was going on, not even when he saw Crazy Diamond appear and lay its hand on Josuke’s side, until he heard Koichi behind him cry:

“Don’t!”

_Do something, Josuke told himself, his grip on his own flashlight tightening. Do something! And so he did the first thing that came to mind, the only thing he could think to do to make himself feel less afraid: he turned his flashlight on._

_The axe halted mid-swing. The man turned, arms dropping to his sides, and for a moment the whites of his eyes were caught in the beam of light. Then he raised his hand, the long slender shadows of his finger blotting out his face._

_In a panic, Josuke threw the flashlight as far away as he could. Through the undergrowth the light crashed, beam swinging wild, before he heard it settle with a soft rustle somewhere in the brush._

_The man took off after the light, stride wide and purposeful as he waded through the scrub. Josuke ducked under the thick cover of knotweed and clapped a hand over his mouth, as if he didn’t trust himself not to scream._

_The footsteps drew closer – and then passed along. He heard the knotweed rustle and close off behind the man as he ventured deeper into the woods._

_Up ahead, through the pushes, Josuke could see a faint glow. The man had left his flashlight on the ground. Once the footsteps had passed, he crept toward it on his belly._

_He found the flashlight in a tangle of ferns, and Yuki lying on her back beside it. When she saw him, her whimpering trailed off. She peered up at him, round mouth agape – in the dim light her pupils seemed to fill her eyes completely, so that they looked like two shining black beetle’s wings._

“Hey!” Hazamada shouted. “You try anything with Crazy Diamond and I’ll signal to my buddy over there to – .”

Before he could finish his sentence, something zinged past his nose.

Josuke staggered and crumpled to one knee. His hand went to his side. In the quiet that followed, he
could hear a steady *plip, plip, plip* as droplets of blood hit the wood deck. Against the handle of the hunting knife, his fingers brushed.

“To do what, exactly?” he demanded. And though his voice was tight with agony, there was a sneering note of triumph in it all the same.

***

Rolling with Josuke, Okuyasu had learned out over time, was a bit like being part of a flying trapeze act. You didn’t always know what would happen, but you had to trust yourself to catch him and for him to catch you.

Seeing the knife bury itself in Josuke’s side and watching Josuke crumble to the ground, all Okuyasu wanted to do was rush over and shake him and call him an idiot – and then make sure he was okay. But right then, Josuke was waiting for Okuyasu to catch him, and he knew that didn’t involve fussing over anyone or kicking an evil spirit’s butt. Josuke had asked for a magic trick.

And so, just for now, he let himself forget about Josuke and the knife and Vox. Instead, he called forth the Hand. Okuyasu could feel the tension and resistance in his wrist as his stand swiped away space. The motion was slow, deliberate: a swimmer doing the front crawl through a vat of molasses.

Space disappeared with a gasp. The effect was like he’d taken space and stretched it like a rubber band. When the band snapped back to its original shape, it didn’t just get smaller. All that force that he’d used to hold the band in tension was turned into momentum, and that momentum shot Okuyasu clear across the cove. For a second or two, he was looking down beneath him at the waves, churned into white froth as they sped up close to shore. His legs peddled furiously beneath him – and then he hit the ground running.

By that point, Sato realized what was happening. Dropping the kids, he started to run, but on hearing the sound of space contracting behind him he turned. Okuyasu let the leftover momentum carry him. Head-first into Sato he slammed, catching him between the eyes.

The old man landed sprawled on his back. If it weren’t for the wet, rasping sound of his breathing, Okuyasu might have thought he was dead. The impact had smashed his glasses, leaving cuts and bits of glass stuck in his cheeks and eyelids.

The exertion left Okuyasu breathing hard. Blood dripped down his face from a shallow cut in his forehead.

“Is he dead?” Jolyne asked.

She had picked herself up off the ground and was now surveying Sato’s laid-out form. Whether he was dead or unconscious, she chose to believe her steady assault had somehow contributed to the man’s current state.

“Nah.”

If Okuyasu hadn’t seen the knife at her throat moments ago, he would never have guessed the ordeal she’d been through. Whether this was owing to her disposition or the psychological elasticity of toddlers wasn’t clear. Ken, on the other hand, was pale and wild-eyed. He had one hand held out in front of him, like he was about to throw down at rock-paper-scissors.

Stooping, Okuyasu grabbed Sato’s arm and hauled him over his back fireman-style. His legs trembled at the effort. The old man weighed like he was in a habit of eating lead flakes for breakfast.
To Ken, he said: “Hold onto her hand, eh? Don’t let her get near the edge.”

Being addressed seemed to bring Ken around. He unclenched his fist, letting his hand fall back down to his side. “Uh, y-yeah,” he stammered. “Sure.”

Once Okuyasu was certain Ken had Jolyne by the hand and that no one was going to be falling to their death any time soon, he started back toward the others at a jog, Sato’s unconscious body bouncing on his shoulders.

***

“Don’t look so smug, jackass! I don’t need that guy anyway.”

Even as Hazamada uttered these words, he heard a scream. He tore his eyes away from Josuke in time to see several lengths of black hair wind themselves around his stand. Then Yukako, with her teeth clenched in a snarl, wrenched her body around and her hair went with it, launching Surface into the air. Hazamada watched as a tiny speck of shadow fell from the sky and landed somewhere in the fields in the distance, sending a flock of birds wheeling away. Then, nothing.

“Give it up,” said Koichi. His arms were folded in front of him, chin jutting out – a look on his face that immediately made Hazamada wish he could sink into the ground and die. When you crossed Koichi Hirose, you knew it.

“Koichi…”

When Koichi didn’t reply, Hazamada felt a weight settle on his chest. Specifically: the weight of a lock the size of a basketball.

Hazamada let out a squawk. He tried to run, to get out of range, but the Lock kept growing in size until Hazamada tripped. When he tried to pull himself back up, the weight was too much – his arms trembled, then collapsed.

“Get this thing off me!” he cried from on the ground.

“None’s can do,” said Tamami.

“Not until you apologize,” Koichi affirmed.

Yukako regarded him, one finger poised on her lips. “I think that’s a good look on you.”

Josuke, meanwhile, was struggling to rise up to both knees. The knife was in deeper than last time – of course last time, it hadn’t flown at him from a hundred feet away – but it was lodged in place securely enough to keep the bleeding down.

The shadows on the observation deck shuddered and let out a screech. Vox gathered itself together and shot off in the direction of its user, but not before Josuke grabbed hold of it by one of its chains.

“Like hell you’re taking off again,” he panted.

His hands, however, were slick with blood, and the chain freed itself from his grasp.

“Koichi!” he called out.

“R-right! Act Three freeze!”

To the deck, Vox dropped. There wasn’t much to it flattened out like that – it looked like a sad
Act Three had materialized near Josuke. Its palms were pressed together, stance wide.

“Got this motherfucker on lockdown, boss man,” it quipped.

Hands appeared on Josuke’s shoulders. He was lifted to his feet, supported on either side by Yukako and Jotaro. Koichi peered up at him, a huge grin on his face and his hands clenched into fists at his chest.

“That was so cool!” he exclaimed. “With the knife and everything! – Um, you’re okay, right?”

“I wouldn’t call stabbing yourself cool,” Yukako mumbled.

“I’m alright,” Josuke stammered. The pain was making everything seem slow and far away – when he opened his mouth, his lips felt heavy. The roof of his mouth had acquired a metallic taste. “Been better.”

“There was dried blood on the knife from when he stabbed you, right? Is that how you did it?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“How did you know he hadn’t cleaned the knife?”

Ever since Vox showed up, Jotaro had hardly said a word, so Josuke was surprised when he heard his nephew’s voice inches from his ear. Amid the excitement and shouting of the past half hour, Jotaro’s voice was nearly lost – if anything, he’d gotten quieter since the car ride.

“From here, it looked like he hadn’t changed his clothes since yesterday,” Josuke explained. “I figured if he didn’t have time to change, he didn’t have time to clean his knife either. It’s like that quote I mentioned earlier…”

“Locard?” Koichi prompted.

“Yeah, that.”

“Trace evidence,” mused Yukako. “DNA can be difficult to get rid of. Even with bleach, dried blood can get stuck in the handle or in the serrated edges of a knife.”

“So you think we can drag Vox back to town like this?” Josuke asked.

“I… I think so.” said Koichi. “I’m not sure how long I can hold it, but I’ll try!”

Just then, they heard a loud crack. When the group turned, Vox was where they’d left it, pinned to the deck under Act Three’s supervision – but beneath it, the wood beams had splintered and were beginning to cave inward.

“Call off Act Three!” Jotaro ordered, but it was too late.

Just as Echoes faded, the deck beneath Vox gave way and the stand slipped from view. Down below, they could hear the planks hit the water with a slap.

Josuke felt his legs suddenly give out. He pitched forward, the sky and the ground tumbling over each other. For a moment he thought he’d managed to trip, but then he watched his friends’ faces grow further and further away and he didn’t understand what was happening, until he twisted around and saw the chain wrapped around his ankle.
By the time he noticed this, however, he was already falling through the observation deck, and the ocean was rushing up to meet him.

***

When Okuyasu saw Vox pull Josuke through the observation deck, and heard the distant, quiet splash of Josuke hitting water, he dropped Sato and broke into a sprint. Later, he’d say he wasn’t too sure what he was thinking at the time. He wasn’t a strong swimmer to begin with, but he was on the verge of jumping down after Josuke when suddenly, there was a shift. Like a glitch, or a bad edit in a movie. Not fifteen feet away, Yukako had gone from standing to hanging mid-air. She fell backward into Koichi, who managed to catch her by the waist, but something had changed.

At first, Okuyasu couldn’t figure out what. Then, from the base of the cliffs, he heard the second splash.

Chapter End Notes

* Araki stating that Jotaro withholds his feelings because he believes everyone knows what he's thinking is my source of life/the death of me.
* I originally had Sato giving the time vs. distance spiel, but then I remembered that a) his jaw is wired shut and b) he’d have to be at least a hundred feet away for the stupid scheme to work. So if the plan Surface spouts out sounds suspiciously like something Sato would come up with... that's why :D
* I have a twitter now, but I have no idea what I'm doing or who to follow, so feel free to leave your twitter handle in the comments if you'd like! I enjoy jojos/memes/cute animals/aesthetics/art/cool facts about history & science.
Josuke had never seen the stars from outside Morioh before. Back home, the stars lived high up, in the banner of half-dark above the bright orange glow of sodium streetlamps. Tiny faint lights like someone had taken a pin and poked holes in the sky.

At present, there were no sodium lamps in sight. The stars filled his vision – not just scattered pinholes but towering silver clouds of them, filling up the sky like static.

In his peripheral vision, shadows swept pasted. Blurred; there and gone so fast he nearly missed them. Trees. Utility poles. Power lines. But as quickly as the scenery passed by, the sky above rolled slowly on.

Once, his grandfather had taken him to a fishing pond in the mountains. They’d driven along Route 169, near Mount Hakkyo. The pine trees cut past them, fracturing the sunbeam that fell in Josuke’s lap. The susuki grass along the roadside bent with their velocity. But in the distance, above the treetops, the mountain peaks lumbered with ancient, ponderous slowness. His grandfather had explained that the mountains moved that way because they were far away, and much larger than they appeared.

The stars crept by much slower than the mountains. He imagined how distant they must be and how enormous. As long as he could remember, he’d thought of the stars as a superficial feature of the sky – little more than a painted-on afterthought – but lying on his back and staring up at them now he realized that all those tiny pinholes of light he’d been gazing at all this time were physical things, just like the mountains. All that immensity left him overwhelmed, as though the entire weight of the universe rested on his chest; he found it suddenly hard to breathe.

In a town as small as Morioh, his existence had always felt significant. He had a hard time imagining that the universe could ever allow disaster to befall him when he was the center of his mother and his grandfather’s universe, the rest of the world was a place that fit on the globe atop his desk, and the stars were something you could draw with the tip of a paintbrush. Now, with all that vastness hanging over him, he felt small.

***

The waves reached shore in stages. First came the slow roll as the waves rose and collapsed on themselves, dissolving into white froth. Then, as more waves piled in behind, the crest flattened and rushed up to the waterline, effacing any dips and dowels in the sand and leaving it smooth and glassy in the wake’s retreat. The waves broke with a granular sound, as if you were to fill a sack with rice
and tilt it slowly from side to side.

As the latest wave retreated, another rose up to fill its place. It tripped awkwardly on the heels of its predecessor, collapsing into the withdrawing surf before it could come to a peak. Water sloshed across the sand and flowed around Josuke’s feet. As the ocean drew a breath and the wave retreated, he could feel the sand beneath the soles of his shoes retreat with it.

There was someplace he was supposed to be. Something important he was supposed to remember. He turned, one eye scrunched shut against the sun’s brightness. Further up the beach, dark, sheer cliffs rose abruptly from the sand. He had to crane his head back to see the top.

That’s right, he thought. The cliffs. His friends were up there somewhere fighting Vox. And the kids…

As he faltered up onto the beach, another wave grasped after his ankles – and, falling short, slunk away.

He couldn’t remember how he’d gotten down on shore. There were no stairs or paths anywhere in sight. The beach on a whole wasn’t much more than an inlet: tucked away into the cliff’s side, surrounded by craggy groupings of rocks that looked sharp enough to slice open knees and palms, if he were to try to climb them.

Twenty meters or so away, he caught sight of a figure hunched over the sand. As he got closer, he saw the figure was a young girl, no more than ten years old. A bright blue plastic pail was overturned before her; as he watched, she lifted it slowly with care, revealing a mound of sand the same shape and size as the pail.

“‘Scuse me,” said Josuke.

The girl lifted her head. She had a gash on her forehead along the curve of her temple – it was pale and puckered, just beginning to heal.

“You’re early,” she said.

“What’d you say?”

At him, she thrust her pail. “I need more sand.”

“Sorry, I can’t help your right now. I need to get back up top.”

He pointed at the cliffs, but the girl wasn’t looking. At her knees, she had a pile of shells, pebbles, sea glass, and other odds and end. Fishing out a mussel shell, she placed it carefully atop the sandcastle. For a moment, her fingers lingered on the tiger-striped shell, before she changed her mind.

“Everyone wants to get back up top,” she mumbled as she nudged the shell over by a few centimeters.

“Look, I’m in a hurry. It’s kinda important.”

Even as he said this, however, he couldn’t remember what was so important about getting off the beach. Something about the cliffs. Something about danger.

The girl raised her eyes. She had her head down, chin pressed against her collarbone. She was a chunky, plain-looking child; the loose skin of her neck folded beneath her chin, soft and pale like
mochi.

“You don’t got anywhere to be,” she insisted.

From her hands, he took the pail. The blue plastic was brilliant and untarnished, with a hard-edged, glossy shine. New in a way children’s toys never seemed to remain for more than an hour or so.

What the hell, he figured. If whatever he was supposed to be doing at the top of the cliffs was really all that important, he would have remembered it, right?

“Make sure you get the wet stuff!” she called out as he traipsed back down toward the waterline. “But not too wet – or else it won’t stick!”

At the water’s edge, he planted the pail in the ground, rolled up his sleeves, and scooped a mound of sand up in his hands. The sand splattered when he dropped it into the bucket. Wet granules stuck to his hands, leaving a gritty feeling between his fingers. He dug up another handful of sand and dumped it atop the first.

A wave snuck up and sloshed against the side of the pail. An empty crab shell tumbled across the sand. Its hollow eye sockets gazed up briefly at Josuke before the receding wave dragged the shell skittering back down into the surf. He was left staring at his shadowy reflection in the wet sand.

Bubbles broke on the sand’s surface as air trapped between the grains escaped. He wondered what kind of animals lived under the sand; in that moment, he imagined being buried beneath it, all that pressure collapsing on him, wet sand filling his mouth, his last gasps a handful of bubbles on the surface….

“Thanks,” said the girl when he handed her the pail. She, in turn, passed him a trowel. “You can start working on the moat. I want it nice an’ big.”

This time, the urge to protest withered before it even left Josuke’s mouth.

Grapping the trowel, he settled down on the sand next to the girl and set to work.

“What’s your name?” he asked as he dug out the first half-foot of a trench. He lined it with wet sand, using his hands to shape out the moat’s walls.

“Sayaka Horikawa.”

The name didn’t exactly ring any bells, but the sound of it was familiar enough. A name his mother might have brought up once in a conversation about people he didn’t know.

They continued on in silence. Sayaka built more sandcastles and gave them sea glass windows; Josuke dug the moat, and carried the pail back and forth to fetch more sand and water. At some point, Sayaka glanced up, her brow creased in a frown.

“Gotta hurry,” she said. “Tide will be going down soon.”

“Down?” Josuke turned and peered back over his shoulder. Since he’d started work on the sandcastle, the waterline had gradually crept up the beach – but the edge was still a good four meters away. “It’s already down. Looks to me like it’s coming in.”

She shook her head. “When the tide’s high above, it’s low down below, and when it’s low above, it’s high down here. Tide goes up, tide goes down. Like a see-saw, right?”

From her little pile of found treasures, she selected a seagull’s feather and stuck it atop one of the
castles. The feather’s barbs trembled in the wind like a flag.

“I like it better when the tide’s high up top,” she said. “Then I can build sandcastles. When the tide’s low up top, it’s soooo boring. There’s nothing to do except float.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever you say,” Josuke mumbled.

He was starting to wonder where the girl’s parents were. A quick scan of the beach revealed no one else in sight. Allowing a kid play alone in a place that came with its own billboard of warning signs didn’t seem like the kind of thing most people would do, but then again, Morioh was filled with folks who did not meet the definition of ‘most people’ (or even ‘people’, where certain maybe-aliens were concerned). He was really hoping the girl was not about to turn into another personal liability. It was not that Josuke didn’t like kids – it was just that the last time he’d stumbled upon a lost child with no parents, his bank account had taken a huge hit. He was not ready for the financial commitment of having another kid.

“So,” he began, “you got a mom or a dad around here somewhere?”

Sayaka, who’d been in the process of carving out a doorway in one of the sandcastles, paused. She tilted her head to one side, her puffy eyelids lowering and raising slowly in a drawn-out simulacrum of a blink. “Yeah, he’s here.”

“Who? Your dad?”

To Josuke, Sayaka’s eyes darted. Her chin dimpled in displeasure. “I wasn’t talking to you,” she grunted. “Sure, I’ll warn him.”

“Who are you – .”

“They want to talk to you,” she interrupted, sounding more than a little annoyed. Her eyes slipped from his face and settled on the sand at her knees, where they remained. “Whatever you do, don’t look behind you.”

If you have ever made a conscious effort not to think about something – polar bears, for instance – then you will appreciate the futility of telling someone not to look in an arbitrary direction.

“Who?” Josuke repeated. And sure enough, he did just as he’d been told not to do. He turned and looked over his shoulder.

We would endeavour to describe what he saw, but describing the likeness of an entity without physical form is an inexact science at best. What Josuke thought he saw – or, to be more precise, the image his subconscious inserted into his memory after the fact – was a wall of darkness through which hundreds upon hundreds of hands emerged outstretched.

“Shit!” Josuke yelped, as he crushed his eyes shut.

A peculiar feeling came over him, like he was receding further into himself; his sense of his limbs, as well as his hearing and smell, grew distant and faint. When he was opened his eyes, he was alarmed to find himself staring at the backs of his own shoulders.

Josuke tried to scream, only to discover he no longer had the lips or vocal chords to do so.

Please try to relax, we advised him. Think of something different – white bears, maybe – until your subconscious can kick in and repress the memory.
Josuke, thankfully, seemed to take to this suggestion. His soul ceased trying to rend itself from his physical representation, and gradually, both parts of his spirit snapped back into place.

Blinking, Josuke tested his tongue against his lips. Just to be safe, he wiggled his fingers, counting them out – to his relief, all ten were still present.

Before he had the chance to relax, he remembered Sayaka.

“What’s with the face?” she demanded – immediately before Josuke tackled her to the ground.

Growling, she gave his shoulder a shove. “Hey! You stupid or something? You’re gonna knock over my sandcastles!”

Despite her protest, Josuke was undeterred. He shoved her face into the crook of his elbow, shielding her eyes. “Forget about the sandcastles, kid. There’s something behind us – don’t look or it’ll drag your soul away!”

“I know that. I was the one who tried to warn you, remember?”

Allow us to explain something about being a ghost: the whole act of appearing before the living and frightening them half to death is fun the first time. It’s something of a novelty, like visiting the Eiffel tower in Paris: every tourist feels obligated to go. New ghosts, similarly, seek out that first real scare, even if it is a cliché. Sometimes, they love the thrill of haunting so much they go in for it a second time, or a third. Sometimes, a ghost can making a hobby out of haunting. But everything has its limitations, including the affliction of terror and dread upon unwitting hordes of the living.

You see: fear gets old fast. Especially when you are the Neighbourhood Watch. We cannot tell you how many times we’ve listened to the incoherent cries of the living as their souls are wrenched from their bodies, and wished we could instead have a nice civil conversation for once in our afterlives. No one ever bothers to ask us how our day is going or how eternity is treating us; instead, all we ever get is ahhhhhh or euughghgh or the occasional god please no.

Josuke Higashikata, we said, is that any way to greet someone?

Josuke’s shoulders squared off. Sayaka’s complaints tapered to a grumble as he stopped trying to cover her eyes and instead rose to his feet.

“Those things can talk?” he muttered. His hands at his sides tightened into fists.

Yes, and we don’t appreciate you going around calling us things. We have a name, you know.

“What are you talking about? What name?”

Josuke’s stand appeared – it mirrored his pose, fists clenched, the air around its body practically vibrating. Sayaka, unable to see the big burly bubble-gum spirit hovering in front of her, hummed and picked up her shovel once more. “They call themselves the Neighbourhood Watch,” she explained, as she dug her shovel into the sand, picking up where Josuke left off on the moat.

“That’s the Neighbourhood Watch? Those things?”

Again – no need for the things. And what were you expecting? The parent-teacher association?

“You motherfuckers!” Josuke nearly turned around just then, but Crazy Diamond managed to grab hold of its user before he could undergo a second bisection of soul and body. “Back at the alley behind Owson’s – you almost killed my buddy Koichi! Just now, you were about to drag me to hell
too, weren’t you?!”

We can assure you that we have never tried to steal anyone’s soul or drag anyone to hell.

“Oh yeah? Then what was all that just now with the hands trying to grab me?”

Ghosts, typically, retain some semblance of their living form, we explained. An apparition, if you will. The living can see ghosts and process apparitions just fine. But we are many and without form. Neither the living nor dead can withstand an encounter with the pure aphysical. Faced with the incomprehensible, the spirit is split apart. Even ghosts are not pure spirit – they have a consciousness that keeps their souls pinned in limbo, and when that consciousness erodes away or is destroyed – say, by glimpsing a non-being – off their soul goes. Have you heard of attribute substitution?

Josuke palmed the back of his neck. He was, we could tell, having a difficult time following the conversation. “I, uh, probably heard of it before. Mind refreshing me?”

Let’s say you’re faced suddenly with a complex situation. You find yourself gazing straight at an impossible entity and suddenly your soul is being ripped from your body. Very well. You’re forced to make a split-second judgement in this situation. And so you, with your squishy singleton brain and short lifespan, take the easy way out and fall back on a heuristic attribute – pardon us, we should say rule of thumb. In you and your friend’s case, you have both made the reasonable but inaccurate assumption that you are under attack by something and that something is pulling at you. Thus: the hands.

Josuke’s stand remained, but his posture untensed as the initial flight-or-fight gut reaction wore off. Gripping his shoulder, he rolled his elbow back like he was winding up to throw a pitch. This appeared to signal he was thinking about something.

“Allright,” he said at last, “so let’s say I buy this – this substitution or whatever bullshit. Back in the alley, Koichi said he heard voices. That’s what made him turn around. If you weren’t trying to snag him, then why bother tricking him? Why mimic Reimi’s voice?”

Mimicking voices is not one of our competencies, we said.

Josuke must have already realized this by then. Whenever we spoke, he did not hear a voice. Rather, it was like the words suddenly popped into his head all at once without tone or inflection, the way one might recall the phrasing of a math problem.

We continued: Of course, we’re sure you are already familiar with another entity in Morioh who specializes in voices and mimicry.

“Vox.”

For a split second after Josuke uttered the name, the sound of the waves grew quiet. Sayaka adjusted her position. Beneath her, the sand rustled.

“What the hell would Vox want with Koichi?” Josuke demanded. Around him, sound resumed; the roar of the waves nearly drowned out Koichi’s name.

Think about it, we replied. He and Kishibe had just met Miss Sugimoto. They’d learned of the existence of a serial killer in Morioh. We’re sure you can deduce the rest.

“Vox wanted Koichi and Rohan dead so they wouldn’t catch Kira.”

There you go.
"Is that why you wanted to chat? You gonna tell me you want to help destroy Vox too or something?"

On the contrary. We thought this would be an opportune moment to air the list of grievances that we, the Neighbourhood Watch, have accumulated against the person of Josuke Higashikata – that’s you, by the way – over the past few weeks.

“Oh boy,” Sayaka muttered under her breath as she drove her trowel into the sand. “Here we go.”

“The hell did you just say?” Josuke demanded.

We know you and your friends think you’re all hotshots. Who needs medical professionals, police officers, and the fire department when you have a shaggy-dog group of teenagers, right?

“No one said anything about being hotshots. Who the fuck even uses that word anymore?”

Regardless. We all have rules to follow – you, the police, even spirit-amalgamates. You caught Fujimoto, congratulations. All you had to do was stick to the usual routine: you and your friends unmask old man Jenkins and listen to his spiel about how he would have gotten away with it too if it weren’t for you meddling kids. Instead, you had to go knocking on headstones and turning up grave dirt.

Josuke shifted. His stand moved in tandem, its muscles tensing and releasing as it transferred its imagined weight from one foot to the other. “I wasn’t about to sit around on my ass knowing there was always gonna be another Kira or Fujimoto around as long as that thing was still in Morioh. I’ve gotta finish high school – I don’t have time to keep hunting these dudes down.”

We hate to inform you, but you’ve only made things worse by not sitting around on your posterior. The Voice in the Dark is stronger than ever thanks to you – and you may have gotten yourself killed in the process.

“Killed? The fuck’re you talking about – this stupid scratch?”

Reaching down, he touched his side. He felt the soft cotton of his t-shirt, and nothing else.

You seem surprised, we remarked.

“I was – I got the knife back,” he mumbled.

Until that moment, he hadn’t remembered the hunting knife, or how he’d fixed the dried flecks of blood on it so it had flown right back into his side, but as soon as he spoke the images began to emerge. He remembered the plit, plit, plit as drops of blood fell to the deck; how the wood slats had been slick beneath his hands as he scrambled up onto his knees.

On Josuke’s shirt, a red mark appeared – no larger than a thumbtack at first, but it spread out quickly until it was the size of a dinner plate

You haven’t been thinking about the wound in your side, we explained. Of course, now that you’re remembering it…

After a moment’s hesitation, Josuke touched the growing red stain on his shirt. His fingertips came away wet.

“T-the hell?” Josuke muttered.
Do you remember what happened after you oh-so-heroically elected to stab yourself? we asked.

Pressure around his ankle. His friends’ faces getting smaller by the moment. Falling.

Josuke shook his head. “Not really. Like, bits and pieces, maybe, but…”

Vox pulled you under with it when it hit the water. You’re drowning.

In Josuke’s vision, the sand and cliffs and sea and sky began to blur. A pounding pain squeezed at the base of his skull, but he brushed it aside with a laugh.

“C’mon. I’m nowhere near the water. How can I be drowning?”

You mean you haven’t figured it out yet?

Then came Sayaka’s voice: “When the tide’s low down here, it’s high up above.”

When Josuke glanced down, he felt the air leave his lungs all at once. There was Sayaka, in the same skirted polka dot swimsuit as before with the same trowel as before, only now she was soaking wet: rivulets of water running down her cheeks, her arms; a wet shimmer in the hollow of her collarbone. In the sunlight, her dark clumps of wet, seaweed-tangled hair took on an oily sheen. Barnacles crusted between her bloated, greenish fingers. Where there had been a cut on her forehead before there was now a huge, gaping hole, so that he could see inside her head: water sloshed around in the empty cup of her skull, little silver minnows darting to and fro and nibbling at the pale, pulpy remains of a brain.

There it was again. The pounding in his head, a pressure that came and went again and again. A sound buzzed in his ears, a drone at first, but as he staggered back it deepened into a roar –.

– He opened his eyes. The sunlight was weak and distant, shattered into fragments as it passed through the water’s surface. He stretched out a hand. It hung there in the water, sunlight dancing in ripples across his skin, the surface so very far away. The roaring filled his ears, surrounding him, as the deep undertow of the waves buffeted his body –.

– Gasping, Josuke doubled over. He heaved and seawater poured from his mouth, litre after litre of it splashing onto the sand. The taste of salt sharp and acrid. Sayaka looked unimpressed.

“Gee, s’not that bad,” she complained. “At least you didn’t hit your head on the way down.”

Once again, we said, try not to think too hard about it. The panic will only starve your brain of oxygen quicker. Besides: you’re not dead yet. You have a remarkable talent for not dying. We wouldn’t be too worried, if we were you.

Josuke coughed and wiped the last of the sea water from his lips. All at once his clothes were dry, and the bloodstain was gone. He was staring at Sayaka. At her, he leveled a finger.

“What’d you say your name was again?”

Sayaka tilted her head. The water in her skull sloshed over; a minnow spilled out onto the sand and after thrashing its body a few times lay still, mouth gaping, gills expanding and contracting in a vain effort to fight collapse.

“Sayaka Horikawa,” she said.

“I thought I heard the name before. I remember now… it was on the news a couple years ago. A kid
fell off a cliff by the water. The body didn’t turn up for months.”

Sayaka’s face scrunched up in disgust. “I hope they didn’t use my school photo on the news. The photographer made me look like I had a pig nose.”

If it’s all the same to you, we offered, now may be an opportune time to give up the race – skip the whole *curriculum vitae* in its remaining entirety. Why, if you were to join Morioh’s ghostly ensemble right now, you would land yourself some prime waterfront real estate.

“I’m not sharing with him,” Sayaka protested.

Ignoring this interruption, we continued: And, given enough time, you may even become a member of the Neighbourhood Watch and join in the wonderful democratic collective consciousness of Morioh’s dead.

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to pass on that one,” said Josuke. “I don’t plan on dying any time soon, and even if I do, like hell I’m joining your stupid ghost club.”

We beg your pardon?

“You call yourselves the Neighbourhood Watch or whatever. Keeping the neighbourhood safe is right there in the name. So why the fuck aren’t you doing anything about Vox?”

After taking a moment to collect ourselves and recall that to be a single living soul in a physical body is to be fallible and ignorant, we replied: We are sorry to inform you that you do not seem to have a grasp on the situation.

“Then how about filling me in.”

That’s hardly necessary.

“Fine. Then me and my friends are gonna take on Vox ourselves.”

And how do you plan on doing that, exactly? The best strategy you’ve come up with so far is to get *us* to take care of the problem for you – thank you for asking, by the way. And besides: even if we agreed to help, it wouldn’t make a difference.

“The hell do you mean?”

Groaning, Sayaka jabbed her trowel into the sand and leaned back, arms folded across her chest. “C’mon, Watch. You’re really cutting into my turf time.”

We could tell by Josuke’s stance – legs wide, shoulders slouched, fingers resting at his thighs – that he wasn’t about to take our advice anytime soon, so at length, we relented.

For one, we began, you keep referring to Vox as ‘it’. The Voice in the Dark is not a single spirit or entity as you seem to think – they are a collective, like us, composed of the spirits of forty-seven men, women, and children of Morioh. All dead in an earthquake years before you grand-parents and great grand-parents were a twinkle in someone’s eye.

“Yeah, well I’ve seen Vox. It doesn’t *look* like forty-something ghosts, unless that’s another one of those – whatever you called it – *substitution* things.”

At Josuke’s feet, the warm, cream-colored sand darkened to a concrete grey. The outline of his shadow – until then, prominent under the sun’s scrutiny – vanished. Glancing up, he noticed a
covering of mangy, bruised clouds had overtaken the sun.

We continued: Hardly. The difference is in how we were formed. We came together naturally over Morioh’s history; Vox was formed all at once when a roof came down and buried those forty-seven souls in one grave together. How much do you know about ghosts?

“They’re tied to a place, right?”

We’re feeling generous, so let’s call that half marks. Sometimes, when a person dies, if they have a particularly strong emotion tying them to the mortal world, some aspect of their personality persists in the form of a spirit. Over time, that personality degrades. If a spirit lingers too long, they can develop a kind of madness – something you might you might compare to senility in the living – and in a place like Morioh, where the line between life and death is as thin as a rumour, a ghost can linger for a very, very long time.

A breeze rose up. Josuke could feel the wind booming in his inner ear like it was playing on a snare drum. The wind beat back the waves and cut ripples in the great rolling walls of water, making them look like wrinkled bedsheets. On the horizon, the edge between water and sky softened as fog began to uncoil further out. A sense of dread stewed in Josuke’s lungs as he turned and gazed out at the ocean – he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something just out of sight where the wind ended, something racing toward him over the water.

The Voice in the Dark, we went on to explain, are an old collection of ghosts. Where we in the Neighbourhood Watch are constantly evolving and changing as spirits join us or move on to the afterlife, Vox has been together since their death. They’ve forgotten that they are distinct entities; they have even forgotten that they were once human. They were born out of rage and trauma, and those feelings keep them bound to earth. They are, naturally, drawn to those with feelings that mirror their own.

“You’re talking about Fujimoto.”

And others like him, yes. The process is one of identification. In absence of a personality of their own, Vox subsumes the personalities of the people they are drawn to. Do you know why they are so interested in you?

Josuke made a single, punctuated sound of disbelief. It was a bit like a laugh, if a laugh were a pair of keys clasped between your knuckles on a long walk down a darkened street. “Hazamada said something about me killing Vox. But I mean, c’mon – he was just fucking around. Right?”

Even if you only killed one of their so-called hosts, Vox wouldn’t know the difference. That’s what we mean by self-identification: they don’t distinguish between one another and they don’t distinguish between themselves and the mortals whose spite they feed off.

“I’m telling you – I didn’t kill anyone!”

Right, our mistake. Eternal punishment encased in a stone caricature or a cryptic hardcover is a far cry from death.

There was heat in Josuke’s voice when he spoke again, but something else too – we could hear it in the way his throat contracted, in the way his voice pitched up. “Look: I don’t care about your fucking history lesson or your stupid ghost science. If you’re not gonna help, we’ll figure it out on our own.”

Haven’t you been listening? We’re trying to tell you – you and your friends have it wrong. You’re
looking for a villain where there is none.

“We’re talking about an evil spirit that’s killed people here.”

No, Angelo Katagiri killed people. Sato Fujimoto killed people. People like them have always existed in Morioh – it was their thoughts, their feelings that Vox latched onto. The Voice in the Dark is a mirror of what’s already there – that’s all.

Josuke turned, heels leaving a slash in the sand – punctuated by Sayaka snapping, “Are you nuts?!”

But his eyes were closed, jaw squared off. Whether he was trying to be brave or clever, we couldn’t decide.

“So maybe Morioh has a few weirdos; so what?” he demanded. He took a wobbly half-step forward, hands reaching out before him as if to catch himself from falling. “You know how many of my friends have tried to kill me?”

You have poor taste in company. We fail to see your point.

“What I’m saying is: yeah, of course, you hold up a mirror in front of someone that shows them all this ugly shit, they’re gonna have a hard time seeing themselves any other way, y’know? You’re not even giving them a chance! Maybe all they need’s a voice that isn’t Vox.”

You can’t know that for sure.

“Fine, whatever – Vox goes, maybe not all Morioh’s problems go away, but I’m not afraid of giving it a try. I know people who’ve gone their whole lives being told that they’re stupid, or that they need to make people like them, or they’re nothing without talent. I’ve seen the kinda shit it does to them. I don’t know what it’s like having a voice hanging out in your head twenty-four-seven reminding you of ever fucked-up thought you ever had, but I think I get the picture. That’s why I need your help. You’re supposed to be Morioh’s guardians, right?”

That title has been used in reference to us, yes.

“Then do something!”

He spat out the last two words like they had left a bad taste in his mouth.

Our aim is principally concerned with the preservation of Morioh’s history, we corrected him. Mortal lives are fleeting; places have a long memory. A handful of deaths here and there don’t mean much in the scheme of things.

“You’re lying,” said Josuke. As he spoke, we could see his eyelids twitch as his eyes darted from side to side beneath them. He seemed to be thinking. “You pretend you’re all… like you don’t give a shit. But that’s bull. Back when I was a kid, I met a boy, a ghost, who said his ‘friends’ told him where I could find the man who kidnapped Yuki Imai – that was you, right? And when Rohan got caught up with Cheap Trick, you’re the ones who saved him. And when Kira and Reimi met in the afterlife, you protected her. You talk about mortals and spirits and emotions like you’re above all that crap, but I don’t buy it. You were all people once; you lived here, you know people who live here. You care about Morioh just like my grandpa did. Just like I do! So cut the fucking act already and help me!”

With that, Josuke opened his eyes. To be precise, he cracked one eye open – a part of him still unsure, despite all the confidence in his voice. Then, when nothing happened, the other eye followed.
The beach stretched out before him, empty.

“You moved,” Josuke mumbled. “You were afraid I’d see you, so you – .”

We were just moving so we’d be out of Sayaka’s way, we retorted.

Sayaka snorted. “Yeah, right. Don’t bring me into this.”

“So you’ll do it? You’ll drag Vox away?”

We told you – we don’t drag souls away!

“Whatever you call it – you can do it, right?”

It’s not that simple.

Letting out a strangled sound of frustration, Josuke threw his hands up in the air. “You mean I spent all that time riding your ass, and you can’t even do anything?!”

We didn’t say we couldn’t. We just can’t while Vox is in its current form. A consciousness is required for conscious recognition to occur. We need to find a way to separate its souls out – to make them remember their individual selves again.

“Great. So how do we do that?”

You’ll need to find things that remind them of their old lives. Trinkets, household items – that sort of thing.

“That’s it? Piece of cake.”

Against the backs of his calves, he felt sand shower. Over his shoulder, Josuke glanced: just in time to see Sayaka dig her nails in the sand, pick up another handful, and throw it at him.

“Hey! Cut it out.”

“Are you stupid?” she demanded. Another handful of sand showered the backs of his legs. “Or did ya just miss the part about those guys being dead for like a bajillion years?”

Since 1854 to be exact, we corrected her.

“Alright,” Josuke mumbled, as he stooped over to brush the sand away. “But there’s gotta be some of that stuff in, like, a museum or something, right?”

Unfortunately not. The Voice in the Dark were farmers, artisans – common people, not daimyōs.

“That’s just great. Then what the hell are we supposed to do?”

There’s still a way. Everything you need existed here in Morioh at some point or another. The only distance to surmount is one of time. The living occupy time; the dead occupy space. It’s not easy for the living to traverse time. For the dead, on the other hand…

“Hold up,” Josuke interrupted. “Are you saying ghosts can time travel?”

Not as you imagine it, no, we replied – somewhat indignant at this reduction of a complex metaphysical topic to a cheap sci-fi gimmick. We are sure you’re familiar with the metaphor of time being a river. The living may stand perfectly still in the river, but they are not really remaining in one
place – moment to moment the current makes the river anew, so that the water they are standing in is not the same water they were standing in seconds before. Places for the living are fleeting; they can only really encounter a place once before time’s current drags it away and replaces it with a space that seems familiar but is not the same. New dust bunnies in the corner. New cracks in the wall. For the dead, however, that river has no current. There is no passage of time. The water is still and placid. You are only ever in the same water, the same place – but you can trudge back and forth through it as often as you please, from front to back, the beginning of time to the end of time all encompassed in a neat little space.

Josuke pressed two fingers to his forehead. “So, in other words – you want me to go get this stuff in ghost world.”

That is the idea, yes. If you’re serious about stopping Vox, though, you’ll have to act fast. Say, by five thirty-six this evening.

“Why’s that?”

For one: as we said before, the Voice in the Dark takes on the personality of their host. The only reason you were able to locate them was on account of Sato Fujimoto – he’s not the flashy type, but he’s proud, and his desire to get a reaction out of people demands an audience. Now that you’ve isolated Fujimoto from the larger picture, Vox will be forced to attach themselves to someone new, and there’s no telling if they will resurface again when that happens. Second of all: now that you’ve given back some of Vox’s agency, they’ve started to get ideas about acting on their own.

“What kinda ideas? And why five thirty-six, specifically?”

You’d only be distracted if we told you.

“What happens?” he repeated.

With luck, you’ll never have to find out.

Josuke proceeded to let out a string of curses that have already been mentioned individually elsewhere, and which, in our opinion, are not worth repeating here in concert.

“Oh, okay. Okay, so… I just gotta make my way back up to the world of the living, or whatever you call it, grab the gang, come back here, and go on your stupid ghost item scavenger hunt?”

“Can’t come back here,” Sayaka pointed out. “The tide’s almost down. Won’t be a beach left when that happens.”

Now that she mentioned it, he noticed that the tide had crept further up the sand since he’d last looked. The fog, too, had moved inland: it clung close to the ground, swirling around Josuke’s ankles in cool, damp wafts.

You have that friend of yours out by the highway – have him take you, we said.

“Daisuke?”

That’s the one. Oh, and here, you’ll need this.

Into his back pocket, Josuke felt something slide. Letting out a yowl of surprise, he slapped a hand over his pocket; when he did, he felt the slight bulge of a folded piece of paper.

Your list of things you’ll need, we explained.
“H-hey, hold up! I was joking about the scavenger hunt thing!”

Good luck. Of course, all this is depending on you not drowning in the first place.

“I thought you said I shouldn’t worry about that!”

Only because worrying would deplete your oxygen supply quicker.

Clucking her tongue, Sayaka set down her shovel and frowned. “Here it comes. And I was so close to being done…”

Her eyes were fixed out over the water. By then the fog was so dense that Josuke could see only twenty feet or so away, the sound of the waves lapping against each other unfolding somewhere in the grey emptiness. That same feeling came over him again: the indistinct dread of something headed his way. Sure enough, a dark shape rose from the fog – small at first, but growing taller by the second. Only when the water at the shore’s edge receded all at once and a great wall of water loomed into view did he recognize the wave for what it was.

Josuke staggered back. He didn’t look where he was going; a sandcastle crumbled away beneath his heel.

“Wait!” he shouted, voice nearly lost under the rumble of the approaching wave. “How am I supposed to find this stuff? What am I supposed to do with it?

Sorry, we said, but you’re all out of time.

Over the remaining stretch of beach, the breaker arched. For a moment, a huge cylinder of water hung overhead: the light shone weirdly through it like it was made of stain glass. Then the breaker collapsed. Over Josuke and Sayaka’s heads water poured down, effacing in one instant the sand castles, the moat, everything. The incoming rush knocked Josuke off his feet. For several seconds, he was completely enfolded in darkness, his body spinning around and around as he stretched out his arms, trying to stop himself – with no idea which direction was up or down.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself surrounded on all sides by deep green water. Air bubbles rose in clusters before his eyes. The world around him had gone soft, muted – he could not so much hear the ocean as he could feel it, in the pressure against his ear drums, the glug glug of air pockets releasing all around him. A huge, pale silver disk of light hung above. He felt himself floating upward toward it. Through the water’s thin membrane, he could see the distorted outline of the cliffs – small, and impossibly far away.

Something brushed against his arm. There, floating beside him, was the bloated corpse of Sayaka Horikawa: bashed-in head, waxy skin, fish-eaten eyes gazing emptily ahead.

Panicked, he kicked away. His limbs felt heavy all at once. Above, the silver disk of sky grew smaller, collapsing on itself until it was nearly the size of a pinhole. Darkness closed in all around him.

You better remember how to breathe again soon, we advised him.

***

He was exhausted, the breath fire in his lungs. Though Yuki was a third his age, she was more than half his size and bottom-heavy at that; his elbows were locked in place, he could feel the joints going weak but he didn’t dare relax his arms, fearing that if he did, he wouldn’t have the strength left to lift the girl again.
Ahead, he could see the string of lights that marked the length of the highway. It must have been his eagerness for the streetlights’ false sense of safety, or maybe the sound of reeds rattling and heavy feet sloshing through the water behind him had him out of his mind in a panic: either way, Josuke’s attention slipped along with his footing. From the causeway he tumbled. The marsh was dark, no more than silver suggestions of starlight rippling over black water – he didn’t realize what was happening until he felt himself plunge beneath the water’s surface.

In his shock, he opened his mouth. Lukewarm, acidic bog water filled his lungs in gulping dregs. He felt Yuki’s arms tighten around his neck as his arms and legs wheeled helplessly in the blind, mute darkness. Fear shot like a thunderbolt through his body; he thought for sure he was going to drown.

Then, his feet touched bottom and he stood. Bog water streamed from his head and shoulders – there was a thick, almost animal quality to it, a viscous film he could feel clinging to his skin. The sulphuric smell of peat stung his nose and coated his tongue. Through the ringing in his ears, he could hear Yuki crying – she’d been quiet until then, but the fall had startled her. He shoved a hand over her mouth, feeling the vibrations of her voice against his palm.

Somewhere behind him, the sloshing and rustling paused before resuming with increased fervor.

***

When Josuke awoke, he felt a heavy pressure bearing down on his chest. He’d drowned, he remembered – but it was a fuzzy, impersonal recollection, as though he’d watched the whole thing unfold on television, or read about it in the paper. The confrontation on the cliffs, the floating oyster farms, the dark glitter of eyes in bonfire light, even his memories of sitting in class months before: in the vertigo moments between life and death, all of it took on a kind of flimsiness.

The pressure on his chest continued in rhythmic thumps. He tuned into a voice, little more than a whisper on a breath, repeating: “— twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.”

A hand on his chin forced his head back. Lips, wet and clumsy, fit over his own – quick and desperate so that he felt the nick of teeth on skin – and a hot breath of air forced its way into his mouth and filled his chest until his lungs felt like they were burning up.

Josuke opened his eyes and saw faces hovering over him, features shadowed against a backdrop of cloudless sky as bright as hot tin. Okuyasu, who’d just sat back on his heels in preparation for another round of compressions, stopped and sucked in a breath, and Josuke could almost hear the unsteady way it rattled around in his lungs.

Koichi was there too, face drawn with shock, and Yukako, who refused to look at him and instead picked at her fingers, making new marks beside scabs that hadn’t yet healed in the crescents around her cuticles. No one said anything, and that was the part that scared Josuke the most – he didn’t mind silence but this was different: it was morgue silence, the drawn-out pause that always seemed to precede bad news.

“Are you gonna die?”

Turning his head, he noticed for the first time Jolyne kneeling on his other side.

When Josuke spoke, his lungs felt heavy and water-logged. “Nah,” he wheezed.

Jolyne stuck her lips out, contemplating this verdict. “If you do die, can I have your Nintendo?” she ventured.

Josuke tried to answer, but he instead broke into a coughing fit.
Whatever spell of fear and awe had taken over the rest of the group at once evaporated.

“What?” Yukako ordered.

“He okay?” Koichi asked as he helped Josuke struggle into a sitting position.

“Fuck, dude,” Okuyasu mumbled. “Don’t ever do that shit to me again.”

He had his arm supporting Josuke’s back – the other hand was looped around Josuke’s wrist, measuring his pulse. After a whole summer of feeling self-conscious every time he and Josuke were alone in a room together, after weeks of hoping Josuke didn’t notice the way his hands got sweaty every time they brushed fingers, he was strangely unaffected now with Josuke’s breath warm on his face and the taste of salt water still fresh on his lips. His attention was elsewhere, on something other than Josuke, eyes wide and out of focus and as if he was still preoccupied with the unrealized fear of could-have-beens.

Seeing the raw fear and worry on Okuyasu’s face, Josuke felt the back of his neck stiffen with something akin to dread. To him, other peoples’ emotions were like porcelain vases: he knew they were valuable, and that he was supposed to appreciate them, but he was terrified of handling them and preferred to take them in at a safe distance. Both he and Jotaro shared the same dismissive attitude in moments of crisis: but where for Jotaro this took the form of failing to notice or shrugging off the feelings of others, Josuke handed these back with a polite refusal.

This same refusal could be heard in the underlying, horrified echo when he laughed and said: “Guess this makes us even.”

“Yeah, well…All I did was the CPR ‘n stuff.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Before Josuke could get an answer – or even get a good look around to figure out where he was and what exactly was going on – Yukako inserted herself directly in front of him.

“…What?” he asked.

“You weren’t breathing. Your heart stopped for nearly a minute. Technically, that means you died.”

“Is uncle Josuke a zombie?” Jolyne asked.

“I’m not – .”

“I heard that some people have out-of-body experiences when they’re dying!” Koichi piped up. “But, um, if you don’t want to talk about it, I’ll understand!”

“Did ya see anyone?” asked Okuyasu. “Like my brother, or yer grandpa?”

“I read in a magazine that scientists can use magnetic fields to simulate the sensation of dying,” said Yukako. “They put a special helmet on you in an isolation chamber. It supposedly feels quite peaceful. Some people even describe feeling a comforting spiritual presence.”

Josuke shook his head. A pounding pain in his temples jolted to the forefront of his awareness when he did so. “Sorry. No out of body experiences, no dead relatives, no comforting presences.”

There was something – a feeling like a forgotten dream, the kind he’d wake up from with no recollection of, except for the exhaustion and the impression that his mind had been busy all night.
Behind Yukako, he heard the crunch of wheels over dirt. She turned and Josuke, at last, was able to
take a look around.

Somehow, he was back up at the top of the cliffs where the fight had taken place. Hazamada was
still turtled over on his back, the Lock resting on his chest. Beside him, Tamami squatted, nursing the
few last drags out of the stubbed remains of a hand-rolled cigarette. A few paces away, Sato
Fujimoto lay unconscious on his back. Further back up the trail, about as far away from Fujimoto as
he could get while staying in sight of the group, Ken was playing cat’s cradle with a yoyo. Josuke
could hear the whir of the yoyo’s bearing as it spun.

The sports car they’d all seen at the other side of the cove pulled up alongside the group, wheels
squealing as it trundled to a stop. The driver’s side door swung open and out stepped Jotaro. He was
wet from head to toe: hair plastered to his forehead, coat disheveled and lying flat against his body,
the dark color of his turtleneck showing through beneath the white. It didn’t take much for Josuke to
put two and two together.

He’d wanted nothing more than to keep Jotaro out of the whole Vox business, but somehow, history
had found a way of repeating itself. Ten years later and here Jotaro was taking a second dive off the
edge of a cliff – and just like before, it was all his fault. He didn’t even feel guilty, just humiliated. At
the time, marching right up to meet Vox had seemed like the courageous thing to do. Maybe even a
little cool, in a badass martyr sort of way. Now it just seemed recklessly stupid. The kind of stunt a
kid might pull. That was probably how Jotaro saw him right about then: a dumb kid in need of
rescue a second time running. His only saving grace was this time, he’d at least had the decency to
wait until high tide to fuck up.

“He’s not dead!” Jolyne cheerfully informed her father in Japanese.

Jotaro didn’t seem to notice his daughter’s sudden acquisition of a second language. “Get him in the
car,” he told Okuyasu.

The paternal tone of this command – the way he didn’t bother to look at Josuke when he said it –
embarrassment had already backed Josuke into a corner, so that he couldn’t help but lash out:

“I don’t need anyone to carry me! I can stand up just fine all on my –.”

He was prevented from finishing this sentence whereupon attempting to demonstrate his ability to
stand up just find on his own, a sharp pain shot like electricity up his side.

Okuyasu swore and stumbled as Josuke pitched forward. For a brief moment, the edges of his vision
darkened and the sound of the waves below grew distant through the thick cotton haze that seemed
to envelop his head.

Between the shock of coming to and the numbing effects of being submerged in the frigid Pacific
Ocean for several breathless minutes, he’d managed to forget about the hunting knife in his side. But
there it was: the damage wasn’t as bad as he’d thought at first, it had nipped him in the fleshy part of
his waist, out of danger of anything too important, but it was in there deep all the same, nearly deep
enough to poke right through to the other side, and he could feel the blade’s serrated edges digging
into him, ripping and shredding muscle and tissue with every move he made. He could already tell
that the knife was going to be hell to pull out.

Jotaro made no acknowledgement of this half-rendered protest. Narrowing his eyes at the hunting
knife’s handle, he said: “We’re taking you to the hospital.”

When Josuke spoke, the air felt thin in his lungs. “Vox… did it…?”
“Got away. We can worry about that later.”

Pain had smoothed over whatever knee-jerk anger had leapt to Josuke’s defense moments ago. Over his face, he dragged a hand. “I wasn’t – I mean, you shouldn’t have – I don’t know. Thanks?” His head was swimming; the word half eluded him. There was a strangeness in the sound of it when it left his mouth that didn’t quite seem to match up with what he wanted to say. “I guess?”

At him, Jotaro stared. He reached up, as if to adjust his hat – but when his fingers grabbed onto nothing, he let his arm drop back down to his side, gravity to the movement like his hand had suddenly gotten too heavy for him to lift. Josuke wondered what had happened to the hat. As best he could figure, it was somewhere down at the bottom of the cliffs under ten meters of water.

He expected Jotaro to say something, but instead he turned and grabbed a knapsack from the passenger’s seat. At Koichi, he tossed it – the weight sent the boy staggering back a few steps.

“Found that in the car,” Jotaro explained. “There’s about thirty feet of rope in there. I need you to watch Fujimoto. Do you think you can tie a strong knot?”

At Fujimoto, Koichi glanced. His grip on the nylon backpack tightened. “I’ll, uh, manage something,” said Koichi, who’d worn Velcro shoes right up until high school.

At Jolyne, Jotaro jerked his head.

“Get in.”

She immediately scrambled for the passenger’s side door, but when her father shot her a look of warning she let out an exaggerated sigh, stomped over to rear door, and flung it open. The door slammed shut behind her.

As Okuyasu helped lower Josuke into the passenger’s seat, he felt something dig into his tail bone. Shifting, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out the offending object – a piece of paper folded several times over until it was the thickness of a wallet. Despite his shorts still being wet from his impromptu high dive act, the paper was dry to touch.

“What’s that?” Okuyasu asked as Josuke unfolded the paper and began to read.

Written on the sheet was a list of objects. As Josuke scanned through the list, he felt the others crowd in around him to do the same.


Before Koichi could continue, Okuyasu plucked the note from his hands. “The hell? This some kinda shopping list or somethin’?”

“I don’t remember,” Josuke mumbled. There it was again: the feeling of a dream forgotten. He felt there was something about the note he was supposed to remember, but he couldn’t pin down what that something was.

“Whatever it is,” said Yukako, “it appears to have been a collaboration. Each line looks like it was written in a different hand.”

For a brief moment, the grey haze of pain and confusion that had settled over Josuke like the prelude
to sleep gave way to perfect, acute clarity. He saw the long beam of sunlight stretched across the car’s dash; he felt warmth seep through his wet shirt where Okuyasu gripped him; he heard the rumble of the waves down below and the shriek of the wind against the cliffs’ face and he smelt the brine, the rotting seaweed, the hot baked sand with its clean skin-like musk – as distinctly as if he were standing down on the beach, the warmth of the sand radiating through the soles of his feet.

Josuke snapped his fingers. “Say that again.”

“What’s going on?” Jotaro demanded as he slipped into the driver’s seat.

“I’m having one of those things – like where someone says something and suddenly it’s like, woah!”

“About handwriting?” Yukako asked. She sounded skeptical.

“No the other thing, how you said it, like how it was written by different…” Josuke paused. He had his hand raised in a fist beside his head. He rolled his wrist a few times, a gesture that made it seem like he was about to roll a pair of dice, then turned to Koichi and demanded: “That one time, in the alley with Reimi when you turned and looked back – what’d you see?”

“Oh! I, uh, saw something trying to grab me.”

“What? A bunch of hands?”

“Sure?”

“But you don’t actually remember, right? Like, you can’t actually picture the thing that tried to grab you. You just assumed ‘hands’, because that’s what makes sense, because of – fuck! I forget what it’s called, but you get the idea. Substitution! That’s it.”

“Josuke,” said Yukako, “as interesting as I’m sure this conversation is to you, what point are you trying to make?”

A smile with a knife’s edge of delirium crept across Josuke’s face. “I remember now,” he said. “I met them too.”

All told, explaining the details of his near-death visitation and the plan that had formed as a result went a lot smoother than Josuke had expected. Ghosts and convoluted plot points had become an everyday occurrence in Morioh; the others would have been more surprised to hear he’d gotten a job or ranked at the top of his class.

“So the Neighbourhood Watch wants us to go on a scavenger hunt,” Yukako concluded – which is, we repeat, a gross oversimplification of the task at hand.

“I’m up for it,” said Okuyasu. “But we gotta get ya checked out first, dude. A few stitches ain’t gonna fix it this time.”

Koichi jumped in to add: “You said you can travel back and forth through time in ghost spaces, right? In that case, all the stuff we need will still be there even if you need to stay in the hospital for a few days.”

“Can’t,” said Josuke. “They said something was going to go down after five tonight if we didn’t stop Vox.”
“Did they say what?” asked Jotaro.

“No, but I got this bad feeling.” Josuke paused to lick his lips. The saltwater had dried out the inside of his mouth; his tongue felt thick and leathery. “When we caught up with Kira, that morning when the phone rang and woke me up, but there was no one on the other line… I had this twisted-up feeling in my guts after the call, like I was going to throw up. That feeling, that’s me right now.”

“Joestar intuition.”

Everyone looked at Jotaro. When it became obvious they expected him to elaborate, he shrugged and muttered, “It was something the old man used to say. He was probably just bluffing.”

“There could be something to it,” Koichi mused.

“Intuition among stand users,” Yukako mumbled.

Okuyasu let out a grunt and leaned over to spit on the ground. “Well, I don’t feel nothing. No offense, but Josuke ain’t gonna be much use to anyone bleeding all over the place.” To Josuke: “If yer worried, the rest of us can check it out.”

“You got it all wrong,” said Josuke. “When I was on the ‘other side’, or whatever you want to call it – I didn’t feel anything. Like, I completely forgot about the knife. When you look at it that way, there’s no better place for me right about now, yeah?”

“Out-of-body spiritual experiences don’t count as medical attention,” Yukako pointed out.

Furling his brow, Koichi brought a hand up over his mouth. He looked older wearing a frown, as though the expression belonged in a set with a business suit and a briefcase. “I don’t know… if something happens…”

“It’s not like we need to fight Vox or anything. We just gotta find all this stuff – the rest is on Watch.” He was, once again, making the assumption that he and his friends could get away with us doing all the work.

The discussion limped on. One by one, all arguments opposing Josuke’s return to Morioh’s underworld petered out.

They decided to return to the parking lot and sort out the vehicle arrangements. Between the white sedan and the sports car Sato had driven, they were ten people to two cars – a tight squeeze, especially with two children, an unconscious serial killer, and freakishly large marine biologist in their midst.

While waiting in the parking lot for Jotaro to bring the car around, Okuyasu spotted a bike rolling slowly down the road in their direction.

He grabbed Josuke’s arm. “Ain’t that Yuuya’s ride?” he asked.

From a distance, the bike certainly looked like Yuuya’s: with its high fairing, its electric purple body, its chrome exhaust pipes angled wide on either side. He could even see Yuuya and Rohan seated rear of the handlebars, heads hobbled beneath two oversized motorcycle helmets. But the bike was moving at a crawl, and absent was that characteristic, nasally wine that all the boso guys were crazy about. Okuyasu couldn’t hear any sound coming from the engine at all, for that matter – it was only when the motorcycle was almost on top of them that a solid, steady slapping sound reached his ears.

Then the bike pulled into the gravel parking lot and the back of it fishtailed out in a stop, and the rear
tire swung into view.

The tire looked like what a small child might have drawn in a crayon rendering of a car. Hundreds of years of engineering, hubcaps, spokes, and rims, all been reduced to a shiny rubber donut. More peculiar still, the tire had legs. Two of them, one on either side of the bike, and those two legs were currently plodding along as hard as they could, pushing the motorcycle forward at a tedious wobble as if it were some kind of self-propelled wheelbarrow.

Rohan was wearing an expression that might have once been amusement, but had long overstayed its welcome – what remained was the shabby, irked remains of a sneer. A tense, frozen look in his facial muscles that people tend to adopt whenever they are in conversation with someone they hate, but want to be polite.

“Alright, that’s good!” Yuuya shouted.

The rear wheel’s feet dug their heels into the ground and the bike, having lost momentum, toppled sideways, throwing Yuuya and Rohan onto the gravel.

Where the rear wheel had been, Mikitaka rose up. He looked disheveled, with his hair all a-frizz and a grease smear slashed across his cheek.

“I’m afraid my body requires recharging,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me.”

With that, he took a few stumbling steps in the direction the others had flown, then collapsed face-first onto the gravel.

Yuuya was up again in an instant. No sooner was he on his feet than he rushed over to the bike, a stream of fuck and oh shit bubbling up under his breath as he lifted up the motorcycle and saw the scratches the gravel had made in the paint.

“Are you alright?” Koichi asked. He was leaning over Rohan, who’d yet to move.

“I’ve been better,” mumbled Rohan in reply.

He held up a hand. Koichi stared blankly at it, until Rohan cleared his throat and shot him an expectant look.

“O-oh! Right!” Koichi stammered.

Reaching out, he grasped Rohan’s hand. After much pulling and tugging and grunting with the effort – their height difference certainly paid no service to the physics of leverage – the taller man was more or less back on his feet.

“What happened to the bike?” Okuyasu asked.

“We ran over a rock,” said Rohan. “There was a flat, we didn’t have a spare…”

“I became a tire!” Mikitaka chimed up, only his face was still pressed to the gravel so all any of them could hear was; “Mnh mnhphheph mm mphyyr!”

“Some wheel he made,” Yuuya muttered. He had a hand on the motorcycle’s body; the fiberglass radiated heat beneath his palm. “I get up to ten clicks on the speedometer and he starts puking all over the road. So he decides he’s going to push the bike the rest of the way.”

A faint glow surrounded Yuuya’s bike. Beside him, Josuke held a hand out over the seat, expression
pinched with concentration. Yuuya’s eyes landed first on the other boy’s sopping wet pompadour – disheveled, hanging deflated in his eyes – then slowly meandered their way down to the bloodstain on his t-shirt and the knife handle sticking out of his side.

“…The hell happened to you?” he asked as he watched the scratches to the motorbike’s body fade.

“Don’t wanna talk about it.”

“I take it the three of you didn’t have much luck finding Fujimoto,” Yukako remarked. Though she used the plural “you”, this remark was paired with a sideways glare at Rohan.

“He packed up before we arrived,” he replied coolly. “We did manage to find some interesting documents hidden in his house. It appears Mr. Fujimoto had a morbid scrapbooking hobby – not unlike someone we know.”

From the ground, Mikitaka lifted his head. Gravel pebbles were stuck in his cheeks. “We followed him to Okuyasu’s house,” he said. “Mr. Nijimura was present; he seemed like a pleasant individual.”

“He was naked and carrying around a paint can,” Rohan amended.

Relief knocked the wind from Okuyasu’s chest. As he drew a shaky, shuddering breath, he felt Josuke’s hand on his shoulder.

“Told ya,” he muttered under his breath, low enough that only Okuyasu could hear.

“After that,” Yuuya continued, “we followed Fujimoto’s trail out here. I think he must be somewhere nearby – his scent’s strong, really strong.”

Yukako took a step back and gestured with her palm pointed up, elbow locked at her side in a way that reminded Okuyasu of a sales clerk pointing out the latest product to a customer. “You found him.”

Where she indicated lay Fujimoto’s unconscious body. His chest rose and fell in shallow movements; wet, rasping breaths whistled through the wires in his jaw.

Rohan raised a finger to the corner of his lips. “Somehow, I don’t think an unconscious old man is going to make for exciting reading material.”

Behind them, brakes squealed against asphalt. Jotaro had returned with the car – along with the rest of the group.

Koichi glanced sidelong at the motorcycle – which, despite the repair job, was still short a wheel – and clucked his tongue. “Well,” he said, “I think we’re going to need another car.”

***

While Jotaro drove Tamami back to Nankai Stadium where he’d left his car, Josuke filled the newcomers in on what had happened at the cliffs, and their plan for stopping Vox. At which point, Rohan raised an important question:

“How are you going to find everything on this list? Morioh is a large town with a long history – it’s not like you can wander down the street and stumble upon…” He paused, the tone of his voice flattening as he read off the list, the lines around his nose deepening with each pronounced syllable: “Bucket for night soil collection.”
He had hardly finished this last sentence when Yukako stood and brushed the dust from her sundress.

“What’s up?” Koichi asked. “Did you think of something?”

In place of answering, she stooped beside the edge of the parking lot, picked up a rock the size of her fist, and proceeded to hurl it as hard as she could at the trail sign, which Josuke had only just restored to its original place minutes ago.

Both Koichi and Okuyasu were on their feet at once.

“Dude!” Okuyasu exclaimed, “I think she’s lost it!”

“T-that’s town property!” Koichi squeaked, mortified. “What if someone sees? We could all get arrested!”

The sign’s coating finally cracked. Fragments of acrylic showered Yukako’s feet. From the exposed particle board, she pulled a map that had been affixed to the sign. It depicted the town of Morioh, on which a big red arrow had been drawn. Beside it was written: You are Here!

They watched as Yukako opened up her messenger bag and laid out the oversized scrapbook with MORIOH 1999 written on the cover in gold glitter pen, followed by her scissors, glue, stamps and other scrapbooking implements. Even Mikitaka, who’d been preoccupied trying to communicate with the locals (which consisted mostly of bothering an obese seagull), circled in close to get a better look as Yukako began to shuffle through several sticker sheets, sorting them into two piles.

“These sheets all have two or more of each sticker,” she explained as she passed the sheets around. “I want you to go through the list, taking turns, and place the first sticker that comes to mind beside each item.”

Yuuya leaned over Rohan’s shoulder and whistled. “How come you get the fancy ones with glitter?”

Rohan, meanwhile, was glaring down at his sticker sheet. He held it resting atop his palms, as if he couldn’t decide between holding onto it and letting it drop. “More scrapbooking? I thought it only worked for tracking down serial killers and dead teenagers.”

“You’d be surprised at what intuition can accomplish,” Yukako replied, and while there was no discernable change in her tone, she made a point of not looking at him, and instead flashed Koichi her widest smile as she handed him a sticker sheet.

Koichi took his sheet and held it close to his chest. “So what happens after we place the stickers on the list?”

“Then I place an identical sticker for each item on the map. That’s where intuition comes in – that, and what stickers you choose. So choose wisely.”

Forensic aesthetics – or intuition, or whatever Yukako was calling it – was not, Okuyasu decided, for him. He’d gotten stuck on the very first item: a ceremonial tea whisk.

“You’d be surprised at what intuition can accomplish,” Yukako replied, and while there was no discernable change in her tone, she made a point of not looking at him, and instead flashed Koichi her widest smile as she handed him a sticker sheet.

Koichi took his sheet and held it close to his chest. “So what happens after we place the stickers on the list?”

“Then I place an identical sticker for each item on the map. That’s where intuition comes in – that, and what stickers you choose. So choose wisely.”

Forensic aesthetics – or intuition, or whatever Yukako was calling it – was not, Okuyasu decided, for him. He’d gotten stuck on the very first item: a ceremonial tea whisk.

“Nothing on these stupid sheets looks like a whisk,” he complained.

“I don’t have to look like the thing,” Josuke pointed out. “I don’t know – just pick something that makes you think of whisks. So he’d put a sticker of a mouse down on the list, for no reason other than he thought it looked kinda
cute, and every sticker he’d put down after the fact had been chosen at random. He was sweating up a storm by the end of the process, leaving damp streaks on his t-shirt where he wiped his palms. He wasn’t sure to what extent he believed in slightly-psychic scrapbooks, but he was genuinely terrified at the thought that he could be actively dooming himself and his friends through the careless application of pastel animal stickers.

All that worrying had him wound up too tight to stick around and watch Yukako work her magic on the scrapbook page. So instead, he grabbed Fujimoto’s backpack and wandered over to where Josuke was sprawled out with his back flat to the grass.

“Ya still with us?” Okuyasu asked.

“Yep,” said Josuke, speaking through the inhale.

He was keeping his breathing shallow, Okuyasu noticed. His exhales came out in a stutter like he was trying to reign them back; the movement of his diaphragm must have been putting pressure on the knife.

Onto the ground, Okuyasu dumped the contents of the bag: compass, rubber gloves, bleach, rubbing alcohol, matches, rations, multi-tool, fillet knife, a plastic pill case organized by days of the week. The spread looked like what Okuyasu imagined Jason Voorhees packed for summer camp. What he was after was the little white case Jotaro had told him about.

“Looks like Fujimoto’s got his own kit,” he said, rapping a fist on the first aid kit’s lid. “Mind if I get a look?”

“Are you gonna pull the knife out?” asked Josuke.

“Nah. Then you’ll jus’ bleed lots. I’m gonna make sure it don’t move around too much.”

As Okuyasu tore the plastic wrap off a roll of medical gauze, he snuck another glance at Josuke. There was a withdrawn look to his eyes: pupils pointed straight ahead, sclera dim, brows drawn at the middle. Something about his expression seemed deeply private. All the same, Okuyasu couldn’t stop himself from blurting:

“What’s up?”

“I’m just thinking,” Josuke said, with no show of resistance. Maybe it was the pain loosening him up.

“‘Bout what?”

“Something Watch said. How maybe Vox was after me because I killed one of its old hosts. Hazamada said something like that too.”

“What about Kira and Angelo?”

“I didn’t kill Angelo. And Kira… that was more Jotaro than me. I don’t know. I’m probably overthinking it. There’s just something that’s been bothering me. Vox’s last host, the one who took Yuki – someone mentioned that guy being dead. You remember that too, right?”

“Yeah, somethin’ like that… I thought ya said Jotaro did him in. Y’know – blew his brains away.”

The feeling of menace heavy in his chest. A gulping fear that lodged in his lungs. The whip crack of a gun going off, the throb of his eardrums, the sulfurous, intoxicating spell of gunpowder
cottoning around his head.

The strange part was, Okuyasu couldn’t remember where he’d overheard that Yuki’s kidnapper was dead either. Maybe he’d listened to Josuke’s story about the confrontation in the woods and carried on with the assumption that Jotaro really had caught and killed the murderer, even after Josuke had changed up the facts.

“That’s just it,” Josuke pointed out. “Jotaro was in the hospital when everything with Yuki was going down.”

Okuyasu picked at the ground. Under the bright midafternoon sun, the grass had a plastic look to it. He hated those long, winding summer afternoons that seemed to stretch on forever between noon and supper time. The world seemed flat without shadows; the heat filled his head like white noise and the sunlight made him squint. He got used to spending his afternoons glaring at everything out of necessity until the glare worked its way deeper beneath his skin and he started skulking around and losing his temper – the expression preceding the emotion, instead of the other way around.

Some of that frustration was starting to rear up. Okuyasu ripped up a handful of grass and let it fall from his hand. The wind immediately snatched the blades of grass away.

“I dunno,” he was saying. “Whatever happened – he had it comin’, right? That guy, he got what he deserved.”

He’d said something similar to Josuke when Keicho died. At the time, there’d been something comforting about the assertion, but now that he was no longer back in that moment, no longer in frantic search of a way of rationalizing his brother’s death, it just sounded lame.

“Gramps was a cop for thirty-five years,” Josuke mumbled. “He dealt with guys like that all the time. He never had to kill anyone to do his job. If I’m carrying on in his place, I gotta do it right.”

As always, the drawer of his grandfather’s nightstand was locked, but that didn’t deter him. The key was where it always was, tucked up under his grandfather’s pillow where he’d discovered it first by chance months ago.

In the stillness of the room, the sound of metal clicking together as he fumbled to fit the key into the lock was just as loud to him as the voices downstairs. Eventually he had the key flipped right-way-up, and one by one the lock’s tumblers clicked into place and the key turned smoothly. With hardly a breath passing his lips, he carefully drew open the drawer.

His eyes made a quick, nervous pass over the service-issue handgun with its textured finish and matte-black sheen, as if it were a living thing that might at any moment snap its teeth at him.

Josuke hardly ever spoke about his grandfather. Okuyasu was taken aback; he had to pause a moment for his train of thought to catch up with his ears. Then, remembering that he was supposed to be dressing a knife wound, he hurriedly finished unwrapping the medical gauze and set to work securing it around Josuke’s middle.

“…’M sure you had nothin’ to do with it,” he muttered under his breath as he worked. “Guy probably just – got the noose, or choked on his fuckin’ breakfast. Or something.”

Josuke huffed, a grin-turned-grimace as his diaphragm contracted in a laugh. “Can you imagine…” he began.

Before he could finish, he cut himself short. Something in his expression seemed to reset: his pupils snapping back to center, the line of his mouth straightening out. For a moment, Okuyasu felt his heart
plummet. He thought for sure he’d done something wrong – bumped the knife, pierced a vein.

Then Josuke grasped his arm and out of reflex, he turned.

Earlier, Yuuya had begrudgingly volunteered to be the one to tie Sato up. He tied a mean knot; it was only after he’d been pestered and pressed repeatedly that he admitted, through clenched teeth, that he’d been part of Morioh’s Boy Scout chapter once upon a time.

(Yuuya Fungami had in fact been in possession of the coveted first class badge. He’d been a scout’s scout, the type of boy who spent his time reading up on how to find true north with just a shadow or make a fish hook out of a pop can tab. This promising career in wilderness survival was tragically cut short on a troop outing to a stable out of town. At twelve years of age he’d been terrified of horses. He’d cried the entire time he was in the saddle. In a last-ditch effort to overcome his fears, he had attempted to stroke one of the horses’ pretty tails as a show of good will. The hospital stay lasted three weeks.)

They’d left Fujimoto lying unconscious on the ground, trussed up so tight that if Okuyasu was of the mind to care (he was not), he would have been concerned about the old man losing circulation. When Okuyasu turned, Sato was seated cross-legged behind them. His head was bowed low; his spine arched in a deep curve that reminded Okuyasu of a vulture. There was certainly something bird-like in the way Sato’s small, hard eyes followed them, his head turning slightly from side to side as if tracing the flow of their conversation. He the unhurried watchfulness of a scavenger about him.

“That my stuff you got there?” he asked, voice muffled through mostly-closed lips.

“Don’t move a fuckin’ muscle!” Okuyasu barked in warning.

“Didn’t plan on it. You boys mind handing me my inhaler?”

“Shut up!”

“I need it, you know. It’s the asthma. If you plan on letting me die here, that’s none of my business. If you don’t: I’ll be needing that inhaler.”

At Josuke, Okuyasu glanced.

“That my stuff you got there?” he asked, voice muffled through mostly-closed lips.

“Don’t move a fuckin’ muscle!” Okuyasu barked in warning.

“Didn’t plan on it. You boys mind handing me my inhaler?”

“Shut up!”

“I need it, you know. It’s the asthma. If you plan on letting me die here, that’s none of my business. If you don’t: I’ll be needing that inhaler.”

At Josuke, Okuyasu glanced.

“Your call,” said Josuke, but Okuyasu could tell by his tone that he had already formed an opinion on the situation.

From the pile of odds and ends, he fished out the blue rescue inhaler and tossed it on the ground in front of Sato.

“How am I supposed to pick it up and use it with my hands tied?” Sato demanded.

“Figure it out.”

Grunting, Sato leaned forward. “Don’t suppose I can get a cigarette too.”

“You’re fucking right you don’t suppose you could get a cigarette,” said Josuke.

Sato slowly straightened up. He had the inhaler wedged between his lips; he let it drop down into his lap, where his hands were bound together at the wrists.

“Doesn’t hurt to ask,” he mumbled.

***
“You, uh. You know this sort of thing is usually a one-way kinda trip, right?”

The last time Daisuke Mitsukoshi had been surrounded by more than a handful of people was at his own funeral. Being suddenly confronted by a three-car motorcade, then, was a bit of a surprise. Seeing so many faces together at once was giving him something akin to stage fright – it had taken a great deal of coaxing from Josuke and the others to convince him to appear, and even after all that, he was as translucent as a threadbare sheet, as if he might at any moment fade altogether. This introduction was made all the more awkward by the little girl who’d tugged on his jacket and demanded to know why he wasn’t scary, if he was supposed to be a ghost? – and by a white-haired kid in 3D glasses who’d asked if he was Josuke’s stand.

“We know,” Koichi reassured him. “The thing is – we’ve been there before.”


“So can you take us there or not?” Jotaro demanded.

Aside from the incident with the hubcap, Daisuke had never even met Jotaro before – yet the man hadn’t bat an eye when he’d appeared. He was starting to wonder if there was anyone in Morioh who wasn’t in a habit of making casual conversation with the dead.

“Sure thing! – Well. I can take some of you.”

Turning, Daisuke strolled away from the group. As he walked, a car appeared in his wake, revealed like a wipe effect in an old movie. To the bystanders, this somehow seemed perfectly natural to the eye, though none of them could explain it.

Against the hood of the car, Daisuke leaned. The car was a boxy, snub-nosed old Datsun that looked like it had seen better days. Not that the car hadn’t aged well – if anything, its body and trim were as shiny and untouched as if the Datsun had just rolled off the lot yesterday – but the hood of the car was crumbled like a sheet of aluminum foil, the windshield was cracked, and there was a depression in the roof near the front.

“I can take four of you,” he said, knocking on the car’s hood. It resonated with a tinny, hollow boom. “Four people, four seatbelts.”

Over his jaw, Yuuya smoothed a hand – he was wearing a big grin on his face. “Hey man, nice wheels,” he said.

“Sure, nice vintage,” Tamami agreed, “but they just didn’t make ‘em like the American cars.”

Tamami’s own American car was happily oxidizing a few feet away.

“How are we doing this?” Josuke demanded. “We picking straws, or what?”

By that point, he couldn’t stand on his own. He was slumped between Okuyasu and Mikitaka, legs hanging slack beneath him. Pain made him loose at the knees, made the world seem to float in front of him, the people and the utility poles and even the distant mountains drifting in an unseen tide before his eyes.
“I, Rohan Kishibe, should be in one of those seats,” declared Rohan.

Koichi groaned. “Rohan. It’s not a tourist trip!”

“Oh, I’m aware. I have every intention of taking my visit seriously.”

“Besides – we have a job to do. We won’t have time to look around.”

“I should go,” said Yukako.

When Rohan let out a snort, she added: “I have the scrapbook, don’t I?”

“What scrapbook?” Jotaro asked.

“It’s a long story,” Koichi offered. “But we do need it…”

Yukako interrupted: “You’re coming too, Koichi.”

“Me? But why?”

“You know the most about Morioh’s history. It’ll come in handy.”

“Well… I did do a lot of reading up before I moved to Morioh… It was mostly tourist guides, but still!”

“I’ve done my share of research into Morioh’s history too, you know,” Rohan interjected, only to be collectively ignored.

At Josuke, Yukako pointed. “And you – you’ll need to go too. You’re our contact with the Neighbourhood Watch.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Josuke mumbled. “And the bait too.”

“And the bait too,” Yukako agreed.

“That leaves us with an open seat.”

Jolyne tugged on her father’s coat. “Can I go?” she asked, before he even had the chance to stoop down.

“Absolutely not.”

Eyes cast down on the asphalt, Okuyasu scrubbed the back of his neck. His skin felt raw, sunburnt. “Guess Jotaro should go with ya, hunh?” he said. “Since he’s got Star Platinum.”

When he looked up, the others were all staring at him. Josuke’s lips were curled back at the corners, teeth set together. “Dude,” he growled, “you’re coming with us.”

“You don’t think that I’d, I dunno, hold ya back or anything? I’m not good at this riddle solving shit.”

“Of course we don’t think that!” Koichi said.

“To be honest,” Yukako threw in, “we all just sort of assumed you would be coming.”

“But…” Okuyasu stuttered. He cast Rohan a look, expecting the other man to jump in and object.
But Rohan just stood there examining the backs of his knuckles. “I suppose I’ve already been to Morioh’s haunted side before,” he mumbled. “I’d probably be bored doing it all again a second time.”

The arm Josuke had draped over Okuyasu’s shoulders gave him a squeeze. “See? Besides – Star Platinum’s time stop’s not gonna do much in a place where time doesn’t exist or whatever. You can erase space. That’s like, basically ghost kryptonite. I think.”

“You guys coming?” Daisuke called out. He’d been standing with the driver’s door of the Datsun open for the last five minutes, patiently waiting for the others’ small-scale drama to play out.

“Yeah, just a sec!”

“Are you sure about this?” Jotaro asked as Josuke slipped his arm from Mikitaka’s shoulder and leaned his remaining weight against Okuyasu. “No one will blame you if you decide to sit this fight out.”

“Like you said – my stand user, my call,” said Josuke. “I’m kind of looking forward to not dealing with the pain for a few hours, y’know?”

He was quick to add: “Plus: I’ll feel a whole lot better if you’re here to keep an eye on him.”

The identity of him went unspoken. They could both see the blue hood of Sato Fujimoto’s windbreaker through the hatch window of Tamami’s car. Every now and then, Josuke would catch that hood turning, and he’d see the profile of a nose and a pair of broken glasses.

Jotaro grunted.

“Allright,” he said. “Just remember – even without its user, an independent stand like Vox is still dangerous.”

– Which was about as close as Josuke knew he was going to get to a ‘be careful’ or ‘stay safe’ from his nephew.

On the inside, the car felt like any car Josuke had ridden in before. The plush seat gave under his backside; the seatbelt resisted when he tugged on it. It even had that distinct car smell to it – not a new car smell, but the smell of a car used often over a long period of time, all the different scents of food, cigarettes, and people lingering thick in the upholstery.

He knew, however, that the car wasn’t real. At least not in the sense that he was used to thinking about things as real.

“Everyone buckled in?” Daisuke asked, twisting around in the driver’s seat to check in back. “How are we doing back there? Cozy?”

“We’re fine!” said Koichi. He, of course, had been stuck in the middle seat, sandwiched between Okuyasu and Yukako.

“Okee dokee. Hang on – things might get a little bumpy.”

With that, Daisuke put his foot to the gas. Down the road the Datsun accelerated. Utility poles flew past; the yellow divider line was reeled up beneath the car’s hood.

Then, just as they got up to the speed limit, Okuyasu felt traction give out beneath their tires. The car veered across the center line – then, the world shifted. From the way his backside lifted off the seat,
he could tell the car was rolling. For a moment, everything blurred into a kaleidoscope of colour. He heard a scream, but he couldn’t tell if it had come from him or from someone else.

He’d died once before. He couldn’t remember much from that time – just the conversation with Keicho. Even in that memory, he didn’t feel like he was dying. Despite the bright light, the place he’d stood in and spoken with his brother had seemed familiar. It’d been like meeting someone he hadn’t chatted with in a long time for tea. He supposed he hadn’t really had the chance to realize he was dead; it had all happened so fast.

This time was different. He knew it was coming the moment the car veered for the ditch. What was strange to him was that after the initial panic when the car first lost traction – that singular moment where life and death hung in the balance – after that moment, as the car was careening out of control, he felt himself relax. Now that there was no chance that the car would stop or Daisuke would get back control, now that there was nothing anyone could do, Okuyasu found himself oddly at peace with his pending demise.

He must have blacked out at the moment of impact, because when he opened his eyes, the car had come to a rest on its roof. Outside, night had fallen. In a halo of sodium light, snowflakes drifted to the ground in lazy, sidestepped movements.

Chapter End Notes

* I suspect that most readers had already figured out what Watch is supposed to be before this chapter... it was still a fun reveal to write, though. I'd been looking forward to that scene for a long time haha.
* I’ve officially surpassed the wordcount of my previous longest work (which was around 185k iirc).
* Some characters absolutely get "lost" over the course of this chapter. Sorry about that... I thought it would be too tedious if I went into detail about what every single character was doing in every scene at this point.
* If my estimates are correct and I stick to the plan of the scavenger hunt only taking up one chapter, there should only be four chapters plus an epilogue left. Please yell at me to finish this fic, I’m feeling super burnt out and need the motivation @_@
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I know I probably sound like a broken record at this point but -- once again -- I'm super sorry for the delays! The last few months have been the most challenging period of my life so far. Among other things, I had to unexpectedly move. The good news is that I'm all settled in now and I'm doing great! The bad news is that the next chapter will probably also take a while to come out -- but that's because it's the climatic chapter and I have something special planned. Fingers crossed!

Regarding the history of Morioh as discussed in this chapter: I know 4th Another Day had its own backstory thing (at least from what I've heard), but I've never read the light novel, and I had my own thing I wanted to do. Apologies if things don't quite line up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Everyone alright?” asked Daisuke as he lifted his head from the steering wheel. Blood stains imprinted on the airbag corresponded to the cuts in the ghost’s face. “Nobody dead? – I mean. Dead-er?”

“The fuck, dude!” Okuyasu grit out. Now that the moment of near-death serenity had passed, he was lit up like a roman candle. “You tryna 

“W-what was that?” Koichi asked, twisting around in his seat as he craned his neck to look out the rear windshield.

“We hit an ice patch,” Yukako mumbled. She was gazing out the window, one hand resting lightly beneath her chin: reflections of snowflakes danced in her dark, lidded eyes.

Daisuke gave a nervous laugh. “Sorry about that! It’s the only way I know how to cross over. Something about getting in the right frame of mind, shifting your perspective – Watch could tell you all about it.”

“Yeah?” said Josuke, as he reached for his seatbelt buckle. “Too bad I don’t have time to listen to another lecture from –.”

Both Koichi and Daisuke tried to shout out a warning at once, their words overlapping and becoming tangled up – “don’ttouchthatbecareful!” – but they were a step too slow.

With varying levels of ease and grace, one by one the rest of the group unfastened their seatbelts and crawled out from under the overturned car. The Datsun had landed in a ditch. Its wheels pointed motionless at the sky; the smell of motor oil heady beneath the clean metallic whiff of fresh snow.

And there was snow: a good half foot of it and piling on. As Okuyasu scrambled up the side of the ditch, pristine white powder crumbling and sliding away beneath him, he could feel the cold burn the
skin of his palms – but it was a distant, second-hand feeling, not so much like pain but the memory of it. He could see why Josuke had been so eager to dive back into Morioh’s underworld with a hunting knife in his side. Physical sensations were different here. Abstracted.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t worried. But seeing Josuke bound up the ditch and twirl around on the snow-sheeted highway made it easy to convince himself that nothing was wrong.

“So this is your place, hunh?” Josuke remarked, though he was gazing down the road, and not at Daisuke, as he said it.

“It’s so dark out here!” Koichi exclaimed. He was standing at the edge of the ditch, back to the road, hands shielding his eyes to cut the glare of the streetlights. “I can’t see the marsh at all!”

“We should get going,” Daisuke interrupted. A hard edge to his voice that disappeared when he added: “You guys need to get back to town, right?”

Down the highway they marched. Single-file, leaving a trail in the snow snaking behind them. The fresh powder crunched beneath their feet; the temperature was cold enough that the compacted-down snow had a squeak to it. Beyond the light of the streetlamps, the world cut off abruptly: darkness stretched on, unbroken and impenetrable. The wind made no sound. All noise but their footsteps was muffled by the soft stillness around them; even the sound of their own breathing seemed to vanish the moment it left their lips.

For the longest time, no one spoke. Everyone seemed caught up in his or her own world. The same thing happens when people visit a new country for the first time: they get wrapped up in comparing the similarities and differences to places they’ve been before. Aside from the inclement weather, there was something about the other version of the highway that felt off to each of them in a different way, but none of them could pin it down: the muted sensations, the way sound carried, the strange tint to the light or the way it plunged suddenly into darkness past the shoulder of the road.

After being on the road for nearly an hour, Josuke – who’d been chewing on one corner of his mouth for a few minutes and deliberating – drew a long, deep breath and said: “Uh, hey, Yukako?”

She paused, and one at a time the rest of the group came to a staggered stop.

“Yes?” she asked, drawing out the one syllable just long enough to make Josuke almost regret saying anything.

“Uh. I was thinking,” he mumbled through his teeth, “I don’t know where we’re going and since you’ve got the scrapbook…I figured you should, you know…”

Tilting her head to one side, she peered at him from the corners of her eyes. Despite the hard edge to her tone, he caught the brief flicker of a grin across her lips. “What’s that?” she asked. “Take charge? Call the shots?”

“Oh, y’know. Just lead the way.”

“Is that so?”

On Koichi, her eyes fell. He straightened up and stammered: “Y-yeah! I think that’s a great idea!”

On the snow, Yukako knelt. As she was digging out her scrapbook from her messenger bag, Daisuke asked:

“You guys are into scrapbooking?”
“Forensic aesthetics,” Yukako corrected him.

“Sure, whatever it’s called nowadays.”

“It’s just her,” said Josuke.

Okuyasu scratched the back of his head and mumbled under his breath: “Mostly.”

“Dude!”

“What? It looks kinda fun!”

Before Josuke could argue, Yukako announced: “We’ll be passing by a few items on the list on our way into town.” Against the map, she tapped the end of one rounded, polished fingernail. “Here.”

Josuke peered at the map and tried to orient himself in it, looking for familiar streets amid the unlabeled white lines. The map seemed a decade or so out of tune. According to it, there was still a residential street behind Owson grocery, and the train tracks hadn’t been built yet. The sticker Yukako had pointed to – two stickers, to be exact, a flower and a mushroom with a cutesy face – were somewhere on the outskirts of Morioh to the north.

Okuyasu sniffed and rubbed a hand along the side of his nose. “…Looks like it’s out by the tracks somewhere,” he mumbled.

“I don’t see a road leading out there,” Koichi remarked.

“Actually, there is one!”

Josuke glanced up with a start to see Daisuke, arms folded behind his back, leaning over the scrapbook.

“I mean, don’t quote me on that or anything,” the ghost continued, “but there’s a dirt road at the intersection just before the highway – it heads out in that direction, I think.”

While the others had been speaking, Okuyasu found his attention slipping. His eyes roved. He must have been staring out over the darkness where the bog should have been for a few seconds or more before he realized what he was looking at.

“What’s that over there?” he asked.

When the others lifted their heads from the scrapbook, they saw it too: a string of lights in the distance running parallel to the road. Whatever the lights were, they didn’t carry far: nothing could be seen of the marsh, not even the reflection of the lights on the water.

“What’s up?” asked Josuke. “Is there a road running past here or something?”

“Those don’t look like streetlights,” Yukako pointed out.

She was right. The lights were too warm, too dim to be electric light. Red beacons flickering in the distance: torches or campfires, maybe.

“Those aren’t streetlights,” said Daisuke, and Josuke might have been taken aback by the flatness in his voice if he weren’t distracted by a quiver of movement.

In the lights’ self-enclosed radius, shadows passed. The profiles of faces; the shapes of limbs, stretched to unnatural lengths by the angle of the light, so that the personages in silhouette looked ten,
twenty feet tall.

“The hell was that?!” Okuyasu growled.

“T-they look like people!” Koichi exclaimed.

Josuke cleared his throat. “Not to imply you guys all know each other or anything, but are there any other ghosts hanging out around here?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it later,” Daisuke hissed under his breath. “Let’s just go. Come on! Come on!”

“But – ,” Koichi began to say.

Then he froze when, in one of the bloody red auras of light, a figure paused and turned to face them. There was something off about the shape of the face – too round, too exaggerated: a mask, with holes for eyes and a mouth. And he could tell they were holes, despite the figure being only in silhouette, because the red light shone through them, as if there was nothing behind the mask, no face or a head between it and whatever was producing the light.

The rough-hewn cut of the mask’s slits; the swaying movements, low to the ground, stance wide. Even if Koichi hadn’t known anything about history, he still would have recognized the figures lurking in the solitary island of light as ancient. A form of humanity that had more in common with animals seen only at night in passing phosphorescent flashes of eyes than with asphalt streets and convenient stores and the creature comforts of civilization.

A snow squall picked up, blotting out the figures and the lights in the distance behind a wall of white static. Yukako snatched hold of Koichi’s arm and dragged him after Josuke and Okuyasu, who’d already broken off into a run.

By the time they stopped, all four were out of breath. Okuyasu flopped down onto a snowbank; Koichi stamped his feet and blew on his hands; Yukako smoothed her hair back into place; Josuke stood panting, hands on his knees, staring back down the road in the direction they’d came.

Only Daisuke didn’t seem phased. “So, you know how it’s like really, really dark everywhere except the highway out here, right?”

“We noticed,” Yukako muttered.

“Well… what’s out there, it’s not exactly night. I mean, not not exactly – it’s not. The reason everything’s so dark is, out there, it’s all a bunch of… of…” He made a few confused, scattered gestures with his hands. “…Nothing!”

Grunting, Okuyasu rolled himself up into a seated position, elbows slung over his knees. “Maybe s’just me,” he said, “but I don’t get what yer sayin’.”

“Okay. Let me try again. So this place isn’t just ghosts, right? It’s made up of, like, Morioh’s collective memory? Or something? And there’s some stuff that gets forgotten: places, people…”

“So those creepy shadows we saw – ,” Josuke began.

But Koichi cut him off, tripping over his own tongue in his eagerness to blurt out: “They were people from an earlier Morioh, right? From before recorded history? Maybe Jomon or – .”

“Something like that. I guess. Like I said – not really my area. I don’t think those guys are dangerous or anything, it’s just… I mean, you saw them too, right?”
Josuke had seen them, alright. They’d scared the hell out of him (though he wasn’t about to admit it),
but it had been more than that. There was something about the movements in the light that had been
familiar, something that had triggered an association. When he closed his eyes, he could see the
shadows dancing on the insides of his eyelids: outlines sketched in hurried strokes, like a cave
painting brought to life.

In the light of the discarded flashlight beam, the shadow shifted. Moving low, stance wide, head
swiveling in search of what had been left behind. Through the fern cover Josuke was hiding beneath,
he caught sight of details: the dip of the man’s shoulder, the pale cut of the underside of a jaw. The
sinewed column of a neck.

He hoped the man would move on. Wander deeper into the forest in search of Yuki, giving them both
time to get away. But despite his best efforts to hold her still, Yuki began to squirm in his arms.

“Jo-jo!” she babbled, one hand reaching up to pat him on the cheek.

He bat her hand away. “Quiet!” he hissed, the word no louder than the rush of air from his lungs.

The man’s shadow stilled, then slipped from view. From the undergrowth, Josuke heard a gentle
rustle that reminded him of a thin plastic shopping bag. Above, fern fronds lay crosshatched atop
one another, trembling in the thin snatches of breeze that stirred among the trees, every movement
enough to make him jump. He pressed his lips together and held Yuki tight to his chest, not caring in
that moment if she could breathe or not.

As he sensed the man draw near, Josuke found himself torn between the instinct to run and the
instinct to stay hidden. So far as he knew, the man hadn’t seen them yet. What finally made up his
mind was the recollection of a crime show he’d seen in glimpses, on one of the rare nights he’d
snuck downstairs to watch television after his mom and grandfather had both gone to bed. The one
scene that had stuck in his memory was when the murderer had burst into the closet a woman had
been hiding in and dragged her out with a rope around her neck.

For Josuke, the fear of getting caught helpless far outweighed the fear of getting caught on the run.

Out from under the fern Josuke shot. The world tilted around him. Fear-blind, his view of the forest
blurred: deep receding shadows, suggestions of trees at frenzied angles, freckles of moonlight
floating like spots in his eyes. Something was crashing through the woods behind him but he kept on
running, aware of nothing, not even Yuki. His pulse rolled through his ears like a timpani.

Suddenly, he stumbled and pitched forward. On his feet he landed, hard – the jolt rattling his bones.
He’d fallen into a ravine, maybe, but he didn’t spend much time considering this. He didn’t consider
much of anything, not where he was running, not how he was going to find his way back to town.
Instinct had supplanted thought, and that instinct told him to keep on running. He staggered. What
sounded like pebbles skittered away at his feet. One hand found hold on a ledge – “Hang on!” he
hissted to Yuki as he let go of her to grab on – the rock scraping his palms raw as he pulled himself
up.

“Want mamma,” Yuki complained.

“Soon, okay?”

He paused, giving his breathing a chance to settle. The woods(13,58),(990,982) had gone quiet: no sounds of another
body forcing its way through the brush, no skitter of pebbles echoing his path across the ravine.

Far ahead, amid the overlapping shadows of the woods, he saw a light wink at him through the
lacework of branches. The glimmer wasn’t much: if he shifted his weight to one side he lost sight of it, swallowed up somewhere behind a tree. But it was there all the same, so he stumbled toward it. The wind was beginning to pick up too; he could feel the bite of it, cool through his sweat-dampened t-shirt. Under the earthy scent of soil and wood decay, there was just a whiff of lush green and burning sulfur. Smells he remembered from when he’d passed over the marsh on his way into the woods.

Suddenly, Yuki let out a shriek. Before Josuke could shush her, he felt a crushing pressure on his arm. The searing heat of a coarse, work-worn hand on the soft underside of his wrist. When he was yanked around and forced to face the other direction, he couldn’t see much of the man through the thick cover of dark, but Josuke could hear his breathing, ragged and uneven; could feel the warm wetness of it, could smell the sourness of the man’s unwashed mouth.

Quickly, not much time to think. His free hand shot to the waistband of his shorts, where metal dug into hip. Over the familiar, brushed matte texture his fingers stumbled, as if trying to play a half-remembered song on a piano.

The familiar what, exactly? Josuke couldn’t remember. Something was bothering him, some piece he was missing. As he played back through the memory he edged away, putting distance between himself and the others. Koichi was saying something about the shadows they’d seen, some dry bit of history trivia, but Josuke wasn’t paying attention. He’d taken something with him that night, something other than the flashlight…

Against a solid surface, his back pressed. Swearing, he spun around, hands up in front of him like he was about to execute some serious karate on whatever or whomever he’d just stumbled into.

The silhouette of something dangling by a rope swung into view, and for a disoriented second, he thought he was looking at something alive – person or animal – hanging by its neck.

“Yo, what’s up?” Okuyasu called out.

“Uh, just. Looking around,” said Josuke, who on second glance, realized he was looking at a telephone dangling by its cord through the frosted-over glass of a phone booth. The receiver rocked slowly back and forth in a shallow arc, wire creaking from the cold.

“Well,” said Daisuke, “looks like this is where I have to split.”

“Why’s that?” asked Okuyasu.

“I’m bound to this place, right? That phone booth? – that’s the end of the line for me.”

“No, that’s not…” Koichi began, then trailed off.

On the other side of the highway, he caught sight of a corner of black cloth, half-buried beneath a snow drift. If he didn’t know any better, he would have thought it was just an old coat someone had left behind. But Koichi did know better, and he knew to look for the blue flash of a wrist, the thin silver slash of a watch.

As soon as he realized what he was looking at, Koichi tore his eyes away. Josuke and Okuyasu didn’t seem to notice, and Yukako… well, it was hard to tell with Yukako. They’d started watching horror movies together lately, and while she frequently vocalized her distaste for some of the gorier parts, he couldn’t remember ever seeing her flinch or close her eyes at those same scenes, even while he was watching them through his own fingers. Just then she had on a neutral expression, but that didn’t signify much.
Daisuke was another story. As soon as Koichi looked away, he could feel the ghost’s eyes on him, his lips quirked up in a tired half-smile that looked like it was supposed to be reassuring, but had somehow gotten lost in translation. He had his hand wrapped around his wrist, thumb tracing the thin silver band of his wristwatch.

“Sorry,” Daisuke said.

Josuke, missing the context of this apology, spoke up: “Hey, don’t worry about it, alright? I mean, thanks for the lift and all, but we can take it from here.”

“Speaking of lift,” said Yukako, “was that offer for a round trip?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course!”

When Yukako narrowed her eyes at him, Daisuke added, with a nervous laugh: “It’s not like I’ve got anywhere else to be!”

As they were passing the phone booth, Josuke heard Daisuke call out behind them: “Good luck!”

When he turned, however, the ghost was gone – as was the snow. The highway was completely clear, spider-cracked asphalt bone-dry and sun-bleached, exactly as they’d left it on the other side.

They were at an intersection, directly across the street from the same gas station they’d passed by again and again on their way out to the highway over the past several weeks. The convenience store’s windows were darkened, but the canopy lights were on, casting the gas pumps and fixtures in a self-contained rectangle of light that held within it all the same false sense of comfort and security of a staged living room. Around back of the station was a single utility lamp. Even from across the street, Josuke could hear the lamp buzz. It flickered, intermittently throwing an oily green light over the corroded metal door below it. He had never noticed the door before during the day, when there’d been nothing to draw his attention to it.

At the intersection, there was a dirt road that trailed off into the distance. Without pausing to glance at the gas station across the street, Yukako marched toward it. By the time the others noticed, she was already twenty paces away and gaining.

“What the fuck – don’t wander off like that!” Josuke snapped when he’d finally caught up, voice light and thin and starved for air.

“What’s the rush?” asked Koichi.

“This isn’t a tourist trip, remember?” she replied, with a hint of a lilt to her voice that, if Josuke didn’t know any better, sounded like teasing.

Further back on the road, Okuyasu trailed – taking just as many steps with his feet facing backward as he did with them facing forward for how often he kept turning to look back at the gas station.

“Not to sound dumb or nothin’,” he spoke up, “but they didn’t have 7-elevens back in the 1850s, right?”

“Why, what’s up?” asked Josuke.

“Cause everything we’ve seen so far looks pretty damn modern, so I’m thinkin’, how’s this ghost world time travel bullshit supposed to work?”

“Well – .” Koichi began.
But Okuyasu cut him off: “Come on, you got no idea either right? Jus’ say it!”

“What? No, I was just – over there –that doesn’t look modern to you, does it?”

He was referring to the building on the road up ahead, nearly a quarter of a mile away. It had first appeared on the horizon as a white and brown rectangle amid the sunflower-dotted fields, which were strangely day-bright despite being penned in by darkness, almost as though someone had cast a spotlight down over them. The rest of Morioh, the mountains somewhere in the distance: waiting in the wings, stage-dark. No one had thought much of the building at first. From a distance, it was indistinguishable from any other low-rise structure. Josuke had written it off as a barn or a warehouse. Now that they were closer, however, he could make out a whitewashed wall and a dark, sloping roof.

“You think that place has anything to do with those two stickers?” he asked.

He didn’t look at Yukako as he said this, not quite, but he tipped a shoulder in her direction.

“We’re in the neighbourhood,” she said, eyes on her scrapbook and the tip of one nail working its way under the loose edge of a sticker in an effort not to look too pleased with herself.

Silence fell over the group as they neared the complex. The dirt path they’d been following meandered right up to a gate. As they approached it, they felt the temperature drop. Though there were no doors at the gate to bar their way, the huge wood crossbeam that hung over the entrance nonetheless gave it an air of imposition. Through the gate, a courtyard lay open, edged on either side by garden: rocks, ferns, ponds thick and sluggish in the cold crisp air. At the center of the courtyard was a house, its tile roof at a steep slope with deep, sweeping eaves. The house itself was shut up behind heavy wood storm shutters.

Okuyasu whistled. “See, that’s more what I’m talkin’ about. This place has gotta be a hundred years old.”

“Older than that,” Koichi mumbled, tracing a character engraved in one of the gateposts with his thumb. “I’m thinking early Edo, maybe?”

Close.

Koichi’s shoulders jumped. “W-who said that?!”

He tried to turn to look behind him, but Josuke stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

The construction is early Edo, we continued to explain, but the timbers are older. They were taken from a castle built during the Sengoku period. Some small-time lord trying to make a grab at more than he could handle, et cetera – anyway, the whole affair didn’t last. Even the house the timber was used to build had a longer shelf life.

“Anyone else just have a bunch of words pop into their head?” asked Okuyasu. He had one pinky hooked inside his ear, as if he were trying to fish out the source of the voice.

“Must be Josuke’s friends,” said Yukako.

“Hiya, Watch,” Josuke mumbled. He made no move to lift his hand from Koichi’s shoulder.

You can tell your friend to relax, we said. As long as he keeps his eyes where they belong, he’s at no risk of spiritual hemisection.
“What do they mean by hemisection?” Koichi asked, the pitch of his voice rising until it broke off in a squeak on the last word.

Josuke lifted his hand just long enough to give Koichi a pat on the back. “Hey, don’t worry about it. They’re on our side,” said Josuke, who at present was feeling anything but confident in the latter statement.

We thought you might be interested in the particulars of navigation here – not so much the ‘where’s, but the ‘when’s.

Okuyasu grunted “Think we got a handle on the whens,” he said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the house. “Koichi says this place is old as balls.”

“Well,” Koichi mumbled, “I didn’t say that exactly but…”

But you have no idea how you ended up here, in this now, we pointed out.

Across his chest, Josuke folded his arms. “We followed a map. That’s good enough for me.”

Amateur’s luck.

“Let me guess,” said Yukako. “It has something to do with what Daisuke mentioned earlier – about being in the right state of mind?”

Wrong, but you’re headed in the right direction. Imagine yourself for a moment in your house. Say it’s morning, you’re going about your daily routine before school. Business as usual. A new doorway appears, or a new corridor. How likely are you to go through it or down it, or even notice it, for that matter?

Josuke made a sound of disbelief. “C’mon. There’s no way I wouldn’t notice. I know what my place looks like.”

That’s exactly our point. You know. You have a map of your house in your mind, and that’s what you use to navigate in the middle of the night when nature calls, or in the bleary hours of morning before you’ve bothered to wipe the sleep from your eyes. You’re not really looking, the way you would if you were visiting a stranger’s house for the first time: taking in the décor, keeping an eye out for the toilet, trying to memorize the layout so you won’t get lost.

“What’s that got to do with this time travel shit?” Okuyasu demanded.

You’ve all been out to the highway before. You have a picture, a map of how it should look in your heads – but the moment you stepped down an unfamiliar road, a different map took over. One not already knocking around in your hormonal swamp brains.

“You mean Yukako’s scrapbook map?” Koichi ventured to guess.

Something like that. If you want the hallways and doors you need to pass through to open up for you, you’ll need to banish the thought of the Morioh you know. Of course – that gets more difficult, the longer you’ve lived in a place.

“You’ve been here like forever, right?” Okuyasu said as he turned to look at Josuke, the first couple words blurring together with the motion.

“Yeah. Well,” Josuke stammered, “who says I have to be the one doing the navigating, right?”
“Koichi transferred just this year,” Yukako pointed out, stressing the syllables of ‘Koichi’ and ‘transferred’ the same way Josuke’s mother had ‘my son’ and ‘top of his class’ once upon a time.

(A singular, never repeated incident: second grade science, when they’d done a semester on dinosaurs. By then Josuke Higashikata had already checked out every single one of the school’s library books on dinosaurs at least twice, and judged his classmates who said their favorite dinosaur was the t-rex. Josuke’s favorite dinosaur, of course, was the Lambeosaurus.)

“An’ you read those history books about Morioh, didn’t ya?” Okuyasu chimed in.

“Guide books!” Koichi squeaked.

Of course. A bit of light reading picked up from the train station, no doubt. Just something to pass the time. Or was it more in line with your Sunday evening fare?

Koichi’s ears heated up – the same raw, translucent pink of a hairless newborn animal: two embryonic mice curled in the nest of hair on either side of his head. “I – how --?” he stuttered.

He’d never told any of his friends about his family’s Sunday night tradition of eating dinner in front of the television. His father was an avid consumer of historical documentaries, and Sunday nights were when they ran on most broadcast stations. Sunday night dinners were a reluctant compromise on the part of Koichi’s mother as the only way of having the family all in one room at mealtime.

“Ya alright?” Okuyasu asked.

“Sure, I’m – just – you said there were two things on the list here, right?” Koichi asked, turning to Yukako.

“The flower and the mushroom,” she replied. “Which…” Unfolding the piece of paper she’d kept tucked in her scrapbook, she smoothed it over her thigh before holding it up to read – close to her face, suggesting a leaning of near-sightedness. “…Someone picked for the Hakone parquet box and the white rabbit netsuke.”

At the house, Koichi glanced. One of the storm shutters lay ajar; the darkness inside was solid, as though you could knock on it like a door.

“That’s all, right?” he mumbled, speaking out the side of his mouth. His eyes didn’t move from the entrance.

Josuke caught Koichi looking in the house’s direction. He must have calculated the intended trajectory of the boy’s thoughts, because he said: “You know we’re just kidding, right?”

“It’s fine.”

“Koichi!”

At the other side of the gate Koichi paused, the toe of one shoe resting lightly on the ground. When he turned, there was a grin on his face. “I’ll be right back,” he said. Josuke heard in his voice the insistent, exasperated reassurance of a mother leaving her kids in the car. “Everything here is dead, right? The only thing I’m worried about is them.”

Thank you for the glowing endorsement.

When Koichi was out of earshot, Okuyasu grabbed hold of Yukako’s arm. “Couldn’tcha said something?” he demanded.
“Independence in a relationship is important for building trust and helping both partners feel emotionally secure,” said Yukako, and by the rote way she recited this line – as if she were giving an oral exam – it was obvious she’d memorized it out of a self-help book or magazine article.

Just then, they heard a loud wooden rattle, punctuated by the sound of the storm shutters slamming shut at Koichi’s heels.

***

The gap between the storm shutters and the sliding paper doors was narrow. The engawa has been built for two to walk abreast, and that was the extent of it.

Scant light filtered in through the lattice ranma above the storm doors. Grainy, pixelated, falling on the sliding screens in shifting patterns that reminded Koichi of moonlight through the trees: the inverse shapes between leaves lit up in silver of the pavement, swaying and appearing and disappearing with the wind’s reconfiguration.

The storm shutters were clattering in their rails. Outside, unseen, he could hear the wind whistle. Rain fell with a monolithic roar, though above all that white noise the musical patter of raindrops on the tile roof was still audible.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled the smell of the closed-off porch. Damp, lead-heavy, settling in his lungs like wood rot. His chest felt weighed down when he tried to draw a breath, but he wasn’t so sure it had anything to do with the damp, mouldering storm shutters. There was a familiar cramping in his guts. A balled-up feeling at the back of his throat like he was about to throw up. Situations like the one he presently found himself in – and situations really was the only word he could think of that fit the purpose, his whole life having recently turned into one situation after another, stand users and ghosts and aliens and first girlfriends – had a habit of putting his body out of sorts. His level of panic and the corresponding physical discomfort were inversely proportional to the relative level of danger. The only time he could recall feeling calm in a given situation was when he’d been lying on the sidewalk bleeding out, a hole in his middle and the unshakable certainty that he was about to die.

Despite reassuring the others (and by extension, himself) that he’d be fine, that nothing in the villa could hurt him – reassurances he had no reason to doubt – he realized that going it alone wasn’t the wisest choice he’d made in the last few months of desperate and foolhardy choices. He wasn’t trying to prove anything. No, that was far from the reason why. He’d long gotten over his self-consciousness, keeping only the nervous gestures and habits that had once accessorized it: the stammer, the underdog smile, the air of deference – transmuted in the new Koichi from figurative ‘kick me!’ signs into admirable marks of humility.

The problem, instead, was that Koichi Hirose was a terrible bystander. This quirk was known to his family. His mother never had any luck getting her son to do his chores through nagging and griping, but all she had to do was put on her apron and drag out the vacuum cleaner or begin piling dishes by the sink and there Koichi would appear at her elbow, fretting: did she need help? The same held true of his friends. Nothing made him squirm more than seeing others do all the work and take all the risk. Most of the time, he didn’t even have think. Some pack-animal instinct written in his DNA – he never realized the gravity of his actions until it was too late, and he was standing in the empty engawa of a centuries-old house in Morioh’s own personal version of purgatory.

Fumbling, Koichi felt for the edge of one of the sliding doors and hauled it aside. The wood frame scraped noisily along the rails. He felt the light catch of resistance, then it was gone.

Stepping inside from the covered porch, he was struck by the dark, sweet smell of smoke. Though he couldn’t see the roof, he could picture the timbers blackened with age. Woven in a tight bind of
complex joinery.

The room, from what he could tell, was crowded with the dim shapes of what looked like sheeted-over furniture. He cursed himself for not having the foresight to bring a flashlight. Not that he could have known he would need it – he’d started out his day in a sunny ice cream parlor by the pier. That didn’t stop him from feeling annoyed. Foresight or not, there was a flashlight in the drawer by the sink in his family’s kitchen; it would have been so easy to just grab it on his way out the door that morning…

On the floor, he caught sight of a dim glow. A fire pit, the coals cooled until they were only the memory of warmth: dull ruby on black. Bending, he blew on the coals until they lit up from within, radiating warm kiln glow from their centers. Sparks floated up into the air, whirling in loose circles like fire gnats.

Immediately, his eyes were drawn to a low table no more than a few steps away. Sitting on the table was a beautiful wooden box that had been lacquered to a glossy finish. In the dim light of the burnished coals, he could make out the muddied semblance of autumn colors – yellow, copper, rusted reds – in geometric patterns that reminded him of origami. Folded paper stars and pinwheels rendered in contrasting wood grains.

Now: Koichi had never seen a Hakone parquet box before. He recognized Hakone by name, but could not put a picture to the place; he had only vague guesses about the definition of ‘parquet’. But something about the way those two words were shoved together – or something about the echo of French that hung about the word ‘parquet’ – conveyed the idea of an ornate item of value, so that the moment he laid eyes on the box, he recognized it.

Carefully, Koichi lifted the box. He held it close to his chest, grip tight, as if he were afraid that it might jump from his hands at any moment and splinter apart on the floor. He tried not to get too excited. After all: the decorative box was the easy item on his two-item checklist.

That left the matter of the netsuke. Netsuke were worn on sashes. He’d never taken the time to consider where an Edo-era man might hang his sash when it was not on his person. None of the documentaries he’d seen with his father had ever depicted samurai or governors with their feet up.

That’s the thing about history. The majority of human life is occupied by the mundane: toil, eat, sleep. Yet history has a way of abridging out the mundane, of reducing the strife and joy and failure of millions of lives over hundreds of years to a handful of battles, a few biographized lives of generals, emperors, poets.

Koichi turned from the table, mulling over thoughts of searching the villa, of more rooms hidden behind opaque paper screens – when a violent jolt knocked his feet from beneath him.

“Hey!” he snapped. He knew it was silly. What was he expecting, if he really was under attack? – For his assailant to step out from the shadows and say “hi” right back?

No response. Koichi tried to pick himself up, but when he placed his hand flat on the floorboards he could feel them tremble beneath him, rattling the joints of his wrists until they ached. For a confused moment, he thought there must have been a train passing by until he remembered where – or more specifically, when – he was.

Koichi had never experienced an earthquake before, or at least, not one he’d recognized. There’d been classmates who’d felt the bumps, broken plates his mother had fretted over when he got home from school. All minor events that had escaped his notice amid his preoccupation with getting to class on time and keeping his shoelaces tied.
Another jolt. Crashing from somewhere deep within the house, the rattle of metal and the clear high-pitch note of porcelain shattering. An ominous crack from somewhere up above in the timbers. When he raised his head he saw hot coals from the fire pit roll skittering across the floorboards, leaving trails of sparks in their wake that settled in flecks on the aged wood veneer.

In the pinwheel of embers he saw movement, as what he’d assumed to be dust-sheeted furniture stirred and turned their eyes toward him. Over the howling of the wind outside, muffled through the timbers, Koichi heard the rustle of robes and long sleeves over the floor. He felt a brush of rough fabric against his calf. Directly on his left, a woman kneeling on the floor lifted one slender hand toward him.

“Echoes!” Koichi cried, his voice cracking as panic wrapped itself around his throat.

He must’ve know. He’d seen the shrouded figures, he’d recognized their shapes – but he’d told himself he was mistaken, that they were something else. It wouldn’t have been the first time his imagination had constructed something from nothing – the shadows on his bedroom curtains warping into an intruder in the late hours of the night when he was home alone and having trouble sleeping, his anxiety leading him by the hand down path after path of worst-case scenarios.

The woman’s fingers brushed against his t-shirt, settling for a moment on the word written there: hyooo. Suddenly, a gust of wind picked up – a low wail that loudened into a screech – and the woman was blown back into the shadowed figures behind her. Koichi could hear the woodwork rattle, paper screens tear, but by then he was already moving. Echoes’ wind had put out the coals. The room was once again dark, the human figures returned to faceless, shrouded shapes; the only light leaking in through the pinholes in the lattice ranma.

He ran, stumbling, toward the light. Trying not to pay too much attention to the brush of coarse fabric against his legs, or the soft give beneath his feet whenever he tripped over something solid.

Just then, Koichi heard a familiar cry – dampened at first, but then then the storms doors exploded through the sliding screen and flew across the room and there was Crazy Diamond, at full volume, shouting “DORA!” with its fists flying.

Crowded around the gap made by Crazy Diamond’s entrance were Josuke, Okuyasu, and Yukako. Their faces were turned to him, backlit in a way that made them seem more distant than they were, almost as if they were looking down at him through a hole in the ground. Behind them, Koichi noticed, there was no sign of the storm he’d been hearing. Just the same black sky, the same unfamiliar landscape lit in spotlight.

“Koichi!” Yukako called out, her voice firm, commanding; one hand outstretched toward him.

He made a move toward her – his own hand, already unconsciously raised, pending the promise of contact and safety – only to feel resistance at his elbow.

When he turned, he saw a man behind him, his gnarled hand wrapped around Koichi’s arm: dirt under the crescents of his fingernails, flesh dimpling under his fingertips. There wasn’t anything particularly frightening about the man’s appearance, not like the masked figures they’d seen in the unremembered place. He was an ordinary elderly man, someone Koichi might have passed on the streets in Morioh, except for his clothes and the way he wore his hair in a topknot. But there was something about the man’s eyes – a wild, frenzied look of desperation – that made Koichi immediately want to wrench away.

Then his gaze fell on the cord dangling from the man’s obi. Holding the cord in place was an ivory figure of a rabbit.
“C’mon!” he heard Josuke shout. “Move!”

“Ya think he’s iced up?” Okuyasu asked.

But Koichi’s focus was elsewhere. At his side, Act III manifested.

“Got the geezer on lockdown, boss!” it gloated, clapping one hand atop the other, palms to the floor. Down went the man. Hard, as if the floorboards had been pulled out from underneath him. At the same time, Koichi reached out and grasped the netsuke. There was a moment of tension, a tug at the other end of the cord – then it snapped. He was left holding the netsuke, and the old man, squirming on his belly on the floor, gabbering in an unfamiliar accent, unable to get up.

“Got it!” Koichi cried. He held the rabbit netsuke up to the light. One tiny blood drop of an eye glinted at him from its ivory inset.

He didn’t have long to admire the figurine. There was sound of compression. Then, a pull at his back. The room retreated – punctuated by an audible whump as he flew backward into something soft with enough force to knock the air from his lungs.

“Hey man, you’re getting pretty good at that!” said Josuke.

“Ya think?” Okuyasu rumbled.

Koichi – draped over Okuyasu’s arm, fighting to fill his lungs again – couldn’t for the life of him understand how anyone could stand around swapping compliments with nothing but a hole in the wall between them and a horde of the restless undead. Then again: it was just so like Josuke and Okuyasu, getting caught up in the banter and the delivery of best-laid plans so that the outcome slipped from focus. The line of contact those two shared in the heat of danger was a ritual that Koichi could only compare to some combination of a secret handshake and a game of Russian roulette.

“Josuke!” Yukako snapped.

“Right – shit!”

A brief flash of Crazy Diamond’s arm. Just as the crowd of spirits spilled out onto the engawa, the hole in the storm shutters burned away, leaving a solid wood panel behind.

No sooner were the storm shutters mended, something struck them with a loud, punctuated bang. The heavy wood doors lurched in their frames. A volley followed, the shutters rattling without stop, blow after blow and weight behind them as if on the other side there weren’t just fists hitting the doors, but whole bodies.

Okuyasu took a step back, dragging Koichi with him. Josuke remained rooted in place.

“Talk about persistent,” he mumbled. “What the hell didja say to piss them off, Koichi?”

“Nothing! I just grabbed the stuff!”

Unfolding his arms – which, ever since the villa, had been curled in a rigor-mortis grip against his chest – he showed the others the parquet box and the netsuke, which he held nestled in the palm of one hand.

“So you did manage to get them.” Yukako observed.

“We heard ya shoutin’ and figured it was abort mission,” said Okuyasu.
“Oh, that!” Koichi let out an embarrassed, strained laugh. “The earthquake caught me off guard.”

To Koichi Josuke turned. His arms, crossed at his chest, fell slack to his sides. “You said ‘earthquake’, right?”

“What? You guys didn’t feel it?”

“When was this?” asked Yukako – the drawn-out emphasis on the was making her sound like she was addressing Koichi from the other side of a chaise lounge.

1854, to be exact. December twenty-fourth. What you all think of now as Christmas Eve.

Josuke let out a groan and re-crossed his arms. “You’re still here?”

That does come with the territory of omnipresence. We are always still here. And there.

“Eighteen fifty-four…” Koichi mused. “Then we must have slipped out of sync!”

It wouldn’t be hard to do so. This world reacts to your state of mind. Your fear took you somewhere frightening, didn’t it?

“Hang on!” Josuke interrupted. He was staring at the ground, knee jiggling in place. “You mentioned that date before, right? When you were talking about how Vox got together? Something about an earthquake? And if we’re here on an errand to get Vox’s shit, those people in there – .”

Those spirits you saw were the Voice in the Dark, correct.

“The hell?!” Okuyasu spat. “Why didn’t ya tell us? Koichi coulda got his brains sucked out!”

Koichi frowned. “My… what?”

“Those are zombies, Okuyasu,” said Yukako. “Not ghosts.”

In any case, we interrupted, your friend was never in any danger. Those spirits are nothing more than memories. Just look.

Behind the group, the villa had toppled like a deck of cards: one wall completely buried in the ground, the other leaning at a drunken tilt. Splintered debris everywhere, snapped like matchsticks. Only the heavy tile roof remained intact – it lay upon the rest of the house like a silent, monumental tombstone.

Okuyasu staggered back, his arms wheeling comically as if he was swatting at invisible cobwebs.

“Shit!” he swore. “When did that happen?!”

We told you. 1854.

“Yeah, but we were right here, watching,” said Josuke. At Koichi and Yukako, he threw a glance. “Right?”

It doesn’t matter. Time doesn’t flow here the way you’re used to.

Beneath the group’s feet, the ground gave a jump. Koichi yelped and grabbed Yukako’s hand out of instinct; Josuke and Okuyasu stumbled together, back-to-back: an old choreographed dance, half-remembered. The wreckage of the house rattled with a freight-train sound. Water seeped from the buried foundations, bubbling up to the surface in deep gulps. On the roof, a section of tile began to
buckle. A crack formed, a small protrusion breaking through the tile as if it were an eggshell – then moments later a column of stone burst through the crack, rising up another ten feet or so before grinding to a halt. If you are acquainted with a certain 1979 Ridley Scott sci-fi film, the scene would have been somewhat familiar.

The scene changed again. As quick as changing the television channel: Josuke and his friends hardly noticed the transition. Nothing could be seen of the villa’s ancient timbers; on the roof, moss had started to form. A few dozen more pillars stood alongside the first, various heights between one to five meters. All ajar at crazy angles. Around each rock was wreathed an enclosing rope festooned in paper shide.

“What are those rock formations?” Koichi asked.

Protuberances caused by the earthquakes, we replied. They were called the Wall Eyes. This was once a famous spot in Morioh, you know. Sacred ground – or cursed, depending on the angle you took. Some people thought the rocks resembled the earthquake’s victims.

Okuyasu cocked his head. His lower jaw was jutted out, lips folded over his bottom teeth. “Don’t look much like people t’ me.”

The ruins of the villa were gone. Sunflower fields surrounded the Wall Eyes, which had long since shed their shimenawa. To one side of the site, a string of transmission towers stood in the distance. On the other side: a 20th century farmhouse and long stretches of rice fields, green stalks on black water, the farmhouse’s reflection cast in duplicate.

Josuke cleared his throat. “So if this spot was so famous, how come I’ve never heard of it?”

“It wasn’t in the brochures…” Koichi added quietly.

Of course it wasn’t. The Wall Eyes have not been a feature of Morioh for twenty years. They befell the same force responsible for every disruption to the town’s peace since the post-war rebuild.

“Serial killers with stands?” Josuke quipped. He was not taking the whole scenario seriously – or the very least, he was making a tremendous effort to pretend not to.

Worse, we replied. Civil planning.

All four jolted at the sound of a blast. Where one of the protuberances had stood was now a smoldering patch on the ground. Rock and debris showered down in a cloud that hung in the air, a milky translucent sheet, for nearly a full minute after the detonation. The remaining Wall Eyes were once again wreathed round in rope– only this time, instead of paper shide, the ropes connected sticks of dynamite that had been slotted into holes drilled in the rock. At each detonation the electric current burned quick through the fuses: a ghostly violet glow nearly white in the daylight.

The Wall Eyes were gone. Bulldozers crawled over the leveled field. Flatbed trucks trundled down a makeshift gravel road, chassis squeaking, huge steel girders strapped down with red nylon slings.

A railroad cut across the field. Sunflowers swayed in the wind, nearly rising to the height of the gravel rail bed. The farmhouse in the distance still stood, though the rice fields had vanished: in the driveway, a beige Toyota Corona gleamed in the light, freshly waxed.

The ground beneath the group’s feet shook. On the rail ties, pebbles of gravel jumped. With a deafening roar, a train blasted past. Hot wind buffeted their faces. Then the last of the train shot by; nothing leftover except the shriek of the wheels on the rails, steel on steel, growing quieter by the
second.

Okuyasu was the first to speak. “That was…” he began, but the remains of the sentence eluded him.

“Yeah,” Josuke agreed, nodding, “yeah, for sure.”

A strange feeling of vertigo had settled over him – and the rest of the group. For Josuke, it was the same feeling he sometimes got after walking out of the theatre from a long, involved movie: sea-legged from the camera movement, the empty theatre lobby a flat, surreal cutout.

“Next on the list is a sushi roll,” said Yukako, words breezy over a long, drawn-out exhale. She sounded like she’d been holding her breath.

“Whazzat?” Okuyasu asked. “The sticker, or the thing the sticker’s supposed to be?”

“The sticker. The thing it represents – let’s see –.”

She tracked one finger down the list, lips moving soundlessly as she read the items out to herself. Before she could land on the sushi roll sticker, however, Koichi leaned over the scrapbook and exclaimed: “We’re looking for a sake flask!”

***

The Morioh Josuke had grown up in would not have seemed like a town with a long and rich history. Modern homes, national chain stores, cafes that sold drinks with Italian names. The town – to anyone under the age to twenty, at least – felt like something that had been grown in a test tube and transplanted onto a beach resort in the eighties.

While you couldn’t spit in Morioh in 1999 without it landing on someone’s beautification pet project, the area itself had been occupied in some form or another dating back to the seventh century.

The story goes something like this:

A mendicant priest, having strayed from the road one day, paused to rest. Starving and sore, he sat beneath the shade of a tree, offered a prayer, and fell asleep. He awoke to find a knife buried in the ground at his feet. The priest was alarmed, but after a moment he collected himself and pulled the knife from the ground. To his surprise, water bubbled up from the earth when he pulled the knife out. Using the knife, the priest dug a hole in the ground. Under the dirt he found a running stream, and a school of silver fish wriggling on their bellies. As soon as he collected the fish the stream dried up. The priest cooked up the fish, eating half and offering the other half to the spirits of that place.

After, the priest went on his way. He stopped in a neighbouring town, where he met the local lord and told the story of what happened to him. This lord – who was at the time a powerful figure with far-reaching influence – ordered a shrine to be built on the spot in dedication to the three kami of the ground spring: the spirit of the sea, the spirit of the river, and the spirit of the mountain.

This is, of course, the fairy-tale version of the story. But nonetheless, we know for certain that a shrine was founded in the place Morioh now stands sometime in the seventh century. The shrine became a popular destination for pilgrims, and where travelers went, an industry built around lodging and feeding those travelers followed. By the beginning of the eighth century, what had started out as a shrine had evolved into a village proper. It was not called Morioh yet, and would not be for more than a millennia – but more on that later.

The village’s fledgling years of growth lasted until 736. Around then, bumps began to appear on visitors to the shrine, and soon on the locals as well.
At the time, the village’s entire economy was based on servicing travelers. As smallpox swept through the country, devastating everything in its path, pilgrims stopped coming. With no means of survival, the village was soon abandoned – the sick left to succumb alone in their homes.

After the epidemic had passed, the area was resettled: slowly, gradually, over a long stretch of time. The residents this time mostly farmers. By then, the story of the mendicant priest and the underground stream and the rainbow flash of fish gills in the open field had faded to local legend: a poem carved into a stone along the road to the village, an impassionate rendering of a face on a scroll painting hung among the dark recesses of the local shrine.

All the same: there was then as there is now a touch of oddness in the place. In addition to the usual offerings, priests would bury a fresh catch of fish in the ground at the start of every harvest season. People would report strange children by the river, bodies with wounds that bled without clotting, and the ghosts of the abandoned smallpox victims, wandering the streets in the late hours of the night in search of some place to wash clean their sores.

The warring years passed over the town quietly. Daimyo from the surrounding area rose and fell in prosperity and fortune. Samurai stationed in the village to hold their lords’ positions built elaborate homes. Conquest was something that happened elsewhere, in other towns; all the villagers saw of war was the clouds of dust kicked up by the horses’ hooves as their masters road off in full regalia to meet the battle in those other, unfamiliar places. The flags flown changed with the seasons, but everyone kept their heads down and pretended not to notice. The villagers had no loyalties or ties to so-and-so’s aspirations. Their lives were tied to the mountain, the river, the sea.

Traffic in the town only started to pick up when the wars were over. Under Tokugawa reign, it became a popular post town off the major roads between Kyoto and Edo. The town’s already slim population of samurai, on the other hand, declined – either falling into some bookish official role or following their daimyo in procession to Edo, where they remained indefinitely. No more elaborate villas were built. The town was, once again, a place of pure commerce.

Time passed.

The changes of the Meiji era were slow to reach the town, but they traveled down the road from the city nonetheless. Bits and scraps of the west – language, products, idiosyncrasies – gradually found their way into the inns and sake shops. By decree a path was forced through the mountain, to whose spirit shrines had been dedicated for centuries.

Through the Twin Forests Tunnel, the world came to the town. A trickle at first, then a great flood, and by that point – what had seemed like a novelty at first, a distraction – there was no stopping it. Young people began rejecting an agricultural career or a stake in the family business in favor of the glitz of city life. After WWII, the government consolidated several small towns into one – this new town being given the name Morioh, which it still goes by to this day.

Even consolidated, however, the town continued to struggle. Rice fields were bought and burned. People moved away. Day by day the new town seemed to grow smaller. Then, in the early seventies, with the housing demand in S City on the rise, local officials decided to invest money in Morioh, transforming it into a luxury bedroom community for an economic class that had only recently come into existence: commuters. Traditional homes were replaced by modern western homes. A transit line was cut through the heart of Morioh’s old farmland. A stadium was built. A civil engineer failed to design a traffic circle.

For the majority of Morioh’s living population – first and second generation out-of-towners either trying to get away from it all or within commuting distance of it – Morioh was a place with no history, no significance other than somewhere to call home. The dead, however, keep a long
memory.

***

The map lead them back down the dirt road and to Nankai Stadium. From back on the footpath, they could hear the buzz of the crowd inside and the muffled blare of an announcer.

“Ya sure this is the right place?” Okuyasu asked.

“Yes, just through here,” said Koichi. He was quick to append, in a voice that sounded the way fine print read: “I think.”

The front gates hung open, so they passed through, entering a dark corridor. Past empty ticket booths, closed signs behind the windows. Garbage pins, metal rails, unguarded turnstiles.

They emerged out into the light at the end of the corridor to find themselves standing with grass beneath their feet, somewhere around third base. No one remarked on how odd it was that they’d somehow ended up in the middle of the field instead of in the bleachers. They were all too preoccupied with the appearance of a wooden building in center field. The blinding stadium lights above cast shadows in crazy angles from the building. The sound of the crowd, deafening while passing through the entrance, had fallen silent. The bleachers were empty, discarded sweaters draped across seats and empty soda cups littering the aisles, everything touched with a rumpled post-game look.

Yukako clapped her hands together. “I knew you could do it!” she exclaimed.

“Thanks?” Koichi volunteered.

“I just hope there aren’t any more of those dudes you met at the last place hanging out here,” said Josuke.

Yukako rolled her eyes. “You’re not afraid of ghosts are you?”

“Whatever. You’re not gonna take off again are you?” he demanded, brushing her question aside.

“Of course not. We’re all going in together.”

“Sure, I’m just saying maybe we should – .”

“Give it a rest. I can’t stand people who worry all the time. Bo-ring!” Yukako complained. By then she had already turned her heels to him, but she glanced back over her shoulder just then. Her eyes drifted up, before settling on something behind him, as a smile slowly insinuated its way onto her face – a perfectly pleasant smile, nothing out of the ordinary, but it somehow managed to scare him more than any of the handful of times he’d seen her pissed off. “A word of advice, Josuke? Don’t tiptoe around what you want.”

“Man, she seems like she’s in a hurry,” Okuyasu mumbled as he slouched up behind Josuke, hands shoved into his pockets.

“Yeah,” said Josuke. He kept his eyes ahead, on Yukako’s back, aware that they weren’t quite out of hearing distance. “Talk about direct.”

*Direct* was an understatement. Yukako Yamigishi seemed to move exclusively in straight lines; Josuke had no doubt in his mind that she had never taken a corner in her life.
The pair followed Koichi and Yukako into the building. The inside was lit by warm firelight. A kettle hung over the hearth. Human shapes lounged about on cushions and low benches – we say human shapes, because although they were definitely people, moving about and chatting and drinking, there was a strange blurred quality to them, so that no matter how long Josuke or the others stared, they could not make out any defining features, other than the occasional, gauzy suggestion of a brightly colored pattern on this or that individual’s kimono.

For a moment, all four froze at the threshold, even Yukako – but when the spirits paid them no mind, they slipped off their shoes and stepped up onto the main floor.

“Reminds me of the inns we used to stay at when father took us on business trips to bath houses or hot springs,” Yukako mused. “But this place? Too rustic for him.”

“I think it is an inn,” said Koichi. He was moving through the room a little less boldly this time – taking care to keep out of arm’s reach of the surrounding spirits. “An old one. It must have stood here before they built the stadium!”

Josuke did a slow turn around, eyes drifting slowly up to the rafters. “You think the earthquake got this one too, or…”

A fire, actually, we corrected him.

“Fire, earthquakes… sounds like pretty shitty luck to me,” Okuyasu rumbled.

These things tend to happen when everything is made of wood and fire is your primary source of heat and light. You would be surprised how many times half of Morioh has burned to the ground.

“That’s great,” Josuke mumbled. As he scanned the room, his eyes alit on a sake flask. And then another. And then another. Every gathering in the room had a flask or two laid out before them, and more flasks were being ferried through the inn on trays by faceless figures.

Already, he was beginning to see a problem.

Over the murmur of the spirits’ conversation, he could hear the roar of the baseball stadium. The sound of the crowds had returned. An announcer’s voice, quiet but as clear as if it had come from inside his head:

“…Up two to twenty-six degrees over this past hour. Two on, two out here in the fourth inning. And there it is! A flyball to the left!”

“Hey. Watch. Your scavenger list – does that thing come with hints?”

Think of this as a character building exercise.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

It wouldn’t hurt you to make an effort to get to know the spirits you’ve made up your mind to destroy.

“Person with the flask… they gotta be the owner or whatever of the inn, right? Or maybe the owner’s family or something?” Okuyasu interrupted.

“Why do you say that?” asked Koichi.

“All this stuff – it’s s’posed to important to the dead guys, right? So that it’ll make them remember
who they were? So I figure it ain’t some random customer, ‘cause who the hell remembers the cup they drank out of at a restaurant?”

“So what you’re suggesting,” said Yukako, “is that it’s not one of the flasks used by the customers. It would have to be something special – like an heirloom.”

“Uh, sure.”

For a moment, they all stood around taking a slow turn of the room. The trouble was, no one really knew what they were looking for. For Okuyasu, this meant glaring pensively at a wall hanging and making an effort to look like he was accomplishing something.

Outside, they heard the crack of a baseball striking a metal bat. The audience roared. At a nearby table, a group of spirits let out a cheer as another round of sake was poured out.

Then, Yukako clucked her tongue, muttered, “Here we go,” and strode across the room.

Far back from the hearth was a tokonama sunk into an alcove. Yukako stooped over it. She returned a moment later with a plain glazed white sake flask in her hands.

“Ya actually found it?” Okuyasu asked.

Yukako, in response, placed the flask in his hands. There was a stopper in the flask’s mouth; he pulled it out, held the flask up to his nose, and took a whiff – then immediately pulled back, face crumpled in disgust.

“Seems like a weird place to keep a flask,” Josuke remarked.

“Okuyasu!”

He turned to see Koichi staring at Okuyasu, slack-mouthed, lips turned down in dismay. Okuyasu had two fingers held up in front of him, the tips of both coated in a fine grey powder.

“My bad,” Okuyasu stammered. He re-stoppered the flask and – without thinking – wiped his hands on his shorts. “I thought, y’know, it’d be booze.”

“I guess that answers your question, Josuke,” Yukako murmured.

“They must have a family tradition,” Koichi began, “of keeping some of the, um –.”

“Knock it off, dude, I get it,” Josuke cut in, waving a hand. “Just put the thing away, it’s giving me the creeps!”

No sooner had Okuyasu slipped the flask in his pocket, the inn dissolved around them. They were left standing in center field, their shoes lying on the grass several feet back. Once again, the sound of the crowd and the announcer had gone silent – the field and the bleachers were empty.

Koichi let out a long, whistling sigh. “Well, that’s one more down.”

“How many more we got?” asked Okuyasu.

“Man,” said Josuke, “I don’t even want to know.”

“Forty-four,” Yukako helpfully supplied as she drew a checkmark on her list in glitter gel pen.

“Great.”
From the stadium, they made their way toward the center of town. Koichi led the way. There must have been something to all that talk about perception shifts earlier, and maybe having a history nerd guiding them helped, or maybe the whole time travel thing wasn’t as difficult as the Watch had described (except it was, of course – we are never wrong about these things). Either way, the familiar rows of modern houses began to change. The effect was slow, insidious at first – Josuke, without paying much attention to his surroundings or looking too hard for the hidden doors or corridors among the familiar, stopped in his tracks when he saw wedged between a pastel bungalow and a Cape Code with a two-car garage a bright roe-colored tori gate. Beneath the gate’s crossbar ran a footpath that disappeared into someone’s in-ground swimming pool.

From then on, the scenery appeared in a constant state of shift. Old Morioh and new Morioh overlaid each other like a lenticular photo. Josuke could be looking at a corner store or a bus stop, then with a slight shift in the angle it would become a field or a darkened doorway, forests of cedar posts receding into shadow. The asphalt under their feet transitioned into a dirt road. Shades began to appear: faceless memories like the spirits of the inn. They came in ones and twos at first, then in teeming swarms that closed in all around the group. The hive-chatter of forgotten conversations swelled all around them. Some voices familiar, some accents and dialects that the four of them could barely understand, catching only a word here and there:

“…Since he was deployed, you know, the house seems so quiet. You can hear the wind in the trees outside. All these years and I never noticed…”

“…The next morning, and he had such an awful headache. I told him he had it coming, spending the night up there…”

“…Black smoke, horrible. I can’t keep myself from looking out from the cliffs and wondering if I’ll see it to…”

“…Down by the river, but I don’t know if I believe her, she’s always making up stories…”

“……..wait…………her…………………………couldn’t…………………”

“…New sandals. I’ve been through three pairs since I’ve been on the road.”

“……three……………………moon……………………when………”

“There was frost on the fields already this morning…”

“…Decided yet for that essay. Have you…”

“Not tonight, I told her seven-thirty.”

“Didya see the game last night?”

“Are you going to –.”

“Watch it!”

Eventually, the individual strains of conversation were broken apart by the cacophony of voices, reduced to singular syllables that leapt out at them every now and then, plucked from the constant, booming hum like individual notes on a string instrument:

“Wait”

“No”
Seeing the serene, indistinct faces of the spirits as they went on their way at a leisurely pace unnerved Okuyasu. All those people in the past were living their lives without realizing that they were dead and history had already forgotten them. He wasn’t used to thinking on history as a thing packed with real people who’d lived lives just like him: shake it, and human beings would come tumbling out. It made him wonder if someday, someone would prod at his fossilized remains and come to the conclusion he was an idiot for sitting around all his life with a thumb up his ass until he keeled over in the shower from a heart attack or something stupid like that. Thinking about a future without him in it made him feel kind of dizzy.

Up ahead, Koichi came to a stop.

“What’s up?” Josuke asked.

“I. I don’t know where I’m going,” stammered Koichi.

Yukako flipped the scrapbook around and pointed at the map. “The next sticker is near The Grand.”

“I know, but… I don’t know where we are.”

At some point, the modern homes and streets had disappeared entirely. They were standing on a stretch of cobblestone road no wider that Tomoko’s kei car. On either side, wood and plaster facades of shops, tea rooms and inns rose up, fencing in the road.

The street was somewhere in Moriori. But with none of the familiar landmarks, it was impossible to say where. The only remaining presence of the Moriori they knew was in the occasional, distant whistle as the train approached the station: a long, sorrowing wail that, no matter what time of day, always reminded Okuyasu of lying in bed at night, the window open – the train whistle creeping in on the edges of his dream, lonely and lurid. But the sound was so faint, nearly imagined, that it was impossible to say where it was coming from, or what direction the station might be in.

“Sorry,” Koichi murmured. “I should have been paying attention to where we were going.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Okuyasu, “I space out all the time.”

“Maybe Josuke can take over navigation,” Yukako suggested.

“I mean, I can try.”

For a minute, Josuke stared down the road. He let his eyes go out of focus, let his vision blur. He tried to imagine what the road’s modern counterpart looked like: maybe a one-way side street or a box store or one of the town’s many residential cul-de-sacs lined with catalogue houses. But when his vision came back into focus, the cobblestone and the tile rooftops were still there. It was a bit like one of those old visual illusions: once he was able to see the old woman, it was hard to see the young girl again.

“Are you guys lost?”

At the voice, all four teens turned at once, but at first, no one saw anything except the empty street. Then, Okuyasu swore and stumbled backward into Yukako.

There was a man on all fours behind them: palms and feet flat on the ground, back arched, belly-up.

“Good afternoon,” said the man. “Don’t mind me. I’m just a bit self-conscious.”
“You’re a ghost,” said Yukako.

“Umm, yes?”

“Not a memory.”

“Uh, that’s right. I’m Kinoto. Nice to meet you.”

The man held up a hand, his other arm trembling as he struggled to hold himself in a tripod stance. Koichi, after a moment’s hesitation, reached out and took it.

There’d been something about the man that seemed a bit off (besides the obvious, of course), something that was bothering Josuke. Just then, he figured it out: Kinoto’s head was twisted all the wrong way, the back of his head facing his belly.

“You’re an architect, right?” said Koichi as he shook Kinoto’s hand. “I recognize your name… you worked with Mr. Kishibe? He told me you had, uh… back problems.”

‘Back problems’ was about as delicately as he could think to phrase the issue. From what Rohan had told him, Masazo Kinoto had no idea that stands existed, let alone that he’d been killed by one.

“Mr. Kishibe. Yes. I was just on my way to meet him actually.” Kinoto took two crab walk steps to one side, glancing wildly up and down the street. “What time is it? I hope I’m not running late…”

“I think you mighta missed that boat, dude,” said Okuyasu – punctuated by a grunt when Yukako elbowed him in the ribs.

“Sorry? What was that?” Kinoto asked, his head swiveling toward them. From the angle, Josuke could see the twist in his neck.

“You don’t happen to know how to know how to get to the Grand Hotel from here, do you?” he interrupted before the current thread of conversation could progress any further. One run-in with Vox that day was bad enough – another ghost with an existential crisis was just about the last thing he was prepared to deal with.

“Of course! You must be new here. It’s easy to get the 17th and 18th century architecture confused when you’re getting used to the place. If you’ll just step through this alley here, I’ll be happy to show you the way.”

They all waited for Kinoto to lead the way, but he remained in place: a huge, practiced grin on his face, growing staler with each passing second. At last, he let the smile fall away and cleared his throat.

“Please, after you!” he said. “I insist.”

***

The trouble with the highway was there was no place in all that long stretch of asphalt to hide yourself from the sun. The long diagonal cuts of shadow cast by the hydro poles were more of a taunt than anything: you’d have to be some kind of thin to fold yourself in that shade. Jotaro was beginning to have second thoughts about agreeing to wait for Josuke and the others by the roadside. And third thoughts, and fourth thoughts. But waiting by the road had been the plan, and he wasn’t about to deviate – even if it meant standing in spitting range of the sun wearing ten pounds of trench coat and novelty pins.
And maybe the heat was putting him on edge. He’d spent the better part of the past hour with his eyes on the rear window of Tamami’s Malibu, watching the back of Sato Fujimoto’s head. Within a few hours, someone from the Speedwagon Foundation would be by to collect him. The less trouble out of Fujimoto between now and then, Jotaro knew, the better – but that didn’t keep him from hoping Fujimoto would try something. After the cliffs – after seeing the knife just out of range and feeling frozen for the first time in years – all he needed was one good reason.

But they hadn’t heard a peep out of Fujimoto, not since putting him in the car. They’d left the windows cracked, but the old guy must’ve been roasting in there. Then again: Jotaro was hard pressed to care if Fujimoto died of heat exhaustion in the back seat of a car like someone’s forgotten dog.

Like we said – the heat didn’t have Jotaro in the best of moods. Rohan wasn’t helping much either. The artist reminded Jotaro of a shark: you’d think it would kill him to stop moving. The whole time, he’d been up and down the road, sketching in his notebook or snapping pictures. It was just as bad as traveling with a toddler, and Jotaro would know – he’d travelled from Florida to Japan in the company of a toddler, and he’d somehow come out the other end of the twenty-four hour trip feeling like he’d lost a year’s worth of sleep. In situations like these – with an enemy stand-user/serial killer twiddling his thumbs not ten feet away – he liked to keep a mental map of his surroundings. Just in case. But it was hard to keep a clear picture of everyone’s positions in his mind when a certain individual insisted on “going for a stroll” or “stretching his legs” every five minutes.

Tamami and Yuuya, at least, knew how to stay in one place. They were both hovering over the open hood of the red sports car Fujimoto had been driving, eying up its internals. Kobayashi had somehow convinced Fungami to strip a few parts for him, under the guise of using them to key up his Malibu. Jotaro was pretty sure that this time next week those same auto parts would turn up in a flea market somewhere. But it wasn’t any of his business.

The Hazekura kid had left. Something about going to check on his friend at the transmission tower. Hazamada, Jotaro already sent on his way – but not before reducing the kid’s stand to an interesting pile of sticks (“Just get Josuke to fix it for you,” had been his reply when Hazamada complained). All in all, it made for two less heads to count.

From the ditch to one side of the road: a loud splash and a shriek of laughter. Jolyne was flopping around in the bog water in her underwear while Ken squawked and scuttled backward up the embankment to avoid a second dousing. Last Jotaro had checked, Ken had been in the process of teaching Jolyne how to walk the dog – but after a few failed attempts at replicating the trick, she had apparently decided to give up. Her patience was short for anything she couldn’t immediately succeed at. She’d been that way ever since she was a baby – he blamed this tendency for her stubborn refusal to learn to talk until she was nearly two.

Jotaro stared at the murky water, calculating the respective risks of bacterial infection and heat stroke, but in the end he only felt a by-then familiar pull of exhausted resignation. Fuck it, he thought. He’d just have to march Jolyne to the bathtub when they got back to the hotel.

A police car sped by. Not half a click down the road it squealed to a stop and fishtailed into a U-turn. The car’s lights came on. The siren gave a hiccup – before bursting into a full wail.

“Shit!” Tamami exclaimed.

He cut off in a run, but he didn’t get far. No sooner had the cop car rolled up on the shoulder of the road, two officers leapt out.

“Put your hands on your heads!” one barked. He already had one hand resting on the holster at his
hip. “You! Walk back here toward me – slowly!”

Tamami – after a moment of hesitation – complied, and trudged back toward the group with his hands on his head. The second police officer turned to Jotaro and Yuuya.

“You two – same thing. Hands on your heads! – What is *that*?”

“A screwdriver,” said Yuuya.

“Drop it.”

At Jotaro’s side, Star Platinum appeared, but he immediately thought better of it and dismissed his stand.

“Is there a problem?” he demanded as he raised his hands above his head.

“The car,” the second officer said, jabbing her head in the direction of the red sports car. “Where’d you get it from?”

“It’s a rental,” said Jotaro.

Behind him, he heard footsteps on the grass. At his side, Jolyne appeared, grimy and stinking of peat moss.

The cop’s eyes flickered to the half-naked, mud-streaked kid, then back up to Jotaro. “Do you know a Tōru Nagano by any chance?”

“No.”

“There was a man found dead this morning. Tōru Nagano. His parents said he was driving a little red sports car with your licence number.”

Jotaro watched Yuuya glance down at the car he’d been working on with a mortified expression. He couldn’t blame the kid. He was suddenly having apprehensions about where exactly Sato Fujimoto had gotten it.

The first officer, meanwhile, was doing a slow turn around the red sports car. He paused in front of Yuuya and flashed him a huge, shit-eating grin. “So this is a rental, hunh? What happened, you folks break down?”

“Fuck off, I’m not talking to you,” Yuuya spat.

“I meant the other two cars,” Jotaro interrupted. Thankfully, what he lacked in the ability to disassemble, he made up for with a perfect stone poker face. “We just came across this one.”

“Someone actually rented you this pile of junk?” The first cop asked as he strolled over to the Malibu. “Hello? You got another passenger in back?”

Before Jotaro could interject, the officer pulled open the rear door – then immediately leapt back, drawing his handgun in the process. “We got a body over here!” he shouted. “We got a body!”

“*Hands on your head!*” the second cop shouted when Jotaro flinched in the other police officer’s direction.

“Dad, are you in trouble?” Jolyne asked.
“Not in trouble,” Jotaro hissed under his breath.

The first cop dragged Fujimoto’s body from the car and laid him out on the shoulder of the road. After holding two fingers over the older man’s throat for a moment, the police officer stood and cleared his throat.

“Never mind! Just unconscious. They’ve got him tied up real good though.”

“What about this guy?” The second cop asked. She was looking at Yuuya and Tamami. “Are you going to tell me you don’t know him either?”

“Never seen’s him in my life,” Tamami asserted.

“I know this guy!” the first cop piped up. “He did some work on my wife’s car.”

“He was with the car when we found it,” said Yuuya. He was looking at Jotaro when he said this – checking for verification that he’d gotten whatever story they were all in the process of collectively fabricating right. Jotaro, however, was gazing straight ahead, and didn’t seem to notice.

“We were about to take him to the hospital,” he muttered.

Jolyne tugged on his coat. When he didn’t bend down, she hissed: “I thought we were going back to the hotel! I don’t wanna go to the hospital!”

“Can I ask where you’re staying, sir?” asked the second cop.

“Morioh. Grand Hotel.”

The first cop snapped his fingers and leapt to his feet. “Waaaait a second. We got a fax on this guy the other day.” He pointed at Kobayashi. “From S. City. Multiple counts of loitering and soliciting. And you!” The finger drifted over to Yuuya. “You were in the other day in connection to that girl they found, you and your gang!”

“They released us,” Yuuya growled. “No charges.”

“And this guy,” he jabbed his finger twice on Jotaro for emphasis, “this guy was there at the explosion on Main a couple months back. And when someone phoned in officer Higashikata’s death.”

This man, Jotaro realized, absolutely had a corkboard collage in his office. Complete with thumbtacks and yarn.

“Three, possibly four suspects,” he heard the second officer say into the car radio. She was stretched over the driver’s seat, her eyes trained on Jotaro over her shoulder. “And we’re going to need an ambulance.”

He gazed out over the police cruiser’s roof at the field beyond. Five or ten minutes ago, Rohan had wandered off for the third time and Jotaro hadn’t seen him since. Where the hell was he? If they had Heaven’s Door on hand, the whole situation could have worked itself out in under a minute.

But with Heaven’s Door out of the picture, Jotaro took a moment to survey his options while the cops were temporarily distracted. Yuuuya wouldn’t be much help. He considered Tamami briefly, but he didn’t see the Lock having much effect – he couldn’t imagine making it far in a career in law enforcement without some kind of self-assured moral high ground.
“Hey. Kid,” he mumbled under his breath. Ken glanced up, meeting Jotaro’s eyes with a slow, heavy-lidded blink. “Maybe you should see if these cops are up for a game of rock-paper-scissors.”

“Can’t,” said Ken. “Mr. Kishibe said he’d write ‘I wet the bed’ in my book if I played for keeps again.”

The second officer’s head whipped around. She released her trigger finger on the radio. “What was that?” she demanded.

“Sounded like a threat,” said the first cop.

“Did that man threaten you?”

Ken folded his arms. “Can I go home now?” he asked by way of reply. “I don’t know these guys. I’m only here ‘cuz Mr. Kishibe paid me.”

“Paid you,” the officer repeated, voice deepening with the suggestion of disgust. Her partner shook his head.

“Are you Mr. Kishibe?” she asked Jotaro.

“No, I – .”

“Who’s the other kid?” the first cop asked. At Jolyne’s side, he crouched.

“My daughter.”

“Is that your dad, sweetie?” the cop asked. In the same baby voice Jotaro knew Jolyne hated.

Jolyne, of course, only wrinkled her nose and stared back at the man, her jaw setting stubbornly into place.

“Allright,” said the second police officer. She was in the process of unclipping a pair of handcuffs from her belt. “I think that’s enough. You can tell us the rest of the story later.”

“Wait.”

Across the street, the wind died down and the grass settled. The road lay empty up and down, disappearing into the horizon in a wet silver shimmer. No Rohan for miles in sight. No Heaven’s Door.

How long could he stall for time, Jotaro wondered.

He figured it just had to be civilians. If it’d been stand users he could have dealt with the problem. At least you knew where you stood when someone was trying outright to kill you.

“You have something you want to say to me?” the police officer asked. She grabbed hold of one of his arms and wrenched it behind his back, followed by the other. He let his muscles go slack.

“The unconscious man is named Sato Fujimoto. He’s the one you’re after.”

“Don’t worry,” said the other cop. Jotaro heard the click of the cuffs, felt the hot sting of sun-warmed metal against his wrists. In the distance, the sound of sirens drifted in above the wind. “We’re going to get this alllll sorted out.”
Within thirty seconds an ambulance and another cop car were pulling up alongside the first patrol vehicle. An officer was cuffing Yuuya, who was pale and swaying on his feet and looked on the verge of being sick. Another cop was arguing with Tamami, who was in the process of feeding him some sob story: a run of bad luck, sleeping rough on the town, a sick mother back in Morioh, some friends-of-friends of his who’d offered him a lift. A pair of white gloves gently leading Ken and Jolyne toward one of the patrol cars. A pair of medics loading Fujimoto onto a stretcher.

Jotaro watched the scene unfold with his fists clenched tight in the handcuffs. If he had some form of evidence to prove Fujimoto was the killer, the situation would be different. He could step through the facts and lay the whole scenario out for the officers. But he’d only heard of Fujimoto a few hours ago, and he had nothing to go on except the sense of urgency he could feel in the quickening of his pulse. Maybe if he were Joseph or Josuke he could turn that urgency into a plea and find a way to talk himself out of the situation. For Jotaro, however, the feeling was just that: a vague, physical reaction he couldn’t articulate. So he stood still with his jaw clenched and the frustration of wanting to say something but having nothing to say tying his throat into knots.

The way he saw the situation, it could go down one of two ways. One: he could settle it the old fashioned way. Break a few bones, deal out a few concussions. He and the others could slip away. Then what? The Speedwagon Foundation had gotten them out of a legal jam before, but that was India. Things were different there. The law took on more of a local flavour. You could get a long way if you knew the right people. Not so in Japan. Whatever temporary trouble Yuuya and Tamami were in would be nothing compared to a bunch of busted-up cops. Then there were other issues: Jotaro’s passport, the already complicated custody issues back on US soil.

Option one was how he would have settled the score when he was a teenager. Being reckless had been so much easier when he was young and dumb and had nothing to lose: the type of kid that smoked like a chimney and picked fights and walked on train tracks at night and shrugged at slim odds – what did he care? He’d probably be dead by thirty anyway.

The Jotaro of present, of course, was nearly thirty and very much not dead, and held much different opinions. As such, he found himself leaning – albeit begrudgingly – toward option two: do nothing.

“Keep an eye on him,” Jotaro rumbled, eyeing Fujimoto’s unmoving figure.

From what he’d seen at the cliffs, the old man was a cornered animal. There wasn’t a doubt in Jotaro’s mind that there was still some bite left in him. But the Speedwagon Foundation wouldn’t be far behind, and they’d know how to deal with Fujimoto.

“Don’t worry,” said the second officer. She opened the police car’s back door and gestured with a wave of her hand for Jotaro to slide in. “We will.”

***

By the time they parted ways with Kinoto, Josuke and the others had a general feel of Morioh, past and present. Not of the layout or any specific landmark – those were changing with every fire or earthquake or official whim – but with the method of navigation. It was like learning to play piano with two hands. Over time, you could learn to see both sides of the town at once, old and new: and everything in between.

They passed through shrines, open-air festivals, museums. Steel-hulled construction zones and one-room homes with thatched roofs. Inns, tea rooms, department stores. They wandered through prosperity and abandon, fall and spring – the seasons coming and going, the years erased by one another like footprints on the beach.
Kinoto helped them find the next few items on their list. They found the next few on their own. Then, gradually, something peculiar happened. More and more, among the faceless memories, they came across ghosts who, somehow or other, had in their possession or happened to know where they could find exactly what they were looking for. An old lady in a sweater and pearls handed them an inkstone. A young woman in a funeral kimono pushing an empty stroller handed them a wooden doll. And so on and so forth. It was as though Morioh, past and present, was rallying to them.

Most of the ghosts were strangers, but not all. On the steps of Morioh’s library (one of many flammable iterations), the Librarian silently passed them a copy of a book of poems. They, of course, all assumed she was a different librarian than their librarian – as we’ve mentioned before, there is a sweeping assumption that all librarians look the same.

“How are you liking it here?” Yukako asked.

“Alright,” Aya replied. Her voice was breathless, whispery. Though low blood pressure was no longer a concern of hers, in death old habits lingered.

Reaching up, she slipped the comb from her hair, letting it fall loose about her shoulders. “Busy. Here I thought I was in for an early an early retirement.”

The door behind her opened. Down the steps another ghost drifted: eyelashes perfectly crimped, lips plumped and rouged. As she passed by Josuke, she giggled and dipped her head: which, at present, she was carrying under her arm. A pretty green ribbon trimmed off the empty stump at the end of her neck.

“Good luck!” Aya called after the girl from the top of the steps. “Don’t forget to wear your ribbon!”

To Yukako she turned, a smile frozen on her pale, translucent face: “Car accident. Her little two-door went right under a flatbed truck.”

“Really?” asked Yukako, voice flat with disinterest.

“Girls like her who are all about hauntings would do anything to look exquisitely dead. For the right price, I can help them snag the love of a living person. Gravesite visits, flowers left on headstones, pictures carried around in lockets – it’s every ghost’s dream.”

“You guys actually have money down here?” Okuyasu blurted.

Yukako ignored him. “They should have put more effort in when they were alive,” she mumbled. “Well, better late than never I guess.”

“That reminds me,” said Aya. “You were looking for this, weren’t you?”

She handed Yukako the comb that she’d taken from her hair – a tortoise shell pick.

“Thanks,” said Yukako.

“My pleasure. Feel free to stop by again any time.”

As soon as they descended the steps to the Cinderella Beauty Salon, it disappeared behind them, leaving them standing once again in an empty field sometime in the Heian period.

“Sweet!” Josuke exclaimed. “You got the pick?!?”

“That’s right,” said Yukako. Taking out her scrapbook, she scanned through the list for the hair pick.
“Aya looks better than I thought she would. Considering.”

“You’re not, uh, actually planning on going back any time soon are you?” Koichi asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What’ve we got left?” Okuyasu asked.

He reached for the scrapbook, trying to pull it toward him so he could get a better look – but Yukako slapped his hand away. “Just a minute,” she muttered, voice tight with annoyance. Then: “We’re down to one more: a girl’s braided ribbon.”

“At least it’s not heavy,” Koichi mumbled.

He had a point. By then, the pile of memory items had accumulated. They’d had to steal a shopping cart from a department store parking lot (circa 1986) to load everything in.

“Where is it?” Josuke asked.

“Not far,” said Yukako.

“Looks like Kame Square to me,” said Okuyasu, leaning over Yukako’s shoulder. She shot him a warning look.

Just then, they heard the glassy ting-ting of a bicycle bell. Past them a man on a bike wobbled. He had his back to them; his large build and broad shoulders comically out of proportion with the two-wheeled bicycle. His crisp blue police uniform, all polished brass and officious seriousness, only lent itself to the absurdity.

“Did you guys see that?!” Josuke demanded.

“Yeah, so?” asked Okuyasu. “S’just another memory – hey!”

Before he could finish the sentence, Josuke shot after the bicycle in a sprint.

“Wait up!” They could hear Josuke yell – just as he turned a corner and vanished from sight.

“Oh man,” said Koichi, in more of a sigh than a sentence.

Yukako shook her head. “And he yells at me for wandering off,” she mumbled under her breath.

Without another word, she, Koichi, and Okuyasu bolted after Josuke.

Somehow, despite the maze of overlapping years, they managed to find him. He was by himself in an empty sunflower field, under an electric street light. As they waded through the field toward him, tall sunflower stalks bending out of their way, he turned to them with a rounded look of surprise that quickly dissolved into a sheepish grin: all lips and teeth and an embarrassed dip in his brows. His was the expression of someone who had gone their life being chewed out for frequent but minor misdemeanors.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I thought I recognized someone back there for a minute.”

“It’s okay,” said Koichi, “we know.”

“I think this place is messin’ with our heads,” Okuyasu rumbled.
He couldn’t blame Josuke. Ever since they’d crashed into Morioh’s underworld, he’d been keeping both eyes open, half expecting to turn a corner and catch a glimpse of his brother somewhere among the crowds of spirits.

“In any case,” said Yukako, “it looks like we’re here.”

The field rolled away beneath their feet, leaving sidewalk and asphalt behind. Before them stretched Kame Square – and beyond that, on the other side of the chimeric monstrosity of urban engineering, was the train station. Once more, a train whistle howled in the distance – closer this time. The train would be arriving at the station soon.

Suddenly, Koichi let out a noise that sounded like something between a gasp and a wail. “G-guys!” he stammered.

Beside the water fountain in the square was a blue tarp. As they watched, the tarp slowly rose, until there was a girl standing by the fountain, the tarp wrapped around her shoulders, her night gown wet and clinging to her legs and stained in something that looked black by moonlight. The girl took a few steps, leaving silver prints behind on the concrete. Lights from the train station glimmered the imprints of her arches.

“Dude!” Okuyasu exclaimed, grabbing Josuke by the arm. “That’s the girl from the fountain!”

“No shit.”

“She’s looking your way,” Yukako observed.

“Wasn’t she the one who was… you know…?” Koichi ventured to ask.

Okuyasu gave Josuke’s arm a tug. “You should say somethin’ to her!”

“Why the hell do I have to do it?” Josuke grumbled.

Even as he said this, however, he was already shrugging Okuyasu’s grip off and making his way toward the girl.

“Er, hey,” he said.

Where she stood, toes edging over the sidewalk, the lights from the fountain backlit the ghost’s face so that he couldn’t make out her expression. He could hear her breathing though – wet, rasping, as if she were inhaling through a hole in her lungs. And she probably was, he realized, as he remembered the newspaper article Rohan had read them. Several puncture wounds to the abdomen. Scintillatingly gruesome but tastefully non-specific.

When the girl didn’t reply, he continued:

“Sorry. About what happened. I wish I coulda done something.” He could have done something, he realized just then – only he’d spent two weeks on an oyster farm getting seasick instead, because somehow that had seemed like the best option at the time. He snapped his eyes shut, crushing out the thought. “Like. It’s super shitty and I feel awful, because you should be out there on our side right now having a kickass summer. You know? You should be growing up and going to high school and being cool and popular and just…”

He raised his hands and let them fall to his thighs. He could feel the others’ eyes on his back and the discomforting at knowing they were watching was an itch he couldn’t scratch.
“Don’t worry,” he added. “We’re going to get the guy.”

When the girl reached up, he bit down on the fight or flight instinct that rose up in response and forced himself to stay perfectly still. For a brief moment, he felt the cold, clammy touch of her hands wrapped around his – he sensed her gaze through the shadows, a connection that traveled like a shock down his spine – then her hand was gone and the girl was gone and he was left holding a braided ribbon.

The clock in the square sounded. The water fountain shut off, leaving a becalmed pool: in it, the reflection of the old Morioh, tile and thatch rooftops and dirt roads and narrow alleys, converged on the reflection of the train station and the rest of the new Morioh. One world hovering above the other – two horizons merging into one.

It was day again, in some other time and some other place and Josuke found himself caring less and less which.

He unfurled his fingers and stared at the ribbon in his hand. Purple and white braided together in harlequin patterns, tied off in tassels at both ends.

He’d just been running his mouth of, but there was still a sliver of truth somewhere in that babble that got stuck under his skin. The whole time they’d been hunting down Fujimoto – and Kira too, for that matter – he’d held onto the feeling that if they could only solve the mystery and catch the bad guys, everything would be alright. That somehow, whatever had come before – the deaths and the loved ones in mourning – would be negated.

It was hard for him to accept that anything could be completely permanent. Especially when it was all his fault.

“So that’s the last of it, hunh?” said Okuyasu as he circled around Josuke, hands folded behind his head.

“I guess so.”

“Good,” said Yukako. Slipping off one of her flats, she uncurled her toes and rolled her ankle. The soles of her feet were blackened with dust. “Then we can find your stand and get out of here. My feet are killing me in these shoes.”

At the clock, Koichi glanced. “It was kind of silly to worry about running out of time, hunh? It doesn’t really matter here…”

“What time did Watch say we needed to be done by?” Yukako asked.

“Five thirty-six?” said Josuke. “Something like that.”

“That seems random.”

Okuyasu sniffed. “S’not.” When the others looked at him for an explanation, he shrugged and said: “That’s when one of the trains gets in from S. City. The five thirty-six is always suuuuper packed.” And then, with less confidence: “I’ve, uh, taken it a few times.”

Lifting his chin, Koichi furrowed his brow in concentration. Josuke couldn’t figure out what he was doing, until he followed Koichi’s gaze and noticed the direction the hands on the clock were moving.

“Uh, dude,” he said.
“I’m just curious,” Koichi protested.

At which point, we couldn’t help but butt in: we should advise you, we said, that attempting to walk upstream through time can be extremely difficult. With the past you have some general frame of reference, but what lies ahead –.

“Yeah, yeah,” Koichi grumbled. “Whatever, I’m not going _that_ far ahead just a couple of hours…”

Yukako tapped a finger against her chin. “It’s the train itself,” she said.

“Whazzat?” Okuyasu asked.

“Back at the villa, Watch showed us the Wall Eyes. They weren’t just a reminder of what happened to Vox. Those people were buried there. If _I_ were a pissed off ghost out for revenge, and someone tore down _my_ memorial and built over top of _my_ buried corpse –.

“Almost got it!” Koichi exclaimed. The hour hand was already on the five, the minute hand inching toward the seven’s place.

And Josuke, at that moment, understood exactly what Yukako was getting at.

“Okuyasu! Get us out of here!”

The Hand appeared, but stood still at Okuyasu’s side. “But –,” Okuyasu began.

“Now!”

There was the train whistle again, right on top of them – a deafening, off-kilter warble that exploded into a shriek as the train thundered into the station. Too fast. Way too fast.

The station obscured Josuke’s view, so he couldn’t tell what happened – whether the train jumped the rails or collided with something or whatever else – but suddenly the rear half of the train was swinging out and shredding through the station building in a show of sparks and shriek of metal. The cars slammed against each other, piling up. A jackknifed section of train cars careened across the roundabout toward them, ripping up the asphalt – then a tug at Josuke’s side, and suddenly he and the others were a few hundred feet back up the road, rolling across the pavement. The sky tumbled overhead, the rooftops turning like the spokes of a wheel.

For a minute, Josuke lay on his back in a daze. It was as though some part of him was still back at the square, lagging behind – but eventually it caught up, and he rolled over onto his stomach and raised himself up onto his elbows.

Kame Square was engulfed in smoke and dust. Black-edged flames soared upward from the station. The sky was night-black.

Above the ruins of the station, he saw a figure hover. The shadowed suggestion of chains, the tattered imitation of a coat. Then it was gone.

Beside him, Okuyasu was doubled over, head in his knees, Yukako kneeling beside him.

“It hasn’t happened yet,” she was saying, matter-of-factly. “It’s useless to get upset over.”

But despite her choice of words, the surety of her tone, there was a hint of a tremble to her voice.

To his feet, Josuke leapt.
“Watch, you motherfuckers!” he snapped.

There’s no need to yell, we told him.

At what remained of Kame Square, he pointed. “That’s what you didn’t want to tell me about?!”

You would have just been distracted. Like you are right now.

“How many people – .”

No one is going to die, we reassured him. What you saw only happens if Vox continues to exist long enough to make it happen – that’s the whole reason you’re here in the first place, isn’t it?

“Yeah, and what happens if we don’t defeat Vox?”

We highly doubt you will be in a position to care about that if Vox kills you.

“We have to go back,” Koichi whispered. There was dust all in his hair, solidifying it into weird angles. “We need to tell people.”

And then what? You can’t take the things you’ve collected here back with you, you know. They don’t exist in your version of the world anymore.

“It wants me, right?” asked Josuke.

He didn’t wait for a reply. Instead, he bent over, picked up the overturned shopping cart, and began piling the memory items back into it, one at a time. “Alright,” he said. “You guys go. I’ll catch up.”

“Josuke…” Koichi mumbled.

“Cut it out. It’s just ghost world, remember? Pretty sure I can’t die here. I think.”

“We’ll tell Daisuke to come back with the car and wait for you,” Yukako offered.

To his feet, Okuyasu slowly rose. His eye were bloodshot. Snorting, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Uh,” he began to say, then licked his lips and stammered: “Don’t be too long, a’ight? I don’t wanna wait around for your ass.”

“Do you even know where you’re going to find Vox?” Koichi asked.

“I’ve got it all worked out,” Josuke muttered as he dumped the Hakone parquet back into the shopping cart with less decorum than a two-hundred year old antique demanded. “Everything’s just great.”

“Uh,” said Koichi, “O-okay, if you’re sure.”

“Koichi.”

“I know! Um. Good luck?”

“Thanks.”

He kept his head down and his eyes on the teapot he was in the process of picking up as the others left – not because he was focused on the teapot, but because he was worried if he looked up, his expression would echo the way he felt. In his periphery vision, he could see Okuyasu’s white trainers on the asphalt. They lingered there – and then with a “Come on!” from Koichi, they were
Throwing the last of the things into the shopping cart, Josuke set off down the street. The cart’s wheels squeaked and rattled noisily — one had gotten jammed from the impact.

“What the fuck am I going to do?!” he hissed under his breath.

“You really need to stop lying to your friends, we suggested.

“I don’t want them to worry, alright?”

Well, you’re doing an abysmal job at that.

“Where the hell am I supposed to find Vox? Do I get three clues or something?”

You should know just as well as anyone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Vox is bound to you, correct? It latched onto your memories of when you were six. It’s been feeding off those the same way it feeds off its friends. So think: if six year old you were a ghost, where would you be haunting right about now?

“I don’t know,” said Josuke, even as he wrestled the shopping cart into a tight corner. “I guess haunted houses are a popular thing, right?”

It’s your afterlife, we said.

Down the road, he heard the rapid, staccato snap of shoes against cobblestone. Toward him Okuyasu was running, arms wheeling to keep his balance on the uneven road.

“What the hell are you doing?” Josuke asked, more disbelief than anger.

Okuyasu was panting, face red. “Whazzit look like?” he grit out.

Josuke blinked at him. He was afraid for a moment that his brain was playing tricks on him — that the other Morioh was once again showing him people he wanted to see for the hell of it. He had questions. Like why wasn’t Okuyasu with the others? Why would he bother coming back? But the only thing he managed to get out was:

“Why were you running?”

“Dude, being alone in this place scares the shit outta me,“ Okuyasu admitted, letting out a laugh that broke off in a wheeze. “I thought I’d lost ya for a minute.”

Straightening out, he added. “I figured, y’know – Jotaro and them are all waiting back there with the car, so it’s not like Koichi and Yukako need me or anything.”

“Stop saying bullshit like that,” Josuke growled.

“Whaddya mean?”

“Everyone else is glad you’re here. And I’m – same,” he stammered, stopping himself just short of saying “I’m glad you’re here too.”

He remembering the look Yukako had given him in the ball field. A good thing she wasn’t there just
then – he could only imagine what she’d say.

“That’s – sure,” Okuyasu fumbled in reply. “I mean, if ya don’t mind me tagging along – .”

There was a smile on Josuke’s lips. He could feel his face hurt. “That’s great,” he said.

“We gonna go give Vox a hard time or what?”

“That’s the plan.”

Having Okuyasu there took the edge off the panic. They fell in step as they pushed the trolley down a road that was at times dirt, at times cobblestone, at times asphalt. Despite the unfamiliar view of the town – open air and clusters of farm houses dotting the horizon – there was something about walking together that felt familiar, even nostalgic. The pace, the sway of his body, the way their footsteps echoed each other, but mostly the clumsiness of it all: feeling like he was a kid again, blindly fumbling his way through conversation and where his hands and shoulders were supposed to go and trying not to trip over his own shoelaces.

And gradually, his surroundings, too, began to look familiar. Wood signposts dissolved into mailboxes. The dirt beneath their feet turned to sidewalk. Suddenly, he was back in his old neighbourhood, houses he recognized that belonged to people he hardly knew, and once that happened all trace of the old Morioh was gone.

“Where we headed?” asked Okuyasu.

“I know Vox is waiting for me somewhere and I figure it’s got something to do with my memories.”

He came to a stop, shoes scraping against the sidewalk. They were standing outside his house, though – when he got a closer look at it – it was a version of his house that had never really existed. The mailbox was from a year ago; his grandfather’s bike was still in the garage; the flowers his mother had planted just last month were in bloom in the garden. The house he was seeing was like some kind of temporal amalgam: a collection of all the things he remembered best about it.

“Here?” asked Okuyasu.

“I think so.”

At Okuyasu’s side, the Hand appeared. To Josuke, he turned. “We doin’ this?”

“You know it!”

Moments later, the front door burst clean from its hinges and went flying down the hall of the Higashikata home. Josuke stepped through the door after it, Crazy Diamond moving in step with him, and Okuyasu followed.

“Hello?!” Okuyasu called out.

“Dude, you’re not supposed to let it know we’re here!”

“Who cares? We busted the door in; I think it knows.”

Into the living room, Josuke ducked his head. Late afternoon light poured in through the windows, suffusing the room in a golden blush.

“Anything?” asked Okuyasu as Josuke stepped back out into the hall.
“Nope.”

“How ‘bout I grab upstairs?”

“You mean, ‘bout I grab upstairs?”

After Okuyasu’s footsteps thundered up the stairs, Josuke did a slow turn of the ground floor, but found nothing. The worst part was – he wasn’t even surprised. Something didn’t feel quite right.

“Where the hell are they?” Josuke growled under his breath.

You seem to have some misconceptions about hauntings, we remarked.

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Well. It’s not about the place, per-say. It’s about the feelings that tie someone to a place.

We highly doubt, we added as Josuke slid open the door to the toilet, that your six year-old-self felt a significant emotional attachment to the lavatory. Though psychoanalysts might disagree.

“It was easier last time,” he complained. “At the cliffs – I really felt like those memories were trying to tell me something.”

Who’s to say they’re not doing the same thing right now? We asked.

Against his forehead, Josuke pressed a fist. He tried to think, to pick out from his memories all the little moments of emotion that had lingered on years later – the bits of him that had become living ghosts.

There was him sitting on the steps after Jotaro’s accident and after Yuki disappeared, the guilt he wasn’t old enough to understand yet gnawing a hole through his chest. The bright flash of lights, pixels on the screen, elated feelings of determination and triumph with each harmony acquired; the strange thrill of the blue-dark outside the windows as a summer evening wore to night; the burls of Jotaro’s knuckles, tendons moving under the skin of his hands as he worked the controller – something about it, comforting. The nervous thrill of easing open the suitcase. The desperation and dismay of the days his nephew seemed glued to the couch. The smell of cigarette smoke, window open – the adultness of the smell making Josuke nervous.

In the hallway, Josuke paused. Bounding down the carpet runner, he threw open the door beside the stairs – but there was nothing behind it, of course, except a few coats and some miscellaneous things stuffed into plastic grocery bags.

“Dammit,” hissed Josuke.

We told you, we began –.

“Yeah, I know. The more familiar you are with a place, blah blah blah, the harder it gets to see the doors.”

At least you were paying attention.

Overhead, he heard footsteps. Okuyasu appeared at the bottom of the steps.

“I’ve got nothing,” he said. “You?”

Just then, Josuke remembered the conversation he’d had with Koichi about the basement. It occurred
to him he’d never finished telling Okuyasu the story.

“Hey,” he said. “You trust me, right?”

“S’kinda hard to when you put it that way.”

To Okuyasu’s surprise, Josuke closed his eyes and held out a hand.

“What’re you – .”

“Come on, take it,” said Josuke.

“But – .”

“Just take it.” When he felt Okuyasu’s hand close around his own, Josuke sucked in a breath and continued: “You know how I told you about how Jotaro was staying in the basement that one summer? It’s right through the door. Can you take us down there?”

“Can’t ya walk down yourself?”

“Just trust me on this.”

“A’ight.”

Through the warm dark on the inside of his eyelids, Josuke could hear the door creak open. There was a pause. He felt his heart sink in his throat – for a moment, he thought it wasn’t just him, that all Okuyasu could see either was the closet and the crawl space that had been put in when his mother had filled in the basement.

Then, he felt a tug on his hand. He took a stumbling step forward – a gruff “Watch it!” from Okuyasu as his foot fell through where the closet floor should be. Another step. Down they descended, into the humid enclosure of a basement that had not existed in ten years.

***

At the edge of the forest, Josuke looked back over his shoulder. The lights from the town were a twinkle in the distance – from where he stood, they looked like far-off boats, adrift somewhere where the faint shapes of the marsh disappeared into black. Over the water, fireflies hung, winking slowly on and off. Their light refracted in the steam off the water as the night air cooled, making them look like ghoulish green spirit lamps hovering out over the bog.

Overhead, the black pines towered above him, their silhouettes blotting out the faint silver starlight. In all the years people had lived in the area, in old Morioh and new Morioh and everything that had predeceased both, this alone hadn’t changed: the view of the moon and the way the pine trees looked at night and the sound the wind made as it blew through them.

Back on the highway, he’d been hesitant. The familiar trappings of his home had been close at hand, ready at the rescue. But all the way out here, the highway and the town were small and toy-like, and suddenly he was no longer fighting the urge to turn back.

From his belt loop, Josuke slipped the flashlight. Then, he walked into the forest.

Chapter End Notes
Please look up pictures of the lambeosaurus. I worked too hard for that joke.
So in case you missed the tumblr post: the climatic chapter is in video game form!

**Download Links**

- [Google Drive](#)
- [Dropbox](#)

**Installation Instructions**

Note: Most antivirus softwares do not take kindly to random zip and exe files downloaded off the internet, so there is a very good chance yours will throw a fit. Windows defender freaked out when I did my test downloads. If this happens to you too, just click on "More info" and there should be a "run anyway" option. You may need to be the administrator on your computer to do this.

**For Mac users:** If you are an OS user, you can install [Wine Bottler](#) to run the game -- note that I do not own a Mac and therefore have not tried this myself, but if you run into any issues let me know and I will do my best to help.

1. Download the file.
1. Extract the zip folder. This will give you an exe file.

1. Double click on the exe. It will prompt you to choose a location for the game folder. Select a location and let it run.
1. Open the game folder and double click on the application file (see screenshot below). As a bonus, the RPG Maker project file is included -- if you are an RPG Maker fan, feel free to crack it open and poke around!

**Gameplay**

- Control the characters using the arrow keys.
- Use enter/space to interact with objects, select dialogue options, etc.
- Use the escape key to bring up the menu to save the game, use skills, etc.
- Use the shift key to fast-forward through dialogue

**Accessibility Resources**

If you are unable to play the game for whatever reason, you can still catch the story at these following resources:

- [Game Playthrough (Youtube)](link)
- [PDF Script](link) for the visually impaired (it's pretty bare-bones, since I mostly used it as an outline, but you still get all the dialogue, which is the important bit)

**General Notes**

- This game has three different endings! A bad ending, a neutral/good ending, and a golden/true ending. The latter is the one that will be treated as 'canon' in the last two chapters.
- Depending on your own personal speed, the estimated playtime for the game on a first playthrough is 45 minutes - 1 hour.
- I know the game is far from perfect and still has a few bugs! I could have definitely done more with it. Please try to keep in mind that I am just one person with not a whole lot of free time! I am very passionate about what I do and I always pour my heart into my work, but I have limited energy and other obligations out in meat space, so at some point, I usually find I need to put down my work and call it a day, even if there are things I know I could have done better.
• This game is based on Mother, the famicom game that has been referenced throughout the fic! If you're familiar with the game, you'll recognize many of the sprite assets and songs.
• I am super out of practice when it comes to art, so please forgive the mediocre ending art inserts akdfjlksfld.
• If you have any trouble with the game installation, or if you are having trouble getting past a level, please feel free to reach out to me! My email is shylittleghost.th@gmail.com. You can also message me on tumblr (honey-nut-doppios).
• If you want to upload your own playthrough on youtube, let me know! I would love to feature it on this page :)

And that's all! Thank you so much for your patience. We're on the home stretch now. Hopefully the last couple chapters will be a lot quicker coming!
Chapter Notes

Just a reminder - everything going forward is based on the golden ending of the last chapter! If you didn't get that ending on your playthrough, you can watch it here! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Lyk-1ezNVA&t=2124s Go go go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The vertigo kicked in somewhere between the bottom of the stairs and the top. Squiggles floated in front of Josuke’s eyes and darkness crowded the edges of his vision like an iris shot in a silent film. He could see well enough if he kept his head straight, but the moment he moved – turned his head, took a step – his vision blurred. More and more the shadows around him deepened and the lights grew brighter, until the doorway up ahead at the top of the step was reduced to the light at the end of the tunnel: a painted-on cut-out of an exit, acme-white on a solid wall.

Suddenly, he was staring down the hallway of his house, cheek pressed into the carpet runner. The walls were tilted on their sides, and from somewhere behind him he heard Okuyasu mutter, “Ah, fuck.”

Josuke tried to tell Okuyasu he was fine, but his lips felt heavy and slack and he couldn’t muster up the energy to move them, and then he was opening his eyes again and his cheek was no longer pressed into the carpet runner but into the cold metal frame of the shopping cart. Clang clang clang. The wheels rattled beneath him. One of them kept sticking; every few paces the cart would give a violent jerk.

In the gaps between the metal mesh, stone walls snaked by. Half-timbered edifices, stoic cousins of their European counterparts. Rusted flashes of autumn leaves gathered in the road’s shoulder. Clothes hanging out on a line, translucent in the sunlight. Bus stop signs standing alone in the rain. The decaying smell of wet thatch; the sharp, woodsy sent of a fire on a winter’s night.

Keeping his eyes open was difficult, so he let them slip closed once again. The conversation from the streets pressed in close, all the individual voices coalescing into a booming chatter like he was in the midst of a crowded room, ricocheting back and forth in the cavernous dark on the underside of his eyelids…

Overhead, snow whirled past a black backdrop at an unhurried pace, disappearing as it passed in front of the white glow of the streetlamps.

More voices. Lights and shadows. Josuke’s body felt strange all around him: a too-bulky suit draped over his skeleton.

Then time got a little slippery.

Light through thin, cheap curtains, catching on the coarse weave. The soft click and beep and whirl of instrumentation.

And again: night, artificial light through the window casting staggered spokes on the popcorn ceiling. Shadows snagged on the edges of the ceiling’s divots, giving it a strangely lunar look.
Josuke tried to turn his head to look around. He found himself looking through a bed railing to a nightstand on the other side. Sitting on the table was a potted plant. A swath of Asiatic lilies in plastic pink shades peaked out from folds of foil wrapping. The flowers were furled up for the night, showing Josuke the poisonous-looking spots on the backs of their petals; as he looked closely, trying to find something, anything he could fix his attention on, a pair of startling yellow eyes suddenly flashed open in the bouquet’s recesses and blinked at him.

Once again, his vision faded out. Pain throbbed behind his eyes. The room was spinning beneath him. He felt pinned down by the heaviness of his limbs, like he was strapped to one of those medieval torture wheels, going round and round and round. Every thought he had seemed to congeal the moment it entered existence, getting nowhere, all premises without conclusion: Where was he? Still in the other Morioh, or back in his own? Had they defeated Vox? Did the 5:36 train arrive safely at the station?

His chest was tightening, heart pounding in the straightjacket of his ribs. A hot flush swept through his body. Later, he might have recognized these symptoms as the onset of a panic attack. At present, however, he just thought he’d screwed up for real this time: he was brain-damaged or paralyzed, or he’d got himself trapped in a semi-lucid purgatory in Morioh’s underworld.

Then, with his eyes still closed, the nasally, pneumatic whine of a machine of some kind came into hearing. And under the loud wail, a voice singing: rough, gravelly, indistinct, tunefully mumbling through a phonetic semblance of unremembered lyrics.

On hearing the voice, he had the peculiar feeling of reminiscing about something he couldn’t recall. As though he couldn’t remember the thing itself, but he could remember the feelings attached to it, and in this case, those feelings left him with a comforting weight radiating out from his center, like a small warm animal curled on his chest. And just like that, all Josuke’s uncertainties and anxieties seemed to sluice off him, and he drifted off under the beckoning call of sleep.

***

He wasn’t exactly sure when he managed to wake up for good, but at some point, he found himself staring at a sunbeam that lay across the pillow next to him, and this time, keeping his eyes open didn’t feel like a fight against gravity.

Josuke’s mind was still slow and syrupy, but otherwise, he felt no different than he would after waking up from a long nap. Everything that had gone down in the other Morioh felt like it had happened only an hour or so ago, but he recognized by the mid-morning clarity of the light that it must have been longer than that.

Tilting his head, he peered down at himself. Blue cotton night shift. Tubes secured at his elbow with white medical-grade tape. Not that he was all that surprised – it wasn’t his first stint in the hospital, though it was the first time he couldn’t remember how he’d ended up there in the first place.

Beneath him, he felt a shift in the mattress. By his side, black hair spilled over the thin ratty hospital sheet: Tomoko, face buried in her folded arms, one closed eye showing through the part in her hair. She was sitting in a hospital chair, surrounded on all sides by monitors and IV’s. Her back was hunched over; as Josuke watched, her spine bowed and collapsed slowly with each deep breath. He could hear her soft, congested, open-mouthed snoring. Fast asleep. Her purse was on the floor. The tiny hospital garbage can was stuffed full of empty coffee cups and chip bags. She smelt like grease and black coffee and unwashed hair and vending machine snacks; like dark rose perfume and nicotine and a third application of deodorant, aluminic and sharp; she smelt stale in the same way staying up until five AM felt.
When he thought about reaching out to her, Josuke was surprised to see his body obey his brain’s instructions: he watched with distant, third-person interest as one hand came up to rest on top of Tomoko’s head. His sense of his body was vague and far away. The hand on his mother’s head might as well have been in another room somewhere, being piloted by remote control.

All at once the warm, solid shape beneath his hand disappeared as Tomoko jolted back in her seat.

“You—,” she bit out, in the same leading emphasis that preceded every one of her emotional extremes, so that Josuke had no way of knowing if he was about to face down an inquisition or a tribunal of tears or her arms around his neck in a noose.

He decided to cut her off before he could find out. “Hey,” he mumbled.

She composed herself, taking a deep breath and clearing her throat. Locking her hands together (fingers bent at sharp angles, tendons standing out against the backs of her hands), she leaned over the bed’s railing. “Have you been up long?” she asked.

“Nah. I mean. It’s like I’ve been kind of in and out? I’m awake now, though. Definitely awake.”

Awake, and already wishing he wasn’t: the pain was slowly creeping back, stealing his breath away between words.

His mother’s fingers gave a squeeze. “Yeah, well. You were out pretty good for a while there. They had you intubated and the whole nine yards. You just started breathing on your own last night.”

“How long was I out?” asked Josuke, voice rising to a panicked pitch by the last word.

“A couple days,” said Tomoko. “You were up before they operated, I guess. The doc said you were all over the place. Couldn’t get a single useful answer out of you.”

Then she pried her hands apart and set them down atop the coverlet: her fingers still half-curled, the tension not quite gone. Her eyes settled on him, pupils fixed dead in place, lips pressed tight into a thin line. The expression a warning: she’d worn the same look to the dinner table the night after his grandfather passed away, the first time they’d felt the absence in that empty chair. The “we need to talk” look.

Last time, on the ride into the hospital, there’d been a SPW representative in the back of the ambulance with him to explain – in a clipped, professional voice that made the lie seem perfectly legitimate – the cover story that would be repeated to the police and Morioh’s local news agency. A gas leak, huge explosion, senseless tragedy, blah blah blah.

This time, he had no idea what his mother had been told or what convenient story the stooges at the Speedwagon Foundation had cooked up to explain his coincidental proximity to a serial killer. By then, word of Sato Fujimoto’s crimes would have already gotten out. Even if Tomoko hadn’t made the connection, there was no way she was going to believe he’d accidentally fallen on a knife.

So he averted his gaze and waited for the questions to fall.

“How –.” Tomoko paused, sucking the air through her teeth. Oh boy, though Josuke. Here it comes.

“How… are you feeling?”

“Well.,” Josuke paused, sucking the air through his teeth. Oh boy, though Josuke. Here it comes.

“Alright,” Josuke mumbled with the exact same reluctant hesitation of someone who’d just been asked to stick their arm in a bear trap

He braced himself, waiting for Tomoko to ask him about how he’d gotten the knife wound or why
he’d jumped out of the car back at the intersection or what the hell did he think he was doing?

“How’s the egg?” she asked. “Scrambled?”

Josuke gave a slow blink. He wondered if he’d somehow missed part of the conversation. “Good… I guess?” he stammered. “Scrambled’s… good?”

“Scrambled not good.”

“Sorry?”

Reaching out, she flicked him on the forehead. “I’m talking about that noggin of yours.”

Josuke raised a hand to touch the crown of his head. A familiar throb answered the pressure – but it was duller now, easier to ignore. “Oh, yeah. Right.”

“Forgot scrambled. I think you’ve gone right to meringue.”

Tomoko leaned back, plastic hospital chair creaking beneath her. One leg crossed over the other, hand to her chin, regarding him with an expression like she couldn’t quite figure out what she was looking at.

“When were you planning on telling me about the concussion?” she asked.

Before he could process the question, Josuke was already opening his mouth, excuses tumbling out in a heap – “What concussion? Did the doctor say I have a concussion?” – And he was becoming aware, not for the first time that summer, that his first response to stress was to disassemble.

Tomoko waved him off. “Look, don’t worry about it. Hey – speaking of egg, when’s the last time you put had something in your chow-hole, kiddo?”

At the question, Josuke’s stomach gave a flip. “Dunno, damn I’m starving.”

“Not loving the liquid diet, hunh?”

“They had me on a feeding tube?”

“Kiddo, they had a tube in you for everything. There were tubes for bodily functions I didn’t even know existed.” She was grinning, but her voice sounded rough when she added: “We didn’t know how long of a haul you were in for.”

She was holding back, Josuke realized: her fingers knotted in a death-grip on the sheets, physically restraining herself from prodding the way she normally would.

The muscles along Tomoko’s neck constricted as she swallowed – then another smile cut into the corners of her lips. She wasn’t wearing lipstick, Josuke noticed – without it, her mouth seemed small. “How about I grab ya something from the food court?” she asked.

Josuke pinched his face together. He’d had plenty of opportunity to sample the food court’s cuisine on his last trip to the hospital. The memory of stickerized plastic bento boxes, transparent clamshell covers fogged with precipitation, and the vinegary, formaldehydic taste of preservatives was enough to quell his appetite.

Tomoko must have seen the change in his expression. “No good, eh?” she asked.

“Maybe something from the 7-11 instead?” Josuke offered weakly.
“Really? You’d rather have convenience store grub instead? Hey, I’ll tell you what – .” Over the hospital bed railing she leaned, arms folded beneath her chin. “How about I drive downtown – .” (‘downtown’ being a generous way of referring to the part of Morioh that had traffic lights) “—And pick you up something?”

“Yeah? Alright.”

“There’s a new-ish Italian place in town I guess,” Tomoko continued. “Trendy’s? Trussardi’s? Something like that. A little birdy tells me the grub there’s good if you’re on the mend.”

When Josuke gave her a wide-eyed look, she added: “That sound good to you?”

“I – I could probably go for Italian, yeah,” Josuke stuttered. He wondered if his mother was aware of the unique properties of Tonio’s cooking. Our readers should bear in mind that this was 1999, before the advent of internet restaurant reviews would have made short work of Tonio Trussardi’s eccentric culinary career.

“Alright! So it’s a plan then,” said Tomoko, slapping her knees.

She rocked forward onto her feet, folding at the middle to retrieve her purse. When she straightened out she was holding a set of keys. Charm on the keyring: Valentine heart with cartoon eyes and perturbed eyebrows. She tossed the keys up and caught them in one quick flick of her wrist.

“You hang tight – don’t go running off anywhere, hear me?”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” said Josuke. To demonstrate exactly how much he was not planning on running off anywhere, he lifted an arm – wincing as one of the needles pinched his skin – and a tangle of wires and tubes followed the movement.

As a child, it had been impossible for him to imagine anything bad happening to him as long as his mother was there with him, as if the same tone of authority she took when she was calling him by his full name could boss the universe into behaving. Even now, there was still a radius of security that seemed to follow her around. When she walked out of the room and shut the door behind her, that security went with her. Suddenly, he was thinking about the Other Morioh, and his last few vivid memories of fighting Vox before its voice had lulled him under, like Yukako’s hypnosis, only this time the trick had worked. And he was thinking about the bodies under the stone roof where the train tracks had been, and whether Okuyasu, Koichi and Yukako had made it back alright, and he was thinking about how long he’d be stuck in the hospital, and as all these anxieties rushed over him at once he began to feel dizzy, his body pins-and-needles paralyzed like someone had shot him up with Novocain.

He needed a distraction. There was a television monitor on the wall opposite. Josuke’s hand shot out toward the nightstand in search of a remote – something to keep him from having to think for a while – when he felt his knuckles knock against something. A sudden counterbalance, a shift in weight he felt as acutely as if it the other object were a part of his own body. And it was at that exact moment he remembered the potted plant on the nightstand.

Just when the pot was about to hit the ground, Crazy Diamond flashed into being and caught it.

As his stand was setting the plant back down on the nightstand, Josuke noticed for the first time the little card tied around the foil wrapper by a thread of twine: “Get well soon! –O.” But what caught him off guard was the sound the plant had made when Crazy Diamond placed it down. A kind of growl.
Josuke stared at the plant. The plant stared back.

“Easy,” Josuke mumbled as the growl deepened into a snarl. “Good… kitty?”

Stray Cat glowered at him. Then – as if by a change in the wind – its attention shifted away. As Josuke watched, it batted peevishly at one of the Asiatic lilies, apparently not enjoying its company.

Outside, the sun slipped free of its cloud cover. A sunbeam fell across the nightstand. Stray Cat, taking notice, perked up. It strained its leaves toward the patch of light, but the plastic pot refused to budge.

“Here,” said Josuke.

With more effort than he cared to admit (his arms felt weak and exhausted, as if he’d spent all day lifting weights instead of lying in bed), Josuke managed to nudge the pot into the sunlight. Immediately, Stray Cat curled up, its eyelids dropping over its big yellow eyes as it settled in for an afternoon snooze. When Josuke stroke its – ears? Petals? – it even let out a content purr.

The sun’s warmth was making him sleepy again. He sank back into the pillow, letting his eyes relax. He found himself gazing at the walls. They were painted coral, with green racing stripes running horizontal to the floor – a stark contrast to Budogaoka Hospital’s inoffensive off-white, the same color as sun-bleached sea shells. Budogaoka was a newer hospital, completed five years or so prior to service Morioh’s growing population. S City Regional was older. The last time it had undergone a renovation was during the height of the eighties.

Though it was the first time in years since Josuke had been to S City Regional – his last hospital trip had been to Budogaoka – he remembered its interior better than Budogaoka’s. S City Regional’s décor was an empty mockery of aesthetic – something Mikitaka might come up with if Josuke showed him a few pictures from a fashion magazine and told him to design a whole building interior based on the backdrops. And yet, strangely, that dart of green along the walls was as familiar to him as an individual brushstroke in a painting.

Outside, muffled by the double-pane glass, he could hear the squeak of brakes and the growl of engines. The Regional was right downtown, sitting on the pulse of the city, and the sound of it carried even in the sterile hospital room.

He closed his eyes, and listened.

*Overhead, the ribbon of telephone wire gave way to the frowning, concrete faces of tall buildings. Post-war office towers: tiny windows, severity and claustrophobia. The way the buildings crowded out the sky made it look like they were hunched over the bed of the truck, peering down, scrutinizing.

When the truck rolled up to a red light, Josuke clambered out the back. He held onto the ledge for a split second, legs kicking in the empty air beneath him – then let go. His feet landed flat on the asphalt.*

“Come on,” he hissed to Yuki, as he stood on his tiptoes and stretched out his arms toward her. The fumes from the truck’s exhaust pipe felt warm against his bare knees.

*For a moment, he was terrified the truck would pull away and take Yuki with it. But then she crawled over to him, and he grabbed the back of her jumper and hauled her into his arms, and by the time the light turned green he was left standing on the sidewalk with the toddler balanced against his chest. The neon stoplights raised a halo around his skin where it caught on the gooseflesh.*

“We home?” Yuki asked.
“No, I don’t think so,” Josuke mumbled. His voice sounded hollow, a slight echo ringing at the end of the sentence from the way it bounced off the tall buildings all around them. “We’re in S City. I think.”

Not that he recognized the place – he’d only been to the city once or twice before – but it was the only city he knew, so he couldn’t think of anywhere else he could be.

As he did a slow turn around, looking for a payphone, a corner shop, anywhere where he could call for help, Josuke noticed the building across the street. A long, tree-lined drive-up preceded it, gated off by a toll booth. But what caught Josuke’s eye was the symbol on the building’s side: a red cross.

“Where we going?” asked Yuki when he darted across the street after making a quick check for cars in either direction.

“Hospital,” said Josuke. “I was here with mom before – they’ll know what to do!”

The doors opened with a sighing sound. Josuke found himself standing in a waiting room: glossy speckled titles; rows of chairs upholstered in antimicrobial black vinyl; plexiglass windows into the triage stations and reception, yellow light spilling out over the floor.

When Josuke stood on his tiptoes and peered over the counter into the reception office, it was empty. ‘Attitude is everything!’ a poster on the wall declared. He could hear voices from somewhere behind the office’s closed door, women’s laughter – but he was too nervous to call out for someone.

By then his arms were beginning to tire again, so he set Yuki down on one of the waiting room chairs.

“I need to go find help,” said Josuke.

“Jo-jo,” Yuki babbled in reply.

Josuke took a quick glance around. There was no one in sight, but everywhere there were signs of life just beneath the hospital’s dormant surface. The murmurs from the back office. The wet floor sign on the freshly polished tile and the sound of the floor cleaning machine still running somewhere down another corridor. For six year old Josuke, who understood the hospital only as a place you went when you were sick, where there were nurses and doctors and people who could help you, the idea of anything bad happening in that building seemed unfathomable.

So he said to Yuki: “You wait here, okay? If anyone weird tries to talk to you, to just…” he paused to take a quick stock of the defensive mechanisms available to a two-year-old child. “…Scream real loud.”

Yuki, taking this as a queue to demonstrate, opened her mouth and let out an ear-splitting shriek. Josuke clamped a hand down over her mouth.

“Not now,” he hissed. “Just… don’t move. Okay?”

“O-K!” said Yuki.

“I’ll be right back.”

“O-K!”

Signs on the walls, arrows pointing in the direction of an information icon. Question mark. Josuke followed the signs, body-numb, his mind somewhere not quite present. Hallway after hallway, each
identical to the last: coral walls, green racing stripes, bumper handrails. Eventually, he exited from the emergency wing into a wide, sweeping atrium. At its center: benches arranged around a fake plant display, an artificial waterfall gurgling away, glug, glug glug. All around the atrium were darkened, gated shopfronts.

Josuke wandered past the shut-up shops, glancing furtively at the wire-rack displays of keychains and postcards inside. The locks on the gates made him feel like he was trespassing, like he was seeing something he wasn’t supposed to see. The feeling doubled when he stepped up to the information desk and saw the receptionist tucked into a carton of instant ramen, his eyes glued to the screen of a portable rabbit-ear television set.

“Excuse me?”

The receptionist started. He set his noodles down and leaned over the desk, one hand held over his mouth as he finished chewing. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Josuke paused. He’d planned on asking for help – if the receptionist could call his mom or Yuki’s mom or just about anyone – but a thought occurred to him.

“I… I’m here to visit someone,” he stammered.

“Where’s your mother?”

As the receptionist asked this, his eyes slowly made their way down Josuke’s body. Josuke glanced down, noticing for the first time the grass stains and mud on his knees and the scrapes peppered across his legs.

“She’s in the bathroom,” he lied.

When the receptionist spoke again, whatever edge there’d been to his voice before was gone. Now he just sounded bored. “I’m sorry,” he said in a voice that suggested he’d repeated the words a thousand times before, “but visiting hours are over.”

Just as he was beginning to doze off, the sound of singing drifted into the room from out in the hallway:

“There's a border line in front of me,
the future is close, yet impossibly far away
happiness likes to hide its face
when I'm feeling satisfied
there's no time to spend looking back,
to take a load off my feet and relax
I'm longin’ for the strength to live,
let me stay here just a little longer.”

This time, he recognized the voice. He’d heard it back in the basement. Back then it had been dark all around and the voices were everywhere, whispers and wails overlapping with a rustling sound that rose slowly to a shriek he could feel rattling deep in his frame. Hopes and dreams shattered by lives cut short; the dismay of parents who’d been powerless to protect their children; the long, drawn-
out despair of suffocating in the dark, waiting for help that would never come. Life to the Voice in the Dark was one great big cosmic joke, full of meaningless violence and uncertain tomorrows. Josuke had felt all that rage and vindication run through him as though it were water and his mind a hollowed-out vessel, and for a brief time, he’d even believed in it.

Then another voice had reached him in the dark. Warm, familiar – hearing it made him feel the same way he did whenever he came across an old cartoon or a playground he remembered visiting when he was younger: nostalgia for something he knew wasn’t quite real but he wanted so deeply to believe in anyway, to chase down doggedly in his memories: grass under his back and warm hands in his and popsicles and laughter and the last streaks of sunset before nightfall, fires in the dark and the neon holographic glimmering vapor trails left in the wake of a happiness that always seemed just one step ahead, the thrill of pursuit. And though he couldn’t remember much of what was said, at the time he knew he only had to hold onto that voice and ride out the darkness and everything would be alright.

Okuyasu strolled into the room, pushing a mop bucket in front of him. Swivel wheels clattered over the threshold. He didn’t seem to notice that Josuke was awake, or staring right at him, or that the look on Josuke’s face was one that maybe Josuke might have been embarrassed of, if he wasn’t still loopy on whatever drugs they were dripping into his IV. Okuyasu had headphones over his ears and a Walkman on his belt. He was wearing what looked like blue scrubs, with a plastic name tag clipped to his breast pocket.

Without bothering to wring out the mop, Okuyasu plopped it down on the floor. Soapy water flooded over linoleum. He had his eyes closed, lower jaw jutted out as he sang to himself over the tinny, muffled melody that blasted from the headphones loud enough for even Josuke to hear:

“Meeting you made my heart shiver with each new thing
we could both trust in.
Nothing could get in the way,
on the road to you, now I want to bundle my love
and send it your way.”

Josuke had never heard Okuyasu sing before. He kept his voice low, as if the song were a secret he was whispering to the room. Even half-whispering, however, Okuyasu’s singing was warm with passion, shooting hard at the highs, voice cracking, his expression twisting and contorting around the lyrics as the notes pulled at the puppet strings of his face.

“Okuyasu,” Josuke called out in an effort to get the other boy’s attention.

But Okuyasu didn’t notice, not at first. Only when he dredged another heavy mop-load of water across the hospital floor and noticed the movement in the wet floor’s reflection did his head snap up.

“You’re awake!” he blurted, ripping off his headphones.

“I’ve been awake,” said Josuke.

Against a wall, Okuyasu leaned the mop. His hand lingered in front of it for a moment, like the mop was an animal and he was trying to get it to stay put. “I should,” he stuttered, “I gotta – Dr. Manabe will wanna – .”

“I’ll want to, what?”
There was a woman standing in the doorway: lab coat rolled up to her elbows, the harried look of someone who had fifty different places to be all at once.

Before Okuyasu could answer, she turned to Josuke and said: “Josuke? I’m Dr. Manabe. Your mother told us you’d woken up. How are you feeling?”


“Good. Do you mind if I smoke in here?”

Josuke was about to say he didn’t mind when Dr. Manabe whipped out a pack of cigarettes. “Thanks,” she said, “I’m trying to quit but the nicotine helps keep me awake.”

As she was lighting up a cigarette, Dr. Manabe’s eyes fell on the mop. “Mopping in here again, Okuyasu?” she asked.

“Well, uh –,” Okuyasu began.

“You’re lucky, Mr. Higashikata,” Dr. Manabe continued, slipping her lighter back into her lab coat pocket. “Room 4J has got to be the cleanest room in the whole unit. The whole hospital, even.”

When Okuyasu dragged a hand across his forehead, his face was flushed and shiny like a pink gumball. “I should, uh, leave you to, uh–.”

“You stay right there. Now, Josuke: can you take off your hospital shirt for me or do you need help?”

“I can get it!” Josuke squawked.

He sat up, in a hurry to rip the Johnny shirt off for fear that if he didn’t do it in the next half second, Dr. Manabe would do him the honours – and it was precisely then, with the night shirt partially pulled over his head, that Josuke came to a horrific realization:

Included among all the wires and tubes the ICU had left him hooked up to, was a catheter.

Somehow, in the nary-a-second it took Josuke to get his night shirt off, Dr. Manabe had thrown on a pair of latex gloves. Her stubbed-out cigarette was balanced over one ear like a pencil.

“I’m going to be taking off your bandages, ‘kay?” With the bandages off – so quickly Josuke barely had time to process it – she said: “Now some of the things you need to look out for – Okuyasu, come a little closer please – some of the things you need to look out for are any odours, pus, discoloration…” She went through this list with the same methodical indifference with which other people read out their grocery list.

“Gotcha,” said Okuyasu.

Much to Josuke’s apprehension, Okuyasu was leaning over the hospital bed, politely examining the ugly, gnarled seam that ran along his side. Dr. Manabe, at least, had spared him his dignity by leaving the hospital sheet rolled up around his waist.

“Redness and swelling too – that’s something else you should watch for,” Dr. Manabe continued as she traced around the wound in the air with the tip of a ballpoint pen. “Any fever?”

Josuke, for a second, didn’t realize the question was directed at him.
“No,” he stammered when she repeated the question. He was still stuck on trying to think of a way to ask Dr. Manabe to remove the catheter without Okuyasu overhearing. “At least not that I – hey!”

“Sorry, does this bother you?” asked Dr. Manabe. She was shining a pen light in Josuke’s eyes. Once again, without waiting for a reply: “I just need to check your eyes – how’s your sight? Any blurriness?”

“No –.”

“Headaches? Migraines?”

“Yeah, I –.”

“Where at?”

“Kinda, around here I guess?” Josuke offered, touching his forehead, near the hairline.

“And if you had to rate the pain on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the worst pain you’ve ever experienced in your life?”

“I don’t know, maybe a six –.”

“Okay Josuke,” said Dr. Manabe, rising to her feet, “everything looks good here.”

“It does?” asked Josuke. He was starting to panic – maybe a six had been lowballing it, maybe he should have gone with a seven or eight instead.

“If anything gets worse, or you have any concerns, let us know right away.”

“Hey! Wait up!”

Dr. Manabe’s eyes went to the clock on the wall; as she spoke, Josuke could see her gaze following the second hand. “Yes? What is it?”

“Now that I’m up an about, do you think I could, uh, get some of the plumbing unhooked?” When the meaningful look he gave her was met with a blank stare, he added, stammering: “Y-you know – like, go off grid, ditch the water main?”

“Right. Excellent idea,” said Dr. Manabe, without inflection. To Okuyasu, she turned. “You’re comfortable changing his dressing, right?”

“Yeah, sure I –.”

“And could you remove the catheter while you’re at it? Mr. Higashikata seems insistent.”

“No!” Josuke squawked, his voice cracking for the first time since puberty. “I think I’m good, actually.”

“Alright. Well, if you change your mind…”

Dr. Manabe patted her breast pocket and frowned. “Now – where’d I put that cigarette?”

“Ear,” Okuyasu choked out. He was watering a bit around the eyes, circles of sweat forming at the armpits of his scrubs.

From behind her ear, Dr. Manabe plucked the cigarette. “There we go. Good thing I’m not in
surgery. Who knows where I’d be losing things? – Anyway, it was nice meeting you, Josuke. I’ll be seeing you again.”

“You too?” Josuke squeaked.

For all Dr. Manabe’s haste, the time it took for her to leave the room – no more than a second, if he were to time it – still felt to Josuke like an eternity. But at last the door clicked softly into place and he and Okuyasu were left staring one another down. Between the color of his face and the sweat beading down his neck, Okuyasu looked like he was seconds away from spontaneous human combustion.

He’d been dying to get Okuyasu alone again. From the moment Josuke had heard Okuyasu’s voice and seen him stroll into the room, relief, affection, and guilt had been battering him relentlessly, like waves. And for all that, the moment they were finally alone, all Josuke’s doped-up brain could think to say was:

“Nice get-up. Where the hell did you manage to snag it?”

“Whaddya mean?” asked Okuyasu. From his waistband he unclipped the Walkman and carefully set it on the nightstand.

“I mean, that’s how you were able to sneak in to see me, right? Dressing up like that?”

The sound of water running. Okuyasu was standing over the hospital room’s sink, his back to Josuke. “I didn’t sneak in,” Okuyasu retorted. Quick jerks of his elbows as he washed his hands: frustration, or maybe annoyance. “I work here.”

If Okuyasu had been anyone else, Josuke would have assumed he was joking – but this was Okuyasu. Okuyasu, who had no poker face to speak of; Okuyasu, who never could take a joke himself; Okuyasu, who couldn’t tell a lie if he was reading one off a teleprompter.

“How come you never said anything?” asked Josuke, because suddenly it was all fitting together. Okuyasu’s perpetual state of exhaustion over the last several weeks. All those times he seemed to up and disappear.

“You’d make fun of me if I told ya,” Okuyasu grumbled.

“You in some kind of trouble?”

Josuke tried to lift his head from the pillow to get a better look at Okuyasu, but his head felt like it weighed the same as a bowling ball.

“My pops is like, loaded,” he added. “If we asked Jotaro he could probably –.”

“Knock it off, dude! I got it handled.”

“Why the hell would you get a job all the way out here anyway? Bet they’d pay you the same to scoop ice cream at Johnny’s. Beats wiping shit off the floor.”

“S’not like that.”

Okuyasu’s voice faded in and out as he moved around the room. His eyes were everywhere but on Josuke.

“I saw this flyer,” Okuyasu continued. Over to Josuke’s bed, he wheeled a table. “Jus’ – out of the
blue one day. For some kinda first-aid course. And at first I was thinkin’, there’s no way in hell I’m gonna sit in some classroom all summer, but then it put this idea in my head, you know? An’ I figure, if you can’t patch yourself up, maybe it’d be good if someone else could to it for ya.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Josuke pointed out, feeling his face heat up.

“I don’t give a shit about what I don’t hafta do,” Okuyasu retorted. “I wanted to do it. So.”

On the table, Okuyasu laid out a row of white sterile packages. Josuke slowly realized, with a drowsy sort of surprise, that Dr. Manabe had mentioned something about changing his dressing.

“So, uh,” he began, “did the hospital offer you a job after your course or something?”

“Nah. Sorta. See, I got talking to this one nurse who was teaching the thing, real nice lady, and she told me I should look up Dr. Manabe.”

One at a time, Okuyasu opened the packages. There was something methodical in the way he went about it, starting at the corners and working his way out, but what that method was Josuke had no clue.

“So I did, and it worked out great!” Okuyasu exclaimed. He cracked open a bottle of clear fluid – which, from context, Josuke gathered to be anything but water – and poured a little into one of the open packages. “…’Cept with Dr. Manabe, it’s not really like yer talking with her, it’s more like she says a whole lotta things at you all at once and you gotta put it all together afterward, like a puzzle.”

“Yeah, I know. I met her.”

Okuyasu stepped away. Once again, the sound of the sink running, and Okuyasu’s voice speaking over the rush of water: “She ain’t that bad, dude. Dr. Manabe’s real smart, like scary smart. And, y’know, regular scary too, but for a doctor she’s pretty laid back! I gotta do the regular job, janitor stuff, but she’s been letting me follow her around to watch ‘n learn. And she lets me help out! The hospital boss or whatever would have her fuckin’ head if they knew she was letting me change your bandages.”

“What’re you trying to learn, exactly?”

Okuyasu paused. He was midway through rolling a pair of gloves over his hands. “Well… Koichi talking about university and stuff got me thinking, yeah? Dr. Manabe’s job is important and all, but I know I ain’t got the marks to get into med school. And I’m more of a hands-on kinda guy.”

At the gloves, Josuke caught himself staring. He was thinking of the way Dr. Manabe had asked Okuyasu to take care of dressing the wound, almost like he was a –.

“So like,” Josuke began, slowly, hoping he wasn’t wrong, “…a nurse?”

“Shit!” Okuyasu swore, bringing a hand up to touch his face – prompting a second expletive when he remembered he was swearing the sterilized gloves. “Fuck! – Now I gotta…”

Ripping off the gloves, he tossed them over his shoulder. For a split second, Josuke saw a glimpse of The Hand – and then the gloves disappeared mid-air.

Okuyasu stomped over to the sink. The knob turned with a squeak.

“Forget about it, a’ight?” Okuyasu muttered over his shoulder. “Told ya you’d laugh.”
“Hey, I’m not laughing am I? I think it’s cool that you know what you wanna do. I still haven’t figured it out. At this rate, I’m going to be bagging people’s groceries or something after high school.”

“Fuck off,” Okuyasu growled, in the same exasperated tone people used when they were having their leg pulled – the idea of Josuke being anything remotely mediocre too ridiculous for him to be expected to believe.

He pulled on a fresh set of sterile gloves. From one of the packages, he lifted a wet sponge, wringing it out twice with two quick flexes of his fingers. When Okuyasu dabbed the sponge along the incision in Josuke’s side, the shock of the cold – wet, slippery – caused his stomach muscles to flinch away.

“Sorry,” mumbled Okuyasu, “this might feel a little cold.”

As he worked, Okuyasu fell silent. Josuke didn’t usually mind the pauses. He liked the unspoken familiarity they implied, but just then, sharing the silence with Okuyasu felt like being in a room with a stranger. So his eyes roved about, looking for the stray scraps or rags of a potential conversation. They came to rest on the pot on his nightstand.

“Signed ‘O’ – that you?” he asked.

Okuyasu didn’t look up from his work. “What?” he mumbled. He sounded like he was only half listening.

“Nothing, I just noticed someone brought Stray Cat in.”

On the nightstand, Stray Cat blinked one eye open. It fixed him and Okuyasu with a look – then its pupil constricted and its eyelid slid back into place as the plant stand tucked its head under one curled leaf.

“My old man’s idea,” Okuyasu muttered. As he spoke, he summoned The Hand to vanish the last of the used sponges. “Stray Cat got hurt when he and pops got into it with Fujimoto. Since you were mending up, and Stray Cat was mending up too, it seemed like a good idea? Y’know, to keep each other company?”

A few of the stand’s stems, Josuke noticed, were bent out of shape. They were currently propped up: tied with a bit of string to some popsicle sticks.

At Josuke’s beside, Crazy Diamond manifested. “No fun being stuck in the hospital, hunh buddy?” Josuke asked, turning his head to one side to look at Stray cat.

“Hey! I’m tryna do stuff here,” Okuyasu growled. “Quit movin’!”

“I’m not moving,” Josuke protested.

Crazy Diamond stretched out a hand. Stray Cat started up with a hiss when the other stand’s fingers brushed against its petals – only to go still again when Crazy Diamond’s hand immediately retracted, leaving behind a mended stem. The surrounding lilies, which had been looking stooped and bedraggled after Stray Cat’s bullying, were also returned to their original state: petals flush and dewy.

“What about the lilies?” Josuke asked. “Was that your dad’s idea too?”

Okuyasu’s eyes never strayed from the incision in Josuke’s abdomen when he replied: “Had to smuggle Stray Cat in somehow.”
Then he went back to saying nothing. Taking a couple of gauze pads from their packages, Okuyasu set about arranging these around Josuke’s newly-cleaned wounds. Tension squared his jaw, tightened the sinews of his throat. Something was up. Okuyasu had never been one for silences. He was always scrambling for something to fill the pauses in their conversations; it drove Josuke crazy sometimes, the way Okuyasu could be an inexhaustible wave of commentary when all he wanted was a few precious minutes for his brain to gel. There was no way that after everything that had gone down in the basement in the other Morioh, Okuyasu could just have nothing to say. The almost-weres seemed to fill the room all around them, all the moments Josuke couldn’t quite remember, but he knew Okuyasu did.

“What’s up?” Josuke asked.

“The ceiling.” Okuyasu muttered in reply.

Over Josuke’s side, he laid a large, rectangular abdominal dressing, and began the process of taping it into place.

“C’mon. What’re you thinking about?”

“This was a stupid idea.”

Okuyasu’s hands were resting flat on the clean dressing. Even through the thick layers of gauze, Josuke could feel the weight and heat of his body.

“What idea?” he prompted. “The flowers?”

“No, *this* shit,” growled Okuyasu, ripping off his sterile gloves.

“I told you – I think it’s great! Patching up stab wounds is pretty hard-core.”

“Yeah, yeah, and changing bed pans and colonoscopy bags is hard-core too.”

“The hell’s your problem?”

“I ain’t cut out for this.”

“Are you kidding? You’re doing great!”

Rocking his weight forward, Josuke raised himself onto his elbows – wincing at the sudden, sharp stitch of pain in his side. His abdomen was tight, almost as though he’d pulled a muscle.

“What about back on the roadside?” Josuke continued. “The stitches you gave me? And the CPR down at the cliffs? Dude I’d be fucking dead if you weren’t cut out for this shit.”

“S’not like that.”

The chair Tomoko had been sitting in earlier was still at Josuke’s beside. Okuyasu slumped down into it, his back tabled over his legs. He looked like an oversized, folded-up lawn chair.

“Dr. Manabe says I gotta keep one step back. ‘You’re not going to last if you let your patients follow you home’ – somethin’ like that.”

Lifting his head, Okuyasu pressed his fingers to his temple. The crests of his fingernails flushed white. “But so far, yer my only patient, and all I could think about when you were under was, what was I gonna do if you didn’t wake up? An’ I thought I’d feel better seeing ya awake, but all these thoughts keep poppin’ up in my head, like a catchy song, y’know? – all the shitty ways you could
get hurt next time. Or worse.”

He dipped his head, running his hands down the back of his neck. “It scares the hell out of me,” he muttered.

“Is this about what happened in the basement?” Josuke asked.

Okuyasu went still. Hands resting on the back of his neck, fingertips touching over the nub of his first vertebra. “S-sorta,” he stammered.

“Hey, that one was all one me,” said Josuke, in a voice he hoped sounded reassuring. “You were the one who warned me Vox was trying to get under my skin and I still fell for it.”

“S’not your fault,” Okuyasu mumbled. He hadn’t even been thinking of Vox.

There was a lot on Okuyasu’s mind just then. His thoughts were a bunch of strings, all tangled up, and no matter which way he tugged at them they only became more snared. But if Okuyasu were able to disentangle that slippery mess and lay it out in clear, succinct fashion, it would look something like this:

Love, for Okuyasu, had always been a selfless thing. He’d loved his father and his brother in spite of and not on account of them. And in doing so, he never felt like he owed either of them anything. Life without any kind of attachment or personal debt was, in some ways, easier. Okuyasu didn’t need to worry about anyone else. He could float through his days in a dreamy haze, blinders on against future uncertainties. An animal life he could live one day at a time, with day-at-a-time problems. Where his next meal would come from, if his father would be drunk when he got home from school, if Keicho would walk through the front door that night with blood on the cuff of his shirt.

With Josuke, love was different. Selfish. Okuyasu found himself worrying about Josuke, not for Josuke’s sake, but his own. Love, for Okuyasu, did not make the world seem softer, happier, brighter – it made the world seem bigger, frightening, filled with dangers that in a snap could take away the people he cared about. Love made him covet. Love took off the blinders and made him stare straight ahead into his future, nauseous with uncertainty. Okuyasu Nijimura was finding out, in the most excruciating way one could, just how difficult caring about someone can be. Sitting by Josuke’s hospital bed, his emotional threshold hairline brittle with insomnia, he had to wonder if it was all worth it – that small voice at the back of his head, the same one that told him he was a good-for-nothing something, was whispering to him just then that he couldn’t handle it, that he’d be better off alone.

“I can’t,” he muttered into his knees. Tears were sliding down his cheeks, pattering on the cold, hard linoleum floor at his feet. He hated that he couldn’t even talk to Josuke like this without getting choked up. He must’ve looked so lame.

With Josuke, love was different. Selfish. Okuyasu found himself worrying about Josuke, not for Josuke’s sake, but his own. Love, for Okuyasu, did not make the world seem softer, happier, brighter – it made the world seem bigger, frightening, filled with dangers that in a snap could take away the people he cared about. Love made him covet. Love took off the blinders and made him stare straight ahead into his future, nauseous with uncertainty. Okuyasu Nijimura was finding out, in the most excruciating way one could, just how difficult caring about someone can be. Sitting by Josuke’s hospital bed, his emotional threshold hairline brittle with insomnia, he had to wonder if it was all worth it – that small voice at the back of his head, the same one that told him he was a good-for-nothing something, was whispering to him just then that he couldn’t handle it, that he’d be better off alone.

“I can’t,” he muttered into his knees. Tears were sliding down his cheeks, pattering on the cold, hard linoleum floor at his feet. He hated that he couldn’t even talk to Josuke like this without getting choked up. He must’ve looked so lame.

Josuke – who hadn’t realized the subject had changed, and who still thought they were on the topic of nursing – was understandably startled when he heard the strain in Okuyasu’s voice. His vocal chords pulled tight like a bowstring. Seeing people cry always made Josuke uncomfortable. He was always his most nervous when he didn’t know what to do.

Under Okuyasu’s jaw he cupped a hand, the pulse oximeter on his pointer finger resting beneath the other boy’s chin. He meant only to lift Okuyasu’s head, to say something to him. Maybe something corny or silly, something to put a smile back on his face where it belonged, so that Okuyasu would bat Josuke’s hand away and tell him to knock it off and forget about whatever was gnawing away at him. But then Okuyasu’s eyes jumped to him, wet at the corners, looking at Josuke like he’d just asked a question and was waiting for Josuke to answer.
There was that feeling again. The same one Josuke had experienced back on the highway, passenger door ajar and the insistent nagging of the car alarm: that some window of opportunity was closing on him, that if nothing changed now it never would. Only this time, the sense of urgency was acute. Less the wailing of a railroad signal, and more the blaring of a train right before he went under its wheels.

The impression firmly entrenched in Josuke’s brain up until that point was that one’s first kiss was a magical, electrifying, life-changing experience. His own first kiss, however, was none of the above. It was over before he realized it had happened. He hadn’t even thought to close his eyes or purse his lips or do any of the things he knew you were supposed to do when you kissed someone. He was riding a wave of nervous energy – adrenaline first, followed by anxiety – so that he barely felt anything at all, not his lips or his hands or the frantic way his heart was beating, and he might not have even registered that the kiss had happened at all if it weren’t for the look of shock on Okuyasu’s face when he pulled away.

And only then, with the wail of whatever oncoming train Josuke had been facing down reduced to a ringing in his ears as the sense of urgency receded, did he remember why he’d never kissed Okuyasu before, despite all the times he’d really, really wanted to.

“Sorry!” he blurted. One of the machines by his bedside beeped in protest when he lurched back, disconnecting a wire in the process. “I didn’t – I made a mistake.”

“Mistake?” Okuyasu repeated.

The thought occurred to Josuke that maybe Okuyasu didn’t believe him – that he thought Josuke was just fucking with him – and the idea made his stomach drop.

“Fuck up of the century!” Josuke insisted.

Okuyasu stood up so fast that the chair nearly rocked over backward. “I gotta get going,” he mumbled, looking about the room wildly like he’d misplaced the exit.

“I’m sorry,” Josuke repeated.

“Nah, it’s fine – just forget about what I said in the basement, alright? I gotta get back to work. See ya!”

Before Josuke could protest, Okuyasu scurried from the room – ran, practically – with his hands in his pockets. The door slammed shut behind him, sending the empty paper wrappers on the over-bed table scattering to the floor with a hiss.

With Okuyasu gone, the implications of what he’d done finally crashed down over Josuke. The kiss was irrevocable; he might as well have written it on the wall because now Okuyasu knew how he felt, and if his reaction was anything to go by, the feeling wasn’t mutual. Even if Okuyasu set him down gently, even if they were still friends by the time Josuke got out of the hospital, that confession would still be hanging over both their heads. Okuyasu was bound to remember it every time their shoulders brushed. Every time Josuke called him up to ask him to hang out alone.

He hoped this was like the dreams he’d sometimes have of showing up to school only to learn that he had half a dozen assignments due that he’d somehow not known about. Maybe, any minute now, he was going to wake up in his bed at home and the strange dream logic that made him working up the nerve to kiss Okuyasu seem plausible would fade along with the sleep in his eyes. But as the minutes wore on and the room’s ventilation fans rumbled away without the scene fading to black, hope soon vanished.
Groaning, he rolled over onto his side and glowered at Stray Cat. The plant stand only regarded him languidly before letting out a yawn. At the moment, however, he felt so completely idiotic that every last fibre of the universe seemed to bend and warp to reflect his self-judgement back at him. The bored glance from Stray Cat became a look of contempt, because why had he assumed Okuyasu would want to kiss him, especially now of all times when his hair was caked in a few days’ worth of grease and he smelt of hospital sick and there was still a tube in his (pardon our vernacular) dick?

There was something bothering him, thought. The last thing Okuyasu had mentioned, about forgetting what he said in the basement. He tried to think back to the fight with Vox, to feel his way through the fragmented memories of chaos and darkness. He recalled Okuyasu telling him that the whole incident with Jotaro hadn’t been his fault. That Morioh needed him. And he remembered, too, the way he’d bit back, repeating the same stupid shit Vox had been feeding him: why go through all the trouble, just for him?

It was only when he’d given up trying to remember, and had resigned himself to squinting at the ceiling, that the part he’d forgotten slipped back into head, so clear he couldn’t believe he’d forgotten it in the first place:

_I love you._

Josuke wanted to shove his face into the pillow and scream. And maybe suffocate while he was at it.

_A mistake_, he’d called the kiss. _Fuck up of the fucking goddamn century._

Just great, he thought. Okuyasu probably thought he was an asshole now.

His only comfort was that the situation was just a misunderstanding. All he had to do was explain that to Okuyasu. And tell him he loved him too. And maybe kiss Okuyasu again, if he was lucky enough to get the chance, and not fuck it up this time. And all that, Josuke reasoned, couldn’t possibly be _that_ hard.

***

All that was _definitely_ that hard. Josuke was only on step 1: find Okuyasu, and already he was stuck. He’d pressed the call button several times, but no Okuyasu had appeared – just several tired, and a titch annoyed, actual nurses, none of whom seemed to know who Okuyasu was. And when he tried to get out of bed once or twice to look for Okuyasu himself, he was reminded, via several simultaneous pinches and sharp tugs in various sensitive regions, that he was currently hooked up to more tubes than a pipe organ.

“But you said you were _hungry_,” Tomoko complained when she returned. All that agonizing over finding Okuyasu made Josuke completely forget about his appetite.

Being in the hospital made it so much worse. There was nothing to distract him from his anxiety, which came and went in low-grade waves of panic, complete with new and creative conjurations of all the catastrophic ways his accidental rejection could end. Reels right out of the second act of a romance movie: the telephone line ringing through to voice mail; him showing up to the Nijimuras’ home to find it empty, everything packed up and moved away; a letter in his locker come September, Okuyasu writing that he didn’t want to see him anymore. He was resigned to suffer in slow-burning silence, watching game shows on television or playing Go or card games with his mother (the only card game Tomoko knew was Rummy, and she was fiendishly good at it).

So he was a relieved, then, when a nurse poked her head through the door to inform them that ‘Mr. Higashikata’ had a visitor. For a minute, Tomoko slipped out of the room. On the other side of the
door, Josuke could hear voices, and already his heart was doing the thing where it was skipping away on him and tugging the rest of his body along for the ride.

But the person who walked through the door when it opened again was not the person Josuke was hoping for.

“I told your mom she could step out for a break,” said Jotaro.

He was wearing his long white jacket, which appeared to have developed a protrusion at the back. Specifically: a protrusion with a knock-kneed stance and feet that wore size 17cm shoes.

“Jolyne with you too?” Josuke asked.

“Yes.”

Out from under her father’s coat, Jolyne ducked. She marched right up to Josuke’s bed, whereupon she shoved a mug in his direction.

“Here,” she commanded.

“I told her she could pick something out for you at the gift shop,” Jotaro explained in an unaffected tone.

“Thanks?” said Josuke, as he turned the mug over in his hands. On one side, there was a picture of a smiley face wearing sunglasses, and a caption that read, in majuscule rainbow letters: ‘THANKS, GRANDMA!’ “It’s. Nice?”

He expected Jolyne to say “you’re welcome,” but instead she wandered off without another word, intent on a panel of prohibitive-looking medical equipment on the other side of his bed.

“So,” Josuke began, because Jotaro was staring fixedly at him and he felt the need to say something, “Did you hear about Vox?”

“They’re not a threat anymore,” said Jotaro. He’d taken a seat, one leg folded over the other, on the edge of the chair like he wasn’t planning on staying long. “Okuyasu told me.”

“He works here, you know,” Josuke blurted.

“I know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He’d been coming to see me – put that down.” The sudden change in Jotaro’s inflection made Josuke jump. He glanced around his hospital bed guiltily, thinking the command was aimed at him, when he noticed Jolyne behind him. She was in the process of shining an ophthalmoscope into her own eyeball, her tongue poking out at one corner of her lips. She did not put down the ophthalmoscope.

Jotaro, apparently not noticing, continued: “...For tutoring. He wanted to get his science grades up.”

“Did he say something about nursing college?”

“Something like that.”

Scrunching his eyes closed, Josuke smoothed his forearm over his brow before letting it drop. He gazed up the ceiling, remembering how it had looked at night when he’d been slipping in and out of
consciousness, not knowing where he was or what was going on: pitted lunar surface looming large over him. He’d been awake maybe a few minutes, but the way the image stayed clearly in his memories made it feel like hours.

“There’s something I wanted to ask about,” he heard himself say.

When Jotaro dipped his head, he continued: “Did I… come visit you in the hospital? After… you know.”

“Yes, that.”

For a minute, Jotaro regarded Josuke, brow furrowed. There were dark half-moons shadows beneath his eyes, Josuke noticed, and a peppering of stubble along his jaw. He was already getting silver patches in places. Jotaro dragged a hand over his mouth, fingertips pausing over his lips, before muttering: “Okuyasu told me about the form Vox took when it was feeding off your memories.”

Josuke gave an incredulous laugh. “What? Are you guys best friends now or something?”

“You can talk about it, if you want.” He pronounced ‘talk’ like it was a 100 point Scrabble word. There was, too, a notable omission of ‘we’ in the sentence, but Josuke didn’t seem to notice.

“Are you going to answer my question or not?”

Jotaro licked his lips and opened his mouth like he was about to say something – only to close it again and clear his throat. The chair’s front legs lifted off the floor as he leaned back. “It was late. I was surprised your mother wasn’t with you. I couldn’t figure out how you managed to get all the way to S City on your own.”

“I, uh, hitchhiked.”

Closing his eyes, Jotaro nodded. “That would make sense.”

“I have no idea how the hell I found your room though – see, I wasn’t really supposed to be there.”

“You used my stand to track me.”

“I – what?”

The corridor stretched out before him at a tilt. Painted racing stripes rushed ahead, narrowing where perspective pinched the hallway together. Bumper handrails hugged the walls, so narrow he could barely squeeze his tiny fingers through the gap. Even bracing himself against the railing, the corridor’s angle didn’t fully correct itself. He felt as though some centripetal force was pulling his weight toward the center of the hallway, the gravity of it tugging at his grip on the handrail.

Though there were no windows in the hall, he could tell somehow that it was night. Not just because of the quiet; not just because of the fuzzy feeling of exhaustion that clouded his thoughts; something heavy seemed to settle over the halls, like a thick blanket of static, something he could not describe.

Underfoot, the hard linoleum floor was polished to a dull gloss. His dark, featureless reflection glided before him as he walked. Signs were posted everywhere: Wards 5a-6c, Radiology, Pathology, Ambulatory Care. Words he didn’t understand jumped out at him from everywhere, white characters like grinning bones on black signs, slender runes of arrows pointing down corridors each identical from the last.
The reason Josuke was still going was not that he hadn’t given up. He had given up, and wanted only to go back, find Yuki, and get both of them home, only he’d worked his way so deep into the hospital he wasn’t sure how to find his way out again. So he kept on walking in a kind of trance. The hospital whirled past him like he was seeing it from the perspective of a merry-go-round: corridors swinging by, everything blurring together and making his head light.

From somewhere within the nested mass of hallways, he heard a woman’s scream.

Around the corner a nurse came running. Josuke pressed himself against the wall, trying to somehow make himself small in all that open, empty space – but the nurse took no notice of him. She ran right on past, her sandals striking the linoleum floor with a tok, tok tok sound.

After she’d gone by – leaving him leaning rigidly against the wall, body tense and cramped from the effort to hold himself still – Josuke heard a woman’s voice say: “Why are you running for?”

The sound of the nurse’s sandals snapping against the linoleum stopped. Josuke turned. The two women were just around the corner, so he couldn’t see them, but he could see their shadows, weak and fractured in the hospital’s bright artificial light, cast on the wall opposite.

“I saw a ghost!” the nurse exclaimed.

“Oh yeah? What’d it look like?”

“I’m serious.”

“You don’t work overnights much, do you? I saw weird stuff too when I first switched over to the ten to six. It takes time for your body to get used to it.”

“It’s not like that. I was minding my own business, pushing a cart, when suddenly my thermos starts to levitate!”

The nurses were still talking, but Josuke didn’t bother to stick around and listen to the rest. He peeled himself from the wall and began shuffling, mechanically, in the direction the nurse had come running from. The corridor stretched out before him, somehow growing longer with each step he took. There was a light burnt out at the end, plunging that section of the hall into shadow. An exit sign hung above a stairwell door; the red, glowing letters looked like a summons to hell.

There was a lump in his throat that he had to work to swallow. Sweat pricked his palms. He had a hunch about what he might find at the end of the hall, but that didn’t stop the fear of being wrong – and running into an actual ghost – from slipping into his mind. It was a strange, primal, shapeless fear. When it came to monsters and murderers, his imagination could conjure any number of scenarios where he was being stalked or chased. But with ghosts, the fear was more of the thing itself, than what it could do to him.

This was all rather silly, of course, given he’d already run into two separate ghosts that same day, but how was he to know that?

Then, what seemed like all of a sudden, he was at the end of the hallway. He stepped into the shadow, letting it swallow him. For a second, he stood gazing at the stairwell door, trying to peer through its smudged window to the other side, when he felt a light on the side of his face.

The corridor snaked off to the left. There, he saw the cart the nurse had abandoned, alongside a pair of vending machines receded into a nook. Standing in front of said vending machines was a seven-foot tall purple giant that Josuke immediately recognized as Jotaro’s stand.
Star Platinum was in the process of scrutinizing the vending machine’s selection. As Josuke watched, it passed a hand through the machine’s window as easily as if it were made of pure reflection. It grabbed a bag of chips, knelt down, and was in the process of pulling the chip bag out of the vending machine slot when it noticed Josuke standing there staring at it.

“Wait!” Josuke called out as Star Platinum winked out of existence. The vending machine flap clattered shut.

He thought he’d been too late, but after a moment Star re-materialized beside him. It regarded him, head tilted – before turning aside and scooping up the dropped bag of chips.

“You can’t go around picking stuff up like that,” Josuke pointed out.

Star Platinum paused, glanced down at the bag of chips in its hands, glanced at Josuke, then slowly knelt down beside the vending machine, lifted the flap, and placed the chip bag back inside.

Josuke let out a noise of frustration.

“I don’t mean it like that!” he said. “I mean, if you go around picking stuff up, people are gonna think you’re a ghost ‘cuz they can’t see you. Here.”

From the cart, he grabbed a spare blanket and threw it over the stand’s head.

“There!” he said, with a self-satisfied note of triumph. “Now people will just think you’re wearing a costume.”

And indeed, Star Platinum did look like a (giant) kid in a ghost costume. Except it was too tall for the sheet, and its legs from the knees-down stuck out at the bottom. To a non-stand user, Star Platinum would have appeared to levitate.

The stand gave him a grunt of acknowledgement. It turned back to the cart and stretched out a sheeted hand to grab an extra blanket, the nurse’s thermos, and a magazine. Josuke watched, hands fiddling with the hems of his shorts pockets.

“That stuff’s for Jotaro, right?” he asked.

The shrouded face bent down toward him. Josuke wished there was some way he could have cut eye holes in the sheet, just so he could see the stand’s expression. He wondered if it knew he was the one responsible for Jotaro being in the hospital in the first place. But Star Platinum only continued to wait in silence with its head bent, as if it was expecting him to say something.

Josuke’s hands curled into fists. He drew a deep breath.

“Do you think… you could take me to see him?”

“Back then,” Josuke began, “did I say anything about what happened with Yuki? Like… maybe what happened to her kidnapper?”

“Who?” asked Jotaro.

“The neighbour’s daughter. You know – the one that got kidnapped while you were in the hospital?”

Jotaro’s shoulders rose and fell in a shallow shrug. “If I was in the hospital, I likely wouldn’t have heard the news.”

“You mean I never said anything to you about it?”
“If you did, I don’t remember.”

The whole story he’d begun with, of him and Jotaro hunting a serial killer in the woods, of Jotaro killing the stand user… not only had Jotaro not been there, Jotaro didn’t realized there’d been a real kidnapping in the first place. If things with Okuyasu hadn’t turned him into a buzzkill, he might have even laughed.

“Long story short,” said Josuke, “my neighbour’s kid daughter gets kidnapped by one of Vox’s friends, right? And I guess, I felt kinda responsible, so I decided to go looking for her? – I mean, it all worked out! I found her! But, uh, yeah.”

“How would you feel responsible?”

As Josuke answered, his gaze remained fixed on the hospital room’s television set. It was powered down; in its matte black screen, faint blobs of light and color mirrored an approximation of the room back to him. “I thought maybe if you’d been there, you could have done something about it.”

Leaning forward, Jotaro rested his chin against his fingertips. “That night you visited, I figured something like that must have happened – not the kidnapping specifically, but some kind of traumatic event. Often, stands will first manifest fully as a defense mechanism in times of increased stress – or in response to the presence of another, powerful stand user.”

That got Josuke to rip his gaze away from the screen. “I had Crazy Diamond?” he demanded. “That night at the hospital – you saw it?”

Before Jotaro could answer, Josuke let out a yelp when Jolyne dove up onto the bed, her landing coinciding perfectly with several parts of his body that just happened to already be in pain.

“Check-up time!” she yelled.

“H-heyyyy kiddo,” he grit out through clenched teeth. His eyes were watering. “You think maybe you could be a little more careful?”

Jolyne ignored his request. “I gotta listen to your heartbeat!” she announced.

Josuke threw a look in Jotaro’s direction that was the non-verbal equivalent of an S.O.S., but unfortunately for him, Jotaro Kujo was not fluent in non-verbal.

“Just be careful around his stitches,” was all he said.

Jolyne had taken the stethoscope down from the wall. At present, she shoved the diaphragm end against Josuke’s chest, right below his collarbone – which was absolutely not where his heart was located, but he was not about to tell her that. For a minute she sat listening, forehead furled in concentration like she was in the process of trying to crack a safe. Josuke let out a cough.

“So, uh, what have you been up to, kiddo?” he asked, trying to be polite. “Still helping your dad out with his fish science?”

“I got to ride in a police car!” Jolyne exclaimed, her voice all sunshine as she sat back and popped the diaphragm off Josuke’s chest.

“Oh yeah? Were they doing a demonstration?”

“Nope! Papa and his friends got arrested!”
“Oh yeah?” Josuke repeated. This time, his eyes wandered over to Jotaro.

His nephew pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes. “We were picked up while waiting for the Speedwagon Foundation to come collect Fujimoto. The car he was driving was stolen from one of his victims.”

“Damn. But at least they let you off the hook, right?”

“The Foundation sorted everything out. They let us go – except Kobayashi. Something about motor vehicle inspection violations.”

“What about Papa and Mr. Kishibe?” Jolyne complained. “They got to wear handcuffs and sit in a jail!”

“You’ll get your chance someday, kid.”

“So what’s the Foundation going to do with Fujimoto anyway?” Josuke asked. “You think it’s really safe to keep him locked up?”

Jotaro leaned forward. The front legs of his chair hit the ground with a bang.

“Haven’t you talked to Okuyasu since you woke up?”

“Yeah, why?”

“And he didn’t tell you?”

“He was kinda distracted,” Josuke admitted. “Why, what was he supposed to tell me?”

“Sato Fujimoto is dead.”

***

A dangerous silence settled over the bog. All the world seemed to be holding its breath, waiting. The lapping of the black water – still unsettled after the crash – was as quiet as a whisper. Only the hollow, metallic ticking of the ambulance’s radiator intermittently pierced the thick, oppressive silence that seemed to congeal the hot August air. You could almost lean your weight against it.

The ambulance was on its side, half-submerged, the reeds bent and crushed beneath it. A thin layer of steam hung above the bog’s surface where the cold water mingled with the lingering heat from the ambulance’s drowned engine. In the cabin, the back of a man’s shirt humped out of the water: the fold of a white collar, the crescent of a neck. The rest was cut off, submerged beneath the murk. At the back of the ambulance, the rear doors were flung open. Inside, a few papers, translucent latex gloves, and a water-logged red canvas medical bag floated on the bog’s surface. Water receded in and out of the back of the ambulance with a gurgling sound, as though the rear cabin were the darkened inside of a throat.

Something about the overturned ambulance seemed caught in time. A shipwreck – a singular moment of disaster preserved in cold, dark, watery silence.

On the side of the bank Sato was slumped, breathing hard through the wires in his jaw. Water ran in rivulets down his soaked, heavy windbreaker. Smeared, washed-out bloodstains covered his clothing from just above the tops of his boots to his chest. After taking a dose from his inhaler, he returned the blade – a tiny one-and-a-half inch piece broken off of an X-Acto knife – to its hiding place, wedged between the inhaler’s canister and the plastic mouthpiece. The blade was meant for cutting himself free or jabbing into an eyeball, something to cause a distraction and buy him time. It was too flimsy
to kill someone with. No, for that he had improvisation, and an ambulance full of medical equipment offered plenty of improvisational options.

The only hitch was that the driver had been a squealer. Instead of keeping his head he’d panicked, and in his last moments, he’d swerved from the road and put the ambulance where it was now: on its side in the marsh.

By Sato’s estimate, he was still a long ways from Morioh. A half hour walk, probably more. He’d done day hikes far longer, but it wasn’t the distance that troubled him. There was no way to hide the ambulance. At some point – sooner, rather than later – someone was bound to notice, and this time, he wouldn’t be so lucky.

So he set off down the road at a fast walk, which then turned into a trot, and then into a jog. At any moment, a car might pass down the highway. The driver would be bound to notice the skid marks swerving in a sharp sickle from the asphalt. They would see the accident. And naturally, they would call for help. For all he knew, there could already be a police barricade waiting for him at the highway’s end: rotating beacons in daylight, orange pylons sectioning off the road, men and women in uniform lined up for him like a firing squad.

Worrying about what could happen, however, was useless. Panic, Sato knew, drove people to stupid decisions. Panic got people killed. He’d seen it firsthand from the other side of the line. Like the ambulance driver who’d put them both – along with the attendant paramedic, whose body was currently buried in the silt somewhere beneath the ambulance – in the ditch. Biologically speaking, the human body was more difficult to kill than most imagined. People got drunk and lived through sub-zero overnight temperatures buried under the snow; people survived falling thousands of feet in the fuselage of an aircraft; people got marooned at sea and lived for days off nothing but rainwater. Psychologically speaking, however, people were easy to kill. They froze. Lost their wits. Lashed out when they should have run away. Fled when they should have fought back. Sato did not want to catch himself making the same mistakes, so he focused instead on The Plan. He was going to get back to town, hot-wire the first car he came across. He was going to hit the road, and drive, and ditch the car, and maybe catch a train to somewhere up north: somewhere he could slip from the road and walk until he disappeared. As long as he kept moving, as long as he didn’t stay still long enough to leave any trace of himself…

In the distance, a dark shape broke above the horizon. Without his glasses, everything looked bright and blurry, as though he were underwater with his eyes open, but he knew he was looking at the town coming into view.

At the same time, he was feeling weak. Exhaustion weighed heavy on his limbs after only half an hour of exercise. When he slowed to a walk, Sato could hear his breath wheezing. Air rattle in his lungs – a coin in a tin can. He felt like a thick cloth was covering his mouth – when he tried to suck down a breath of air, the suffocation only smothered him more. Zipping open his jacket pocket, he reached for his inhaler.

Nothing.

In quick, jerky movements, he turned out the pockets of his jacket, then ripped it off and did the same with his pants pockets. Still no inhaler.

He’d had it on him after the crash. He’d used it. He was always so careful about securing his inhaler, knowing his life depended on it.

Behind him, he glanced. The road stretched long into the distance. Miles and miles he’d put behind him; miles and miles of gravel shoulder and long grass and bog where the inhaler could have fallen,
if he really had dropped it by accident: miles and miles to search half-blind without his glasses and the asthma attack making his head light.

Instead, he sprinted toward town.

There was a payphone at the intersection. He knew this because he saw it whenever he turned off onto the dirt road leading up to the old farmhouse.

Spots swam before his eyes. He didn’t notice the phone booth coming up until he slammed shoulder-first into it with a bang. Feeling his way around the glass box, he found the door and ripped it open.

Panic makes you stupid. Panic gets you killed. Further back on the road it had been easy to hold this mantra fixed in his head, but not now when his body was drowning on dry land.

Still: there was a part of him that hadn’t given up reasoning his way through the situation. Circumstances, that was all. Avoiding capture was no longer the most optimistic outcome; survival was. Stay alive so he could try his luck another day. Live on to cheat fate like he’d done so many times before.

He snatched up the receiver, expecting to feel the cord’s resistance, but the resistance never came. The cord dangled slack from the payphone. It had been cut.

Tossing the receiver on the ground, Sato shoved his way out of the phone booth and staggered across the intersection. Car horns screamed in his ears, tires squealed as drivers swerved to avoid him. He took no notice; he didn’t stop until he reached the gas station on the other side of the road.

An electronic chime beeped cheerfully as he threw open the door. When he set foot inside, it seemed to create a vacuum: all the conversation and noise he heard on first throwing open the door went quiet. He heard the ghost of a whisper – a hand brushed against his arm but he tore it away and stumbled for the counter. The room turned around him: the packaged snacks lining the aisles, each in brighter colours than the last, vying for attention, were transformed into a garish, nightmare kaleidoscope. He couldn’t seem to find his footing; the floor kept changing heights on him.

He slumped hard into the counter, knocking a display rack to the floor in the process. As he steadied himself, he glanced down at the blurred shape of his hand on the countertop and noticed there was blood beneath his fingernails.

“Can I help you?” the clerk’s voice was muffled, as though Sato was hearing him through a wall. Already, blackness was creeping into the edges of his vision.

He tried to open his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a rasp. There was no wind left in his lungs, no voice left to form into words. His chest felt like there was a tight band around it, keeping it compressed.

His knees buckled. The tensioning strength in his muscles had all gone; with nothing left to hold himself up, Sato slid down the counter and onto the floor.

“Is he drunk?” he heard someone ask the clerk, followed by the clerk’s muttered answer, which sounded like “I don’t know.”

He could feel the press of people all around him. The eyes of their clay mask faces observing him, stiff, emotionless. Even at a time like this, watching him die in front of them like an animal, they were as restrained and opaque as ever. He hated it, wanted to get away from them, but his legs only pedaled uselessly against the floor.
Even with his vision going dark he was still fighting for that last breath. The compulsion, the craving for it tore through him like wildfire. He needed to get the damn wires off. He needed to open his mouth, let the oxygen fill him up again. Over the wires, Sato’s fingers scrabbled. His nails found an edge so he dug in and yanked. And yanked and yanked and yanked, the resistance fighting him – until the moment it wasn’t anymore. Something snapped and gave way, and suddenly there were teeth skittering across the floor and there was blood pouring down his throat and down the front of his shirt.

His mouth was opened, the cold air teasing over his raw, bloodied gums but when he tried to draw a breath there was only a gurgle in his throat. His lungs were filling with blood. Heavy, water-logged: this time he was drowning, really drowning, not a slow suffocation but pair of wet, slimy hands around his windpipe choking the life out of him.

At last, the masks came down. All around him there was shouting and screaming, but by then it was so muffled, so far away that Sato might as well have been imagining it. He lay on his back, fingers twitching, watching the last of the light slip from his vision.

There was a feeling he got sometimes when he traveled or visited a store that was going out of business: a strange, melancholic remorse that he would never set foot in that place or in that building again, that he was seeing it for the last time in his life. He was experiencing that feeling now, over and over again, not just for certain buildings or places but for everything he’d ever done, every moment he’d ever enjoyed: the static crackle of his radio, watching the sunflower fields sway by night with nicotine warming his lungs, the smooth arc of the sunset along the aluminum body lines of his Corona.

From across the street, a figure surveyed the gas station. Police cars showed up. Nearly an hour later, a body was removed on a stretcher, draped in a white sheet: from beneath the covering slipped a massy human paw curled talon-like in the final throws of anguish.

Once the emergency vehicles had cleared out, Daisuke turned and strolled back down the road, humming to himself. He couldn’t remember what the song was anymore or who had sung it, but somehow, the fragmented arrangement of notes had engrained itself in him like a genetic memory, the same way hatchling birds remembered ancient migratory routes.

By the roadside, the Datsun appeared. Daisuke let himself in through the passenger’s side, sliding over to the driver’s seat. As soon as he buckled up and put his hands on the wheel, he was in the other Morioh: inky darkness, snow falling softly as it once had done years ago.

Leaning over, he pulled open the glove compartment. Its contents were sparse: his driver’s license, the vehicle’s registration, a clutch of napkins, the two ten-yen coins Josuke had given him.

And, neatly laid atop the vehicle’s registration, the emptied M60 revolver and its spent bullets.

He placed the blue inhaler beside the gun, shut up the glove compartment, and leaned against the steering wheel as he watched through the snow for Josuke and the others to get back. Once again, he started up humming.

He couldn’t remember the song anymore or who had sung it, or its lyrics or what they meant. Maybe it had been his favorite song at one point, or one he hated, one that refused to stay out of his head. Maybe it’d been on the radio all the time, or maybe he’d dated a girl who liked to sing it, or maybe his mother or father had sung it all the time while they worked in the kitchen. He couldn’t remember why he’d first started to hum the song, but it was something he’d been doing ever since his death, and so Daisuke hummed, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to the wordless beat, and didn’t think too hard about why.
Suddenly, Yuki let out a shriek. Before Josuke could shush her, he felt a crushing pressure on his arm. The searing heat of a coarse, work-worn hand on the soft underside of his wrist. When he was yanked around and forced to face the other direction, he couldn’t see much of the man through the thick cover of dark, but Josuke could hear his breathing, ragged and uneven; could feel the warm wetness of it, could smell the sourness of the man’s unwashed mouth.

Quickly, not much time to think. His free hand shot to the waistband of his shorts, where metal dug into hip. Over the familiar, brushed matte texture his fingers stumbled, as if trying to play a half-remembered song on a piano.

At last, his fingers found their grip. He pulled out his grandfather’s gun, his eyes half-closed in fear as he pointed it at the man.

“Leave us alone!” he yelled, a quiver catching in his voice. He was fighting not to cry. “Or I — I’ll shoot you!”

The hand on his wrist withdrew. The man took a step back, dry brush creaking underfoot.

“Put that away,” he muttered. His voice sounded rough, raspy, like a handsaw biting into wood. “You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

Before Josuke could react the man’s hands were on his throat, thumbs pressing into the soft fleshy part of his Adam’s apple. White sparks flashes across Josuke’s vision. He could feel the press of the man’s stomach against the revolver’s barrel.

Around the trigger, his finger flexed.

Here’s the thing about revolvers, and guns in general for that matter: each gun requires a certain amount of trigger pull to fire. The trigger pull for the Nambu M60 was five or six pounds, perhaps seven factory-new. But five pounds or seven pounds, it made no difference: Josuke, who was all of forty-odd pounds; Josuke, whose limbs had gone weak with fear; Josuke, who just then was barely holding onto consciousness with the man’s hands in the process of choking the life out of him — there was no way that Josuke could possibly exert even five pounds of pressure on that trigger.

A frenzied feeling was bubbling up in Josuke’s chest – the same immense pressure he felt when he swam down to the bottom of the public pool and needed to come back up for air, the tightness in his lungs and moment of terror just before he broke the surface. Only now he couldn’t break the surface, couldn’t draw that much-needed breath, because those hands were crushing his neck, crushing his windpipe. His legs twitched beneath him, feet wheeling through the air in search of solid ground.

And just then, there was a flash of light. The man reeled back, cursing. He was pinching his nostrils closed; a thin tendril of blood raced down his chin.

Josuke collapsed to the ground beside Yuki, gasping.

“O-k?” she asked, patting him on his chest.


There was a presence at his back. Though he couldn’t see it, he could feel it: see the faint glow of it on the backs of his hands, a kind of ghostly rose-coloured after-image. For whatever reason, though, he didn’t feel afraid. From the way Jotaro had described stands, Josuke had thought getting one
would be a lot like gaining a super power. Instead, the thing that had struck Yuki’s kidnapper on the
nose felt like something that had always been a part of Josuke’s body. He was no more shocked or
surprise than if he’d landed the punch himself.

In any case: he didn’t have much time to consider the implications.

Scooping Yuki up in his arms, he set off running. He only made it a few steps, however, before his
foot caught on something. Down he went, the arm holding the pistol coming up in front of him to
catch his fall.

The whip-crack sound of the gun going off exploded near his left ear. For a minute he lay in a haze,
eardrums throbbing and the sulfurous, intoxicating spell of gunpowder cottoning around his head.

He could feel Yuki tug on his shirt. From the way her throat moved against his arm, he could tell she
was saying something to him, but he couldn’t hear it over the ringing in his ears. With his legs shaky
beneath him, Josuke rose to his feet and tucked the handgun away in the band of his shorts again.
From somewhere behind him, he could hear, very faintly, the muted sounds of the man screaming.
He started to run. The forest floor gave soundlessly beneath his feet, branches catching on his
shoulders without so much as a whisper. Quiet, the forest was somehow more sinister than before:
whatever threats lurking in the shadows enveloped in silence.

Blue light sparkled through the branches. All at once he broke the treeline, and there before him
stretched the bog: calm, still, the moon hung like a giant pendent in among the reeds.

A grassy causeway slit through the bog’s throat. Josuke set off for it, half-tripping, half-sliding down
the embankment. Slowly, the ringing in his ears was giving way to sound: he could hear the wind
through the trees again, the soft sighing of the leaves as they brushed against one another.

He was exhausted, the breath fire in his lungs. Though Yuki was a third his age, she was more than
half his size and bottom-heavy at that; his elbows were locked in place, he could feel the joints going
weak but he didn’t dare relax his arms, fearing that if he did, he wouldn’t have the strength left to lift
the girl again.

Ahead, he could see the string of lights that marked the length of the highway. It must have been his
eagerness for the streetlights’ false sense of safety, or maybe the sound of reeds rattling and heavy
feet sloshing through the water behind him had him out of his mind in a panic: either way, Josuke’s
attention slipped along with his footing. From the causeway he tumbled. The marsh was dark, no
more than silver suggestions of starlight rippling over black water – he didn’t realize what was
happening until he felt himself plunge beneath the water’s surface.

In his shock, he opened his mouth. Lukewarm, acidic bog water filled his lungs in gulping dregs. He
felt Yuki’s arms tighten around his neck as his arms and legs wheeled helplessly in the blind, mute
darkness. Fear shot like a thunderbolt through his body; he thought for sure he was going to drown.

Then, his feet touched bottom and he stood. Bog water streamed from his head and shoulders –
there was a thick, almost animal quality to it, a viscous film he could feel clinging to his skin. The
sulphuric smell of peat stung his nose and coated his tongue. Through the ringing in his ears, he
could hear Yuki crying – she’d been quiet until then, but the fall had startled her. He shoved a hand
over her mouth, feeling the vibrations of her voice against his palm.

Somewhere behind him, the sloshing and rustling paused before resuming with increased fervor.

Josuke pushed forward, one hand thrown out blindly in front of him until he felt his fingers curl in
the wet, spongy side of the ditch that ran the length of the highway. He scrambled up it, knees
burning from the strain. The gravel at the road’s shoulder bit into his palms and he pulled himself back up onto his feet.

He’d thought the highway would mean safety. In contrast to the forest, its familiarity was inviting. But standing under the pool of streetlight, Josuke only felt exposed, as though he’d stepped onto the center of a target. Up and down the highway he glanced, hoping to see headlights in the distance.

The road was empty.

“Oh hey! You’re back!”

Josuke’s heart gave a jump, knocking against the back of his throat like it was a bell in a strongman’s game. The fear knocked the knees from right underneath him.

To his relief, the person crouching over him was not Yuki’s kidnapper, but the same teenager from before – the one he remembered saving his life.

“Oh jeeze,” said Daisuke. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you alright? You look like the forest decided to pick a fight with you.” Then his eyes slipped down to Yuki, and a toothy grin spread across his face. “Oh, hey! Is this the girl you were looking for?”

When Josuke opened his mouth, he felt a hard bubble at the back of his throat. A sob was threatening to break loose.

“Help,” was all he managed to gulp out.

“What’s up?”

From somewhere in the black space beyond the streetlight, Josuke heard a splash. Daisuke turned his head to look in the direction of the bog.

“There’s a man chasing me,” Josuke stammered. From the waistband of his shorts, he pulled the handgun, holding it awkwardly by the barrel like it was a blunt instrument. “He’s... he’s gonna...”

Daisuke jumped back. “Jesus, kid! Where’d you get that?”

“S’my grandpa’s. I tried to… but I couldn’t...!”

When Daisuke spoke again, his voice softened. “It’s okay. You did good. You can give me the gun now, alright? There’s truck heading our way, it will be here any second. It’s going to stop and you can hop on.”

There was another rustle from the swamp. Fat tears were making tracks down Josuke’s cheeks. He buried his face in Yuki’s hair and let out a choked sob. A cold breeze picked up, stinging the back of his neck and raising gooseflesh along his arms.

“How do you know it’ll stop?” he mumbled into the top of Yuki’s head. His voice broke with a warble – his teeth were chattering.

“I’m going to make it stop,” said Daisuke. Reaching out, he took hold of the gun by its stock – Josuke’s fingers relaxed on the barrel, offering no resistance as Daisuke carefully slipped the gun from his hand. “Okay, here it comes. Get ready!”

An engine guttered into hearing. Wind buffeted the side of Josuke’s face as the truck raced by with a roar. He lifted his head – just in time to watch as, ten meters or so down the road, Daisuke stepped
out in front of the car.

“Don’t!” he screamed – but his voice was lost in the screech of rubber against asphalt.

The truck rocked to a halt, driver’s side door slamming open as a woman stepped out.

“Fuck,” she hissed as she bent down and peered beneath the body of the truck. But there was nothing there of course – there never had been – and there was no blood on the road either, so after making one last check of the ditch and the road behind her, she stepped back up into the cab, started the engine, and pulled out onto the highway.

She was too busy wondering if the new medication was making her see things to check her rear-view mirror, but if she had checked it just then, she would have seen a man stumble up the side of the ditch and onto the shoulder of the road, where he stood perfectly still beneath the streetlight, watching the truck drive off with his hands gnarled into fists at his sides.

In the bed of the truck, Josuke lay on his back with an arm flung over his face. The crook of his elbow was wet with tears. Beside him Yuki crouched on her knees.

“Bye bye,” she was saying, waving at the dark, flat expanse of bog. “Bye bye!”

Sometime later, faintly, Josuke heard a distant series of cracks. Five of them, like fireworks going off, one after the other.

From his face, he lifted his arm. Overhead, the stars scrolled slowly by.

Chapter End Notes

Ajskfjlkdfklksdf I have. A lot to say about this chapter. So let me do bullet points:
* I'm super curious to know how many people figured out who killed Vox's last host before this chapter :D I've been dropping hints for a long time now but I always struggle with knowing whether I am being too obvious or too subtle with my foreshadowing.
* Since this is the last we see of Sato, I figured it would be a good time to share a fun bit of trivia about him: when I was coming up with his character, my inspiration for what I imagined he looked like and my headcanon casting choice if this fic were a movie was Jun Kunimura. I had just watched Hong-jin Na's The Wailing at the time and I loved Kunimura's performance in that movie. SO ANYWAY fast forward a year or so later when the DIU live action film comes out, and guess who's playing Josuke's granpa? Jun Kunimura. I nearly screamed the first time he came on screen.
* The song Okuyasu is singing is 'Be With You' by Glay :D
* There's a bit of a fuck-up in this chapter: Tomoko saying she's going to head downtown to get Tonio's when the hospital is all the way in S City. But listen -- there was no way I was not going to have Watch make that joke about downtown Morioh.
* I also fucked up in the video game chapter when Josuke instructs Okuyasu to pull back the hammer on the M60. I don't think the Nambu M60 is single-action and requires the hammer to be cocked. Apologies -- I know nothing about guns.
* I promise there will be more josuyasu soon. When I said in the tags this fic was a slow burner I was dead serious, that's all.

Anyhoo -- since there's only one chapter + the epilogue left, I've been thinking of doing
something special to make the completion of this fic, since this has pretty much been a two-and-a-half year endeavor up until this point. What would you guys like to see? A Q&A? Some art? Let me know!
Hi guys.... I didn't mean to write a 30k beach episode, but I accidentally did, so here we are.

Sorry if there's like a million typos in this. I'm super fucking drunk right now and can barely type, so my final pass on this was pretty, uh. Lackluster.

Also, I updated the summary. I am super bad at summaries but I am trying to do better, so hopefully it's an improvement!

“So by the time we got back, Rohan was the only one around,” said Koichi. “He was sitting by the side of the road with all those cars, sketchbook out… he was *complaining*, saying Mister Jotaro and all the others had taken off somewhere and left him with lookout duty!”

“That’s what was on his mind?” Reaching into the tissue-lined box on the bed, Josuke plucked one of the dumplings. He continued to talk with the dumpling in his mouth, one cheek bulging in a way that reminded Koichi of a hamster. “Not, oh hey, maybe something happened to them? Or maybe, oh hey, maybe I shouldn’t have dipped?”

“I don’t think Mister Kishibe worries too much about inconveniencing others,” Koichi admitted. This was a characteristic of Rohan Kishibe that Koichi had experienced firsthand, from many a 3 A.M. phone call. Without fail, the mangaka’s urgent tone would propel Koichi to Rohan’s place – only to learn that the urgent matter involved Rohan getting him to model a pose so he could get it “just right” or using him as a figurative brick wall to bounce a new idea off. The way he angled his proposals (“I thought you might like to listen to the outline for my next chapter,” or “I suppose I could let you see the latest batch of pencils”) made it sound as though he was doing Koichi a favour. And knowing what Koichi knew about Rohan, he probably thought he was.

When Josuke finally bit into the dumpling, he was surprised to feel something liquid ooze out and coat his tongue with the taste of honey and sesame.

“What is this?” he asked, swiping his tongue at the corner of his mouth where some of the syrupy brown filling had escaped. “It’s fucking *delicious*.”

“The man at the shop said they were called mitsudango… I guess it’s a local specialty?”

“If it is, how come I’ve never heard of it?”

“Maybe he just made that up because I looked like a tourist? *Anyway.*” Koichi’s voice was tight with annoyance – Josuke realized he’d interrupted his story. “Rohan drove us back into town. I think it was the car Sato had been driving? The white one?”

“I think that was Jotaro’s rental.”

“Oh, right! There were sirens all along the way – we must’ve passed four or five ambulances. I really
thought we were too late! I expected to see the station on fire just like in the other Morioh. We got there early though, so… Rohan was able to cause a scene and get the place evacuated.”

“How’d he manage that?”

Koichi pinked at the ears. “Well, he… he grabbed all the knapsacks he could find out of the lost and found and left them out in the open then wrote on one of the counter agent’s books that someone had called in a bomb threat about a knapsack.”

“That’s… wow.”

“I think it took the bomb squad five hours to, uh, detonate them all. But five thirty-six came and nothing happened, so I figured whatever you and Okuyasu did, it must’ve worked.”

Josuke held out the box of dango to Koichi, but he shook his head. “I’m okay – thanks though.”

Setting the box aside, Josuke asked what he hoped sounded like a casual, off-hand question: “Speaking of: you haven’t seen Okuyasu around, have you? Or like, heard from him?”

There it was again: that frown of Koichi’s that always struck Josuke as quizzical, as though he were trying to solve a crossword puzzle and the right word was on the very tip of his tongue.

“But not since I dropped by while you were still out cold,” said Koichi. “I thought he would’ve been here with you.”

“Nah. I mean – he was here. Earlier.”

Earlier?”

“Like, when I woke up.”

“And you haven’t seen him since?”

Josuke let out a curt, single-syllable laugh and flopped back onto the pillow. “Come on. I’m sure the guy’s got other things to do.”

“Did something happen?” asked Koichi. He folded his hands together in his lap: a kind of getting-down-to-business gesture.

“Nope.”

He was hoping Koichi would drop the topic, but the other boy only tilted his head and held his gaze until Josuke could almost feel his brain squirm inside his skull. This method of interrogation was not unknown to him; his mother had her own variation: arched eyebrows, crossed legs.

“I just…” he trailed off. He wasn’t sure how to describe what exactly happened in that hospital room without mentioning the kiss. That would mean broaching the whole territory of his crush on his best friend – something he’d never explored with anyone, not even Koichi.

Instead, he settled on: “I said something dumb” – because that much, at least, was true.

“And he hasn’t talked to you since because of that?”

“I don’t know, dude,” Josuke mumbled. He brought his hand up to his forehead, kneading away at the start of another migraine. “Like – have you ever said something to someone, and then immediately got this kind of heavy feeling in your stomach?”
“I think that’s what people mean by sticking your foot in your mouth.”

“Sure, whatever you want to call it – anyway, it was like that.”

On Josuke’s wrist, Koichi laid a hand. The touch was paper-light, making the hairs on the backs of his arms tingle. “Are you two… alright?” Koichi asked.

Josuke thought this was a strange way of phrasing the question. As though he and Okuyasu had been through a car wreck instead of an argument – but maybe it was only the urgent sincerity in Koichi’s voice or the hand on Josuke’s wrist that made it seem that way.

“I mean, we’re still friends, right?”

He meant this as a reassurance, so he was surprised when Koichi’s eyebrows arched inward in dismay. “Oh! I’m sorry to hear that. It must be hard.”

“What? No, it’s – I just need to talk to him,” Josuke said. “If I can do that, we’re golden.”

Here, Koichi flashed him one of his gentle smiles: the sort that made his whole face seem to glow with kindness; the sort that made Josuke realize why so many people found Koichi easy to like. “I’m glad you’re trying to make things work,” he said.

“Thanks?”

“It was like that for me and Yukako too at the start,” Koichi continued. “The best way to patch things up is to show your intention. It easy to apologize with flowers and chocolates or talk about how you’re going to change, but actually treating people like you care about their feelings – that’s the important thing.”

“Right. So you guys are getting along then, hunh? That’s great.”

Koichi was still smiling at him, and Josuke was so caught up in the smile, caught up in the way it seemed to promise that everything would be alright, that he almost missed Koichi saying: “I’m sorry if I put any pressure on you. I, um, I know it must be… hard for you to open up about this stuff.”

“What?” Josuke asked, the word rolling out of his mouth with a warm puff of air like a short, breathy laugh. “What stuff?”

“Y-you know! You and Okuyasu!”

Koichi cut his eyes away as he said this. At last, Josuke realized that the other boy was doing what he often caught himself doing whenever he found himself in uncomfortable territory: speaking in euphemisms.

“You think I’ve got a thing for Okuyasu?” he demanded. The words came out louder than he meant them to; he felt strangely giddy and it was causing his volume control to slip.

“Aren’t you – I mean we thought – aren’t you two dating?” Koichi stammered.

“Who’s we?!”

Josuke watched with his cheeks heating up as Koichi spread his hands further and further apart until his arms were at full wingspan. The all-encompassing implication was clear.

“Why didn’t anyone say anything?” mumbled Josuke. The knowledge that his private feelings weren’t so private after all left him mortified.
“To be honest, I was hoping you’d say something to me,” he heard Koichi say. “I thought, well, maybe you needed time to sort things out? A-and I would totally understand if you did!” Then he added, so quick his words stumbled together: “But I mean if you don’t like each other that way it’s fine too! I probably shouldn’t have assumed…”

“But I do like Okuyasu.”

Josuke hadn’t planned on confessing his crush to Koichi, so he was surprised when the words leapt out of his mouth: the reaction pure fight-or-flight instinct. And judging by the way Koichi’s eyes widened, he was just as shocked.

“So… what happened?” he asked.

A minute ago, Josuke would never have imagined himself speaking openly to Koichi about having a crush on another boy, but with that first obstacle behind him, the rest came naturally. He told Koichi about how easy conversation felt around Okuyasu; how the comfortable familiarity of their friendship had turned into something that set his nerves on fire and made him jump every time their knees knocked together, the ease dissipating into awkwardness and tension as though his crush had turned them into strangers all over again. And he told Koichi about the beach, about the basement, about the battle with Vox and the confession Okuyasu had made in the heat of it (well – not the verbatim, but he gave the gist of it). And, finally, he admitted to how he’d kissed Okuyasu after he’d woken up, only to immediately backpedal.

There was something borderline intoxicating about spilling everything he’d spent all summer holding back – even from himself at times. Some of it was ego. The inane dramas of his adolescent existence were elevated in the presence of an audience. But there was relief, too. He could understand why death row inmates were more likely to confess than felons sentenced to life in prison, why people got chatty just before the gallows: why hold back, when you had nothing else to lose?

Now that he was winding down and whatever kick of adrenaline he’d been riding was deflating out from underneath him, however, Josuke caught himself glancing more and more often at Koichi’s face, watching to see if his expression would change. His pulse ran hot behind his cheeks.

“Isn’t this kinda weird for you?” he blurted.

“In what way?”

“You know… me being into dudes.”

This, too, was something Josuke hadn’t put into words, not even in his own head, until then – but saying it out loud, the description fit in a way that felt just right.

“Oh.”

He was thankful he wasn’t still hooked up to the heart-rate monitor – if he was, he was sure the screen would look like a seismogram just then. But Koichi just wrapped his arms around his knees and gave a shrug. “Maybe at first but… not really, when you think about it.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Well… it’s like language. The way you talk and write seems ‘normal’, but… when you think about it, all those rules about grammar and spelling are just stuff people made up over time, and it’s always changing. And there’s hundreds, thousands of languages out there! It’s the same with people… maybe liking a certain type of person seems ‘normal’, but that’s only because someone decided it should be that way. But that doesn’t mean it’s the only way.”
Some of the more academic points of Koichi’s remark went over Josuke’s head, but it was enough for his heart to settle back down to its usual trot. He grinned. “Man. Has anyone ever told you you’re like, mad smart?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Koichi – a trill of laughter, hand laid bashfully on the side of his face, but a steady, teasing voice that suggested he did know.

“So what am I gonna do?” Josuke asked.

As he said this, he was looking at the potted plant on the nightstand. Stray Cat was curled up for its afternoon nap. What remaining lilies had survived its abuse (becoming a plant itself had not granted Stray Cat empathy for the kingdom plantae) were lit up just so by the sun, so that their swarthy, peach-coloured petals seemed to glow from within: translucent, skin-like. Delicate red-purple veins showing through the powdery thin petals. Josuke was surprised Okuyasu hadn’t come back for Stray Cat yet. He was starting to worry he was about to become an unwitting pet owner.

“Well,” said Koichi, “they’re discharging you soon, right? The semester doesn’t start back up for another few days… that’s plenty of time to track down Okuyasu.”

“That’s the other thing,” said Josuke.

“What? School?”

Josuke pinched his eyes shut and scrunched up his face. “Nah. But you know what else happens in a few days? Jotaro and Jolyne are packing up and heading back to the States.”

“They…yes?” Koichi stammered. He was so far from following, he didn’t even know how to phrase his question.

“Do you remember when everyone met up at Johnny’s?” Josuke continued. “And I had to promise Jolyne I’d take her to the beach so I could get away?”

“Maybe she forgot,” Koichi pointed out.

“Fat chance. You know what she talks about? Every time she and her dad come to visit? The stupid beach. And now even Jotaro’s saying, hey, that’s a good idea, the beach sounds nice.”

“Your Jotaro impression,” said Koichi, “isn’t very good.”

“You got me there.” Josuke raised his hands in a stick ‘em up gesture. “But you see what I’m getting at, right? I have to organize this beach thing and talk to Okuyasu before next semester.”

“Well.” The word was dragged-out, breathy: the tone of someone who was about to volunteer their way into a serious inconvenience. “I can’t do much about the Okuyasu thing.”

Josuke scooted up in his hospital bed, a big, dog-eared grin on his face. “Really? You think you could throw something together at the beach?”

“Guess that depends on what you had in mind.”

To Josuke, however, this admission was as good as a promise. He clapped his hands together in front of him, fingers flat in a prayer gesture. “Dude, you’re the best. All we need is to get a few friends together, maybe some snacks or something – she’s four right? She’s not going to be too fussy.”

Falser words had never been spoken of a four year old.
Koichi gave another long, rattling martyr-sigh of resignation. There was a smile on his face, however, when he said: “I’ll see what I can throw together.”

***

Compared to the grand scheme of Okuyasu’s life – which was not so very grand at all, encompassing a whole of sixteen years and noticed only by a handful in its denouement – his time in Morioh was the stuff of footnotes. He’d lived in the house on Jouzenji road for less than a year. Before that: ten years in Tokyo, in a constant shuttle back and forth between downtown apartments and spacious tract houses in the suburbs. All within view of the crowded reminders of bustling, anonymous modern civilization: high speed trains, glistening glass towers in the distance, a smog that hung around the horizon line making the far off clusters of buildings look like one-dimensional silhouettes. Prior to Tokyo, there were only vague impressions. The colour of the paint on a wall, sunlight falling across his lap as he rode in the backseat of the car, glass shelves where his mother displayed her bisque dolls, always just out of reach. Places he’d lived whose names he could never quite remember.

No: the Tokyo prefecture loomed large in his existence, nearly filling it, but whenever Okuyasu recalled his memories of life in Tokyo, it all seemed distant, temporary. Less real, somehow, than his short time in Morioh. So much had happened since the move, each distinct memory jumping out at him whenever his thoughts happened to brush over the past year. In Tokyo, by contrast, life had followed a careful pattern, each of the thousands of identical memories collapsing into one on retrospection. And so his recollection of Tokyo was a flat, featureless landscape, from which one or two memories rose in stark contrast, throwing shadows on everything else: namely, his mother’s death and his father’s slow conversion into monstrosity, an event that had begun long before the flesh bud in his brain activated.

This pattern, this flat expanse that stretched years and years back through Okuyasu’s life, looked something like this:

He’d leave early for school. Very early. The sun would be a golden glint off the glass faces of the office buildings he always passed on his way. The shadows would still be long, the asphalt cold underfoot, even at the approach of summer. He’d arrive with forty minutes or so to spare before class. For twenty or so of those forty minutes, he’d stand outside of the gates of the school, watching the career men and women pass him by, and if one happened to stop nearby to light up, he’d try his luck bumming off a cigarette. But mostly: he just watched.

His school days passed in a blur. The florescent lights made everything fuzzy and over-exposed, as if he were seeing it through the lens of a dream. He ambled through them with a sway in his step, a waking sleepwalker. Better that way: to think of school as a kind of fiction, a dream-place in counterpoint to the real-place home had become – it made the looming crisis of his grades and good standing seem like the inconsequential penalties of a make-believe game.

After school, Okuyasu sometimes stuck around on the premise of volunteering for cleaning duty. Again, the shadows would lengthen. He liked the way the light would collect in golden pools on the floor, making the normally scuffed-up hardwood glisten. He’d think to himself that he should join up with one of the after-school clubs or sports teams, but nothing ever came of it. He couldn’t look far enough ahead to see the pay-off. The effort of trying something, of going through the motions when he’d probably just get bored of it seemed too much like making a promise he couldn’t keep.

And then on the nights when there was no excuse to hang around school – and even on some of the nights when there was – he’d wander. If he had lunch money he’d save it, and use it to stop in at a coffee shop, dragging out his cup of coffee for as long as he could manage while he memorized the
menu card or watched the rush hour traffic pass by the window. Or he’d go to the mall and wander in a daze through corridors of nauseating electric light until his head felt like it was spinning. Or he’d take the long and winding way home, wandering through the park or his favourite streets, the ones lit up bright even in the dead hours of night, packed so that he could feel the press and throng of people all around him. Or he would tuck in at the library, which always kept extended hours during the fall and winter. During his visits to the library, Okuyasu never seemed to accomplish much by way of reading. There was a semblance of reading, but nothing more: he’d skim through a magazine, or read the first chapter or two of a novel. Okuyasu was a slow reader; there was only so much progress he could make over the course of a few hours. Yet he never once checked out a book. He was convinced that if he did, he’d somehow forget to return it.

This picking up things and leaving them half-finished was a common theme in that era of his life. Nothing held his interest for long: he developed interests in hobbies only to avoid their pursuit; started on his homework only to abandon it, thinking it was all pointless anyway, that he was bound to flunk the assignment.

All these diversions, of course – school, coffee shops, the library – were all an act of running away. Running away from home is not an uncommon occupation for school-age children. Only, when most children run away from home, they first threaten at length to do so, or leave notes behind. For most run-away children want to be found. Okuyasu, however, never announced to his father or brother when he would take these extended absences from home.

He did not want to be found.

And what, we might speculate, did Okuyasu Nijimura wish to run away from? We could articulate something about the chaos and violence at home, which erupted slowly but resolutely from the black hole his mother’s absence left. But that wasn’t all there was to it. For even back then, Okuyasu thought he saw a pattern emerge: first in his father’s drunken, wild moods, and then in Keicho’s consumption with the bow of arrow. Violence seemed to him like a kind of genetic disease, a sickness polluting his and his family’s blood, the selfsame stuff which ran in his veins. This portrait of his future was easier to ignore the more he kept away from it.

You can see, then, how this fatalistic outlook – bordering on a Calvinist belief in predestination, though Okuyasu would have scarcely known such a thing existed – might have hampered him from moving very far in life. What was the point of finding a purpose or interest, when your future was acted out before you, day after day, in the confining hours when escape from home just wasn’t possible? In constant survival mode, Okuyasu had little time to stop and think – but sometimes, the realization would insinuate itself all the same, terrifying and exhilarating in its clarity: that everything he was experiencing was real, and it was all his life.

After the scene in the hospital, Okuyasu was – for the first time in months – running away again. Pursuing, doggedly, the uneasy pattern that had made living seem – if not bearable, if not easy – something remote, something other people did.

Maybe he was punishing himself for wanting something. Maybe he understood Josuke’s rejection as the signal of an end, and was preparing himself, in a self-punitive kind of way, for the disintegration of their friendship. Maybe going from a childhood of glancing over his shoulder and hiding under his covers at night and taking the long way home, to trying his best to be a normal adolescent with adolescent friends and adolescent worries, was proving too much of an adjustment, and his brain was hitting the emergency eject button by trying to convince him that the familiar pattern he had before was somehow better.

He didn’t go back to the hospital. With school starting up, he only had a couple of shifts left anyway.
As expected, the phone calls came. Like clockwork, starting half an hour after he was supposed to report for work, when he was instead sitting on the living room couch with the television blasting, trying his best to ignore the sound of the phone ringing from the kitchen.

His father lifted his head in the direction of the kitchen and let out a groan.

“Ignore it,” Okuyasu growled under his breath. “Jus’ some telemarketers or something.”

Dr. Manabe would be pissed at him, he knew. The thought made him queasy.

He’d been kidding himself wasting her time like that.

When he wasn’t moping in the living room, Okuyasu retraced his way back through old habits. He frequented pachinko parlours and coffee shops. He passed the witching hours in late-night laundromats, thumbing through years-old magazines, listening to the hypnotic hum of the steel drum dryers as they tumbled, punctuated intermittently by the click of a zipper or button striking the drum, and the short choppy whirl of the top-loader agitators. He picked up comic books from the corner store and read them by the banks of the Ichio River, in the criss-cross shade of the steel girders of one of the town’s three bridges overhead.

And yet, for all his falling back into his old motions, the unsettled, restless feeling remained. Okuyasu figured it was the town. Morioh, even at its busiest intersection, had nothing on the quietest of Tokyo’s wards. Of course he’d find it hard to come by way of distraction. Especially with his access to the library still barred (he’d tried, once or twice, to return there, but each time he was met with the frigid death stare of the Librarian, who had apparently not forgotten about the incident involving the vanishing of Works of Historic and Sentimental Importance.)

So he began taking the midafternoon train into the city. He hung about until evening rolled around, until the city began to bleed out, people rushing from work to catch the train home to Morioh, or other destinations further down the long snaking stretch of light rail that banked through the countryside; sleepy towns nestled low into valleys, warm yellow windows that twinkled in solidary islands when the high-speed train whipped by at night. And when that great flood receded, it would leave the city streets embanked in clear sidewalks – clear, except the small, intimate groups that walked abreast and talked and laughed in loud, ringing voices on their way to some bar or downtown dive. And Okuyasu, too, would wander those streets, but where he should have felt at home, where he should have been reminded of similar roads ambled down in years gone by, he was left feeling on edge, anxious for something he couldn’t name.

Though he didn’t realize it yet, something had changed in the past few months – or, to be more precise, something had been changing. All those old habits of his had fit comfortably on the Okuyasu Nijimura who’d once worn them: the Okuyasu who didn’t think of himself as having a future, who couldn’t let himself enjoy anything, who thought the people who were supposed to love him treated him the way they did because he’d done something to deserve it, who thought of violence as a kind of biological destiny. But these old habits, these self-destructive coping mechanisms, did not fit so well the Okuyasu Nijimura who found himself surrounded by friends; who was listening to old records and singing in the shower and learning how to maintain a sterile field; who could not only picture himself having a future, but couldn’t help but put Josuke in it.

But again, we reiterate: Okuyasu himself did not know this. Loitering under the air conditioner in a convenience store as he deliberated between iced tea and a coke, all he could think about was how he’d been someone else’s mistake.

He was still thinking about it – thoughts turning circle, an Ouroboros chasing its tail – when he stepped out of the convenience store, and he might have kept on thinking about it, if he wasn’t
roused by the sound of water running. And then there was the singing:

“Well, it's one for the money

Two for the show

Three to get ready

Now go, go, go!

But don't you

Step on my blue suede shoes

Well, you can do anything

But stay off of my blue suede shoes.”

Around the corner, Okuyasu craned his neck. Sure enough, there was the bike: leaning at an angle on its kickstand, long and zigzagging like a bolt of purple lightning. And, kneeling beside the bike – more an accessory to it than it to him – was Yuya.

“Hey,” said Okuyasu, “Fungami.”

Yuya turned, a parabola of water splashing at this feet in the process. He was holding a garden hose – as Okuyasu’s eyes followed the hose where it snaked down around Yuya’s feet, he realized it was hooked up to a spigot on the side of the building.

Yuya leapt back a step, shaking the water from his shoes. “God damn,” he hissed under his breath.

“Sorry, dude,” said Okuyasu.

“It’s fine. Just a reflex.” Bending over, Yuya turned the spigot until the stream of water flowing from the hose narrowed to a trickle, and then a drip. “What’ve you been up to? I haven’t seen you around.”

“Not much,” Okuyasu mumbled. He was gazing down at his feet. Run-off from the hose was creeping toward him in a sluggish stream. “You, uh, all in the clear now?”

Crouching, Yuya clucked his tongue. “Jotaro told you about our adventure, hunh?” he asked.

There were two buckets set out beside the bike. From one, Yuya grabbed a sponge. He gave it a good wring; soapy water ran down his arm.

“He brought it up when he was telling me an’ Koichi what happened with Fujimoto.”

“Guess I’m gonna be looking for a new mechanic,” said Yuya. “Pigs aren’t bothering me anymore at least. I’d love to know what the hell those Foundation guys told them.”

“Beats me… Josuke’s family seems pretty intense.”

Yuya jerked his head in the direction of the road. “Speaking of – you been in to visit that asshole much?”

The direction he was indicating could have been anywhere, but Okuyasu knew he was referring to the hospital in S City.
“Nah, I…I ain’t been up,” Okuyasu stammered.

“Too bad,” Yuya remarked. He passed the sponge over the bike’s fairing, working outward in careful, caressing circles. “I was gonna ask how he’s doing.”

“Josuke’s fine.”

Yuya paused. Water dripped from the bike, smacking the pavement in big, juicy droplets. “You haven’t been up, hunh?” he repeated, wearing a smirk. “Or’d Jotaro tell you that too?”

Okuyasu cut his eyes away from Yuya’s smirk. Over his nose, he dragged the back of his hand and let out a snort. “I ain’t been up since a few days,” he admitted.

“Hey – nobody’s asking.”

He expected Yuya to hint at him to leave. Tell Okuyasu he was in the middle of something, because he was: up to his elbows in it, sleeves rolled up, sweat glistening at the back of his neck. But Yuya didn’t say anything. He continued working his way down the bike, stopping only to rinse his sponge off every so often in the second bucket. And he started humming again – quieter this time, the lyrics lost under his breath.

Okuyasu shifted his weight to his other foot. “Can I ask ya something?” he said.

“You can go ahead and try – no guarantees I’m gonna answer, though.”

“How did ya get into the whole…all this?” Okuyasu asked, nodding at the bike.

“What? Boso mods?”

“Y’know, in general – motorbikes, the gang…”

“I never thought too much about it,” said Yuya. He passed the sponge over the bike’s leather seat, leaving a wet sheen in its wake. “I liked the idea of the freedom, being able to get away any time I wanted… so I started learning to ride. It’s not like it was love at first sight or anything, but at some point I guess I just realized how much I liked pushing against the wind and having it push me right back.”

Yuya pinched the edge of the sponge between his fingers and brought it to a point. Using the reshaped sponge, he soaped down the rims, getting in between the spokes.

“It’s like anything. How did you get into…whatever you’re into? Same thing.”

“I don’t think I’ve really got a – a passion or whatever you wanna call it.”

“Come on, there’s got to be something.”

“I dunno,” Okuyasu mumbled. Reaching down, he rubbed at his knee. There was the prelude to an ache in the joint; he’d probably pulled something in the other Morioh. The type of injury, normally, Josuke would be quick to fix up. “Always seems like it’s easy for other people. They just go out and find some – thing – and everything falls together, y’know? I bet you ain’t ever worried yer not good enough to ride around with those other guys.”

“Is that it?” Yuya asked. “You’re worried you’re not good enough? – Or are you more worried about failing so you don’t wanna bother trying in the first place?”

“A bit both I guess.”
Yuya stood and leaned back into a long, lazy stretch.

“Even when you’re awesome at what you do, you have your days.” A shrug here. “When you can say you enjoy something even when you’re not feeling it… that’s how you know it’s love, not infatuation.”

Into the rinse bucket, Yuya dropped the sponge. It landed with a wet, heavy plop. “So,” he said, “this ride of yours got a name?”

“What ride?” Okuyasu demanded.

Laughing, Yuya tossed him a shammy. “I’m joking. How about towling down the lady for me?”

“Yeah, well, your joke sucks,” Okuyasu grumbled as he caught the shammy without a second thought. He hated humour that went over his head – the jokes always felt like a jab at him, even when they weren’t. “And what makes ya think I’m gonna dry down your bike for ya?”

“Stress relief,” said Yuya. “What you need is some elbow grease therapy – I’m telling you, you get into it and it’s like the whole world just – .” He waved one hand slowly in front of his face – the same half-circle motion he’d used to soap down the bike. “—woooosh!”

“I ain’t stressed,” Okuyasu retorted. “You’re just tryna pull some Tom Saywer shit on me.”

Nonetheless, he got down begrudgingly to work: running the shammy over the bike’s glistening chrome fender with vigorous strokes, putting pressure behind his arm. As much as he hated to admit it, Yuya was right. He soon lost himself in the simple, repetitive action of wiping down the bike; the steady white noise of it filled his mind until it drowned out the voices that had been reminding him, ever since the hospital, that he was unwanted.

The busywork was self-effacing. Like his old wandering habits had been, but in a good way. With Yuya’s company removed to the background – out of sight but still audible as he chatted Okuyasu through the story of his arrest – and the feeling that he was accomplishing something resting with heavy satisfaction in the bottom of his stomach the same way a full meal did.

Two loud beeps in rapid succession. Okuyasu’s shoulders jumped. He glanced up over his shoulder to see Yuya pull out a pocket bell.

Okuyasu couldn’t see the screen from where he knelt, but the numbers that appeared across it were: 88951.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Yuya’s mouth. He paged back 0906. Then – after hesitating a moment, his fingers drumming against the plastic casing of the pocket bell – he sent a second page: 114106.

“You mind putting on the polish while you’re down there?” Yuya asked. “I gotta have her looking good. We’ve got a date with the girls.”

“Dunno how you can read those beeper codes.”

“Aren’t stressed,” Okuyasu retorted. “You’re just tryna pull some Tom Saywer shit on me.”

Nonetheless, he got down begrudgingly to work: running the shammy over the bike’s glistening chrome fender with vigorous strokes, putting pressure behind his arm. As much as he hated to admit it, Yuya was right. He soon lost himself in the simple, repetitive action of wiping down the bike; the steady white noise of it filled his mind until it drowned out the voices that had been reminding him, ever since the hospital, that he was unwanted.

The busywork was self-effacing. Like his old wandering habits had been, but in a good way. With Yuya’s company removed to the background – out of sight but still audible as he chatted Okuyasu through the story of his arrest – and the feeling that he was accomplishing something resting with heavy satisfaction in the bottom of his stomach the same way a full meal did.

Two loud beeps in rapid succession. Okuyasu’s shoulders jumped. He glanced up over his shoulder to see Yuya pull out a pocket bell.

Okuyasu couldn’t see the screen from where he knelt, but the numbers that appeared across it were: 88951.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Yuya’s mouth. He paged back 0906. Then – after hesitating a moment, his fingers drumming against the plastic casing of the pocket bell – he sent a second page: 114106.

“You mind putting on the polish while you’re down there?” Yuya asked. “I gotta have her looking good. We’ve got a date with the girls.”

“That them on the beeper just now?”

Again: the corner of a grin on Yuya’s lips, this one in spite of himself: Okuyasu could see the muscles in his face tense as he tried to hide it. “They’re waiting up on me.”

“Dunno how you can read those beeper codes.”

“It’s an art.”
Yuya had left a container of cream polish on the ground by the buckets. Okuyasu grabbed a clean shammy and dipped one corner in the polish, then set to work on the chrome engine fins.

“So what’s the occasion?” he rumbled.

“Beach party.” Just then, Yuya’s face lit up. “Hey – why don’t you come with? I’m meeting the girls there so I’ve got the extra seats.”


“No, hey, you don’t gotta worry about that – there’s going to be a ton of people there. You can, you know – mingle.” Yuya grinned at him, one eyebrow arched – not for the first time, Okuyasu found himself drawing parallels to Josuke. Both of them with the same smug, boyish confidence.

“And besides,” said Yuya, grin widening, “I’ll let you ride shotgun.”

***

“You know,” said Tomoko, “I don’t think I’ve been to the beach once all summer.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” mumbled Josuke, whose last trip to the beach had been expedited by falling off a cliff and nearly drowning.

“Your mom,” Tomoko continued, “used to be a hottie in a two-piece bikini.”

He didn’t miss the way her eyes slid across to Jotaro, who was in the driver’s seat, too focused on the road to take notice. Groaning, Josuke pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes as he tried to block out the suggested image. “Mo-oom!”

Against her stomach, Tomoko patted a hand. “That’s what having kids does to you. Still got it, though.”

Josuke felt a tug on his arm. When he bent over, Jolyne whispered into his ear: “What’s a hottie?”

“Ask your dad,” he hissed back, though he couldn’t for one second imagine Jotaro having any notion of the term ‘hottie’ that did not involve temperatures in excess of 40 degrees centigrade.

“Can’t you ask him?” she asked, vowels elongating in a whine.

“No!”

“Please?”

Happily, Josuke was saved from any further supplication when the car pulled off onto a dirt road. Jotaro, after putting the gearshift into park, turned around to announce: “Jolyne, help Josuke with the stuff in the trunk.”

Josuke pushed open the door, but before he could even get his seatbelt off, Jolyne scrambled over his lap – amid his protests of “hey, use your own door!” – and hopped outside.

“You lose!” she shot back at him – though what the terms of the unspoken contest were, Josuke couldn’t be sure.

As soon as he stepped from the car, he was struck by the acrid smell of salt. Sand dunes arched before them, capped by long, brittle reeds of grass that scratched together with a hiss at the wind’s...
provocation. A wooden boardwalk dusted in fine white sand left behind by visitors on their way back from the beach led the way up over the dunes. On the other side of the boardwalk – somewhere over the dunes and just out of sight – Josuke could hear the tantalizing roar of the waves. At a distance, it sounded like the shouts of a massive, unified crowd.

He drew a deep breath. The fresh air slipped smoothly through his lungs. During his near week-long stay in the hospital, the stale, ammonia-thick air had left the inside of his lungs filling sticky with every breath he took. The change was a welcome relief.

In the two days since his discharge, his goal of finding Okuyasu and setting things straight had gone woefully unmet: every call unanswered, every knock at the Nijimura’s front door attended by Mr. Nijimura’s baffled gurgle at the threshold. For someone as loud and unsubtle as Okuyasu, he sure knew how to hide when he really wanted to.

But the blame did not fall entirely on Josuke. His aim was hampered by an unexpected obstacle: Tomoko had taken the rest of the week off work.

“Where do you think you’re rushing off to?” she’d ask every time Josuke made to slip out of the house, followed up invariably by: “how about spending some time with yer mamma, kiddo?”

It wasn’t as though Josuke was trying to ignore his mother. It just kept happening.

Which was why he’d decided to invite her along to the beach. That and the other reason.

Because after ending up in the hospital twice and both times seeing the stress and exhaustion work its way into the circles and creases around his mother’s eyes and smelling the nicotine on her clothes, he was beginning to realize that keeping the truth from her had not kept her from worrying. Telling her in public in broad daylight seemed like the best approach. Less opportunity for a fuss, that way – though if she really did want to make good on her oft-repeated, half-joking promise of “I brought you into this world so I can take you out of it”, Josuke doubted a crowd of witnesses would prevent his mother from doing so.

“Careful with that, kiddo!” he heard his mother say, followed by: “Josuke, don’t let her carry that!”

Cursing under his breath, Josuke made a dive for the large, fully-loaded cooler Jolyne was in the process of pulling out of the trunk. He managed to grab it just before it could crush her foot – ignoring her protests of, “I wanna carry it!”

With the cooler in one hand and a folding chair in the other, Josuke stepped up onto the boardwalk. The planks squeaked with the rhythm of his footsteps. As he neared the end of the boardwalk, where a steep set of steps made one final descent to the beach below, he began to distinguish beneath the roar of the waves the sound of human chatter. And when the wind changed direction, the smell of salt and brine was suddenly replaced with a different scent: sizzling fat, spiced meat, hot charcoal, and a whiff of oily dark smoke.

He came to a halt at the top of the steps. Below, the beach stretched out before him. Packed. More packed, certainly, than he would expect from the tail end of August, with the mornings already growing cooler and the ocean taking longer each day to warm.

No sooner had he stopped, he felt his mother’s shoes scuff the backs of his heels. “Come on, kiddo, get a move on!” she chided.

At the bottom of the steps, they discovered the source of the mouth-watering smell in the air. Tonio Trussardi was stationed over an open-fire grill, piled high with fat-speckled sausages, bone-in steaks,
glazed salmon fillets, and skewered halves of red pepper, eggplant, and zucchini.  

“Good afternoon, signore!” Tonio said with a smile when he noticed Josuke gawking at the grill. “It is good to see you up and about! I hope my cooking helped you to feel better?”

“Uh, yeah,” Josuke babbled in reply. The smell of the grill from up over the dunes had been delicious, but up close, seeing the juices practically sweating off a row of burger patties, he could feel his mouth water. “Better. Much better.”

He wasn’t the only one who’d taken notice of the grill. Tomoko crowded up to Tonio, at a distance that suggested a more-than-passing familiarity. “I didn’t know they had barbeque in Italian cuisine!” she exclaimed.

“Sì, signorina! Grilled meats and vegetables are traditional summer fare in the Northern provinces.”

“It all smells delicious.”

“And just thirty-five hundred yen a plate!” Josuke, all at once, was being elbowed aside as Tamami Kobayashi wormed his way in front of him. He was wearing a translucent green visor, a fanny pack, and a shark-like smile: all toothy and predatory. “It’s a one-day special,” Tamami went on to explain as he pressed a laminated take-out menu in Tomoko’s direction. “All’s you can eat!”

“Let me guess,” said Tomoko. She pressed one manicured nail against the menu, bending it out of the way. “I have to pay for whatever I don’t finish?”

“We-ell…”

“This creep’s working with you?” Josuke asked Tonio.

The chef had his back turned. He drizzled olive oil from a plastic condiment bottle over the steaks. The flames leapt up with a hiss.

“Signore Kobayashi has been assisting with, what we will call, the financial part of the restaurant business.” Tonio’s voice was edged with a smile. Over the cuts of meat, he sprinkled a generous helping of salt and pepper. “I only want to cook! This money stuff… I really have no taste for it!”

“Swell guy, that Tonio,” said Kobayashi. “Those bylaw assholes took my wheels so I had’s to make a change in profession, and my buddy here was nice enough to gives me a shot at the food biz.”

“My friend! For today, why not offer Josuke and the bella young lady a plate for free? – as celebration, of course! For Signore Josuke’s recovery!”

“I can’t argue with free grub,” Tomoko said. To Josuke, she turned. “What do you think, kiddo?”

But Josuke wasn’t paying attention to her. He was too busy scanning the crowd further down the beach.

“Uh, yeah,” he mumbled. “Hey, would you mind grabbing me a plate and saving me a spot?” he asked. “I’m gonna run down and say hi to Koichi.”

“Your friend’s here? I haven’t seen him.”

“This whole barbeque’s was Master Koichi’s idea!” Tamami exclaimed. “He’s a smart guy – always thinks of everything!”

Somehow, this information did not come as a surprise to Josuke.
Excusing himself, he began picking his way toward the water, a long string of “sorry”s and “excuse me”s tumbling from his lips as he stepped around volleyball games and sunbathers. He recognized most of the people there, of course – they were classmates, neighbours, kids he’d grown up with who’d gone off to other schools. A group of girls he remembered from homeroom last semester called out to him; he brushed them off with a wave, a smile, and a promise to catch up soon – a promise he knew he’d probably forget all about later.

When he finally did track Koichi down, the other boy was surrounded by a group Josuke recognized from school but had never spoken to. Upperclassmen, mostly – he could maybe pick one or two names between the six of them, and even then, he couldn’t be sure exactly which name went with what face. The whole circle, Koichi included, was involved in an animated discussion. Josuke could hear the words deadline and filler being thrown around, but he was too far back to make much of the conversation over sounds of the waves.

Spotting Yukako further down the beach, Josuke ambled over, hands thrust into his swim trunk pockets.

“Hey,” he said, pausing as he scrambled to think of something to follow up with that would somehow make his greeting even a tiny less awkward. “…Yukako.”

“Josuke,” she responded. And then before he could reply: “You’re looking for Koichi, right?”

She was sitting on a beach blanket, her long legs folded up under her in a way that reminded Josuke of a newborn colt. All around her were strewn glossy subscription magazines. He was taken off guard – reading magazines on the beach had to be the most normal thing he could recall seeing Yukako do – until he noticed the scissors.

“No,” he lied, eyeing the scissors as Yukako deftly cut into the cover of one of the magazines. “I saw him – he was talking to some seniors?”

“The newspaper club,” Yukako informed him. A look of concentration as she cut around the curves of a letter. “He mentioned wanting to find an extracurricular activity for the fall.”

“Journalism?”

“I think it suits him.”

“He does have a way of, like, stumbling right into all the hot local news, doesn’t he?”

“I’d call it more of a predilection.”

Rocking back on his heels, Josuke took in another long look at the crowd on the beach. “So, uh, here’s the thing – I kind of asked Koichi to put together a small thing at the beach. Like, you know – just a few close friends.”

Yukako exhaled through her nose. She set the magazines aside and turned to him, hands folded in her lap. “He did this for you, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“One last hurrah,” said Yukako, in a sing-songy voice. Despite the forced whimsy, there was not so much as the hint of a smile on her face. “He wanted to get the whole gang together.” Here she leaned in – not quite close enough to be conspiratorial, but getting there. “I think he’s worried your summer was a wash-out with everything going on and he wants to make it up to you.”
At Koichi, Josuke stole another glance. He was beaming, the expression reflected on the circle of upperclassmen hovering all around him – something in it infectious. “He really is a good guy, hunh?” Josuke drawled.

“He has good friends.”

Josuke whipped his head around, but by then Yukako had already retuned to busying herself with the scissors. *Snip, snip* – a perfectly cut-out letter drifted free from the magazine cover and fluttered to the blanket. If the sunshine had, for a brief moment, broken through her cloudy expression, she didn’t show it.

“Anyway, he worked hard for all this, so you damn well better appreciate it,” she said, affecting a nonplussed tone of boredom. “He wanted *everyone* to be here. The Librarian gave him a hard time.”

“The Librarian? She’s not here, is she?”

“No – we needed her permission for a special borrow request.”

Without looking up from her magazine, Yukako pointed over Josuke’s shoulder. He turned. Behind him, there was a towel spread out over the sand. A book lay open atop the towel, a pair of sunglasses weighing down the pages.

He’d noticed the book earlier and had assumed it was someone’s trashy beach read. Now that he was getting a closer look at the book, however…

“Are you serious?” Josuke groaned. “He invited *Miyamoto*?”

A breeze picked up. The book’s pages fluttered and gave an angry rustle – almost as though it was aware someone was talking about it.

“He feels sorry for Terunosuke,” Yukako clarified. “Koichi thought he might enjoy a temporary change of scenery.”

They gazed together for a minute at the book as it continued to lay unmoving on the towel.

“…Do you think he’s actually enjoying himself?” Josuke asked, a hint of doubt creeping into his voice. Then again – he didn’t want to judge a book by its cover.

“Who cares?” he heard Yukako say. “Say cheese.”

“What?”

When he looked back at her, he got an eyeful of a flashbulb going off in his face. A camera shutter clicked.


Yukako made a *tsk* sound as she grabbed the fresh Polaroid from her camera and began to shake it out. “I think your eyes may have been closed in that one.”

“Can you maybe give me a warning next time?”

From her bag, Yukako produced a glue stick and a scrapbook.

“That’s the whole *point* of candid photography,” she complained. “If I warned you, it wouldn’t be authentic anymore.”
“Why the hell are you doing another scrapbook page on me anyway? I thought it was case closed.”

“This is a different scrapbook.”

She turned the scrapbook over. In place of jeweled stickers and gold glitter pen was a plain black cover with the words ‘Fun With Friends 1999’ pasted on the front in letters clipped from various magazines and newspapers. Josuke was pretty sure that at least one of the 9s had gotten its start in life as a humble 6.

In short: the scrapbook cover looked like a ransom note composed by a serial killer.

“This is…” he began to say, but then he flipped open the scrapbook.

The inner pages were brown craft paper. Photographs were arranged in neat layouts, locations and dates printed out with a label maker – embossed white letters on black. There was a picture of Koichi at the bonfire, knees drawn up to his chest, poking at the embers with a stick. A group shot of Morioh’s stand users gathered around Reimi’s alley, saying goodbye. A picture of Yukako in a mirror, holding the camera: in the background, Josuke, Rohan, and Koichi arguing over something around the overstuffed blue velvet couch. A photo from out on the old highway of Josuke and Okuyasu walking shoulder to shoulder, grins on the cutaway shapes of their faces, a trick of perspective making it look like their hands were touching.

“…Where’d you get all these?” Josuke asked.

Yukako lifted the scrapbook from his lap. “I have my sources,” she said. Flipping to the first blank page, she turned her latest Polaroid over and began applying glue to the back. “A couple of the photos were given to me by Rohan… But I’ve been thinking about taking up photography myself. So.”

“Those are pretty good. Any time I try taking a picture, it always comes out blurry.”

She bent her head over the page, a curtain of hair falling across her face – but not quite hiding her smile. “You’re probably using too slow a shutter speed,” she explained. “Or your depth of field is too shallow.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind,” said Josuke, who had no intention of doing any such thing. “So… if I’m in your regular, non-murder scrapbook, does that mean we’re friends?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ll admit I’ve always found you annoying.”

“Great, thanks.”

“…But lately I’ve been worried about your wellbeing, so I guess that means you’re someone I feel a connection with.”

“What kind of worried?” asked Josuke, who could not recall ever seeing Yukako anything other than nonplussed.

“For one thing: it’s a miracle natural selection hasn’t polished you off. Second of all, watching you and Okuyasu tiptoe around each other is just pathetic. How does the expression go?”

“What expression?”

Her eyes flickered upward as she recited: “‘Like two ships passing in the night’ – except change the night part for plain daylight and the ships for a couple of clown cars.”
“Koichi really wasn’t exaggerating when he said everyone knew, hunh?”

“I did say you were lovesick, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but…”

Yukako folded her hands under her chin. “In a horse race, I suppose, everyone knows the current positions except the horses. What I’m saying is – if you ever need someone to tell you the score, I can sort you out.”

“There’s no score to keep track of anymore. Race’s off.”

Huffing, Yukako, blew a loose strand of hair from her face. “Listen, jackass. If I can weasel my way into a second chance, it shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

She was back to using her real voice again – the deep, rough drawl she slipped into whenever she allowed her vocal chords to rest. He was used to hearing that voice whenever she was pissed off, but at the moment, her posture – shoulders rounded, stomach muscles slack – looked relaxed. Josuke, too, noticed that at some point, he’d stopped thinking about ways of making the conversation with her less awkward.

Remembering he was, theoretically, supposed to be spending the day with family, Josuke mumbled an excuse and jogged back up the beach to where he’d spotted Jotaro getting set up.

He found Tomoko sitting with a steaming plate of barbeque balanced in her lap. Jolyne was in the process of piling a shovel, trowel, and several fish-themed plastic molds into her bucket. Jotaro, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

“He went down to the water,” Tomoko said when Josuke asked. She waved her plastic fork over her head. “Something about… biodiversity? Biology was never my best subject.”

When Jolyne stood, Tomoko called out: “Going somewhere, kiddo?”

“I’m gonna built a sand castle,” Jolyne replied. She refused to look Tomoko in the eyes as she said this; instead, she dragged her toe through the sand.

“You want me and Josuke to help?”

Jolyne shook her head.

“Alright,” said Tomoko. “Just don’t go getting too close to the water, hunh?”

Giving Tomoko a plaintive stare, Jolyne mumbled “‘Kay,” before scurrying off toward the waterline – toward wet sand, the “good stuff”.

“Gotta say – for growing up in the states, her Japanese is pretty good,” Tomoko remarked.

“Yeah, it’s great,” said Josuke, suddenly glad Jotaro was down by the water and out of earshot.

“You were like that too when you were a kid,” continued Tomoko. “Sooooo surly!”

“I was not!”

“You were too! For a little while there. Still a good kid, though.”

Josuke spread out a beach towel beside his mother and sank down onto it. He sat with his elbows on
his knees. The wind buffeted his ears, a deep distorted roar, blocking out the sounds of the crowd further down the beach. By then the sun was high; silver ripples like liquid mercury writhed eel-like over the ocean’s surface. At low tide, the water was calm: translucent cerulean instead of the deep-grey blue colour of high tide and rough water.

As Tomoko finished up her plate, he waited. He was hoping – he wasn’t too sure for what, the right moment, perhaps, if such a thing can exist.

He’d never find out for himself, however – because his mother, after wiping her lips with a paper napkin, muttered: “Alright, kiddo, what’s the score?”

“Huh?”

“Since when does my son want to sit around with his mom?”

There was no accusation in the way she said this – she sounded, if anything, amused.

“Back in the hospital… you never asked me how it happened.”

Tomoko balled up the napkin in her hand, making a fist around it. “You’ve still got a pulse, right?”

“Yeah, but – .”

“Then as long as you’re not gunning for another round in plasters, I’m good.”

“I mean, I can try.”

Her eyes flickered up to his face. The angle framed the whites of her eyes under the slope of her brows. She always kept her eyebrows thin and waxed into a crisp line; her eyebrows looked like the tail of a whip and she could bring them cracking down just as fast. “Try harder,” she said, voice flat.

“Here’s the thing: I’ve got this… this…” he cringed at the word that was about to follow, at how ridiculous it sounded, “…superpower – okay except it’s not really a superpower, those don’t exist, but it’s more like –.”

“A stand, right?”

Josuke jolted; hearing that word from his mother’s mouth was a bolt of ice water down his back. “You –?”

Leaning to one side, Tomoko rested her cheek against her fist and regarded him out of the corners of her eyes. “Your father was such a show off,” she said, talking out the side of her mouth. “He loved his party tricks. He’d pull off these sleights of hand, somehow take my wallet without me noticing and then hand it to me, always with this big smile on his face. Or we’d be having dinner and he’d punch a hole through his napkin with a cooked spaghetti noodle and make fun of me when I couldn’t copy him.” Her eyes drifted back to forward-center, gazing at something far away in more ways than just distance. Her mouth hung slack, front teeth peeking out from between her lips. “He was just trying to impress me, I guess. And I was young and stupid enough to fall for it.”

“Did pops ever tell you about stands?”

“He never used that word, but there was one trick of his that always got me. He was always carrying around this stupid pen in his pocket, and he’d take it out and make like it was levitating – and no matter how hard I looked, trying to catch a glimpse of fishing wire or whatever he was using, I could never figure it out.”
“He’s got a stand called Hermit Purple that can pick stuff up.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t see it, right? There was always something strange about your old man. Then you came along. When you were a kid you used to go around talking about your imaginary friend. At first I figured you were just pulling my leg with the usual made-up kid stuff, then one day you picked up a broken plate I’d just dropped and I watch as, poof! Suddenly it’s back together again.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“It didn’t happen again.” Gazing down, she chased a leftover red pepper around the Styrofoam plate with her fork. “I panicked. Said some things I shouldn’t have.”

“Wait,” Josuke interrupted. “Was this the one time you grounded me for like a month?”

His memory of the incident in question was dominated by the recollection of crying in his room over what he, at the time, perceived to be the massively unjust confiscation of his Famicom. But then again – no child has ever thought of parental verdicts as just, unless they are inflicted on siblings, and Josuke had no siblings, so this was hardly remarkable.

Tomoko let out a groan. “God, you must have thought I was being a psycho bitch.” She leaned back in her chair, slumping, her stomach arched out. “When you’re a parent, you just want to protect your kids, you know? It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“So, how’d you find out about stands then?”

“Jotaro.”

When he gawked at her, she added: “What? He’s a parent too, you know.”

“Okay, but since when have you guys actually talked?”

“First time you were in the hospital, he pulled me aside. He had this whole spiel ready – you’d think he had rehearsed it in front of a mirror or something.”

He was starting to wonder if there were any secrets of his that weren’t public knowledge by that point. Hearing his mother talk about stands had the same embarrassing effect of hearing her read aloud from his diary – if he still kept one that is (he’d bought a journal with his favourite pop star on the cover once when he was twelve, made a single entry about his school day, and then never used it again.)

“So – on my last trip to the hospital,” he stammered.

“Yeah. I know,” she said. “I never said anything though, because – I don’t know – I kept hoping it would go away on its own. Every time you come home with a new bruise – I do notice, you know,” she interrupted when Josuke opened his mouth to protest, “every time, I keep thinking to myself, well, maybe this’ll be the last time.”

She was staring at him – waiting for an answer, Josuke realized. Would she feel better, he wondered, if he told her there’d be no more bruises or hospital trips. But he remembered what she’d said on their car ride together about not wanting to be the last to know, and he saw the way her eyes held his, watching his expression for any trace of a lie. What she wanted was not reassurance.

“If there’s any more trouble with stand users in Morioh,” he said, “if people are in danger, I mean… someone’s gotta deal with it, right?”
Tomoko snorted. She lowered her gaze, one hand rubbing at her other wrist. “You and your granddad, I swear… apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree there. Both of you – you’ve got to make everything your business. Him with his cases you with your…” She raised a hand and let it drop. “—Whatever. It’s like the whole world stops if you’re not there to give it a push.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. He’d be proud of you.” Over her chest, she splayed a hand. “I’m proud of you. Apparently I did a pretty damn good job raising you. Maybe a little too good. Sometimes I just wish it was someone else’s kid, you know.” She gazed at him for a moment, lips pressed together, blinking rapidly, before forcing on a smile. “Just tell me next time you think you might be going out and making ghosts punch each other or whatever the hell stand users do. If someone hurts you, I wanna know whose ass I need to kick.”

“You can’t kick a stand’s ass without another stand,” Josuke stammered, as if, in the entire run of the conversation, this was somehow the most surreal thing he’d heard from his mother’s mouth.

Setting her plate aside, Tomoko leaned over, fingers dancing across her knees – an old school-girl gesture she’d never grown out of. “Show me,” she said.

Using Crazy Diamond had become so normal for him, so mundane, that he didn’t have to think about it anymore. Sometimes he’d pick up a sock with a hole in it while sorting his laundry and it’d be mended before he could even noticed he’d seen the tear. Other times he’d forgot to heal someone because he got distracted – assumed he’d already done it, because it was so near an automatic thing to him. So when his mother asked him to show off Crazy Diamond, and Josuke actually had to think about fixing something, he came up blank.

“Um,” he said, “give me something busted?”

“What?”

“You know… something broken. Or like, something that used to be a part of something else or s’got a piece missing.”

Tomoko stretched out, arms hanging down between her knees as she surveyed the sand at her feet. After a few seconds, she picked something up.

“Here,” she said, pressing the object into his hand.

When Josuke uncurled his fingers, there was a smooth, sea-green piece of glass in his palm. He concentrated on it. A warm golden glow bubbled around the glass. Something whizzed past Josuke’s ear with a zing! And then another.

Soon he was left holding a complete bottle – or about as complete as it could get within the limits of Crazy Diamond’s range. The bottle’s neck was almost completely gone and chips of glass were missing throughout. All that was left of the label was the tacky white residue where the backside of paper had stuck to the glue.

Tomoko whistled. “Not too shabby, kiddo.”

“So…” Josuke paused, his lips pursed around the shape of the preceding word. “We cool?”

She snorted. “Yeah. We’re cool.”

Josuke eyed the half-intact bottle in his hands. Now that he’d fixed it, its sharp, jagged edges had
returned: no longer a smooth stone of sea-glass in his palm.

“I should probably go chuck this,” he said. “Did you see a garbage can or something around earlier?”

Tomoko rose to her feet, scooping up her Styrofoam plate on the way. “No, but I’ll go with you.”

***

On their way back from tracking down a garbage can (all the way up the stairs, over the dunes, and way back at the corner of the parking lot), Tomoko grabbed his arm all at once. Josuke recognized the grip, among his mother’s arsenal of strategic manoeuvering that was not so unlike the various permutations on the judo grip: it was the hold she employed when socialization was about to occur and she was pre-emptively barring his escape.

“Mrs. Kawajiri!” she exclaimed. The emphasis was all for Josuke’s benefit; she hated when he couldn’t remember strangers’ names. “How’s it going?”

Except Josuke already knew the name, though he couldn’t remember why, until he followed the pull on his arm and saw a woman approaching them, her honey-brown hair sticking up at odd angles around the pair of sunglasses pushed up over her head, and at her side, staring up at Josuke with as much shock as Josuke was probably staring back at him, was the boy who’d called him on the morning they’d tracked down Kira once for all – Hayato.

Tomoko and Shinobu were discussing something, but Josuke was deaf to it. He was busy trying to catch Hayato’s eyes but the boy refused to look at him. Josuke couldn’t blame him. In Hayato’s shoes, he supposed he’d feel a bit awkward too seeing someone in public after watching them die. Mortals, we’ve noted, are squeamish to the point of absurdity where bodily functions are concerned – and there’s no bodily function more taboo than death.

After the two women had taken leave – with Shinobu uttering that doomed adult adjuration, “We should hang out sometime!” – Josuke asked, keeping his voice low so it wouldn’t travel beyond the radius he and his mother shared: “How do you know her?”

“We work together. Mrs. Kawajiri just started in the ladies’ fashions department,” Tomoko explained. She let her head loll back and flashed him a smirk. “Thanks for asking, by the way.”

“C’mon, I ask about your friends sometimes.”

She angled her eyebrows up at him.

“…Couple friends of mine went to school with her kid,” Josuke muttered. And it was probably true – Ken was around the same age as Hayato, and Shigechi would have been the same age too.

“So you must’ve heard about his dad, hunh?”

When Josuke froze she continued: “Mr. Kawajiri up and disappeared. Probably ran off with some fresh-out-of-college secretary.” She had, she thought, the male model down to a replicable blueprint. “It’s not easy working when you’ve got a kid, but… you’ve gotta do what you’ve gotta do.”

It occurred to Josuke that since his mother was now privy to the whole world of stands anyway, there was no reason he couldn’t tell her what had actually happened to Mrs. Kawajiri’s husband. So he opened his mouth, preparing to do so – the breath of the next word already warm on his lips when –
– When he thought of his mother going into work tomorrow. He pictured her standing at the perfume counter, watching across the polished floor as Mrs. Kawajiri breezed by racks of next season’s fashions, rambling about a good-for-nothing husband and how she couldn’t wait for him to drag his sorry carcass home, to beg –.

And his mother carrying around the truth with her like a pebble under her skin. Because Kosaku’s death would be easy to explain to his mother, but Mrs. Kawajiri…?

So Josuke pictured this confession, watched it shimmer, mirage-like, for a moment in the space of the unfinished conversation. And then he allowed it to dissolve.

***

“I’m really glad you could make it,” said Koichi.

He elected, out of courtesy, not to comment on the way Toyohiro was clinging to the top of the lifeguard chair like an oversized, hairless koala.

“Anytime,” Toyohiro replied. His eyes were roving along the sand below. “Hey, there sure is a lot of ground here, isn’t there?”

“Well, it is a beach…”

“I can’t say I see the appeal woah!” Toyohiro admitted, in what started in a low drawl and then spiked up into a high-pitched squeal of terror as he lost his footing and nearly fell from the lifeguard chair.

“Are you alright?” Koichi asked.

Toyohiro was hanging upside down, with his legs locked in a death-grip around one of the chair’s upper rungs.

“I’m fine!” he insisted, face red from the sudden influx of blood.

Crossing his arms, Koichi tilted his head, resting his cheek against his palm. “You know… there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Sure.”

“How exactly did you manage to get here?”

“Well, I made it down the road and called for a taxi from the gas station, but between you and me I think the driver took the scenic route.”

“That’s not what I meant – I mean, how did you leave the transmission tower? Just out of curiosity.”

“Oh, that.”

With a hup, Toyohiro swung himself back into an upright position, elbows resting on the seat of the lifeguard chair.

“See, that alien kid helped me set up a dial-up connection at the tower, and Tamami gave me a sweet deal on a computer.” Koichi, somehow, doubted very much that there was anything sweet about any deal Tamami Kobayashi was involved in. “So I got this little website set up – kind of like a hotel booking system.”
“You… you’re renting out Superfly?” Koichi asked, flabbergasted.

“Hey, don’t say it like that! You make it sound like she’s working a street corner or something.”

Pulling himself up in the seat, Toyohiro settled into a cross-legged pose. “Think of it as a kind of bed and breakfast. A self-sufficient, sustainable bed and breakfast. It turns out all the yuppie kids in S City are wild for that sort of thing. I’ve even come up with a name for it.” He raised a finger, smirking. “Since guests get to stay at heights of up to 180 feet in the air, I’m calling it Sky B&B.”

A frown clouded Koichi’s expression. “But… what if they try to leave?”

“Why would they do that? They booked her for two nights – they’ll want to get their money’s worth.”

“But they do know they can’t leave, right?”

Toyohiro shrugged. “Sure they do. It’s all right there in the terms and conditions.”

***

While scouring the shoreline for Jotaro, Josuke came across Jolyne, who was industriously beset upon the installation of a beach-front sandcastle city.

“Building a little close to the water, don’tcha think?” Josuke teased. “The tide’ll be coming in soon.”

For her endeavours were taking place only a few meters back from the waterline.

“That’s why I built that, dummy,” mumbled Jolyne.

She pointed to a wall of sand, ten centimeters or so high, that stood between the city and the approaching tide, and behind that, what looked like an amateur’s attempt at an irrigation system: a moat with channels carved between the sandcastles, with the apparent design of allowing water to pass harmlessly around the buildings.

All this, on the surface, was a solid plan; however, it was a plan that was nonetheless futile against the liquefying effects of water on sand.

“That’s great, but I dunno,” Josuke mumbled, scratching the back of his head. “I don’t think that little wall’s going to be able to hold back the whole ocean…”

“S’what the moats are for.”

Next to her knees, Jolyne had accumulated a pile of marine trinkets: sea glass, feathers, pop can tabs, seashell fragments. She selected a handful of shells from the pile and appeared to deliberate between them for a minute, tongue poking out at the corner of her mouth, before she frowned and turned.

“I don’t like the colour of that one,” she complained to the empty space beside her.

A pause. Josuke looked on as Jolyne huffed and selected a mussel shell from her hand and set the rest of the shells aside. Baked clean by the sunlight and air, the shell’s pearlescent interior – gradient-washed blue and opal – showed a faint rainbow band where the light hit it just so.

“Ok,” Jolyne continued as she pressed the shell into the base of one of the sand castles, making what looked to Josuke like a kind of arched doorway, “but I get to pick the next one.”

“Who’re you talking to?” Josuke asked.
Jolyne pointed to the empty space beside her. “Her.”

“Like. Is she. An imaginary friend or…?”

He was thinking of what his mother had said earlier about his own ‘imaginary friend’ – but if Jolyne did have a stand, he figured he would be able to see it too.

“She’s ten,” Jolyne answered, as if age had any bearing on the degree to which one could be considered imaginary.

“Oh yeah?”

“She likes building sand castles like me. But she said she can’t build any sand castles until the water comes back.”

Josuke stared at Jolyne’s brightly-coloured pail and shovel, and at the little pile of knick-knacks by her knee, and a sense of familiarity gradually seeped into the scene – like whenever he accidentally checked out a book he’d read before from the library.

“Your friend got a name?” he asked. Jumping ahead of her answer, he added: “It’s not Horikawa is it? Sayaka Horikawa?”

As you, reader, may have guessed already, children do not have all that pesky time at their backs the way adults (or even teenagers) do, and thus have not had the opportunity to form impressions and ideas about the Way Things Should Be. In this convoluted, double-duty edifice we call reality, which the living like think they have the blueprint thereof mapped out neatly in their heads, children, not knowing the layout, are likely to stumble into odd spaces, rooms that shouldn’t be there, passages and hallways older persons never look for – without ever knowing they are where they should not be, for to a child there are no such things as restricted areas, as off-limits zones. Adults have their own term for this supernatural intuition: an overactive imagination.

“She says hi,” said Jolyne. “Also she says you still can’t share her real-estate.” Here a frown: tongue poking out at her cheek, sampling the after-taste of an unfamiliar word. “What’s real estate? Is there make-believe estate too?”

“Real-estate, it’s… it’s like…” Of course Josuke knew what ‘real-estate’ meant. He’d heard the word a thousand times before. But when he tried to summon up the definition, or why it was called that…

Sayaka, thankfully, came to his rescue. Jolyne turned her head to one side, head tilted, listening intently, before a soft “oh” left her lips, followed up closely thereafter by a cheery “okay!”

As much as Josuke wanted to ask Jolyne what the ghost girl’s answer had been, he knew from experience that getting that kind of information out of Jotaro’s kid would involve some kind of bargain – one that would without a doubt be skewed heavily against his favour.

Josuke toed at the sand. “So… do you need any help or…?”

Jolyne shot him with a blank look. “This sand castle building is for professionals only.”

Picking up a bottle cap from her pile of junk, she added, in way that sounded like it was intended to be an insult: “You should hang out with papa instead.”

“You haven’t seen him around have you?”

“He’s over by the big rocks,” Jolyne mumbled through the corner of her mouth. She was distracted
with the placement of the aforementioned bottle cap.

As far as geographical clues went, “big rocks” was a vague one, but by way of proximity Josuke gathered she meant the short jetty that demarcated the edge of the beach.

Here, the chatter and laughter of the crowd was reclaimed by the sounds of the sea: the deep growling bass notes of the waves as they rumbled into shore and the laughing tenor of the water slapping against the rocks and chasing down the narrow recesses between them before trickling back to its source. Big rocks, Jolyne had called them, and they’d been big rocks for Josuke once too, when he was little. He’d climb up onto the jetty, pretending to be a famous mountaineer. Pulling himself up a particularly large boulder had the same life-or-death drama to him, the same heart-clenching suspense, as if there’d been a hundred foot drop beneath him. Only now the rocks weren’t so big, and he stepped up easily onto the jetty in a few broad strides.

When he peered over the other side of the jetty, Josuke saw a long stretch of jagged, rocky beach, but no Jotaro. Only when he ventured out further along the barrier did he catch sight of the pair of shoes set out neatly by the water’s edge.

He hadn’t been looking for Jotaro out further from shore, mostly because (barring the incident at the observation deck), Josuke could not picture his nephew swimming. Despite what the summer spent out on the oyster farm had imparted of Jotaro’s ease around the water, despite a career concerned primarily with the aquatic, Jotaro Kujo had the type of figure that did not seem designed to float.

And he wasn’t swimming but he was halfway there: standing out near the tip of the jetty, the water nearly to his hips – pants rolled up above the knees, not that it made much of a difference. His coattails floated behind him, bobbing with the action of the waves. In one hand, he held a glass flask, and in the other, a tall, thin vial nearly the height of his torso. As Josuke watched, Jotaro summoned Star Platinum to his side and handed an empty glass flask to his stand. Josuke caught the prelude to a movement – and suddenly the flask was filled with water. Even out of time stop, Star Platinum could move fast.

“Is everything alright?”

Josuke made a sound of surprise. He hadn’t thought Jotaro had seen him watching from the jetty.

Letting out a deep breath, Jotaro turned to him. “What’d she do this time?” A particular, well-worn emphasis on the this time.

“N-no! Everything’s fine! Jolyne didn’t do anything,” Josuke stammered in reply. When he saw Jotaro relax, he added: “So, like… what’re you doing?”

“You can see it better from over here.”

Josuke wanted to protest – they were far enough apart that he had to raise his voice but they weren’t that far apart – but he’d put his swim trunks on that morning with the intent of taking a dip at some point, and the present was as good a time as ever.

Averting his gaze, Josuke slid down the jetty (memories here, too – how he used to sit on the end of the jetty when he was Jolyne’s age, a home-made fishing rod in hand that consisted of a stick and length of string, endeavouring or pretending to fish). Though he was wearing his flip-flops, he took them off anyway and placed them down beside Jotaro’s shoes. Stepping into the ocean without taking his sandals off had the same taboo feeling as doing the same in someone’s house. As he eased his feet into the water, he certainly felt like he was crossing over some threshold.
The water felt warm at first touch, but when he dropped down from the jetty and the water slid up to
his hips, the cold bite of it made him clench his teeth together.

He made his way over to Jotaro slowly, staying on his tiptoes in an effort to keep as much of him
above the waterline as possible – but each passing wave found some new part of him to dig its teeth
into all the same, so he eventually gave up and sank back onto his arches.

“Here,” said Jotaro.

Josuke felt the press of a familiar, cool metal outline against his palm.

“Thanks?” Josuke turned the zippo lighter over in his hands, examining the brushed steel finish. “I
don’t smoke, though.”

“It’s not for cigarettes. Light it.”

Josuke rolled his thumb over the flint wheel. He felt the grooves press into his skin, heard the scrape
of the ignition. Nothing. He shot Jotaro a sheepish glance.

“You need to be decisive with it,” Jotaro explained. “Like snapping your fingers.”

This time, when Josuke flicked on the flint wheel, a flame sparked to life. Daylight seemed to darken
all around it – though he knew it was only a trick of his eyes.

“Hey, I got it!” he exclaimed, his mouth hanging open in a grin.

“Good. Hold it right there.”

Jotaro passed the tall, thin vial to his stand. Star Platinum poured some of the water from the flask
into the vial and held it over the lighter.

“…Are we making tea or something?” Josuke joked as Jotaro leaned over to peer into the vial’s
opening.

“We’re testing the water’s turbidity,” replied Jotaro.

Stepping back from the vial, he glanced at Star Platinum. His stand added more water to the vial.

“Your turn. Tell me if you still see the light.”

“Sure.”

Josuke passed the lighter to Jotaro and leaned over the opening of the vial. He could see, down
below, the distorted, bending shape of the flame, refracted over and over by some magic trick of
glass and water like he was looking at it through a kaleidoscope.

“Yeah, I see it,” he said. “So… what’s turbidity?”

“It’s a way of measuring the amount of sediment in water. The old way of doing this – the Jackson
Candle Method, what we’re doing – is by measuring the distance at which you can no longer see the
light of a flame through the water. Of course there are more accurate ways of measuring turbidity
with modern equipment.”

From his pocket, Jotaro pulled a pen. He pointed it at the flask in Star Platinum’s hand. “What you
would do is take a sample like this and pass a beam of light through it. As the beam of light travels
through the water – ,” he moved the pen across the flask to illustrate, “it encounters these particles of
sediment, which cause the beam of light to scatter.” The pen turned at a right angle and concluded its trajectory at the bottom of the flask. “Sensitive scientific equipment captures the amount of light scattered. More scattering means more particles means more turbidity, which we call Nephelometric Turbidity Units, or NTU for short. But out in the field, without any specialized equipment, the Jackson Candle Method can still give us a rough idea of the water’s turbidity.”

“Gotcha,” said Josuke, who had all of a single-finger grasp on the topic. “Is the water around here super turbid or…?”

“The numbers are higher than they should be. I registered twenty NTU on the last sample I took. It’s because of the denuding.”

“Sorry?”

Jotaro gestured with his pen further back down the beach, where the crowds were most concentrated. “The sea grass was removed – denuded – from a section of the beach so it would be more appealing to tourists and bathers. Normally, sea grass acts as a trap for sediment. Without it, the sediment is picked up by the waves and current and gets re-suspended in the water column.” He made a circular motion with the pen. “Increased sediment, increased turbidity.”

“Right. Makes sense, I guess.”

They laboured on in silence. Star Platinum adding more water, a little at a time, to the vial; Josuke and Jotaro taking turns checking for the flame. The waves rose and fell in shallow, rhythmic swells against Josuke’s lap. He’d gotten over the cold by then. There was something serene standing there, half-submerged: it was a feeling that wrapped itself around him, a gentle, playful tug from the receding waves – come on, follow me!

At some point, he found himself looking down the vial – and seeing nothing but murk.

“S’gone,” he mumbled.

Jotaro cleared his throat. He took out a composition notebook from his bag. When Josuke stepped back from the vial, Jotaro handed him the lighter and leaned in to squint at the numbers notched along the glass.

“…A little over thirty-three point four centimeters,” Jotaro announced, copying the number down in his composition notebook as he spoke it aloud. “That would translate into around nineteen NTU.”

Josuke flicked back the Zippo’s cap. The flame caught on the first strike of the flint this time. Then, another flick of his wrist, and the lid snapped close, extinguishing the flame. He repeated the actions as he spoke. Easier that way – it gave him something else to focus on, the same way he used to stare at the posters on the walls whenever he went to the doctor’s office for a shot.

“Back on the highway,” he said. “I meant to say sorry, but… I kinda fucked it up.”

Snap.

“Sorry for what?” Jotaro asked.

“All that shit I made up when I was a kid – that stuff wasn’t just stories for you.”

The flint wheel clicked beneath his thumb.

“And you got hurt,” Josuke continued, “because of me.”
He didn’t look up from the lighter, but he could hear the whistle in Jotaro’s breath when he exhaled through his nose.

“I should have known better,” he mumbled, and Josuke felt a flash of irritation when he recognized the tone – it was Jotaro’s lecture voice. “Your mother put me in charge of your wellbeing and I–.”

“Who cares about that crap?” Josuke interrupted. “And stop trying to make it out like I shouldn’t feel guilty or whatever. You don’t get to decide how other people feel.”

“Josuke.”

“Just. Say you accept my apology or whatever. Or don’t. It’s cool either way.”

He went to snap the lid of the Zippo shut again and fumbled.

_Plop_ went the lighter as it disappeared beneath the waves. Josuke stared down at the water for a minute, not entirely processing what just happened, and then –

“Oh damn,” he swore under his breath.

He bent over and plunged one arm below the water, feeling blindly around the sand bottom for the lighter. His fingertips glanced against something solid, metal.

“Got it!” he exclaimed, curling his fingers around the lighter.

Before he could stand up, a wave rose up and slapped him in the face.

Jotaro looked on, arms folded, as Josuke spluttered and spat out a mouthful of salt water. A foaming flotsam of spit bobbed on the ocean’s surface for a moment before dissolving.

“Do you remember when you came to see me in the hospital?” Jotaro asked.

“Sorta,” Josuke bit out in reply. He was preoccupied thumbing at the flint wheel, desperately trying to get the lighter to spark again. “I remember being _there_ at least.”

_There was just a moody wedge of shoulder peeking out from above the covers when Josuke entered. Blue hospital shift. A partially-eclipsed dark tuft of hair._

At the sound of the door clicking shut, the shoulder rolled back. Josuke caught sight of an ear and a sliver of a face.

“What took so long?” the voice was Jotaro’s, and yet it wasn’t: it was drawn, brittle – Jotaro’s voice, but aged sixty years.

He couldn’t possibly have been expecting his stand to answer; nonetheless, when the silence that punctuated his question dragged out, Jotaro rolled over onto his back and glanced at the door.

_The window pane was lit up by the streetlamps outside; the dust and grime on the glass stood out in brilliant illumination against the grey-washed backdrop of the city’s night sky. The same yellow light bathed Jotaro’s skin in a gaunt, jaundiced glow. Deep pools of shadow filled his eye sockets. There was a cast on one leg – swollen, pinched toes poking out at the end. Another cast on one arm. His head was sunk into the pillow, his frame small behind the bedrails._

_On seeing Jotaro laid up in the hospital bed, Josuke experienced for the first time a feeling that would visit him again and again growing up: that things larger-than-life in his memories – be they places, things, or even people – were not so large in person._
Jotaro drew a long, shuttering breath. A spasm shivered through his chest as his expanding lungs pressed taught against three broken ribs.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

When the lighter finally sparked and a flame whooshed into life, Josuke gave a triumphant whoop. “See?” he said, passing the lighter to Jotaro. “All good.”

Jotaro slowly folded his fingers over the lighter until he was making a fist around it. Then he turned his hand over, knuckles-up, and held it there a fraction of a second more before lowering his hand to his side.

“It’s easier to fix something than it is to apologize for it, isn’t it?” he asked.

“It sounds kinda shitty when you put it that way.”

Jotaro regarded him for a moment before slipping the Zippo into his coat pocket. “Do you remember what you said that night?”

“No. What?”

“I – I wanted to visit,” Josuke stammered.

He shot a sideways glance at Star Platinum in time to see the stand fade from sight. Jotaro cleared his throat.

“Does your old lady know you’re here?” he asked.

“No…”

Jotaro let out a deep, growling sigh. With his good hand, he reached over to the bedside table, removed the phone from its hook, and began to dial a number.

As Josuke watched, he felt his pulse skip.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

“Your mother’s probably losing her mind worrying about you,” Jotaro grumbled. Picking up the receiver, he wedged it between his shoulder and his ear, continuing to speak over the sound of the dial tone: “The bitch is going to break my neck when she finds out you’re here.”

“Wait!”

There was a click on the other end of the line. Josuke could hear his mother’s muffled voice from the receiver – what sounded like “hello?” But Jotaro made no reply. He was staring at Josuke from across the room. Josuke, who mouthed through the lump in his throat: “Please.”

At last, Jotaro returned the receiver to its cradle. The voice on the other end of the line went dead.

“You just going to stand there?” Jotaro asked.

Keeping his head down, Josuke shuffled over to the hospital bed. He perched lightly on the corner of the mattress, by Jotaro’s feet. The bed shifted beneath him as Jotaro leaned over the railing; a second later, Josuke winced as the bedside lamp flickered on.

“What the fuck did you do to yourself?” demanded Jotaro. Josuke knew he was referring to the
scrapes and bruises.

“I was in the woods.”

Jotaro held his gaze a second longer before he glanced away.

“So,” he said, as he contemplated the back of his hand. “Your monster. The voice on the phone.”

Into his knees, Josuke dug his fingers. He’d been planning on telling Jotaro about everything that had happened since the cliffs. Yuki, the woods, the faceless figure dragging an axe through the undergrowth. On the way to the hospital, he’d imagined how the scenario would play out: Jotaro apologizing and admitting Josuke had been right all along. Jotaro telling him what a good job he’d done.

But hearing Jotaro’s voice thick and scratchy with exhaustion, Josuke realized there would be no celebration.

“M’sorry,” he mumbled.

“Did someone put you up to it? Maybe one of the older kids at your school?”

Josuke drew his knees up to his chin. Burying his face in his arms, he shook his head.

The hospital room was quiet, which only made the absence of Jotaro’s reply all the more noticeable. Somehow, the lack of response was so much worse than any time his mother had yelled at him for something he’d done wrong. He wished Jotaro would get mad and yell too. At least then he’d be able to defend himself.

When Jotaro finally did speak, however, it was not with a raised voice, but with what sounded like a sigh: “You have quite the imagination, kid.”

“You’re not gonna leave, are you?” Josuke blurted, tearing his face away from his knees.

“Not until I get out of this place.”

“But when you do –.”

“I was supposed to be on the return boat a week ago. That was always the plan.”

“Can’t you just… stay?”

Jotaro’s eyes flickered from side to side, as if he was trying to read Josuke’s expression. The hardened, frosted-over look Josuke had seen in his nephew’s face in the days leading up to the incident at the cliffs had melted into something fluid and shifting: the whites of his eyes wet and glossy in the lamplight.

“Is that what this is all about?”

“I thought you liked spending time with me,” Josuke mumbled.

“It doesn’t matter what I like. I can’t stay here forever.”

“It’s not fair.” His voice cracked on the last syllable.

“Listen, Josuke. How do you think your mother would feel if you left home one day and didn’t come back?” Jotaro paused. A snuffle from Josuke bridged the silence. “I have family waiting for me.”
“Is that why dad had to go too?”

When Jotaro crushed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose, Josuke continued: “I’m family too, right?”

“Yes.”

“So why don’t I matter?”

“That’s not – good grief.” Jotaro dragged his hand away from his face. “You’re too young to understand, alright?”

Whatever effect this remark was intended to have apparently missed the mark. Josuke’s face flushed; his mouth trembled, eyelids crinkling as tears made fresh tracks down his cheeks. His breath hitched.

Jotaro stared at the crying child at the foot of his bed with the same wide-eyed bewilderment as though he’d suddenly materialized there. Worrying his thumb at the hem of his bedsheets, he glanced about the room – but no one else was around.

Something pressed against Josuke’s shoulder. He lifted his head, snorting back a string of snot that threatened to escape one nostril, and saw Star Platinum seated beside him on the bed, holding out a box of tissues for him.

“M’fine,” Josuke mumbled. But he grabbed a handful of tissue all the same and pressed his face into it.

“It’s got nothing to do with you, kid,” Jotaro was saying. “People make mistakes. Or they have conflicting obligations.” Reaching into the bedside table’s drawer, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and shook one out into his lap. “…Or sometimes they just get sick.” Tossing the carton back into the drawer, he picked up the cigarette and slid it between his lips. “Point is,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “it’s really fucking easy to be a piece of shit without even trying.”

Josuke’s mother had said something similar – about people not being able to keep their promises, even when they want to – but he couldn’t bring himself to understand it. He couldn’t imagine what complicating forces in the adult world could possibly lead people to hurt each other without meaning to. At his age, bad things were done by bad people.

Hearing Josuke’s sobs reach a ragged, broken crescendo, Jotaro popped the unlit cigarette from his mouth and gestured to the cast on his other arm. “Look. Look at this.” He tapped the end of the cigarette against the plaster. “You didn’t mean to do this, right?”

Josuke pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“You didn’t mean to hurt anyone, did you?”

“No,” Josuke croaked. “I just…”

“I know.”

Shifting further up the bed, Josuke reached out and – tentatively, like he was touching an open wound – splayed a hand over the plaster.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, for the second time.
“I’m sorry too.” Jotaro’s voice rough, strained.

By then, Josuke’s tears had dried into a saline tightness on his skin. He was glaring down at the cast, thinking it was unfair that there was no way of undoing what he’d never meant to do in the first place. In his mind, the universe should come equipped with second chances. If he played through the memory of the cliffs enough times – the dust, the wind at his back – maybe the scene would end differently. Maybe – if he wished hard enough – he’d wake up tomorrow to find the past had rewritten itself, and they had both walked home from the cliffs together.

Returning the cigarette to his mouth, Jotaro reached for his lighter. Just as he pressed his thumb to the flint wheel, however, he paused. The cigarette slipped from his mouth. Over the edge of the bed it rolled, falling silently to the floor.

Shadowing Josuke’s pose was a transparent, barely-there figure. Its hands were resting over Jotaro’s cast. A faintly glistening helmet hid its features; under it, its spindly chicken’s neck bowed with the weight.

No sooner had Jotaro caught sight of it, the figure faded from sight.

“That – just now – was that yours?” Jotaro demanded.

Josuke turned and glanced over his shoulder, but there was nothing to see. “It’s like your Star Platinum, right?” he asked.

“How long have you had it?”

“He showed up before I came to see you, when –,” Josuke faltered, only just managing to keep himself from mentioning Yuki’s kidnapper. “...When I was alone and scared.”

“What does it do?”

Josuke shrugged.

“See if you can bring it out again.”

“How do I do that?” Josuke asked.

“Pretend someone’s about to punch you in the face.”

Scrunching his eyes closed, Josuke scrunch up his face. Beside him, the apparition from before shimmered into view. This time, when Josuke turned to look at it, it turned to look back at him.

“He’s all see-through,” Josuke complained. “And kinda scrawny.” He could see the knobs of his stand’s spine protruding from its back.

“It’ll grow as you grow,” said Jotaro.

He stretched out a hand to touch the heart-shaped metal plate on the stand’s head – only to pause when he realized the hand he was reaching out with was the one in the cast. Frowning, he turned his hand over and wiggled his fingers.

“What’re you doing?” Josuke asked. And then, when Jotaro began ripping the cast off, he cried out, in a shrill voice, “don’t!” – not knowing much about broken bones, he fully expected to see the jagged end of a bone poking out from Jotaro’s arm beneath the cast.

But there were no jagged bones when Jotaro removed the cast. Nor were there any bruises or marks
of any kind – even the scars he remembered seeing once upon a time were gone.

“I thought it was broken,” Josuke stammered.

“It was.”

“Then… did I do that?”

Jotaro made a deep, rumbling noise that startled Josuke, until he realized it was a chuckle.

“I’ve got a few more of those if you want to find out,” he said.

“I walked out of the hospital,” Jotaro concluded, “two days after suffering a compound fracture.”

“I don’t remember that,” said Josuke.

What did he remember? He remembered getting Crazy Diamond in the woods, sure. And the visit to the hospital. But what he recalled from the conversation most of all were silent, still-frame images: the salmon-painted walls, the way the weak light from the bedside lamp fell across the crumpled, touch-worn hospital linen.

Memory, he was realizing, was a strange thing. A museum curated by a madman. Discarded tissues and bottle caps encased in glass beside jewels. Priceless works of art thrown out with the trash.

When he saw Jotaro rolling up his sleeves, Josuke was quick to blurt out: “Not that I don’t believe you or anything! I just…”

He fell silent as Jotaro turned his arms over, palms up. On one arm, an overlapping cobweb of fine lines was edged into his skin. The scars were barely visible except for where they reflected the sunlight back in fine silver filaments. On the other arm – the same that, ten years prior, had been in a cast – there were no such lines, only clear, unblemished skin.

“Even back then, you didn’t like seeing others people in pain,” Jotaro remarked as he pushed the cuffs of his sleeves back down.

“Forget about that! – It’s my fault you ended up in the hospital in the first place, yeah? It’s not like me patching you up with Crazy Diamond cancels that out.”

“Frankly speaking: ending up in the hospital was the best possible outcome. There were…” he paused, rubbing at his wrist as he fished for the right words, “…underlying issues that might not have been addressed without intervention.”

“But what about the two weeks leading up to the hospital? I know there was stuff you were trying to forget about when you came to Morioh, and I made you think you were reliving that shit all over again. It must’ve been hell.”

Jotaro broke off eye contact. He gazed down at the water, hands slowly curling and uncurling. A wave picked up the tail of his coat a tried to drag it away.

At last, he said: “I couldn’t think of a way to explain it. I thought – if I brought you here – it might help.”

“Explain what?”

From his shoulder bag, Jotaro retrieved yet another composition notebook at handed it to Josuke. Unlike the first notebook, the second notebook’s marbled cover was worn, with deep gouges and
stains throughout. The corners were rounded and bent back from being thumbed through so many times.

“I guess you’d remember this,” said Jotaro.

“I might’ve had a peak at it,” Josuke admitted as he eased the cover open. Inside, the pages had mellowed to an ivory color. There was a coffee stain in the corner of the first page – dark at the edges, lighter in the middle.

When Josuke glanced up at Jotaro, he waved him off. “You can read it.”

The contents of the composition notebook were more or less the same as Josuke remembered:

February 26th, 1989
Temperature: 8°C.
Humidity: 52%
Barometer: 102.36 kPa
Wind: 10 km/h NNE.
Mostly cloudy today.

“So, meteorology, hunh?” Josuke remarked. “You’re an odd guy, Jotaro.”

“It’s not a weather log. You can skip ahead, if you want.”

Page after page of humidex and temperature readings. Neat, thin columns, the left side of the page nearly empty. Josuke watched the dates fly past as he flipped through the pages. As he did so, he experienced the same dizzying feeling of dread he’d been wrestling with all summer: the feeling of time slipping away, lost.

Josuke turned the page, expecting to see another uniform column of stiff, mechanical handwriting. And there was – only beneath the weather details for July twenty-fifth were a three hastily-jotted sentences:

Incident today involving Gundam figuring. Haven’t seen Star Platinum throw like that since Iggy. Took Josuke to get video game.

The next page: again, another weather report, followed by:

Be careful of civilians – some are disguised zombies. Canary Village: melody located here.

Beneath, he had sketched a crude map of one of the areas from Mother, with a circle that, presumably, marked the entrance to the aforementioned Canary Village.

As Josuke read in silence, Jotaro continued: “The reason I am testing the water here for turbidity is because of the effect I told you about – how the light bounces off the suspended sediment particles. This is important because an increase in sediment means that more light is reflected back – which means less light reaches the sand bed, especially at greater depths. With less light, it becomes more difficult for the denuded sea grass to grow back. The barren areas may even begin to spread.”

Another entry:
Stroll along boardwalk today. Lots of boats in the harbour. Showed Josuke how to rig a vending machine. It’s been awhile – strange not always being in trouble at school anymore.

From August second:

Josuke informed of possible stand presence in Morioh? Will look into. Voice-based stand? Theories so far:

- Long-range automatic stand – explains absence of witnesses
- Parasitic stand – voices hallucinogenic?
- Targeted sound
- Actual stand abilities distorted by urban legend – effects appear supernatural to non-stand users?

“...And with the seagrass meadows being an important part of the local ecosystem, with them gone you see the loss of other forms of biodiversity, Flora. Fauna. Stretches of beach turned into attractive sand-bottom swimming destinations become dead water.”

August third:

Trip to library with Josuke for research. Librarian working late, let us in. Kid never saw a microfilm before. I used to get excited about getting to use the microfilm machine when I was that age.

“Marine life is fragile,” Jotaro continued. “Even when the problem is removed, a coastal system can take years to recover.”

Another entry from a couple days later:

Raided station in search of clues. Time stop suboptimal – two or three seconds at most. Out of shape; need to practice more. Nothing of interest in files as yet. Volume of disappearances and murders does seem high though. Will compare with national average. Movie tomorrow? Josuke’s pick. Something about a witch. Haven’t been to a movie in ages.

Josuke skimmed through the next few entries – they were mostly concerned with the ongoing ‘investigation’, with the odd Mother map or puzzle solution thrown in. But from the physical appearance of the entries, one thing was clear: they were getting longer, the sentences filling out, and in some places, the day’s weather was even omitted. As though the author had stumbled upon something more important, something more engaging, than local meteorology.

Beside him, he heard, Jotaro say: “It takes time… but things can get better. Sometimes it requires intervention. Even if the damage can’t be undone, the local ecosystem can shift. New forms of life can take over and thrive.”

The last entry was date the fourteen of August: the day after Yuki’s disappearance. The day after the visit in the hospital.

Josuke came by last night – late (early morning?). Upset. Think I scared him back there. Not sure how he made it into the city by himself.

Seems Josuke’s stand appeared sometime yesterday. It’s likely been dormant since his illness last winter. He must be strong enough now to control it. Stand’s name: not known at this time. Appearance generally human-like humanoid. What’s strange is the power. It can heal people. I’ve gotten used to thinking about stands as weapons; it’s easy to forget there’s more to it. I can imagine mom having that kind of ability…
Took the bus back into Morioh. Strange ride, but the driver didn’t ask for a fare. Got back just before sunrise. Kid fast asleep. Made a quick call with the foundation, they got me a boat out. Didn’t want to wake the kid up. I’ve put him through enough already anyway. I think he’ll be alright. He’s a good kid. Hope we run into each other again someday.

Have to be on the boat in a couple hours. Tired, but I feel awake.

Turning over the page, Josuke was greeted by the pressboard back cover. He closed the notebook. When he rubbed the back of his hand against his eyes, it came away wet.

“You really suck at making people feel better, you know,” he muttered, with a smirk on his face.

Jotaro turned his face away and tugged at the brim of his cap, but Josuke still caught a glimpse of a smile cutting into his cheek.

“Thank you,” Jotaro said.

***

If there was a term that meant the exact opposite of a local celebrity, that term could be applied to Rohan Kishibe. He had fame, alright. But that celebrity resided in places other than Morioh. Working-class suburbanites who commuted to their jobs and had mortgages to pay off tended to fall a step or two behind metropolitan tastes. To the citizens of Morioh, comic book artists were, at best, layabouts, and at worst, depraved perverts.

Not that Rohan entirely minded the lack of attention. After all: it was part of the reason he’d moved to Morioh in the first place. He just wished that what few fans he did have in the small town had a sliver more respect for his artistic achievements.

Case point: he was splayed out on a beach chair attempting to work on his tan (a profession that saw him spending upward of twelve hours at his desk at a time, coupled with his own nocturnal proclivities, meant that, for safety purposes, going jogging in short sleeves for Rohan legally counted as wearing a reflector) when he heard a nasally voice say:

“Good to see you again, Rohan-sensei.”

“Hazamada,” Rohan muttered, without opening his eyes. “I hear you tried to kill Koichi and his friends last week.”

“Just Higashikata! And I was under, um…hang on, I got the word, it’s practically at the tip of my tongue—.”

“Duress.”

“I was just about to say that! Great minds think alike, hunh?”

Electing to ignore the insult implied by being categorically lumped with someone like Toshikazu Hazamada, Rohan begrudgingly lowered the sun reflector he’d been aiming at his face and opened his eyes.

Hazamada was hovering over him. The little weasel, Rohan noted, had a girl draped over his shoulder. In the long-honoured tradition of the famous Brian Hyland song, her bikini was indeed itsy bitsy teenie weenie, but that was the only thing about her that was.

“And what, exactly, do you want?” Rohan asked.
“Just saying hi! By the way,” here, Hazamada slung an arm around the girl’s waist, “I don’t know if I introduced you two yet, but I wanted you to meet my girlfriend.”

“Nice to meet you!” the girl squeaked. She sounded like she’d been shooting up helium.

Rohan gave the girl a look that could freeze running water. “Charmed,” he said. Reaching down, he grabbed an unopened can of diet cola from the cooler beside his beach chair. “Where did you say you two met? High school?”

“We were classmates!” Hazamada affirmed.

Arcing his arm back, Rohan lobbed the can at the girl. It bounced off her chest with a wooden thunk.

“The fuck did you do that for?” Surface snapped, breaking character.

Hazamada punched his stand on the shoulder, hissing when his knuckles connected with solid oak. “Nice going, jack-off.”

“What? I told you he wasn’t going to buy it.”

“Anyway,” Rohan interrupted. “Allow me to re-iterate. What.” He held up a finger. “Do.” Another finger. “You. Want?” Each remaining word punctuated by holding up another finger, as though he were practicing one of his stretching exercises.

“See, I know you’re suuuuuper busy,” said Hazamada, “and you probably don’t have time for someone like little old me. But I wanted to ask for a favour.”

A favour that, already, Rohan had absolutely no intention of accepting. But he decided to humour him. “Alright… and what might this favour be?”

Hazamada drew a deep breath. When he breathed out, it was in the form of this rushed-through sentence: “I want to get a tattoo and I was kindahoping you would design one for me.”

“Oh?” This was far from the first time someone had inquired about a commission. Rohan had little interest in creating art for anyone but himself; but that did not necessarily mean there wasn’t the occasional project that intrigued him enough to… “You’re not joining the Yakuza, I suppose?”

“Nonono, I just thought it would look cool!”

“What would look cool? You have a design in mind, do you?”

Hazamada shook his head. “Hey, you’re the professional!”

“Suck-up,” Surface muttered under its breath.

Carte Blanche. Well, at least that was something Rohan could work with. “And how much are you willing to pay for this design?” he asked.

“See, I was thinking we could make a trade – you provide the design, and I provide the exposure.” When Rohan gave him a blank stare, Hazamada, interpreting this as a lack of clarification on his part, elaborated: “I mean, it’s going to be right there on my body, right? Everyone’s going see it and they’re going to want one too!”

“I’ve read your book,” Rohan replied, fighting to keep his voice level. “I believe local law enforcement has given you plenty of warning about causing any more exposure.”
“That was one time!”

“That’s not what I read. And you got a lifetime ban from the grocery store too, didn’t you?”

Hazamada fell silent. Slipping off his sunglasses, Rohan sat up and turned, planting his feet firmly on the hot sand. “Listen,” he said, “I’m not going to waste my time psychoanalyzing your weird… hobby, fetish, whatever you want to call it, for putting your genitals on fresh produce. The point is: Rohan Kishibe does not work pro-bono.”

“That got a smirk out of Rohan. “Go right ahead,” he sneered.

Just then, he felt a hand drop down on his shoulder. When he glanced up, Surface was looming over him, a coy smirk on its cutesy, dimpled face.

“Hiya there, handsome~!” it chimed.

Immediately, Surface’s form began to shift, stretching and lengthening with a sickening creaking sound until Rohan was left gaping up at a perfect copy of himself, complete with Gucci board shorts.

“Ready to get drawing?” Hazamada asked his stand.

Threading its fingers together, Surface stretched out its wrists. Rohan heard its knuckles crack. “Oh yes, boss! I feel ready to draw up a regular Sistine Chapel right about now!”

“This is art theft,” Rohan hissed as he watched Hazamada hand Surface a notepad and pencil.

“Hey, if you didn’t want people to copy your art, you wouldn’t publish it, right? And besides, Rohan-sensei – you should be flattered! I wouldn’t be interested in copying your art if you weren’t such a totally awesome artist!”

As he spoke, Hazamada leaned over Surface’s shoulder to try to get a better glimpse of what his stand was currently drawing, but it threw an arm over the notebook and glowered at him. “Excuse me,” it minced in Rohan’s voice, “but I simply cannot work with you gawking over my shoulder like that. I must have absolute privacy to execute my creation.”

Rohan winced. Did he actually sound like that? he wondered.

“Ugh, fine, whatever,” Hazamada grumbled, crossing his arms and forcing himself to look away.

By then, Rohan had thought of summoning Heaven’s Door, but his curiosity got the better of him. He wanted to wait first until Surface was finished its drawing – if only because he wanted to know if a stand really could imitate his skill.

And wait, he did in abundance. After five minutes, Surface was still working away: tongue poking out at the corner of its lips, sweat dripping down its brown, a look of intense concentration as it made each mark with a careful, deliberate hand.

“Are you done yet?” Hazamada complained.

“Art takes time,” Surface insisted. “Great art can’t just be rushed.”

“Funny,” said Rohan, “it takes me no time at all.”
Hazamada rubbed his hands together. “Just hurry up already! I want to see.”

“Aaaaaaand done! **Voila** – my latest masterpiece!”

Surface flipped the notebook around. The page was mostly blank, except for in the margin, where it had drawn from fourteen lines an angular ‘S’ shape – which our readers may know more colloquially as the ‘Super S’.

“What the fuck is that,” Hazamada said. There was no question implied.

In a gesture that, to Rohan at least, was uncomfortably familiar, Surface touched the tips of its fingers to its chest, wrist bent, and declared, with a theatrical breathiness: “**Art.**”

Rohan watched with a neutral expression as Hazamada chased his stand down the beach, screaming all sorts of graphic threats that, for the sake of the rating, we are afraid we are unable to reproduce here in full. Once the pair were out of sight, he reached down, retrieved the can of diet cola from where it had fallen, shook off the sand, popped the tab open, and took a long, big gulp.

***

“You really didn’t have to go overboard like this!”

“It’s really not that big a deal!” said Koichi. He sounded sincere, but then again that was a constant with him. Maybe he would make a good journalist, Josuke thought. The kind they put in front of the camera on the afternoon news segment: a clean, unassuming, honest face.

(As opposed to the morning news, whose hosts seemed universally endowed with infomercial voices and a gratuitous amount of dental work.)

After spending all afternoon hounding Koichi down, Josuke had finally managed to corner his friend. The polarity of their pursuit had been reversed: now it was Koichi who was eagerly dragging Josuke by the arm across the crowded beach, destination unknown.

“Where’re we going anyway?” Josuked asked.

“Nowhere! There’s just someone I want you to meet.”

“You’re not trying to set me up, are you? Because I appreciate it and all, but I’m not looking for a pity prize – besides, I’m not a casual date kinda guy. I need to feel a real connection, you know?”

Koichi groaned. “It’s not like **that**! There was someone I wanted the Speedwagon Foundation to put me in touch with, and Jotaro mentioned he owed me a favour, soooo….”

Into his pockets, Josuke shoved his hands. “How come Jotaro’s never owed me any favours?” he complained, giving the sand a kick.

“Well…”

Josuke was so busy shoegazing and sulking that he nearly ran right into a kid.

“Oh – jeeze!” he exclaimed as he leaped back out of the way. “You alright?”

Despite the late August heat, the kid – an androgynous-looking beanpole of twelve, maybe thirteen – was wearing an oversized black t-shirt with the logo of some band Josuke didn’t recognize, but was absolutely sure came with parental advisories on their CD covers. The kid’s straight-cut bangs came all the way down to their cheekbones, so that he couldn’t see their eyes.
“You didn’t even touch me,” the kid pointed out in a bored-sounding drawl.

“There you are!”

Over the kid’s shoulder, he saw his mother strolling toward him, a woman following along beside her that Josuke knew he knew – he just couldn’t remember where from.

“Oh my god,” said the woman, “that’s Josuke?!”

“I am?” said Josuke, a waiver of uncertainty to his voice as he glanced between his mother and the other woman.

Grinning, Tomoko elbowed Josuke in the ribs. “Shot up like a weed didn’t he?”

The other woman gently touched the kid on the arm. “Do you remember Josuke at all, Yuki?” she asked.

Lifting her bangs out of the way, the kid squinted at Josuke, passing right over his slack-jawed expression to focus in on his pompadour. “No,” she said.

“H-hey?” Josuke stammered. He was still trying to make sense of the fact that Yuki Imai was standing in front of him. Over the course of the summer, he’d gotten so used to thinking of her as just a character in the stories he’d tell Okuyasu and the others that she’d become exactly that to him: a character; the necessary damsel in distress at the crux of his self-made murder plot. He’d forgotten that she was still out there somewhere, alive – not just alive, but nearly a teenager. He had been convinced that if ever he did meet her again, she’d still be two and wearing a jumper.

Tomoko crouched beside Yuki, hands tucked between her knees. “Me and Josuke used to live next door,” she said. “Your mom babysat Josuke.”

“Cool,” Yuki drawled, sounding if anything disaffected.

“I thought you guys moved away,” said Josuke. He thought back to early on in their search for the Voice in the Dark – how Koichi had wanted to contact Yuki as a witness.

“We did,” said Mrs. Imai, “but only about an hour’s drive away – when your mom called me up, I thought wouldn’t it be nice to come back for a visit? Sometimes I wish we hadn’t been in such a hurry to leave, but, well… you do what you have to do.”

As she spoke, her eyes slid over to her daughter. Yuki didn’t even flinch. How many times a day, Josuke wondered, did Mrs. Imai’s eyes wander in search of her daughter? Just to make certain she was still there?

“We’d just about lost touch,” Tomoko admitted. “Until this fine gentleman here somehow got hold of the Imai family’s phone number.”

When Koichi’s face lit up like a paper lantern, Josuke immediately realized where exactly he’d spent that favour of Jotaro’s. “Oh, I just did a bit of digging, that’s all!” said Koichi. Though his face remained turned toward the women, his eyes flickered over to Josuke. “Josuke said he was wondering how Yuki was doing since – the move.”

This last word he stammered out, nearly stumbling over it. ‘The move’ was the tip of an iceberg, a whole history lurking beneath those four little letters. Something in those surrounding unspoken events had altered Mrs. Imai. In Josuke’s memories of her, she was never anxious the way she was now, with the continual glances at Yuki, the way her feet were perpetually turned toward her
daughter like the needle of a compass pointing north.

There was a decade’s worth of questions Josuke wanted to ask – concerning, mostly, what he’d seen by half-masked flashlight in the woods – but from the way Yuki was looking at him – the same way he remembered looking at strangers when he was her age, boredom and posturing and trying to effect the look of mature disinterest – he knew she wouldn’t have the answers he was looking for.

“Are you, uh, in school?” he asked instead, wincing at how dumb the question sounded.

“Yeah.”

“Do you like it?”

Yuki shrugged. “It’s school.”

“She’s in orchestra,” Mrs. Imai pointed out. As soon as she said this, Yuki’s cheeks went red. “Tell him what instrument you play!”

“Violin,” she muttered, more mouth-sound than word, so that Josuke nearly missed it.

He smiled, prompting her to spontaneously find something interesting on the sand to stare at. “That’s great!” he said.

Tomoko slung an arm around his neck and leaned against him, throwing his weight off-kilter.

“I wish you’d join an orchestra or something,” she complained. “Better than playing those video games all day. Talk about wasting your life!”

“But it’s important!” Josuke squawked in protest. “Just think of my self-esteem.”

“Oh I’ve seen you play. Don’t think you’re going to be getting a confidence booster anytime soon.”

Later, as he and his mother were saying goodbye to the Imais – who had to leave early with an hour drive ahead of them – Josuke held a hand out for Yuki to shake. “It was nice meeting you,” he said.

“I’m – glad you’re okay.”

Whatever sediment and sentiment he’d stirred up from far back-dredges of memory, clouding the waters of the present and his eyes alike, settled back to clarity when Yuki proceeded to high-five his proffered hand.

“Yeah, thanks. I like your hair by the way,” she added, pushing her bangs up into a rough approximation of a pompadour. She seemed lost in contemplation – eyeing Josuke the same way she might eye her reflection in a mirror. “It’s cool.”

After the Imai family departed, Tomoko returned to her spot in the fold-out chair. There, she tucked into a copy of Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropique* in translation, tapping her bookmark against her thigh as she read with her eyes half-lidded, lips pursed together.

Josuke went off with Koichi to say hello to some classmates, but they hadn’t gone far before he saw Yukako sprinting toward him and Koichi in long, even strides. For a split second, he wondered if she’d taken up with track and field as the latest in her menagerie of hobbies.

“You,” she barked at Josuke, jabbing the air in front of his chest, “need to come with me, right now.”
“What’s going on?” Koichi asked. “We’re not being attacked, are we?”

Yukako flipped her hair out of her face. “Do you think I would come running to Josuke of all people if we were? This is more serious than that.”

“More serious than being attacked by another stand user,” Josuke repeated, voice flat with sarcasm.

“Are you going to stand there, or are you going to come with me and prevent the Titanic-level disaster of your adolescent life?” Yukako demanded. “Because let me tell you,” her eyes narrowed – one of those classic dungeon traps, pull the wrong lever and a spiked ceiling comes down on you, only in place of spikes she made due with eyelashes drawn to points in waterproof mascara. “There will not be enough lifeboats to save you when your ship goes down.”

Her pronunciation left no space for argument. Josuke could only slouch and follow Yukako’s quick, cutting stride up the beach, with Koichi jogging along beside them with the fretful look of a bystander to a serious traffic accident.

Coming up the boardwalk over the dunes, Josuke heard the bikes before he saw them: that high, droning whine that ended in a stinger, starting out in a long and stuttering cry and rising to a compacted, monotone wail. Sure enough, when they emerged out into the packed-dirt parking lot, the very first thing Josuke saw was a motorbike with two riders burning donuts into the dust, an ivory cloud of smoke spewing from the wheels.

The riders were both wearing bulky helmets with tinted visors, so Josuke couldn’t recognize them, but he recognized the girls standing off to the side and making a racket as Yuya’s girlfriends. He recognized, too, the chrome-and-purple four-seater monstrosity leaning up against its kickstand next to the girls.

Before Josuke and Koichi could get any closer to the scene, Yukako pulled them behind a row of parked cars.

“What’s the idea?” Josuke asked, but Yukako shushed him with a finger to her lips.

“Look,” she mouthed.

Breaking out from the donut, the bike shot across the parking lot. Halfway to the road, it accelerated and the front wheel popped up off the ground. Josuke – thinking he was about to watch the bike flip over on its back and pin the riders beneath it – felt his breath catch in his throat. But the bike remained steady at a seventy-degree angle. When it reached the road, the rider veered the bike back around toward the girls. The front tire dropped back down and the bike slid neatly into a sideways stop, kicking up a cloud of dust in the process.

The riders stepped off and the bike’s driver removed their helmet. Just as Josuke had suspected, Yuya Fungami had been the one at the handlebars.

“Alright,” said Yuya, tossing the ignition key to his passenger, “your turn – switch places.”

The other rider caught the key and ripped off their helmet. Suddenly, Josuke was staring at Okuyasu’s face. His skin was bright red from the heat and adrenaline, his hair crushed flat by the helmet. There was a big, toothy smile on his face that made Josuke’s heart feel like it was pole vaulting in the Olympics.

“You sure ‘bout this, dude?” Okuyasu asked. “I don’t wanna wreck Yoshie’s bike.”

“You better not, asshole!” one of the girls on the sidelines cried – the bite in her voice dampened, if
only a touch, by the wide grin on her face. “I’ll bust your kneecaps in if you do!”

Yuya waived her off. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be there covering your back brake. No one’s letting you go over, got that?”

“A’ight.”

Throwing a leg over the bike’s saddle, Okuyasu balanced the helmet in his lap and shot a look at Yuya over his shoulder. “So what’s the drill again?”

“Just take her up slow. Then, when you’re ready, pop the clutch – make it as fast as you can, just a snap. You don’t want to ride the clutch. And when you do that, you’re going to just pump up the speed and throw your weight back.” The word throw tight with strain as Yuya demonstrated by gripping an invisible pair of handlebars in front of him and arching his back like he was about to perform an advanced-level limbo manoeuver.

Helmets on, Okuyasu turned the ignition and they eased off. As he made slow circles around the parking lot – warming up, or working up his nerve – the girls beat their sticks together and hollered a mix of encouragement and affectionate insults.

“Kill it!” shouted Akemi.

“Punch the fucking clutch!” Yoshie hollered.

“Don’t be a pussy!” screeched Reiko.

The bike jerked forward. The front wheel bunny-hopped off the ground by half a foot before slamming back down. A shriek and jeer from the girls. Josuke watched, crouching, from over the hood of the car he and the others were hiding behind. His entire body felt spring-loaded with tension. Some indiscernible hodgepodge of feeling was knotting itself into a hard mass at the center of his chest.

After a few more bunny-hops, Okuyasu really geared it. Before he saw the wheel come up, Josuke knew by the high-pitched shriek from the bike’s exhaust that things were about to get vertical. And they did. The front wheel lifted off the ground. Yuya threw his arms around Okuyasu’s waist and held on, one foot tensing over the back break in case the wheel started to go over. Instead, they wobbled along on one wheel for a few meters more, gradually losing speed, before Okuyasu threw his weight forward.

On the front wheel making impact with the ground, the bike jerked beneath the riders, handlebars twisting in Okuyasu’s hands. The bike keeled to one side. Okuyasu dropped a foot down, heel of his shoe skittering along the dirt before he found purchase and pushed off, bringing the bike back upright again. Though they were a dozen or so meters away, Josuke could hear Okuyasu’s nervous, elated laughter – muffled through the thick padding of the helmet.

Whooping, the girls ran across the parking lot toward the bike, which was cruising in slow, lazy circles.

Tearing his gaze away from Okuyasu, Josuke turned to Yukako. “So what exactly is the Titanic-level disaster I’m supposed to be looking at here?” he demanded.

“You,” Yukako jabbed him in the chest with one of her long, rounded nails, “are dangerously close to losing any chance you have left with Okuyasu.”

“And why’s that, exactly?”
“Because Yuya Fungami is dangerously close to requiring a sidecar.”

“It looks like they’re just hanging out!” Koichi cut in, voice rising to a squeak by the end of the sentence. He had one eye on Josuke, watching him like he was a firecracker next to an open flame.

“Body language, Koichi,” said Yukako.

Now that Josuke was giving the scene a second glance – this time, with his vision notably altered by the power of suggestion – he couldn’t help but notice how, despite no longer being mid-wheelie, Yuya’s arms hadn’t left Okuyasu’s waist; if anything, his grip even snugger than before. And then there was the matter of one of Yuya’s girlfriends trying to pull herself up onto the moving bike and into Okuyasu’s lap…

Josuke stood up.

“W-wait!” Koichi stammered.

“You’re going to make it worse,” Yukako warned him.

Ignoring both their warnings, Josuke strode across the parking lot toward the bike. Reiko noticed him first. Dropping down off the back of the bike, she grabbed her baseball bat where she’d left it on the ground.

“Yuu, babe,” she called out. “It’s that jackoff from the hospital!”

The motorcycle rolled up to a stop. Yuya flipped up his visor. “Yo, Josuke! Sweet party.”

Okuyasu, meanwhile, remained motionless at the handlebars: the sun glinting off his tinted visor, completely obscuring his face.

“Want me to deal with ‘im?” asked Reiko. She gave the bat a twirl for emphasis.

“It’s alright, cutie. Just take it easy.” Removing his helmet, Yuya slung an arm around Okuyasu’s shoulder and leaned forward – probably just to make talking to Josuke easier, he rationalized, but that didn’t stop Josuke from feeling a hot surge of venom-like anger at the back of his throat.

“So what’s up?” Yuya asked.

Josuke opened his mouth, all that venom rising to the tip of his tongue. But it went no further. He was caught up staring at the surface of Okuyasu’s visor – his own reflection wavered on the visor’s surface, distorted with the convex shape so that he resembled a ghastly specter out of a funhouse mirror. Whatever mean, smart-mouthed thing he’d been planning on saying, he realized, was just going to make him sound like a jealous asshole. Because he was a jealous asshole.

Whatever Josuke was feeling at the moment, whatever else his urge to jump on the defensive was telling him, Yuya Fungami hadn’t been the one who hurt Okuyasu.

“I,” he stammered, “just – I just wanted to say hi.”

“Glad you could make it!” that was Koichi’s voice. The other boy had appeared at Josuke’s side.

“No sweat! Sorry I’m late.”

At Josuke’s other side, Yukako slid into place. “I see you brought a plus one,” she remarked, with a coy nod at Okuyasu.
Planting a hand on either side of the helmet, Okuyasu lifted it up off his head. All trace of the grin that had been on his face minutes before was gone. His eyes were heavy-lidded, his chin cocked – Josuke recognized it as the same expression Okuyasu always wore when he was trying to look cool and distant.

“Hey,” Okuyasu muttered.

“Okuyasu! I didn’t expect to see you here!” Yukako exclaimed, placing a hand on her chest and blinking rapidly in a feigned look of shock.

“Y-yeah!” Koichi chimed in. His performance was even less convincing than Yukako’s. “What a surprise!”

Josuke wanted to die.

“Didn’t get an invite?” Yuya asked, elbowing Okuyasu in the ribs.

Okuyasu shrugged. His eyes jumped from Koichi to Yukako – making a pointed effort to avoid Josuke in the middle. “I figured I was gonna be busy.”

“Laaaaame,” Akemi shouted, drawing out the first syllable in an exaggerated deep voice that made the other girls snicker.

“You can come hang out with us down by the water – if you want to, I mean,” said Josuke, trying hard not to sound too desperate.

Judging by the sidelong look Yukako shot him, however, he got the feeling it hadn’t been the right thing to say.

Okuyasu, keeping his eyes pinned to the ground, mumbled: “Thanks, but I’m already hangin’ with these guys.” There was a slight stammer hanging onto his words, as though he were talking with a limp

“I think they’ll survive without you,” Yukako remarked, before Koichi jumped in with:

“They can join us too if they want!”

“But I didn’t bring a swimsuit,” Yoshie complained.

Yuya held up his hands. “Hey, man! Don’t let us hog you. You can come riding with us any time.”

But Okuyasu just shook his head. “Nah, I’m good.” Then to Josuke and the others: “Catch ya guys later.”

He made to pull his helmet down over his head again. Trying to go back to hiding behind the tinted visor, where Josuke couldn’t reach him. And Josuke, knowing this, knew that whatever story he had with Okuyasu was running rapidly to its conclusion: last page verso, the main characters go their separate ways into the sunset. As much as he wanted to come right out and tell Okuyasu what he should have told him in the hospital room, however, he realized that doing it then and there, with everyone else crowded in around them would only make Okuyasu think he was trying to humiliate him. So instead, Josuke blurted: “Hey, you remember how you said you wanted to have another bonfire again before school starts?”

“Sure.”
“So how about it. Do you still want to or not?”

Over Okuyasu’s shoulder, he could feel Yuya’s eyes settle on him, twin weights at the back of his skull, the pressure enough to make him squirm. For him and Josuke both, the conversation in the flickering light – a basement that wasn’t, words said that existed no more in the present than the memory they’d stood in – had been easier to acknowledge so long as it remained in the bleary, dream-like world of the other Morioh. Resurrecting that conversation from the land of the dead right there in the parking lot had the effect of throwing on the lights. Not only could he see in sharp relief the geographical features of the room – couch, bookshelf, television, the fixed sense of a place long lived-in and little changed, unlike any room he’d grown up in – but he could see himself too, no longer in shadow. How his face had lit up, eager, when Josuke had mentioned getting together again. Even if he’d only meant it as a throwaway remark.

But here Josuke was, dangling that proposition-that-wasn’t-a-promise in front of him again, and Okuyasu wasn’t sure whether or not he was meant to read into it.

“If you wanna, I guess,” he answered, trying his best to sound disaffected.

“How about here? Tonight?”

“You guys are having a bonfire?” asked Yuya. “Man, I’d love to kick back and roast some marshmallows.”

Just then, however, his and Yukako’s eyes met, and whatever he saw in her expression caused him to add, stammering: “…Too bad me and the girls have something already planned.”

“Since when?” said Yoshie.

“It’s a surprise.”

Okuyasu, meanwhile, had his eyes locked on some point over Josuke’s shoulder. Almost but not quite looking at him. “If I decide on stickin’ around,” he mumbled, “may as well”

“Great! See you then!”

Josuke, by some miracle, had made it through the entire conversation without losing his nerve. But as he walked back across the parking lot, he felt light, shaky – a cold chill running through him despite the hot envelope of the sun.

On the way back down the steps to the beach, Koichi asked, “So… do you think he’ll really stick around?”

“Yeah. I mean, I hope so.”

“Did you come prepared?” Yukako asked.

“Like, mentally, or…?”

On either side of Josuke, Koichi and Yukako came to a stop. Two steps down, when they didn’t follow him, he turned and folded his arms, silently preparing his ego for whatever lashing it was about to endure.

Koichi, at least, tried to be sympathetic. “Well,” he said, “you do need something to start a fire…”

Yukako’s response took no such gloved measures. “You didn’t think this through at all, did you?”
“Are you kidding – did you see me back there? Let me tell ya, I’m not great at improv.”

“Clearly.”

Leaning against the railing, Koichi adopted a pensive expression. “Jeeze… I didn’t plan on the party going late, otherwise I would’ve brought something along.”

“It’s cool,” Josuke insisted. “I’ll figure something out.”

“No you won’t.”

Yukako slid her sunglasses down over her eyes. Josuke could see the chorted muscles of her neck stand out around her throat – tensed from the way she’d locked her jaw, setting her teeth in something like determination.

“I’ll get you what you need,” she continued. “You just worry about what you’ll say to Okuyasu later.”

There was the self-assured confidence in her voice of a girl who was used to getting what she wanted. A tone that at the start of the summer had gotten on Josuke’s nerves. Now, he found himself hearing an underscore to her clipped, entitled canter: something steadier, dependable.

“Thanks,” he said.

He watched her eyebrows arch up before she resettled her expression. To her hair her fingers, drifted, prising at a knot. “Oh please. Watching you two is like reading one of those romance novels where the protagonist’s love letter gets knocked off the nightstand by a draft and lands under the bed,” she muttered. “You’d scream loud enough to make yourself heard through the paper if you could.”

***

On his way back from trip number two to the first aid station – having, as most twelve year olds do, a desire to apply the principles of physics through firsthand experience and a penchant for laughing in the face of god – Ken passed by a teenager at the water’s edge who appeared to be engaged in a back and forth kind of shuffling dance.

He walked on by, not taking much notice. Then, a few seconds later, when his brain finally processed what he’d seen, he turned. He thought he’d maybe imagined it, but sure enough, the scene was exactly as he remembered: the white-haired boy, clad in a speedo, snorkel, rain jacket, and thigh-high waders, had a rope tied around his waist; the mate of the end secured at his navel was affixed to what looked like a cinderblock anchor. As Ken looked on, the boy crept toward the waterline. Half crouched, arms wide for balance – as though he was trying to sneak up on the ocean and take it by surprise. When a wave rolled in and rushed up the shore, the boy turned tail and scrambled out of the water’s way, running with his knees high like some kind of awkward, fledgling sandpiper.

Ken had seen the teenager before. Biting the inside of his cheek, he made a quick dash through the alphabet before stumbling on the name. Hazekura something-or-other. The one who, if he was remembering things right, was supposed to be some kind of alien.

“Yo, mister,” he called out, “you’re one of Higashikata’s friends, right?”

He cringed when Mikitaka turned, and in doing so, tripped over the cinderblock.
“Hello! Are you a friend of Josuke’s too?” Mikitaka asked, lifting his face from the sand.

“Nah. You have sand on your face.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mikitaka, touching a hand to his face. “Thank you! I wouldn’t want it to go to waste.”

Before Ken could ask what he meant, Mikitaka’s tongue darted out and licked the sand from the corners of his lips. When he closed his mouth, there was an audible crunch of sand between his teeth. Ken watched on in a mix of revulsion and intrigue as the muscles of his jaw worked. More crunching followed. The teen’s eyes drifted up and off to one side, like he was trying to appreciate the texture.

“So what are you doing with the rope an’ stuff?” Ken asked.

“Studying,” Mikitaka replied – in a kind of wistful, airy voice that suggested the answer was of no importance. “Did you know that two-thirds of the earth’s human population lives near the coastline? Human beings flock to large bodies of water and yet a few minutes under the water’s surface is all it takes to kill a person. You even consider submersing yourself a leisure activity. I can hardly imagine voluntarily spending time in an environment that is designed to kill me.”

Ken blinked slowly at him. “So in other words,” he said, “you’re chicken.”

“Sorry?”

Eying the rope around Mikitaka’s waist, Ken tapped his chin. “Or maybe you don’t know how to swim.”

“The rope is a precautionary measure. I read that rip tides are capable of dragging a person away in seconds.”

“So you don’t.”

“I don’t…?”

“Know how to swim.”

Rising to his feet, Mikitaka stuck his fingers in his mouth and sucked thoughtfully at the sand clinging to his skin. “Unfortunately, my research hasn’t carried me that far,” he admitted.

“I can teach ya,” Ken offered. “I’m pretty much the king of swimming.”

Mikitaka pressed a fist to his chest. “I’m honored to be in your presence,” he murmured, voice breathy with reverence, “your majesty.”

Scowling, Ken hawked a lob of spit onto the sand. He was not used to being taken seriously. Adults and older teens assumed he was full of shit (and he usually was); actually being taken at face value did not give him the satisfaction he would have thought it would. If anything – it took the fun out of the process. He enjoyed wheedling people until they were forced to acknowledge him.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, “just call me Ken.”

“O.K., Ken.”

“First up: you gotta ditch the jacket and the boots.”
Mikitaka obeyed, stepping out of his boots and slipping off his rain coat.

“An’ the rope,” Ken prompted.

After hesitating for a moment with his fingers on the rope’s knot, Mikitaka slipped that off too.

With some coaxing (namely: convincing Mikitaka that the so-called rip tide wasn’t simply going to grab him by the ankles and haul him out to sea), Ken managed to lead the older boy to where the water was waist-deep.

“Cool,” said Ken. “Now, you just gotta lie down on your back and put your head on my hands. When you’re ready, I’m gonna let go, ‘kay?”

Lowering himself to the water’s level, Mikitaka got into position. A position, at least. Though he was not actually a king of swimming – or even minor functionary of swimming for that matter – Ken was pretty sure that the way the older teenager had his arms rod-straight at his sides, palms in, was not in any way conductive to floating,

“Try loosening up a ‘lil. Spread your arms – yeah like that – palms up – there you go.”

Mikutaka’s legs, Ken noticed, were still submerged. He didn’t give it much thought, though; once he got the top half of Mikitaka floating, he figured, the rest was bound to follow.

“Arch your back. Good. A’ight. You ready?” he asked. His arms were beginning to ache from supporting Mikitaka’s head and shoulders.

“Yes sir!” Mikitaka chirped.

With that, Ken let his arms fall away.

If you have ever experimented with skipping stones, you would likely know how the shape of a stone effects not only its proclivity for skipping, but also the way it sinks. A small, flat stone, when it finally skips to a stop, does not sink straight down. It instead falls gradually, in a kind of side to side motion like a waltz step; it falls the same way a leaf falls, and just as the wind will carry a falling leaf, the motion of the waves will carry a skipping stone, depositing it far from its point of entry. Take, by contrast, a heavy stone with a rounded shape, like a cannonball. While a stone thus shaped might drift a little if it is light enough, its tendency will generally be to make a clean line for the bottom. Less like the trajectory of a leaf, and more like the trajectory of a fired bullet.

Despite the broad surface area of his body, Mikitaka sank more like the rounded stone. He did not drift or waltz. The ocean did not his body lovingly enfold. Nature, instead, got straight to the point and set about trying to drown him with two hands wrapped around his throat for good measure.

Ken looked on in awe. From the ocean’s sandy bottom, Mikitaka smiled up at him and gave him a thumbs up.

“I thought I was going a great job,” Mikitaka later admitted, after Ken had enacted an impromptu rescue involving the discarded rope, a whole lot of floundering, and the superhuman strength granted by sheer adrenaline.

“The point’s not to get as close to drowning as possible, dumbass,” Ken muttered. He was flopped on the sand like a beached whale, gasping for breath – all else considered, in far worse shape than the nearly-drowned half of the pair. “You’re supposed to float.”

“I tried. Honestly. But it appears our species share very different bone densities.” Turning his head to
one side, he peered at Ken with a look of genuine remorse and dismay. “I’m sorry Ken. You are an excellent teacher and I’m sure you would have immense success if your pupil had a bone density and body fat distribution more appropriate for the average Homo sapiens specimen.”

Before, Ken had been lukewarm in his feelings about teaching Mikitaka to swim. But hearing the resignation in the other’s voice put a flame under his motivation.

Forfeiting was just as bad as losing.

Rolling up onto his feet, he took stock of the beach and noticed a bin near the lifeguard’s chair marked ‘PERSONAL FLOATATION DEVICES’.

“You wait here,” he said, “I’ve got a plan.”

***

As the day dwindled, shadows lengthened, filling in each hole and pit in the sand that in the afternoon light had been invisible. The water’s surface was transmuted by the setting sun into liquid gold, white-hot at melting point: you couldn’t look at it without squinting. As the air cooled, a mist gathered near shore. The dark, immense shapes of the distant cliffs through the fog seemed phantasmagoric, half-real, like black-hulled ghost ships anchored just offshore. Existing only until nightfall.

With the return of the tide, Yukako, too, returned. She had with her a plastic grocery bag, whose contents consisted of matches, lighter fluid, snacks, and an afghan blanket. The latter featured an intricately woven pattern of lines, boteh and floral designs that would not be out of place in the weave of a Persian rug. The blanket looked expensive. Not only that, but Josuke could have sworn he remembered seeing the exact same throw – or another just like it – draped over the back of the oxblood leather armchair in Yukako’s parents’ summer home.

“Aren’t you worried about it getting messed up?” asked Josuke, running a hand over the blanket. It felt like cashmere.

“I hope it does,” Yukako declared with a wrinkle of her nose.

“Speaking of blankets – aren’t those your guys’ towels?” Josuke asked.

He was referring to the two water-logged towels that, at present, were being pulled and pushed by the waves: first upshore, then downshore, with each receding wave threatening to steal them away along some mid-stream smuggler’s route only the currents know.

On cue, Josuke heard a shout and then, half a second later, Koichi barrelled past him, nearly tripping on the wet sand before crashing into the water.

“Don’t worry!” Josuke called out. “They’ll be fine! Just wring them out or something!”

Beside him, he heard Yukako utter a soft “oh” and couldn’t understand why – that is, until he saw, amongst the debris that rolled in with the next big wave, a pair of sunglasses.

Cursing, Josuke plunged in alongside Koichi, arms wheeling comically like he was trying to walk along a tightrope as he waded out into the water.

“You go left, I go right?” he asked Koichi, who was too preoccupied scanning the area around himself to look up.
“Got it!” Koichi answered, voice cracking.

While searching, Josuke came across a rope. It was anchored to shore by a cinderblock. At first, he thought it might have been a tie-off for a rowboat or small craft, but when he followed the line – keeping a loose fist around the rope, wet fiber slippery under his touch – he discovered instead a dozen or so inflatable armbands and inner tubes that had been artfully tied together into a kind of raft with more of the same rope. Only on closer inspection did he realize that the raft had arms and legs. In fact, it was not a raft at all, but person in a personal flotation device suit.

“You okay there, dude?” asked Josuke, bending over Mikitaka’s supine form (for the water was still only waist deep.

“I’m doing excellent!” chirped Mikitaka, who looked like he was vying for the title in a Michelin Man costume contest. “My friend, Ken, taught me how to swim!”

“You’re not exactly swimming, bud” – was what Josuke was originally going to say, because if anything Mikitaka was just floating, and even then with assistance – but seeing the great big grin of delight on his friend’s face made him swallow back this remark. It died, tail between its legs, somewhere halfway up his throat.

“You’re doing great,” was what he said instead, flashing Mikitaka a thumbs up.

“Many thanks! I had no idea floating just above certain death could be so relaxing. I even made a few friends.”

“Friends?” asked Josuked.

“Friends,” Mikitaka affirmed, turning his head – the only part of him not lashed to a personal flotation device – to one side.

Josuke’s eyes tailed his movement. Several meters out, he saw two sail-shaped fins pacing back and forth over the water’s surface, chasing one another.


Grabbing hold of the anchor line, Josuke hauled ass toward shore, dragging Mikitaka with him. “Hopefully we don’t find out,” he wheezed between breaths as he plunged forward, water sloshing loudly around his thighs. He prayed the commotion wouldn’t draw the sharks’ attention.

“Aren’t you going swimming too?” asked Mikitaka.

“I think we’ve had enough swimming for one day.”

A quick scan of the shoreline revealed that Ken, of course, was nowhere in sight.

“Found it!” he heard Koichi yelp.

Josuke glanced over his shoulder to see Koichi emerge from the surf, a very bedraggled hardcover clutched triumphantly in one hand.

A few minutes later, the same book was laid out to dry on the boardwalk steps. Josuke had never seen a book look pissed off before, but Enigma looked pissed. Its pages refused to lay flat, but instead arched up on either side of the book’s spine in shapes that reminded Josuke of angry, sweeping eyebrows. But, aside from some warping of its pages, it looked no worse for wear.
By then, he’d managed to extract Mikitaka from Ken’s makeshift raft, but the engineer himself still hadn’t turned up. He’d probably already gone home, Josuke figured. By then, most of the beach had already cleared out, and those who were left were packing up:

Tonio putting away kitchen utensils and leftover ingredients in a large plastic tote. Tamami counting out stacks of bills and slipping rubber bands around them. Toyohiro standing out by the roadside, thumb jutting out, looking to catch a lift. Rohan, on Koichi gently shaking his shoulder, stirring from the Adirondack chair where he’d fallen asleep; when he leaned forward the sunglasses slipped from his nose, revealing a snow-white shadow in the middle of a raw, sunburnt face. In the parking lot, whoops and yells, engines revving – bare tanned legs emerged and disappeared from headlight beams; black silhouettes partially smudged out at the sky’s rim where night was creeping in; taillights leaving red comet trails as bikes pulled out of the parking lot.

In the half-light, they made their goodbyes with faces golden, eyes narrowed against the needled glint of the sun off the waves.

“I’ll catch you Monday,” said Koichi, hugging the still-damp book to his chest.

“Good luck,” Yukako added – voice stern, what sounded like an order.

Exhausted from the effort of building her sandcastle city, Jolyne was passed out against her father’s back. Jotaro, if he was put on at all by her deadweight, didn’t show it – he even found spare hands to grab the cooler and one of the folding chairs.

“We’re flying out tomorrow afternoon,” Jotaro informed Josuke somewhere in the midst of this juggling act. “I’ll be leaving for the airport around one.”

“I’ll stop by to say goodbye,” said Josuke, who’d gotten better over the course of the summer at deciphering these unspoken invitations of his nephew’s.

“You’re not going to be staying out too late I hope?” she asked

Her voice was laced with a playful barb of innuendo, but Josuke chose to ignore it – even if his expression had different ideas. “No!”


Josuke walked Jotaro, Tomoko, and Jolyne back to the steps. The whole time, he felt giddy, like he was riding the high of some peak that hadn’t yet happened: the swift, arching upward assent of a wave before the crest. He felt weightless. When he said his goodbyes there was a breathy whisper of laughter that brushed the edge of his voice, though there was nothing much to laugh about; the smile on his face hurt.

After watching the three of them disappear over the tops of the dunes, he turned back and saw the beach stretch before him, sand blushing under the receding sun, the grainy sound of the wind through the grass at his back, miles and miles of ocean and not a soul in sight, just his own breathing – the sound of it detached, weirdly removed from the space inside his head, like his body was an animal crouched at his side, instead of part of him.
The wave he’d been riding all at once collapsed.

Ever since the run-in at the parking lot, Josuke had been agonizing over whether or not Okuyasu was actually going to show – and if he did, what he was going to say. Surrounding by people, it had been easy to slip into a performative role, to strut and talk like there was a camera trained on him, like there was nothing outside of the script of the moment. Nothing behind the backdrop except the unused props.

When he was alone, it was like taking off a costume. He should have felt at his most authentic then; instead he was left feeling naked. As though parts of his identity were portable, carried around by others, and when they left they took those parts with them. He didn’t mind. He liked who he was around them. His mother. Koichi. Jotaro.

He liked who he was around Okuyasu, too. The way laughter came easy to him, the way he was braver knowing someone else had his back. And what set Josuke on edge – more than the way Okuyasu had been avoiding him, more than the way Okuyasu had jumped to the conclusion that Josuke would reject him, as if there had ever been a chance in hell of that happening – was that somewhere just now, Okuyasu was carrying around part of him in his back pocket, and he didn’t even know it.

***

Sunsets had a way of making Okuyasu feel gloomy. Not the golden hour, not the night that came after, but that space in the middle: when there was nothing left of the sun in the sky except its afterglow, the colour drained from everything, making it seem alien, hostile, like he’d set foot on another world, in another atmosphere – and he always felt, in that twilight hour, the crushing loneliness of that solitary, stranded astronaut.

Sunsets on Sunday were the worst. But late summer sunsets were melancholic in their own way too. Both gave the sense of something drawing to an end. Not only that, but that it was too late to do anything about it.

And yet, Okuyasu was still there – ten steps from the parking lot, his back to the road, perched on one of the boulders put there to keep cars from overshooting the edge of the lot and going over the embankment. From where he sat, he had a long view of the beach.

Ever since seeing Josuke again, he’d figured he would end up skipping their appointment and head home instead. He’d had no trouble picturing himself catching the bus, or bumming a ride off Yuya. Even now, he could imagine for himself no other course of action than to leg it all the way back to Jouzenji Road. What was the point in staying?

But he hadn’t left. The same Okuyasu Nijimura who’d once been afraid to get too hopeful about finishing a library book was waiting with his hands between his knees for a boy who didn’t like him back.

Behind him, he heard gravel crunch. He glanced over his shoulder to see Josuke crossing the parking lot, head down, lugging a shopping bag in one hand.

They caught sight of each other at the same time. Josuke took half a step back, one shoulder arching out of the way like he was dodging an unseen assailant.

“You’re still here,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, dude.”
Josuke cocked his head to one side, dragging a hand down the back of his skull. “I thought you’d ditched me.”

“Nah.”

From the boulder, Okuyasu slid. They drifted back toward the boardwalk together. When they reached the stairs – where the way narrowed so that walking abreast would put them shoulder-to-shoulder – Josuke hung back and let Okuyasu take the lead. The sound of Josuke’s footfalls on the planks behind Okuyasu followed him down the steps in a volley of loud, punctuated *whumps.* Nothing for miles around to repeat the echo back to him.

Halfway down, he heard Josuke’s voice at his back, strange with a tone he wasn’t used to hearing from Josuke: “You know: when you said you were thinking of sticking around, I didn’t know whether you were being serious or not.”

“Me neither,” Okuyasu admitted.

Josuke already had a fire pit dug and wood gathered. Uncapping the canister of lighter fluid, he held it under his nose. At the smell of odorant – part decay, part vegetable, like old cabbage – he shrank his face and replaced the cap.

“How much of this stuff do you think we should use?” he asked, giving the canister a shake. There wasn’t much of a slosh; it sounded nearly full.

“Dunno,” Okuyasu mumbled as he sank down onto the blanket spread out before the fire pit. Already, his gut hurt. He wondered how he was going to survive the next hour or so hearing Josuke’s voice in his ear and having his body so close nearby, an impulsive reach away. “Just try a drizzle to start? It’s like adding salt to soup, y’know – it’s easier to add more of that shit than it is to take it away.”

The fire went up with a *woosh.* Josuke stumbled back, toppling onto his backside in the process.

“I told ya – just a drizzle,” Okuyasu chided. A grin broke through his unease, but it withered when he saw the crinkle around Josuke’s eyes and the flash of his teeth.

There was something in the way Josuke smiled… if Okuyasu had to describe it, he would say it made him feel like he was the only one Josuke smiled that way at, even if he knew his muscles and teeth were just fixing themselves into the same arrangement they did for everyone.


They went quiet as they watched the flames leap up and set their teeth on the driftwood logs. Only when Okuyasu’s gaze followed the tall, silver column of smoke up, and his eyes gradually adjusted from the fire’s bright glow, did he notice the deep matte darkness behind the smoke’s shifting, shimmering screen. Night had closed in all around them, encircling them like a predatory animal around the solitary light of the bonfire.

Maybe it was because that last bewitching snatch of twilight had faded. Maybe it was because, after a long summer of uncertainty and worrying about fudging the one good thing he had going for him, knowing with certainty there’d been no hidden meaning behind Josuke’s friendliness took the guesswork out of the thing for Okuyasu. In either case, Okuyasu felt the knot in his middle loosen as the minutes bled away.

Out of the corners of his eyes, he stole a glance at Josuke. He was hunched over, hands knitted together, rubbings his lips together like there was a dryness he just couldn’t get rid of.
“Uh, hey,” Okuyasu stammered, “thanks, y’know. For inviting me out here. You didn’t gotta do it.”

“Hey, man, we said we were going to get together for a bonfire again, right?”

“Yeah, but ya didn’t hafta.”

Something in Okuyasu’s reply made Josuke flinch. “That’s kinda why I was hoping you’d stick around.”

Okuyasu tore his eyes away. He stared down at his lap, one hand curled in a fist at his knee. Already he could imagine the next words out of Josuke’s mouth, the ones he’d been afraid to hear ever since the hospital room: the “I’m sorry but”s and “I can’t”s, skirting delicately around the conclusions they’d both already arrived at.

“I know,” he muttered. “S’alright.”

Silence answered him, punctuated by a pop from the fire.

“You do?” Josuke said at last. His voice sounded hoarse.

“You’re the best friend I ever got,” said Okuyasu. “It’s like winning a game of poker – the smart thing would be t’walk away with the money. You gotta be a real greedy dumbass to stay at the table. I know I shoulda just walked but I couldn’t help wantin’ to double my luck.” He steeled himself, feeling his body tighten as though it were made of cables and winches. The tension in his muscles was all he could do to hold himself together when he mumbled: “I ain’t gonna pretend around you anymore.”

“Okuyasu.”

Okuyasu swung his head around. His face was half lit in firelight, the other half receded in shadow. The lines between light and shadow sculpted his face, revealing hard edges where during the day there was only smoothness: a heavy brow, strong jaw, high sharp cheekbones. At that moment he seemed, older, more handsome than Josuke remembered.

“You can tell me to take a hike if you want,” said Okuyasu, “but I meant what I said in the basement.”

Josuke’s expression, he noticed, had gone rigid. Lips compressed, pale. Curled hand pressed against the side of his neck. In that second, Okuyasu – who was fluent in the unspoken language of anger – flinched as he imagined Josuke’s hand coming down to strike him.

No such move was made. “Idiot,” Josuke muttered, “you weren’t supposed to be the one doing the confessing.”

“What?”

As he spoke, Josuke smoothed a hand over his hair: “When I kissed you earlier, I should have told you but I choked instead because… I don’t know, for a minute I thought, maybe, there’s no way you could have felt the same way? Like I didn’t really remember what you’d said in the basement, or maybe I did but it seemed like it was all a dream and – anyway, I’ve been all over town looking for you. I was hoping I’d see you here tonight so I could tell you… tell you…”

Okuyasu stared at him. Josuke glanced quickly away, running his hands over his face. “Fuck. I did it again.”
“I don’t get it,” Okuyasu mumbled. There was a slight tremor in his voice.

“I’m trying to tell you how much I like you, but it’s like whenever I’m around you, I get stupid and everything comes out a wreck and I end up saying the opposite of what I mean.”

A furrow appeared between Okuyasu’s eyebrows. “You’re sayin’ I make you stupid?”

“No, I didn’t – fuck! – that’s exactly what I’m saying.” Josuke shoved his face into his hands. His palms were damp with sweat. “I wanted to be all. Suave and elegant and shit.”

“When you say ya like me… you don’t mean in that way, right? We’ve gotta be talking about two different things here.”

“No way, dude. I’m pretty sure we’re on the same page.”

Many nights, in the dizzying prelude to sleep that left his brain unfettered from inhibition, Okuyasu’s imagination had conjured up the exact scenario currently unfolding; hushed words of confession by firelight, the two of them alone with the rest of the world swept away and out of sight. Well-worn film reels of fantasies that seemed so vivid at the time, but left him, on waking with nothing more than impressions. Confronted with a flesh-and-blood Josuke repeating those lines of dialogue from his own personal A.M. theatre, however, had him choking up with an altogether different kind of emotion. A part of him that pre-dated Josuke slammed, hard, on the brakes. The inertia carried him: manic joy crashing headlong into his fear – of what? – of the uncertainty, of the things he had convinced himself he could go without: it wouldn’t work out, it wouldn’t be worth it, things were fine the way there were now – .

“Ya don’t mean it,” he murmured. The words were difficult to wring out; he felt like someone had their hands around his throat, choking out his voice. Talking hurt. The muscles of his throat strained with it.

“You think I’d be out here making myself look like an asshole if I didn’t?”

“Why the hell someone like me? I’m just a good-for-nothing piece of shit.” He spat the last word. His voice was rough and stained with vitriol, but something else too, something that was accompanied by a clenching pain in his chest.

“Fuck off. You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I dunno,” Okuyasu admitted. He had, at one point, believed it – thought of it as no more significant that the fact that the sky was blue, but – .

(Lately, his heart had been beating for things he’d never allowed himself to want before; but it is one thing convincing yourself you perhaps deserve love and affection after all, quite another convincing yourself you’ll ever have it.)

Okuyasu nearly jumped when he felt Josuke’s hand close around his own. He held their hands up between them, fingers twining together. Over their joined knuckles, Josuke’s gaze settled on him. There was resolution in his eyes.

“You know what?” said Josuke. “I wanna tell you a story.”

“Man, screw your stories,” Okuyasu muttered, but he didn’t pull his hand away; on the contrary, he was afraid to move a muscle, afraid to so much as breathe, as if Josuke’s hand were a butterfly that had alighted on his knuckles.
“C’mon, this one’s different.” When Okuyasu didn’t respond, Josuke pulled the other boy’s hand into his lap. Okuyasu’s fingers curled into fetal position. “Once upon a time…”

“That’s kinda cliché, don’tcha think?” Okuyasu interrupt.

“I like cliché, so deal with it. So like I said: once upon a time, I meet this guy who introduces himself by trying to wipe the smirk off my face – along with, you know, the rest of my face. It was kind of a rocky start. We get into it. He gets hurt. Last thing I want by this point is to watch someone else die, so I do him a solid and heal him up. No big deal. I don’t think much about it. There was no deeper meaning or anything – I just didn’t think the guy had to die.

“After that, I get a little distracted. And this guy, he’s got an opening to attack me if he wants. But he doesn’t; instead, he helps me out. And I don’t really think about that either until later I learn a thing or two and realize: here’s a guy with zero reason to be nice to anyone. No one sure as hell’s ever been nice to him. The closest thing to an answer I can come up with is that he’s just a genuinely good guy.”

Over Okuyasu’s knuckles, Josuke dragged his fingers. Okuyasu’s hand twitched. He suppressed a shiver.

“This guy ends up losing someone close to him, just like I did. I don’t know if it’s because I needed someone around who understood what I was going through, or something else, but me and him start hanging out. All throughout spring we’re fighting stand users side-by-side. We get close. I realize he’s a fun guy to be around, and spooning him’s nice, and maybe I’ve kinda got a crush on him, but I don’t know how bad I’ve got it until I think I’ve lost him. Like, god, it’s probably a good thing he wasn’t around to see it – I must’ve looked like a nutjob dragging him around – but I was scared, right? Because suddenly I can’t picture my life without this guy but he’s already gone…

“So when I don’t lose him after all, I make a plan to tell him how I feel at this bonfire we’re having with some friends. Instead we end up talking about the past and I start telling this other story. And I don’t mind because as long as there’s still more story left to tell, he’ll keep coming back to hear it, and I like that. Except it turns out it’s not such a great story after all and soon we’re chasing down another bad guy and all this time, this friend of mine, he never stops blowing me out of the water. Like, sling-shotting himself at a fucking serial killer? Taking on an evil ghost hive mind? Alone? – and beating them just by talking? I even find out he’s been studying up to become a nurse in his free time. So now I’m thinking, shit, what’s he going to see in me? I don’t know what the hell I’m doing with my life and I don’t even have the nerve to say three little words to him. I get nervous and panic and I think I ended up hurting him, because it turns out maybe he doesn’t see things the way I see them.

“Ever since then I’ve been hoping to get the chance to catch up with him. Even if he decides he doesn’t want anything to do with me after all the shit I pulled, maybe I can at least let him know how great he is and how much he means to me, because I think he gets kinda stuck in his own head sometimes and doesn’t see himself the same way everyone else sees him.”

When Josuke slipped his hand from Okuyasu’s, his palm felt damp – though whether the sweat was his or Josuke’s, he couldn’t tell. “But I’m really hoping,” Josuke continued, “that I’ll finally get the chance to tell him I love him too.”

Okuyasu could feel the heat of Josuke’s skin through the leg of his board shorts. He tore his hand away but left it, dangling, in the no-man’s space between them. The next breath to leave his lungs slammed into his ribs with a solid whump.

“Is that supposed to be a story about me?” he demanded.
“Who the hell else would it be about?”

“I dunno. Koichi?”

At Josuke’s laugh, Okuyasu felt heat thrum at the base of his throat – spreading steadily to his collarbone. “Besides,” he spluttered, “talk about a lousy story. There was no, like, structuring or pacing. And what about the ending?”

“What about it?”

“How does it end?”

The shadow of a dimple appeared in Josuke’s cheek as he grinned. “That’s up to you. How do you want it to end?”

Okuyasu stared at him, jaw so tight he could feel the pain at the back of his skull. There was a change of wind. Smoke swept up between them, the warm earthy smell of burning wood. Sparks lit up Josuke’s face in piecemeal, whirling in frantic circles like expiring fireflies, echoing the frantic spin of Okuyasu’s thoughts. The voice from before was still there, urging him to pull away while he still could, but it was quieter now, overtaken by the memory of Josuke’s voice saying all those things no one had ever said to him before.

Still: saying no would have been so easy. Easier than putting his faith and trust in an imperfect, fallible human being, knowing full well what even the best of people were capable of doing to each other. Easier than worrying about heart break, easier than the stress of caring for someone so much knowing he could lose them at any moment. But then he found his thoughts straying to the other Morioh, and the ghosts of memories they’d run across there: there’d been more people in that other town than Okuyasu had met in all his life. And yet: all those people had gone before, already lived and died, whatever they had or hadn’t done set forever in that living stream. He imagined himself as one of those ghosts, with a life that looked no different than the one he was living now: nothing risked, nothing chanced. Or worse: he imagined himself as a ghost like Daisuke, tied to earth by some unpunctuated emotion, by the desire for something that he could no longer obtain.

He had only think of those memories and ghosts, and all at once he saw with perfect clarity the kind of future he wanted.

Slinging an arm around Josuke’s neck, Okuyasu pulled him close. When Josuke breathed, he felt a puff of air against his cheek, warm and clammy against his skin. The smoke was stinging Okuyasu’s eyes, making them water, leaving wet streaks where he pressed his face against the side of Josuke’s neck.

“I fucking love you so much,” Josuke muttered into his ear.

“I love ya too.”

Josuke gave a one-note laugh. The arms curled around Okuyasu’s back spasmed. “You’re shaking like a leaf,” he pointed out.

He wasn’t wrong. Okuyasu’s teeth were practically chattered. But then again; there was no missing the tremble to Josuke’s voice, or the way his hands shook as they smoothed along the length of Okuyasu’s spine.

“So’re you,” he retorted.

And then – because he didn’t want to overthink things, because he knew if he did the moment would
slip by on him – Okuyasu angled his face, lips skirting along Josuke’s jaw until he found his lips.

Over the sound of the fire’s crackling, the waves continued to pile up on the shore with a soft, elongated hush.

While Okuyasu had given plenty of thought to kissing in the past (specifically: kissing Josuke), he had not given any thought to the actual mechanics of the act. After pursing his lips against the other boy’s, he realized he wasn’t sure what was supposed to come after, so he pulled back a few centimeters and repeated the act. And then repeated it again – three pursed-lip kisses square at the center of Josuke’s mouth.

On the third kiss, Josuke pulled away giggling.

“S’rry,” Okuyasu mumbled.

“No, it’s fine, I’m just – nervous.”

“Same here.”

Nervous or not – when Okuyasu’s gaze slid to Josuke’s lips, he was grasped by a stubborn desire to learn. And when it came to his education, Okuyasu was more of a hands-on learner.

He made several more attempts, varying the angle of his head until their lips slotted together in a way that made Josuke shiver and melt into him. By then, his legs were going to sleep and his neck was stiff from the awkward position, so he let gravity tug him down to the afghan, and Josuke followed suite.

You know already about that most popular type of ghost: the spirits of the deceased, bound to a place by an emotion. But there is another type of ghost, more numerous perhaps even than the first type. These ghosts belong to living persons, and they are carried around by the person themselves and by the people who know them. These ghosts exist in the form of memories. Ideas about who people are and are not. Versions of persons not always true to the living thing. Josuke and Okuyasu – they were carrying their own ghosts around, both ghosts of each other and ghosts of themselves. They had in their minds fixed ideas about who they were and who the other was, unreachable idealizations puffed up or obscured by personal hopes, infatuations, and fears. That night, under the watchful gaze of moonlight, they carefully loosed the ghosts and replaced them with memories of flesh and blood, made of hands and lips and apologies for clumsy firsts and determined seconds.

As Okuyasu lay on his side, trying to catch his breath while his heart continued to hammer away against his chest, he wondered how other people managed to keep themselves together under similar circumstances. Actors always seemed smooth and collected in their onscreen flirtations; Okuyasu, on the other hand, felt like he was going to spontaneously combust. And he could not – seeing Josuke’s face softened by shadow beside him, the honest crinkle around his eyes – imagine ever feeling any other way.

“Hey,” Josuke mumbled. He slung a leg over Okuyasu’s thigh, making room so he could shuffle closer.

“Hey,” Okuyasu rasped in reply, as he tried and failed to tamp down his acute awareness of every shared point of contact between their bodies.

Though there was no one around to hear them, they kept their voices at a whisper. As they lay together on the afghan blanket, they spoke of school, what classes they would be taking, and what came next.
“So, nursing,” said Josuke. “Do you have to go to uni for that?”

“There’s special training schools you can go to if ya don’t wanna go to university.” Okuyasu rumbled in reply. “S’like three years. It’s good if you’re like me an’ you don’t got the marks for university.”

“Where’d that be? S City?”

“Somewhere like that. Or maybe Tokyo, for the big ones.”

Josuke drew a rattling breath and his grip around Okuyasu’s shoulders tightened. “Maybe I could go with you,” he mumbled.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We could get an apartment… I don’t know, I’ll get a job or figure something out.”

Okuyasu swallowed. He had his chin resting on Josuke’s shoulder. Over the edge of the Afghan blanket, the darkness stared back at him. Already, he couldn’t help but imagine the romantic domesticity of a one bedroom apartment at the heart of the city. “I’d like that.”

At that point, it was too early for either of them to be talking about the future that way, but as young lover often do: they didn’t care.

Gradually, their conversation died down, and silence settled between them.

“So… what now?” Josuke asked eventually.

Okuyasu, who in the swimming haze of a biological high could not, for the life of him, imagine anything of importance besides 1) kissing Josuke 2) lying next to Josuke, replied with a grunt. “Dunno.”

When Josuke laughed, Okuyasu could feel the vibrations in the other boy’s throat where his face was pressed. Up close he could smell the dried ocean brine on him, the tang of sweat, and the cocoa butter scent of his sunscreen; he could imagine, in that exact moment, the taste of his skin: salt and an underlying bitterness.

“We could play truth or dare again,” Josuke teased.

Okuyasu peeled himself away from Josuke and rolled onto his side, head propped up against one hand, elbow bent at an angle.

“If you wanna know, I only wanted to play in the first place ‘cuz I was hopin’ you’d ask me if I liked anyone or something.”

“Really? Man. I was thinking of asking that too before you got me distracted with the whole first crush thing.”

“You mean we coulda been doing this all summer?” Okuyasu demanded.

“Yeah, man.”

“Goddammit.”

“Yup.”
Something occurred to Okuyasu just then. He blinked, twice at Josuke – long, slow blinks, like dashes of Morse code. “Y’know,” he said, “ya never did answer my question.”

“What question?”

“About your first crush. Ya said something about a classmate but no names or nothing.”

Josuke waved his hand in the air. “Who the hell knows? I might’ve just made that part up to sound cool.”

“I just find it kinda funny that the first thing ya jumped to was that specific summer when Jotaro came to visit.”

Okuyasu hadn’t meant to imply anything – he only meant to make an observation on what, to him, was genuinely nothing more than a strange coincidence. But then he watched as what could only be described as a look of pure mortification unfolded across Josuke’s face and he understood that he should have kept his mouth shut.

“Aw, c’mon, s’not that bad,” Okuyasu said as Josuke rolled over onto his stomach and buried his face in the afghan. “Kids have dumb weird crushes all the time.”

“It’s embarrassing,” came Josuke’s muffled reply from the blanket.

“If it makes ya feel any better, my first crush was on this lunch lady at school. She was ancient. Hairy mole over her lip and everything.” Okuyasu pulled a face, and then added, slightly quieter: “… Except I was like ten so not really a little kid, but y’know.”

“Wow,” Josuke remarked, as he lifted his face from the blanket, “yours actually is more embarrassing.”

“Shaddup. I thought marrying a lunch lady would be great, with the free food and everything.”

“I’m just teasing, relax.”

Cradling his head in his arms, Josuke turned his face toward Okuyasu. “Seriously though: what now?”

“I dunno. Do we start going on dates or something?” asked Okuyasu, who was struggling to picture what going on a date with Josuke would look like. He couldn’t imagine it being any different than what their hang-outs looked like already, except maybe with more kissing. He could get used to the kissing, he decided.

“Maybe? I didn’t really think that far ahead. I was thinking more about how the hell we’re gonna get home.”

“Oh.”

With all that had transpired, Okuyasu hadn’t exactly been keeping track of such practical matters as the current time, or the Saturday evening bus schedule. Judging by the way the bonfire had retreated to a nest of glowing embers, however, they’d been there for two or three hours.

“What time do ya figure it is?” he asked.

“Midnight, maybe?” After a moment’s hesitation he added, in a quiet voice: “We could always just stay here, I guess.”
“Whatdya mean?”

“You said you’d never been camping, right?” Though Okuyasu couldn’t see Josuke’s face, he could hear the grin in his voice. “Besides, what time does the bus run start up again?”

“Six? Something like that.”

“Yeah, exactly. So it’s not like we’d be out here long.”

The heat that had been burning in Okuyasu’s face ever since the first kiss suddenly redirected itself to several curious locations – but he scrunched his eyes shut and forced those other flames out. Those were feeling he wasn’t prepared to deal with. No yet. But they did raise another question.

“What’s your mom gonna think if you show up in the morning like that?”

“I think she already knows. Or, well – she’s got an idea. If she asks, I’ll just tell her.” Josuke’s shoulders lifted up in a shrug. “Better to get it over with, right?”

“You think she’ll be cool with us?”

“Dude, my mom’s like super chill. It’s kinda scary.”

Getting up, Josuke tossed an armload of driftwood onto the bonfire, sending a cloud of sparks up into the air. The flames came to life once more, unfurling from hibernation to lap hungrily at the unburnt fuel. When he lay back down he pulled his side of the blanket over his shoulders and closed his eyes.

“Going to sleep?” asked Okuyasu.

“I figured I should try,” said Josuke without opening his eyes. “I’m supposed to go to the airport tomorrow afternoon with Jotaro and Jolyne.”

“Brutal.”

“Tell me about it.”

Josuke raised an arm, lifting the blanket up with it. “Get over here.”

“That ain’t gonna help you sleep,” Okuyasu remarked, but he slid over to Josuke all the same. Josuke didn’t seem to care either. “Whatever, it’s better than freezing to death.”

“Not that cold.”

“Sure it is.”

After deliberating for a moment, Okuyasu slipped an arm around Josuke’s waist. Josuke lowered his arm, enveloping them both in the blanket. Their foreheads were pressed together; Okuyasu could feel the gentle pressure at the front of his skull.

The fire was too hot on his feet, so he buried his toes beneath the sand. The sand beneath the surface was still cool and damp from the receding high tide. When he still couldn’t get comfortable, he carefully shifted over onto his back – moving glacier-slow so Josuke wouldn’t notice the disturbance – and gazed up at the sky, black velvet beneath a thin smokescreen.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed. He figured Josuke had fallen asleep – he could feel the
steady rise and fall of his chest where it was pressed against Okuyasu’s arm. At some point, he felt Josuke roll over in his sleep.

“Can’t sleep either, hunh?”

Josuke’s voice startled him. Okuyasu glanced over to see him lying on his back, face in profile, the white of his eye the only thing visible in the shadowed silhouette of his face.

“I thought you were asleep,” Okuyasu said.

“Told you: I’m a professional faker.”

By then, the smoke had blown away, leaving them with a clear view of the sky overhead. Sparks wove and whirled through the dark blue panel of night like renegade comets. Silver clouds of stars hung still, a breath of warm air frozen in the surrounding void.

“I remember you telling me how you liked the city because the lights from the buildings looked like stars and the passing cars sounded like waves,” Josuke said, his voice barely more than a hush. “I mean: we’ve got the stars and we’ve got the waves, but I guess it’s not quite the same, hunh?”

“S’fine,” Okuyasu mumbled, “we can see the real deal some other time.”

If he was honest, though – between the two – he thought he was startling to like this view better.

Chapter End Notes

* The beeper codes Yuya uses are all Japanese beeper codes. Let me tell you: it was much harder finding Japanese beeper codes than it was finding English ones. The translations are as follows: 88951 - come quickly. 0906 - I'm running late. 114106 - I love you.
* I realize I kind of messed up with Jolyne's age. I was thinking about DIU and worked out that I would be six or seven at the time DIU took place... and then I remembered that I share a birth year with Jolyne, except for some reason I've been writing Jolyne as though she's four in this fic skljflkdllksldf sorry about that, I'm bad at math.
* I decided to do a Q&A~! If you have anything you want to ask me, whether about this fic or JJBA or writing in general or anything else, please mention it in the comments (or send it to me via tumblr) and I will reply in the comments on the epilogue!
* The epilogue will be pretty short, but I'm still going to hold off posting it for a month or so in order to allow time for everyone to read this chapter... since you know, it's 30,000 words and all that.
* In case you don't know what the 'super S' is, it's this guy: https://i.kymcdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/001/347/stussy.jpg
* Serious author tip: don’t leave the resolution of every single one of your emotional plot points until the last chapter. This chapter nearly killed me.

adfskfdjklfjdj thanks again for waiting, sorry for being late, this has been a super hectic few months for me... I really appreciate all your support...!
Epilogue: The Dawn Bus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

At Morioh’s boom – at the very height of the economic bubble, before rail lines curled around the town’s spine and shoulder pads returned to a reasonable widths – the bus schedule to and from S City was extensive. Starting from before the wink of dawn, a bus would depart Morioh’s town square every half hour on the hour until half past midnight, with intervals as short as fifteen minutes at peak traffic hours.

Since then, the town’s public transit has shifted toward intra-municipal service. Townsfolk even have a nickname for the local service: The Tour Boat. And indeed, the bus runs more frequently in the summertime, when out-of-town crowds flock to Morioh’s seashore. There is still a bus that goes out to S City, but it makes only a few runs each day.

According to officially posted schedules, the earliest bus from S City to Morioh – or vice-versa for that matter – departs the bus depot at 6:30 AM.

But there is another, earlier bus that does the rounds to and from Morioh. This bus makes but a singular run each day, and it is a one-way trip. The timing of its stops changes with the seasons, but if you find yourself on the road in the blue hour before the sun appears over the horizon, you may well see it racing by: darkened windows and amber headlights, wheels that move without disturbing the fog. As to the route’s terminus, the destination sign offers only this cryptic phrase, branded in gaseous orange Nixie-tube letters: ‘FINAL STOP VIA MORIOH.’

Though you may someday meet this curious phaeton by chance, there is no point in waiting at the nearest transit sign for this unmarked bus to stop. For its stops, timings, and even days of operation are never twice the same.

This special route, you see, is called the Dawn Bus, and its timetables only the dead know.

***

At one point in the course of Josuke’s spotty bouts of sleep, he opened his eyes and noticed the sky overhead had lightened to a blue-grey backwater – the stars dimmed to pale freckles. A fine mist had crept in, leaving the Afghan throw heavy and damp, and his skin slick with a clammy sheen.

The stiff ache in his hips as he sat up scolded him for thinking he could get away with spending the night on the ground.

He held a hand out over the fire pit. Overnight the fire had gone out; by now it was cold down to the ashes. He could still catch an acrid whiff of smoke, but it was tamped down by the wet.

Behind him, he heard the sand shift. He turned to see Okuyasu leaning up on one elbow, face turned toward him. The weak light smudged away his expression.

“What’s up?” Okuyasu asked.

“Not much,” said Josuke. He ran a hand through his hair, feeling the grease accumulated at his roots. He never thought he would crave a hot shower as much as he craved one just then. “Just thinking about how maybe if we do the whole camping thing again, we should bring a tent. And, like, maybe an air mattress.”
“Couldn’t sleep or something?”

Sleep the night before had been a slippery thing, blurring and overlapping with the restless hours spent awake. There’d been the trouble of finding a comfortable spot on the sand where some divot or another wasn’t digging into him; and then there was the proximity to Okuyasu, whose body ran furnace-hot even in sleep. But more than that, he’d spent the night in a kind of giddy fever, his mind racing through that confession by firelight, half-remembered conversations and the ghosts of touch leaving goosebumps on his arms interwoven with bright and bleary conjurations that flickered across the insides of his eyelids every time he dozed off, so that he had no way of knowing at any given moment whether he was awake or only asleep. He wondered if the events of that night would evaporate by dawn and he’d awake to find nothing had changed between him and Okuyasu except in the space of some wishful dream.

“I hardly slept a wink,” Josuke admitted. “You?”

“ Took me a while. But when I was out, I was out like a light – must be the waves.”

Digging around in the shopping bag Yukako had given him the night before, Josuke pulled out a bottle of water. He uncapped it, sucked back a huge gulp that made his throat ache and went down hard so that he felt the burn in the centre of his chest, then passed the bottle to Okuyasu, who did the same.

While Josuke, in a daze of exhaustion, watched the sinuous roll of Okuyasu’s throat as he drank, he became aware of hunger raking its nails down his stomach. In the light-headed hours of the night before, the warmth from the fire and the way Okuyasu made the looming, uncertain shape of the future make sense to him had seemed like enough to sustain him. He’d imagined, even, the two of them living there on the beach and sleeping on the sand and never having a care in the world. Now that the spell was wearing off (an enchantment that had been more chemical or alchemical than magical), his Robinson Crusoe fantasy was already looking less and less plausible. Especially on an empty stomach.

“Do you think the bus’ll be running by now?” he asked.

“Dunno,” said Okuyasu. “We can always thumb it if it ain’t.”

Josuke stood and kicked sand over the cooled ashes of the fire pit. “Come on. People don’t actually do that, do they?”

“I’ve done it a couple of times.”

“Dude.” Josuke’s voice was shrill with alarm.

Okuyasu just shrugged. “S’when I first moved here – how the hell was I s’posed to know about all the murders and kidnappings?”

“How are you still alive?” Josuke demanded.

“Beats me. Dumb luck, I guess.”

There was just something so very Okuyasu about coming a hair’s breadth from death without noticing or paying it much mind. As though he were walking along a tightrope without bothering to look down. And as much as it exasperated Josuke, there was something comforting about Okuyasu’s precarious high-wire performance: if only because it made it easier to keep his own eyes up, to give himself something to focus on that wasn’t the sheer drop below – all the ways his best-laid plans could go wrong, all his uncertainties, the things he worried about on the nights sleep eluded him.
They walked back up the grey stretch of beach together. The sand softened the sound of their footsteps. Josuke wrapped the Afghan tight around his shoulders; the blanket dragged behind him, leaving lines on the sand.

At that hour of the morning the wind was still. The grass on the dunes lay flat, blurred beneath a layer of fog. The dampness brought out the smell of the beach grass – for the first time, Josuke noticed how different it was from the smell of lawn grass. Less turf and sharp green, more mellow and vegetal.

Overnight, some of the shyness from before had crept back between them: it occupied a measurable space, in the centimetres gap between he and Okuyasu as they crossed the parking lot together. Okuyasu, fumbling out a mumbled apology when their elbows brushed. Only when they neared the road did Josuke work up the courage to reach out and grab the other boy’s hand. Okuyasu gave his hand a squeeze. There was an urgency in the grip, as though he was worried Josuke was going to let go or his hand would slip away; Josuke returned the squeeze.

He was about to ask Okuyasu if he remembered where the bus stop was when he saw a pair of headlights curve across the black backdrop of the coastline. He heard Okuyasu swear. Morioh municipal buses, according to the rules written out on signage throughout the town, only stop at designated bus stops.

As the roar of the bus’s engine grew close, the high beams swung wide around a turn, slicing across a utility pole and the asphalt and for half a second, it was directly in Josuke’s eyes, burning his vision white. He and Okuyasu broke away from each other to shout and wave their arms and run after the bus, which to Josuke’s relief, squealed to a stop fifty meters up the road.

When they approached the bus, its engine was still running. A deep rumbling sound that reverberating through its metal sides, almost animal-like. The door was already open, expecting them.

“Thanks for waitin’,” Okuyasu mumbled, voice ragged from their brief sprint up the road.

He slipped his hands into his pockets to fish for change, but the bus driver held up a hand. “Dawn special. Passengers ride for free.”

As they boarded the bus, Josuke’s eyes slid over the bus driver’s face. A strange feeling came over him: he was floating backward and the bus was growing further away, his vision blacking at the edges –

– Then Okuyasu pulled him down the aisle, and he immediately forgot what he’d seen. Or, to be exact: what he had not seen.

For it being so early in the morning, Josuke was surprised at how packed the bus was. There were only two benches free. He and Okuyasu slid into one of them. Maybe the other riders were there because of the morning special, or whatever the driver had called it – Josuke didn’t bother to dwell too long on the thought, because no sooner were they in their seats the bus was once again on the move.

He’d taken public transit before by himself or with friends. But something this time felt different. There was no sense, as there usually was, that he was filling a role: acting the part of the adults around him, who rode with monastic serenity, quiet, eyes turned to the window as though at their core was an inner stillness, like level water, that in him was still thrashing and tumultuous, causing him to bounce his knees or watch intently as the names of the stops scrolled past on the rollsign. Over the course of the summer, some internal renovation had taken hold of him. Sitting shoulder-to-
shoulder with Okuyasu, he didn’t feel like a kid anymore. The feeling terrified him, but it was exhilarating too – as though he were coming up to a blind hill and the future was somewhere just on the other side, unseen and unknowable but approaching fast and full of possibility.

But that was the stuff of tomorrow. A night of tossing and turning and waking dreams and dreamless sleep left him exhausted. Okuyasu must have felt the same way: not long after they’d sat down, they slumped against each other and fell asleep.

This time, Josuke’s sleep wasn’t dreamless. This time, he dreamt he saw himself and Okuyasu in third person, as though watching himself on a recording. When the bus drove beneath an overpass, the dim light of the streetlamps was snuffed to black; when they exited out the other side and the lights winked back into existence, the other passengers were no longer in their seats but standing all around the sleeping pair, crowding close. Though it was too dark to make out the passengers’ faces, Josuke sensed they were all familiar, all smiling – though he didn’t so much see the smiles as he felt them: a warm caress on his face, a hand on his shoulder. He had the notion he was missing something important, something that made him feel melancholic and peaceful all at once, the same way saying goodbye made him feel. Struggle as him might to remember – everything always seems so much harder in a dream, including remembering – he couldn’t recall what that something was.

He’d remember it again someday, when the years started to accumulate behind him and the days grew shorter.

While Josuke and Okuyasu slept, the bus turned down the road and roared off in the direction of the old highway. After all: it still had one more passenger to take on.

***

There was not much to gather up from the hospital room aside from the clothes Jotaro had arrived in. These he had on in a minute’s time; he left the room with the bed made up, johnny gown folded neatly on the nightstand. Despite his haste, Jotaro moved with a kind of meticulous thoughtfulness: pressing the heel of his hand along the folds in the gown to square off the creases, the same way a carpenter might drive a planer over a length of wood.

They took the stairwell down. A sign above the door marked emergency exit – Josuke froze at the threshold, expecting an alarm to go off, but when Jotaro stepped through the door and nothing happened, Josuke scrambled after him. Jotaro took the stairs at a gallop, arms spread with one hand on either railing. At each flight pausing to wait for Josuke to catch up. The stairwell was wound in a tight spiral; after several turns Josuke’s vision began to spin.

At the bottom of the stairs, Jotaro pushed open a door. When Josuke followed, he found himself back in the atrium. Motionless plastic palm fronds under harsh florescent light; geometric-cut glass ceiling; seamless walls and floors of alternating cream and teal tiles that reminded Josuke of standing at the bottom of a pool; music drifting from some place he couldn’t pinpoint, so quiet he could have almost believed he was imagining it.

Not until they were on the verge of stepping through the revolving door at the front entrance did Josuke remember he’d left Yuki in the waiting room.

“Be right back!” he called out to Jotaro as he dashed off down the hall.

“Where are you going?”

“Toilets!”
He figured he would come up with an excuse for why he had Yuki with him when he got back. As he approached the waiting room, however, he saw a cluster of police officers and hospital staff through the Plexiglass wall. The object of their attention only became apparent when one of the nurses stepped out of the way: there was Yuki, sitting in the vinyl chair exactly where he’d left her, knuckles stuffed into her mouth as she eyed the people crowding her. Though he couldn’t hear what was going on through the wall, the cops seemed to be in the process of questioning the hospital staff while a doctor checked the girl’s vitals.

Whatever was happening, Josuke knew the doctors and police officers would take care of Yuki. He knew, too – if only in the same vague foreboding way that he knew when his mother was about to lay a lecture on him – that turning up in that room would only cause more trouble. And so, before anyone could notice him, Josuke slunk away from the waiting room.

Jotaro didn’t say anything when Josuke returned. They walked together in silence through the revolving doors. The outside air hit them with a woosh. After being inside the hospital, the air outside felt crisp and sharp and smelt of that warm, cloying something of summer nights in the city.

By then, a long night of being on his feet was catching up with Josuke. As they slipped down the street he yawned, stumbled. As he did, he felt himself bump into something warm and solid; when he opened his eyes, he saw Star Platinum kneeling in front of him, back bowed. Jotaro had stopped a few steps ahead. He shot a glance over his shoulder at Josuke.

“You’re tired, right?” he grunted – an invitation as much as a question.

Carefully – as though he was afraid the surface of the stand’s skin was made of live electricity – Josuke put his arms around Star Platinum’s neck. With no sign of strain, the stand rose to its feet and set off walking at a pace and gait that matched Jotaro’s own.

As Josuke was carried along, the city passed unseen around him, a collection of motor oil smells and the hiss of electricity and roar of distant engines. His head felt heavy so he rested his chin on the stand’s shoulder, and watched the slow gradual sweep of the sidewalk below, and the heels of Jotaro’s shoes cutting in and out of sight.

He must have dozed off then, because he suddenly found himself lying on a bus stop bench, metal grill pressing circles into his arm. Someone had thrown a long black coat over him.

The sky had lightened to dark blue. The skyline – nearly invisible at night when he’d last seen it – was pulled out from the backdrop in huddled silhouettes. Here and there, a single window lit the shadowed façade of a building: the first creature stirrings of early morning risers. Maybe back home his mother was putting on coffee by the light of the clock on the microwave, or his grandfather was lacing up his boots in the front entrance with the lights on and the window by the door black and offering no view other than the hallway’s reflection.

Jotaro was studying a posting of the bus schedule.

“Don’t bother getting up,” he told Josuke. “Looks like we’re going to be waiting for a while.”

“Isn’t that the bus right there?” Josuke asked.

He was talking about the bus parked across the street. No markings, windows dark and opaque. Jotaro couldn’t remember seeing it there a minute ago.

“Doesn’t look like it’s running,” he said – but no sooner were the words past his lips, the bus’s engine revved to life and its high beams flickered on. The destination sign lit up with the words:
‘LAST STOP VIA MORIOH’.

As they crossed the street, the bus’s door folded open for them. Inside was dark, but Josuke could make out the silhouettes of several people hunched in the rows of seats. The other riders were all silent as Josuke clambered up the steps. When he didn’t hear Jotaro’s footsteps follow after him, he glanced back over his shoulder and saw him tearing through his pockets.

“Shit,” Jotaro growled under his breath. “They must’ve taken my wallet at the hospital.”

“It’s alright,” the driver’s voice rumbled from within the bus. All Josuke could see of them was a hand resting on the steering wheel, extracted from the shadows by a slash of light from a streetlamp outside. “Dawn bus special. Everyone rides for free.”

As soon as Josuke sat down, the bus lurched away from the curb and pulled out on to the road. Jotaro, letting the momentum carry him, slid sideways into the seat beside him.

Josuke leaned in close to the window until his shadow swallowed up his reflection, offering a porthole view of the city as it wheeled past and, gradually, thinned out until they rode the main artery down to the exit ramp and then left the city behind altogether as the bus merged onto the highway.

“You going to go back to sleep?” Jotaro asked, his voice startling Josuke, who’d just gotten acclimatized to the other passengers’ silence.

“Nah.” Swallowing back a lump in his throat, Josuke asked: “You’re going back tomorrow morning, right?”

Before Jotaro could argue or try to deny it, he added: “It’s okay. But if you’re gonna go I wanna stay up.”

Jotaro huffed and tugged at the brim of his cap. “Alright. Don’t blame me if you’re tired in the morning.”

The words were meant to sound annoyed, but they came out softened, as though the curve of his mouth – escaping, just barely, the shadow thrown by his hat – had reshaped the words, taken the edges out of them.

Leaning against the window, Josuke let his cheek rest against the cool glass. Outside, the mountains emerged in opaque monotone shapes from the edge of the sky, where the blue hour was already bleeding into dawn; in the foreground, the silhouettes of the trees rose black and solemn in standing columns. Overlapping all this was his reflection, his own eyes peering back at him in the glass, and behind him, Jotaro’s reflection – unaware of being watched, head bowed low, eyes closed.

He wanted to hold onto that moment, he decided. Take a snapshot and keep it in his memory forever. So he tried hard to focus on it, the mountains and the woods and the reflections and the gentle rumble of the bus and the tacky smell of the vinyl bus seats, and keep all that fixed in his mind as if by exposing the moment to his full attention it would develop into something permanent. A full-fidelity photograph that would never erode or fade. With all the clarity that being a living soul existing in the world of the present affords, Josuke, just then, could not imagine ever forgetting that moment.

Of course, as his eyelids grew heavy, and the present turned to past and a new present was reborn in its place, the image was already beginning to fade. As too was his resolve not to fall asleep.

***
At four fifty-nine AM, a man was waiting by the side of the highway. There was nothing remarkable about the spot – no signs, no markers, nothing in any way to set it apart from a hundred identical kilometres of road running in either direction – nor was there anything significant about the time, astrologically or otherwise. And yet the man knew he was exactly when and where he needed to be.

His name was Daisuke Mitsukoshi and twenty-two years ago he had died.

At four fifty-nine, the bus rumbled to a stop in front of the man. The bus was neither late nor early; like the man, it had arrived exactly when it was supposed to.

“Never thought we’d see you getting on the bus,” the driver remarked as Daisuke stepped on. “We thought you would be making the trip the long way.”

The long way being years and years and fading to nothing, as many ghosts do.

“Nice seeing you too, Watch,” said Daisuke.

“How’d you know it was us?”

“The royal ‘I’ kinda gives it away.”

He could have at least had the decency to act surprised. After all: manifesting a convoluted metaphor complete with a six-cylinder diesel engine and hydraulic power steering is no simple feat.

“Where’d you get the vocal chops from?” asked Daisuke, running a hand down the column of his neck. He had his eyes fixed on the dashboard to keep from looking at the bus driver.

“The voice was generously provided by your fellow passengers,” we replied, prompting Daisuke to turn his gaze to the rows of seats. Forty-seven passengers gazed back at him with serene, unblinking expressions.

Daisuke took a step in the other direction, flattening his back against the dash. “You know what,” he blurted, “maybe I’ll just wait for the next bus.”

“It’s alright,” we assured him. “They’re not going to hurt anyone. They barely exist.”

And it was true: without their pain and anger to bind them, the Voice in the Dark had already begun to fade.

“Are you getting on or not?” we asked Daisuke when he continued to hesitate.

“Sorry! Just let me – theeeere we go!”

From his pocket, he pulled the two ten yen coins Josuke had given him and fed them through the fare box slot.

“You know the bus is free, right?” we reminded him.

“Right, yeah, but it just seemed appropriate, you know? Given the whole occasion…”

If we had eyes, we would have narrowed them. “We’re not Charon.” Being reduced to a mere ferryman was a demotion.

Daisuke just gave us a wave and a smile. “Thanks for the lift, Watch.”

“We picked up a couple of your friends earlier,” we called out to him as he slipped down the aisle,
“make sure they wake up when we get back to town or they’ll be riding all the way to the end of the line.”

Halfway down the bus, Josuke and Okuyasu were folded together, eyes closed in deep sleep. Okuyasu’s mouth hung slack, a line of drool running from the corner of his mouth.

Grinning, Daisuke slipped the purple school jacket Josuke had loaned him from his shoulders and draped it over the boys’ laps, before settling down in the seat across the aisle from them.

For you sitting there pushing air in and out of your lungs and pumping blood through your heart without even having to think about it – for you it would be hard to imagine how someone could forget what being alive feels like – you, who daily experience all the textures, tastes, pains and pleasures of living. But the dead do forget, given enough time. Eventually, all that remains of those memories of sensory input are the feelings and history that go along with them.

Daisuke couldn’t remember what cold felt like. But he could remember clearly that night along the highway, his footsteps crunching over snow and the cold air sharp like needles in his lungs, and the growing sense of dread at what he’d thought at the time would only be a major inconvenience. For the first time in his life, he had been afraid to die. And as the years had passed by, the memory of those two feelings – the cold, the remorse – had become one.

As he gazed one last time at the long stretch of abandoned highway, frost spread across the window in delicate, lace-like patterns.

By the time the bus rolled up to a stop in town, the sky’s underbelly was already warming with a tangerine glow. Rising to his feet, Daisuke stepped across the aisle and gave Josuke’s shoulder a gentle shake.

“Hey. I think this is your stop.”

Okuyasu woke first. He arched back in a long stretch, mouth lengthening in a yawn, while beside him Josuke blinked and brought a hand up to rub the sleep from his eyes.

“Dude, what’re ya doing here?” Okuyasu asked. “Didn’t know you could ride the bus.”

Daisuke shrugged. “Why not? It’s public transit, right?”

“This mine?” Josuke asked, tugging at the jacket in his lap.

“You bet! Thanks for letting me borrow it – I thought you might want it back before school starts up again.”

As they followed Daisuke toward the front of the bus, turning sideways to avoid bumping into the other passengers, Okuyasu asked: “So where’re you headed anyway?”

“And? I’m just going on a trip. Like a vacation. Kinda.”

Okuyasu whistled. “Must be nice. I wish I could go on a vacation somewhere.”

Josuke, meanwhile, was quiet. He had his jacket draped over one arm, hugging it close to his chest. As he went to step off the bus, he lingered – one foot on the pavement, one foot on the last step.

Okuyasu turned and glanced back at him. “You coming?” he asked.

“Yeah, one minute. You go ahead, I’ll catch up.”
When Josuke looked back, he caught Daisuke gazing down at him in surprise from the top step.

“What’s up?” asked Daisuke, composing his face back into a smile – but he was a moment too late.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Josuke demanded.

“Leaving?”

“You know – moving on to the other side, passing on, whatever the hell ghosts call it.”

Right, thought Daisuke. He’d forgotten that he wasn’t the first ghost Josuke and the others had dealt with. Euphemisms were just subtext to the wise.

He glanced away, tapping his fingers against one thigh – a habit ingrained into muscle memory even long after there were no more muscles left to remember it. “I think it’s best I be getting on – I mean, I’ve been here long enough, right?”

Josuke didn’t budge. “You were trying to apologize for something after Vox knocked me out. That’s what this is about, right?”

He’d wondered if Josuke remembered what had happened to his grandfather’s gun.

“Well, yeah, but – it’s more than that. I died regretting not doing anything with my life, so I did something I thought would help, but then I just ended up regretting that thing too.” Against his thigh, Daisuke’s fingers stilled. “Guess what I’m realizing is that you can’t fix your life after you die. It’s like – when you stop growing. After that there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Then maybe moving on is a good thing.” When Daisuke tried to interject (“I thought you said –.”), Josuke continued: “I know what it’s like having things you know you’re always going to regret, so – accepting that instead of just trying to fix it? That’s not easy.”

“You have five seconds before this bus leaves,” we warned – because heart-to-heart notwithstanding, even the dawn bus has a schedule to keep.

“But for the record? I’m glad you tried. Because I sure as hell wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t.”

Daisuke folded his arms in front of his chest. “You’re pretty okay, you know that kid?” he said. “Make sure you look both ways and chew your food and all that – I don’t want to be seeing you around any time soon, got that?”

He expected Josuke to say something similar – smile, laugh, tell him to have a nice trip. Instead, Josuke, ignoring Daisuke’s protests (“Wait – you can’t – this is your stop!”), stepped back onto the bus and pulled him into a crushing hug.

“Thanks for everything,” Daisuke heard him say.

And then Josuke was gone – hopping back down on the sidewalk just as the bus door snapped closed behind him.

Through the window, Daisuke watched Josuke wave to him, growing smaller and smaller until he was swallowed up by the horizon.

Daisuke had no memory of what cold felt like. He had no memory of what warmth felt like either, but when the first light of dawn spilled through the windows of the bus and crept across his face, his cheeks were rosy. And when he raised a hand to his face, he found something in his eyes had come
unthawed and melted.

His name was Daisuke Mitsukoshi and twenty-two years ago he had died. And for the first time in twenty-two years, he remembered what it felt like to cry.

***

Behind him, Okuyasu heard the slap of Josuke’s sandals against the sidewalk as he ran after him. When he finally caught up, he stumbled into Okuyasu, their shoulders knocking together.

“Sorry about that,” Josuke mumbled, out of breath. “Just wanted to say goodbye.”

“S’alright,” said Okuyasu, followed by: “Walk ya home?”

Josuke smirked. This was an old joke of theirs, repeated over and over again after school on the way home – as if they weren’t both headed the same direction. “How about breakfast at my place?”

As he asked this, he slipped his hand through Okuyasu’s.

Okuyasu blinked. The warmth and weight of Josuke’s hand felt real and solid in his own. “Alright,” he stammered. He tried to think of something funny to say, but his brain had ground to a halt. “That’s – alright. Okay.”

Seeing the golden light of sunrise cup Josuke’s throat and feeling the heat of his hand radiating into his own and noticing the soreness in the muscles of his face from long conversations deep into the night or a smile he’d been wearing for hours without knowing it or a bit of both, made his rib cage swell with an overwhelming feeling, one that predated Josuke. Predated, for that matter, Okuyasu himself. Like the migration patterns of birds: it was coded in some sleeping part of genetic memory.

Banding together, for humans, has always been a matter of survival. Once upon a time numbers meant defence against predators, meant increased food procurement, meant the replication of DNA – ensuring survival not only during life, but after it as well, in the form of memory. And though over history the tribes people keep have shrunk, though physical survival no longer depends as heavily on the participation of others, there is still that instinctual drive to cling fast to certain people that causes death’s inevitable loom not to feel so consuming or frightening when faced hand-in-hand, the same way ancestors years back might have stood side-by-side and faced down fiery eyes and gnashing teeth and rending claws.

For Okuyasu, life had once seemed like a long highway, stretching an impossible length off in the distance. Lately, more and more, that same stretch of asphalt was starting to feel more like a runway. There was a definitive end, and every day he was racing closer to it, but for some reason, with Josuke around, he didn’t feel afraid.

Hand-in-hand, they walked home together.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you for all the support over the past three years. You've all been so patient and encouraging and I'm grateful I finally had the chance to complete this project. It's been a long haul. A lot has changed in my life since I started the first chapter -- school,
jobs, relationships, friendships -- and writing this story has helped me through a lot of rough patches along the way. I'm burnt out from this fic and relived to be done, but I definitely don't regret it.

I don't recall if I mentioned it on the last chapter, but I updated the fic playlist: https://open.spotify.com/user/pixelaced/playlist/2hLQ7d6yjusNP6xQyPv475?si=-2o7RkX5ShW5aOn77EduHw. The last song on the list, All My Friends by LCD Soundsystem, is one of my favorite songs and it's one I listened to often while working on the last few chapters -- I think it ended up shaping the theme a lot, especially toward the end of this epilogue.

Just as a cursory show of interest: would you folks want a physical copy of this fic? I don't know if anywhere would print something this long or how I would handle the video game chapter, but it's definitely something I can look into if enough people are interested!

Hope you all had as much fun as I did!

-Shy

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!