Buffy the Vampire Slayer is the story of the Slayer. In the words of Giles, "Into every generation is born a chosen one... she alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer." People like Giles were the Watchers, the English mentors of the Slayers. At least...that was the story.

Buffy found a way to unlock the sleeping power within all Potential future Slayers, and now the Slayers are many. Those who survived the last battle helped to form the next Watcher's Council.

Investigation of a certain stone mask sparks inquiries into the history of the ancient vampire relic, and some surprise discoveries are made along the way, including that of another legendary line of vampire hunters.

Angel must finish his retrieval mission on the train. Meanwhile, Xander and Fitz must help their new ally track down a killer...
Calling All Angels

Chapter Summary

Angel tries to find the best way to deal with the unexpected resistance on the train...

Angel might be enraged, but he’s still the Master Vampire, and some dangerous enemy is enough to keep him thinking, strategizing rather than entertaining stupid thoughts of merely running in and tearing the body apart, because being intelligent might just keep him alive. Or, well, the closest equivalent any vampire can come. So while the demon is screaming, calling for blood and pain, he ignores it, remaining careful in the face of this grinning opponent. Despite his reputation as the Scourge of Europe, Angelus rarely picked a fight he couldn’t win, so he’d had much less experience fighting strong opponents. Souled Angel had a bit more, since meeting Buffy, since setting up in the Hyperion, helping the helpless, but he’d usually had backup or some other type of assurance, not just running into a fight blindly.

It’s rare that he actually wishes Spike was here to back him up, but this is one place where Spike’s experience would be handy to have around.

Still, at least he’s fresh from battle. The Circle of the Black Thorn were not easy opponents.

He wishes he had a sword now. But he doubts, despite the polite veneer, that the enemy will just let him rummage through the crates until he finds one, even if he uses the magic word.

At least he’d learned a few things from running Angel Investigations. Specifically, that finding the motivations of the opponent could be as important in identifying strengths and weaknesses as having a Wesley or Fred reading through the textbooks, identifying the demon, and finding the right weapon for the job.

He realizes he’s been dodging mechanically, trying instinctively to find an opening but not diving for one recklessly. That’s good.

He recognizes the dangerous look in the man’s eyes now. He doubts the glasses have an actual purpose—most demons don’t need them to see, after all—but they could be useful. Makeshift weapons, right there for him to play with. If only he could find a way. “Finished with your little internal monologue? Good, because I was getting bored.”

The water now is flying like a miniature hurricane, stinging. He glances down to see that the droplets are gouging his skin, slightly, but it’s enough to draw blood.

And, if they were going faster, say, fast enough to act like a saw…

He ducks behind a box of crates and hears them crack and splinter. It’s a good thing he at least has fast reflexes.

“Oh, I really was expecting better. But then, you’re not about to just ignore what we said before, are you? A little this for a little that.”

The whirlwind doesn’t go to the ceiling, which gives him an opportunity. He doesn’t want to go anywhere near the other pipes. He’s a smart enough vamp to realize that breaking anything to
give this guy access to any more water access is a bad idea. He’s not sure which are connected to the already broken one, but it’s a risk not worth taking.

Instead, he jumps and grabs onto one of the highest stacked boxes as leverage, pulling his legs in as he swings so the water doesn’t cut. The guy’s reflexes are good, but he wasn’t expecting it. He puts all his power into the fist, and the glasses break, embedding themselves into the skin and eyes. He hits the shoulder, and it’s enough to hear bone break, but he dodges backward, still not sure about this guy’s abilities. At least the whirlwind has died down somewhat—enough that it’s tearing up his coat, just a little, but not enough to tear through him.

The demon lifts a hand to his cheek, tawny eyes glinting like a hawk’s. He pulls one of the slivers of glass out of his eyeball, ignoring the blood that comes with it.

And for good reason, too. The split eyeball is already trying to close together, despite the glass inside, and the vampire clearly hears the pop as a bone moves back into place. The enemy’s healing is faster than a human’s. But then, that’s true of most demons, even Angel, to an extent. He’d just hoped it wouldn’t be this fast. He can’t rely on damage simply building up over time. Whatever move he makes, it’ll have to kill immediately, or so close it hardly matters. He wants the sword even more. Beheading tends to work on most demons, and it’d be quick enough to beat the healing.

Still, he’s learned a few things. Most importantly, he’s learned that—if not caught by surprise—the demon’s reflexes match his, or are even better. The annoyance isn’t because he’d posed a threat. Given the healing, that’s more like a joke. More, it’s because he’d failed to keep up. A matter of pride, really, which is one of the few emotions that Angelus understands. One of the few things that human and demon agree on.

He manages a smirk. Every piece of knowledge can help him stay alive. “No, I haven’t forgotten. But you said something about an exchange, didn’t you? Why not answer the question yourself? It’s not like the answer will matter after this fight, one way or the other.”

His enemy laughs delightedly, the water beginning to fall like it’s raining indoors. Angel gets the odd feeling that if the man had a cane, he’d be twirling it. At least he doesn’t have the stereotypical moustache to twirl, too. “Well, it’s a delight to meet a gentleman in a proper duel. And one with such understanding, too. I rather prefer the honorable soldier, don’t you? Fine. I heard about the power of the Arrow, and I was curious. And yourself?”

“It’s dangerous. I wasn’t told directly, but given that no one mentioned anything about prophecy…destroy it.” If there had been a prophecy that it was needed to destroy some ancient evil, despite the threat it posed, he’d retrieve it for the temporary equivalent of the Council vaults, but as it was, it falling into the hands of Wolfram & Hart or this unknown demon would be a problem. “Why are you betraying your former employers, just because of curiosity?” Wolfram & Hart might have been a little disorganized after the fall of their Earthly board of directors, but the danger posed by such a betrayal meant that the demon believed the Arrow was worth the consequences.

He’s circling carefully behind the boxes, but apparently his enemy’s had enough of that. He doesn’t use the water right now, just charges in with a smile and begins trading blows. They’re enough to hurt, especially when he gets thrown into the stack of boxes, but Angel’s had enough experience being thrown into things by now and he gets up quick enough to meet the fist coming his way. Unfortunately, by grabbing it, he realizes something else that maybe the demon was trying to conceal—it’s stronger than he is, too. He’s still got enough to redirect the fist, letting go and using his arm to guide the momentum slightly to the right, enough for the attack to miss. “Why did you break rank?” the man asks, as if it’s all a rhetorical question. “Because the goals of the group and the
goals of the individual no longer coincide. That’s all.”
The fight on the train reaches a conclusion.

The noise is apparently enough to alert the rest of the train by now. They’ve started moving again, despite the danger of traveling through the blizzard. There probably will be others coming to investigate soon enough. He has to make this quick.

Fortunately, he sees something glinting from one of the broken crates, and executes a neat combat roll to retrieve it. Eyes widen behind glasses, and with a toothy grin Angel dashes forward. It’s not long to catch him by surprise, but it takes a moment before the water can follow directions and defy gravity, so he might as well make the most of it. If he can separate the demon’s head from the shoulders, he can see if this is one of the few that can survive a beheading. He swings, putting all his strength into it, and his opponent falls backwards, making the attack miss completely. That kind of instinct is hard-earned through battle after battle. “Now, that’s what your reputation led me to expect,” he exclaims, not at all worried about the fact that Angel just tried to separate his head from his shoulders, and that’s not a little terrifying.

Why would someone like that pretend to be meek, accept the aggressive corporate structure of a toxic workplace like Wolfram & Hart for so long without breaking? That would take intense discipline, because despite the polite veneer, Angel can sense the primal destructive urge in the demon.

With a terrifying grin, the thing gestures and water rises from the floor, parrying every blade stroke. The pressure on the water is terrifying, if it’s enough to stop steel. He’s lost his chance at a quick, painless kill. Now he has to bide his time, wait for a chance, but it’s impossible to tell the stamina of a demon he’s only just met and started fighting. He could, potentially, try to retreat, but given the words from before, that’s not going to be allowed. And, of course, the Arrow. Who knew what destructive capabilities it had in store?

The respect. Of course. Just as they’d joined the place for its resources, attempted to use it for their own ends, so had this demon. The question is, how successful was he? More than we were?

A quick flick of the wrist, and the pressure on the water increases tenfold, enough to cut through the steel like it’s just butter under a butter knife. It slices through his cheek.

It’s more of instinct than anything. He still has the spring-loaded stake gadgets that he’s wearing, considering Wolfram & Hart likes to use vampires as security. The stake makes it through the man’s heart. He falls, eyes staring, and Angel bares his fangs even as the intelligent voice that’s kept him alive for three hundred and fifty years speaks up, warning him that something’s wrong. Nothing’s easy. It can’t be as easy as that. Obviously, whatever his enemy is, it’s not a vampire, because a vampire would dust. And a human would bleed.

Then, the whispering voice becomes a roar, and he moves back just in time to avoid the swift hand tearing the stake out as if it’s a mere splinter in the hand and aiming for Angel’s own heart. Josephine had mentioned vampires like the Turok Han, to which a stake is as useful as a cross. And
given its interest in the Arrow, that’s entirely possible. But then, why the control of water? It might be just a power-seeking demon, though Angel can’t recall any specifically with a water affiliation, but then, his mind is a little preoccupied trying to keep him alive.

“Clever,” the man acknowledges, and barely reacts when Angel knocks the stake out of his hand with a box. It splinters, which given the water on the floor isn’t good. The man could manipulate it like a projectile, seeking his heart and dusting him, unless…

He has to get the man away from any potential sources of water on the train, not to mention the fire which might end up being entirely lethal to him, never mind his opponent, which…

He lets his demon fully loose, allows it to tackle the man and break through the wall of the train. It’s a gamble, but if they stay where they were, it’s only a matter of time.

He easily gets back to his feet because he was expecting the fall. The snow swirls around, and if the enemy was further away he probably couldn’t see him at all. The train quickly flies out of sight.

The man looks vaguely frustrated. Good. He can’t manipulate the snow swirling around them, or perhaps unlike a vampire he’s actually vulnerable to the cold, or maybe it’s just harder for him.

It’s not like Angel hasn’t had experience fighting dirty, though. So what if the opponent is stronger? He’d been fighting stronger opponents all the way back to when he was still alive. Admittedly, he’s a little rusty, but… (and you didn’t usually win, his mind reminds him, but he ignores that.)

He manages to get the demon close. It seems a little weaker—maybe without a source of water around, its source of strength is also gone. If he can finish this off quickly, there won’t be a problem. At least, as a vampire, he doesn’t have any body heat to speak of, to melt the snow…

He hears an ominous crack, like a tree shattering, and feels something bury itself in his back. He has an instant more of consciousness to wonder what happened before he’s gone.

“I must say, vampires give a new meaning to ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’,” the demon remarks, adjusting the glasses on his nose. “I suppose, in due fairness, I should’ve warned you that they were melting the ice and snow on the tracks using their sorcerers, and that I could use that to manipulate the tracks themselves, but, well. You didn’t exactly give me a chance, did you?” He’d return and at least put a cross here or something, once he’d retrieved the Arrow. The fellow had been a good opponent, to the point that he’d managed to delve a little too deep, but really, he’d wasted quite enough of his time.

He turns, and finds that, while the location isn’t quite correct, the law firm’s employees appear to have panicked and scrounged up enough strength to cast their spell, perhaps even from their own fear. The man growls before relaxing, watching the burning train disappear through the portal. “Well, the intelligent see opportunity in every circumstance. It’s not ideal, but I’m sure my ‘former employers’ are as anxious to test this Arrow as I am.” Well, he has time to place that gravestone, now. And the tracks are damaged, so he even has the perfect material from which to fashion a cross. Now, what to put… Nothing exactly communicates the utter shock at having someone realize how much lay beneath the surface of his mask, or the further surprise at the fight that ensued requiring some effort. On the other hand, there’s no point leaving clues like a trite B-movie villain. In the end, at least, he can give a salute, poetical and gentlemanly. “Here lies a clever monster who, in the end, became a man.”
「Angel retire」
Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

Xander gets one more visitor in the realm created by The Colour and the Shape...

Xander knows he should wake. He can’t spend forever here, but…it’s peaceful. Calming.

He sees a shape looming above him in the reflections and nearly freaks out before he notices who it is. “Oh, it’s just Deadboy,” he greets, with a lot of snark and a small amount of fondness underneath it all. Maybe.

“I really wish you wouldn’t call me that.” Angel sighs and sits down awkwardly, staring into the pool. “Why Japanese, Johan?”

Xander starts when he hears the name. It sounds unfamiliar. It feels right. “What—”

“But—Your mother. She decided on your name. I assume you know some of it since you passed on a message about a friend of hers?” They’re not at each other’s throats. It’s a little weird, but he’s still peaceful, so doesn’t argue.

“Yeah. I mean, apparently part of my powers means I relive some of my ancestors’ memories, so, yeah, I get it.” Xander pauses, looking thoughtful. Smiles. “I like it. It’ll give me something new to tell Fitz. Are all British people this touchy?”

Angel blinks. As he says that in an English accent. And not a cringe-worthy mockery of one, either. He decides not to comment.

“So, there a reason you’re here, or did this just turn into Paddington when I wasn’t looking?” He kicks at the water with bare feet. He knows that someone would be scolding him if they were here (well, besides a certain vampire), but he has free reign to be childish in his own head.

Angel smiles, sad and exhausted. “I’m dead.”

Jojo blinks. “Isn’t that, you know. Normal?”

That earns a roll of the eyes. “Really dead, Xander. I don’t know how much you know, but Wolfram & Hart tried to take an Arrow.”

Xander’s first instinct is to joke about that, but there’s a reason Pretender has been urging him to stay, and it’s not for some ordinary archer thief. “And…you failed?” It’s hard to believe, no matter what he usually says about the vampire. He’d never expected Angel to be gone, always expected him to be around to joke about. “I’m sorry.”

That earns a smile, dangerous as a ravening wolf. And Jojo remembers that there’s a demon in there as much as the man, possibly free to wreck whatever havoc he feels like. At least he’s seen Pretender here, so he’s not totally defenseless. “So am I.” He shivers, staring into the water. “And, of course, not as sorry as he’ll be. He seemed like a vampire, barely older than a fledge, but he can
do something with water and he’s stronger than even a Master Vampire. He’s dangerous, Xander.”

Xander blinks at the mention of water, but no, not everything manipulating water has to be connected back to Fitz somehow. He would’ve sensed something about the man, besides the whole Stand thing, if that was the case. “What would someone like him want with the Arrow?” Is he a demon? Probably is, if he wants the Arrow—it won’t give someone already with a Stand more power. Except…there’s something with a blond man that Pretender’s reminding me about, but then, I don’t have the best memory in the world. I can’t remember all of this stuff. And I’ve probably been asleep enough already.

...But I’m not going to leave Angel to die on his own, either. “…Things probably would have gone a lot better if you’d stabbed yourself with it. The Arrow, I mean.”

“I didn’t want out of the situation that badly,” the vampire states sarcastically, and that leaves him blinking for a good few moments.

“…Not through the heart, you dummy,” he states, and reaches out to punch the other’s arm. Judging by the wince, he’s stronger, even here.

Whoops.

“…Through the arm would’ve been fine. I don’t know if a Stand can kill someone that’s already dead, but given how things went, it couldn’t have been any worse, and you could have gotten a power that could have saved you.” He doesn’t mention the thing about the period of uselessness and almost-dying after being hit by a Stand Arrow. He’s not sure how it exactly affects vampires, and as he’d mentioned there wasn’t really anything to lose.

“Now he tells me,” Angel complains, earning a slight chuckle from Xander. He smiles.

“Take care of the others. Especially Buffy,” Angel requests, sighing heavily. “I would’ve liked a chance to redeem myself, especially after the mess at Wolfram and Hart, but…” He shrugs, and Jojo shivers and tries not to let the panic show on his face. It hasn’t been that long. Angel can’t go.

Except he’s dead, probably heading to an afterlife, so oh yes he can.

“I will, but then, you know you never had to ask,” he states, with all the fervor he can muster. “If it helps…you’re not the only one who’s ever done bad things for good reasons. That’s…that’s the Scoobies all over, really. Scoobyrific.” That earns a smile and a shake of the head, but Angel’s looking a little more seethrough, so he needs to hurry this up. “…And Cordy told me. The whole ‘helping the helpless’ thing. Honestly, I think she just needed someone to gossip to, but…”

The vampire’s looking all tortured and brooding again. That probably has something to do with Cordy’s death, though Xander hadn’t gotten all the details.

They had so many to mourn. So many to mourn that they’d never dared.

“Hey, fighting the good fight is dangerous and doesn’t come with an insurance plan. But from what she said, you did good. You helped a lot of people. Maybe it doesn’t fix your situation or ease the pain. Maybe the scales will never be balanced. Personally, I like to concentrate on ‘the world didn’t end’ or ‘I saved someone today’. You, well. Honestly, I think you like to go and look all brooding like Batman, so…”

That actually startles a laugh out of the visually transparent Angel, but it’s good. “Thanks,
Xander. Johan Joestar.”

Xander turns to watch. He might’ve hated Angel’s guts, Angelus even more so. Maybe it was fear, maybe it was misplaced grief, but the urge to cry hits him. Yet another casualty of war. He owes him this.

Angel dusts gracefully, but there’s something different about this than all the other vampires. Maybe it’s the exact angle of sunlight, but it looks like it glitters, just for a moment. A falling star, the passing of a hero. Even Pretender’s appeared, anxious and respectful, and Xander manages a smile. “I’m not telling Dawn about that,” he says, and then the tears come, and Pretender appears by his side, sweeping him up in a hug like the ones he usually gives Willow.
Why Must Rain Fall

Chapter Summary

Johan can't hide in dreams forever. Time to wake up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Xander feels tears on his cheeks as he wakes. He hasn’t done that since he was a kid, and it takes him a minute to even want to sit up and greet the cold, cruel world. It’s disorienting. Was Mom hurt again? Did Dad get drunk?

“Wake up, Jojo!” Harsh, urgent.

Torturing him by talking about clowns. Now that’s just cruel. Though Dad’s speaking really funny…but if that’s the case, he should get up now, so maybe he won’t pass out when Dad starts in…

He sits up abruptly, hitting the head leaning anxiously above him, and winces. When that’s the only pain, it’s clear that whoever this is, it’s not Dad. A glimpse at the (now battered) hat sitting on top of the blond hair, and he realizes, the world shifting instantly, clicking back into place.

“You…you wouldn’t wake up. I thought…” Now that he’s awake, all the anger seems to have drained, and the stoic Englishman’s eyes look bright, his breathing shaky.

Johan manages a smile. There’s no reason to make an ally worry about him, and it’d hurt Speedwagon’s pride if he actually cried. Next time, though, he shouldn’t spend so long asleep. “Nope. I’m still among the living and breathing.” He looks around and realizes that they’re not in the hotel. They’re in what looks to be a ratty old basement, but at least it has a cot and Xander’s slept on worse in his Watcher duties. “What happened?”

“It caught on fire. We managed to get away before the police arrived. We don’t have time to answer questions.” He glares, but it’s not genuine. “You’re heavy, you know.”

“And here I was trying to cut back on the junk food,” he jokes. “I guess we’ll just have to go running for our lives sometime soon. It’s pretty good exercise.”

Unfortunately, Fitz is just as good at seeing through his cheerful mask. Something about the way Speedwagon is acting is…off, but then, he’s probably just trying to conceal his worry. The blond takes a deep breath, looking a little softer. “Nightmares?” The way Fitz asks, Xander’s not alone.

He nods. “Some of them. Apparently Pretender can talk to people, which is nice. Though one of them was a friend that died, so that sucks. At least they’re not about Ahn, right now…”

“An?” By the confused way Fitz screws up his face, he doesn’t get the nickname. Jojo doesn’t exactly want to get into this, but this is his ally who’s proven himself, who’s nearly died for him. He deserves an answer.
“Anya. Ex-demon, ex-fiancé, and ex-alive.” The flat tone could make you think he didn’t care, like the wisecrack he’d made the first time he’d heard. But it hadn’t really sunk in, and…well, humor was his defense mechanism, wasn’t it? The soft look on Fitz’s face says that he’s spotted the anguish in the eyes.

“I’ve lost someone, too. Besides mum,” Fitz volunteers, and then the aura of pain and loss and sheer emotion becomes too much for them both.

They sit in awkward silence for about a minute, before Xander’s had too much. For once, he’s not going to let his mouth and his curiosity get away from him. He notices the linen in Fitz’s trembling hands, and it’s familiar enough he knows exactly what to do. “You’re trying to bandage your back, right? Here, let me.”

To his surprise, Fitz grits his teeth and moves further away on the bed. “I’m perfectly fine doing it on my own. I don’t need your help, Jojo,” he growls.

The hurt must show on his face. He’d gotten pretty good at hiding it, but it’s either been slipping through due to lack of practice while he was in Africa, or Fitz is just really good at reading him. He thought they’d been getting closer, been developing a bond of trust. He’d reached the point where he’d even call the man his friend, but then, fighting always did have a way of bringing people closer together.

The expression softens slightly, and green eyes look away, avoiding his gaze. “I wouldn’t want to be a burden. It’s fine.”

Xander stares at him for one long moment, gauging how much he can push the guy, then comes to a decision. He’ll push, gently but insistently. “It’s okay, it’s not that big of a deal. I’ve had a lot of practice. Besides, if it gets infected we’ll have a whole lot more to worry about. Shirt off.”

It would’ve been easy enough. Fitz had already taken off the hat and the vest, blond hair unruly from the constant presence of the hat. Still, he’s hesitant about taking off his shirt. Probably a Giles-like thing. From his obviously considerable expertise in dealing with Englishmen, Xander guessed that it was probably an always-trying-to-be-proper thing, especially as Fitz was generally so worried about appearances.

“If it’s scars, don’t worry about it. I’ve got a lot of scars from acting as bait. There was this one time where a Master Vampire moved into town, and he was a lot warier than the other vampires. Which meant he was stronger and more intelligent. Not intelligent enough to have survived as long as the Master, which Buffy killed, but still intelligent enough to be more of a challenge than your average bloodsucking fiend. Anyway, I was acting as bait, like usual, and…” And that, apparently, was enough to take Fitz’s mind off of this. He still removed his shirt pretty slowly, but he was slightly worried and intrigued by the story.

And then Xander noticed what Fitz had probably been trying so desperately to hide. A tattoo.

Rather like Giles trying to pretend he hadn’t been a rogue warlock in his youth. That thought unfortunately broke through his story and made the amusement show on his face.

Instantly, Fitz becomes indignant, trying to cover the tattoo with his hand. As it’s on his back, though, he isn’t very successful. “It was stupid, I know, but I was young.” The blond is practically challenging him to make fun of him for it.

So Xander grabs the bandages and without a word gets to work. It’s somewhat comforting
to be doing this for someone else again. Nostalgic, too, and for most people that would be kind of messed up, but Xander hasn’t exactly had the most normal childhood and he’s come to terms with that.

He waits until the confusion becomes uncertainty before commenting. “I don’t know, I kind of like it,” he eventually says, staring at it for a moment before returning to the bandaging. “I mean, I don’t know that I could ever get one. People poking at me with things has started to trigger a ‘fight now and not get eaten or sacrificed’ response.”

This clearly isn’t the response Fitz is expecting. He stares at his hands helplessly, then, in a very soft voice that Xander can barely hear, confesses, “That’s not who I am anymore.”

Xander places a hand on the blond’s shoulder, trying to be comforting. It’s probably a little weird, judging from the look he’s getting, but then, he’s used to comforting girls, so maybe he’s a little awkward at this too. “I don’t know. You’re still a fighter. At least, I’d consider you one. And I’m really glad you’ve got my back.”

“You didn’t need me.” He caught the slight resentment, the loss and confusion of wanting to find one’s place in the world, and he understood.

Xander sighs. “I’m not sure how that would’ve gone without you,” he finally admits. It’s different to say it out loud than to just think about it. “Normally, yeah, I’d trust my friends to the ends of the earth, but…something was definitely wrong. And you’ve saved me since.”

The way Fitz becomes flustered, he hasn’t had anyone thank him in a long time. It’s kind of sad, really. “You wouldn’t have needed it if I hadn’t dragged you into all of this,” he mutters eventually, glaring softly at the carpet. He really does feel guilty. So Xander had made the right choice. Not that he hadn’t known that, but it’s nice to have that confirmed.

Mr. Speedwagon, you’re not allowed to become an Angel McBroodyface 2.0. He doesn’t giggle out loud at the thought, especially not after what he’d learned, but just raises an eyebrow. “And I’m a Joestar.” It feels right, but weird, to say that out loud. He’s starting to get used to the idea, though. “You think that trouble wasn’t going to find me anyway? From my dreams, from everything you’ve told me, we’re danger-magnets. The stone mask resurfacing now of all times is proof of that. And as for being in danger all the time, that’s nothing new. That’s been my life since I was fifteen. I’m just glad that I got to make a new friend. Someone who can fight the same way I do and can help me learn about this wacky new side to the world. Like I said, nothing new, just different.”

For one long moment, green eyes just stare at him in shock. He starts reviewing what he said, though he’s pretty sure he thought that out more than usual. And then Fitz starts laughing, and after a moment Xander joins in at the absurdity of it all.

The thief girl walks in. If they’re going to be working with her, they at least need to get a pseudonym at some point. She stares at them and slowly backs away again, which just seems even more hilarious. It takes some effort, but Xander stops laughing and goes after her. Her running away now wouldn’t help anything.

Chapter End Notes

New opening: Kalafina’s Heavenly Blue. We've reached one of the turning points of the
series.
Thanks to everyone who's checked it out so far, and stuck with me! It's been a blast, and
don't worry, there's more to come!
~Dreamer~
Shadows of the Past

Chapter Summary

Johan learns a little more about the Thief Girl.

It takes a little while to convince the thief girl that they’re not both insane. For once, he’s glad Fitz is still a little unsure, nursing a wounded ego. He’s feeling a little better—they both are, but it’s not as if they have time to mourn. Well, it’s not as if he has the time to mourn. The others don’t know Angel. Now, though, he might be able to call and not put his friends in danger. They’re back to the normalcy of constant crises, no matter how calm it all seems. The last place they were at caught on fire. Maybe he’s paranoid, but his Scooby senses are screaming that there’s something wrong.

His thoughts are still whirling. It’s hard to grasp any of them. He learned so much…

Stop. Your name is Johan Higashikata. You have to protect them. Thief girl and even Speedwagon.

The thing is, they have an understanding, which is horrible, because he knows the origin of that understanding, but it also lets him talk to her without freaking her out in the same way Fitz had. Speedwagon doesn’t know how to talk to her, and he’s pretty sure she can’t look at the green-eyed Brit without thinking I almost killed him.

“What happened?” he asks seriously, and she stares at him, while Whisper slinks out to watch him cautiously. He turns to look at their surroundings.

They’re in what is probably an apartment building—flat complex—and they’re standing on the balcony, now. He’s tempted to say that this is where Fitz lives, but there’s not enough hats or books around, and it seems like the entire place is abandoned. How many people owe him favors? Will any of them come to collect from him?

He shakes off the thought and begins talking conversationally. “You know, I’ve been dealing with this since I was only a little older than you.”

She blinks at him, and he feels the snake brush by his feet. In curiosity, he guesses, but he wishes she’d be a little more careful with the whole touch thing. Well, he’s wearing shoes, so it shouldn’t hurt, this time. “It turned out that one of my best friends had been chosen. By fate or destiny or whatever you want to call it. She had to fight scary things to keep the whole world safe, and the people training her or whatever didn’t care what happened to her.”

He lets his hands dangle over the railing. Keeps going. “Every week, we’d face a new monster. Have to research it, before we can stop it from hurting people. There are more things than Stands in this world, you know. Vampires and all sorts of demons.”

His hands are shaking, but one slender hand slips into his and he manages a smile. “But the worst thing was that as horrible as it was, I knew that the humans were worse. Could be worse. Buffy was always telling me to stay out of it, that I might get hurt, but it was better than going home.”
There’s a heartbeat. Thief Girl squeezes his hand comfortably. “There was a fire.”

“Fitz mentioned that,” he responds, still not turning to look at her. Still not moving. He might scare her away.

“He tried to tell me that it was fine. That it probably had nothing to do with Mum and Dad, but I don’t know.” She sighs, then sits, hugging her knees. “I’m adopted, you know. They weren’t the worst.” She sighs. “I wish that Mr. Speedwagon wouldn’t lie to me just to protect me. It’s annoying. I’m not a complete child.”

Johan leans in a little further, as if he’s about to tell her a secret. “Well, he kidnapped me to keep me safe the second we met. He means well, but he’s an idiot sometimes.”

That earns a smile, but she’s also seeming a little more well-disposed to Fitz, so it’s something.

“I felt something. Like a Stand. Whisper might’ve noticed something. I don’t know. But you felt it too, right? Just from the street. Whatever happened wasn’t normal.” She shivers. Xander would pull off his coat and put it over her shoulders if he had one.

“I think you’re right. We can’t know for sure, not until we caught whatever jerk did that, but.” He sighs. At least Mom—Josephine—is fine, and from what little his dreams tell him, she can handle herself. “Is there something we should call you?”

She hesitates for a very long time before Whisper slithers up to him again, wrapping around his foot in a manner that, he guesses, is supposed to be reassuring or supportive or something.

“Darling Violetta. I don’t like my name very much.”

“Well, I’m going to change mine,” he confides. “The Harrises pretty much all suck. And it’s not as if you’re not around people whose names are just as weird as yours. I’m descended from the Joestars.”

She giggles. “That’s silly.”

“So, where are we, exactly?” Xander asks, and a voice speaks from behind them.

“A friend’s. They bought the building, but no one wanted a flat here.”

They both jump. Xander puts his hand on the others’ shoulder, just to steady her, and Fitz smiles wanly at them.

He looks awful. Like he’s strung out. The blond sighs. “The next step is to hack into the police database and find out the details of the case, to confirm your theory. If it sounds like a Stand, I have another friend we can go meet to discuss all the notes on Stands he’s managed to find so far.”

Johan grins giddily. “So, you and Wils would get on, huh?” It’s the stare that gets him. “…She’s my best friend. A witch and hacker.”

“That wasn’t…never mind.” Green eyes quickly direct themselves to the side. “We promised we’d help you, Darling.”

“That sounds so weird,” she mutters, before looking back up. “It’s cool if I raid the fridge, right?”

“Help yourself,” Fitz agrees.
“I—that one I told you was dead? I should tell the others about that.” Fitz looks worried, but doesn’t contradict.

Xander rolls his eyes as he heads for…well, where he hopes he’ll find the phone. If nothing else, he can have an adventure looking for it. “I get a little annoyed when people act like I can’t take care of myself, but I don’t mind discussions or people looking out for me. Just give me respect and a voice.”

“All right, Jojo. Then…you didn’t want to do that because you thought it would put them in danger. Are you sure it’s all right now?” he asks, stifling a yawn politely behind a hand.

“Sure? No. Pretty sure that they’re currently in danger, and it feels like they’d be in more danger if I didn’t tell them. I’m not sure how, exactly, but someone got their hands on an Arrow and took out one of our heavy hitters. Any way we can help each other right now is a good idea.”

Speedwagon nods, and a mischievous smile comes to his lips. “Well, I’m glad you can think these things through.”

“Hey!” Johan protests, but smiles and ruffles the kid’s hair. The thought occurs to him, and before he can stop himself from making another reference he’s pretty sure no one else in the room will get, his voice makes the decision for him as he ducks a little (these doors are lower than he thought). “See you, Space Cowboy.”
Xander, or Johan, finally gets to call his family (new and old).

Xander’s not sure what he expects when he calls, but knowing the voice that answers as well as he knows Buffy’s or Willows is not it.

Then again, it’s not as if she’s a total stranger.

“Hi, Mom.” His throat is suddenly tight, voice small. Speedwagon nods reassuringly, successfully diverted from his hacking attempt. A smaller hand slips into his own.

“My boy, all growed up.” That’s right. She’s a dork, when she’s not drunk all the time. Warring memories of his childhood and brief glimpses he’d caught while he was asleep dance in his head.

There’s pride. And, well, awkwardness, but it’s not like she’s the only one.

“That me,” he agrees. The smile’s not going anywhere.

There’s a moment or two of comfortable quiet before she speaks again. “Oh, right. Hang on. I’m putting you on speaker.”

When she does, there’s a chorus of ‘hello’ so loud he can’t really make out the individual voices. He laughs. “Come on, one at a time.”

“Xander!” Dawn sounds like she’s going to cry, which is uncomfortable. He hates seeing the girls cry, especially the one who’s so much like a little sister.

“I have powers now. Whaddya say to some celebratory ice cream, or cake, or better yet ice cream cake, to celebrate when I get back?” His voice is softer, and she sounds better.

She still might cry, but at least she’s sounding happier. “You had better. Hear that, mister? No dying.”

That brings up something he should talk about, but before he can someone else speaks. A voice he’s never heard before, not once in his life, but he recognizes it anyway. “Why are you missing an eye in the picture?”

“Jojo!” he hears—yet another best friend he’s never met in his life, scolding him for being insensitive and just blurting things out—and yet.

“Hi, Jotaro-san…You know what, I’m not going to even try to figure out the relationship between us. You can just be Uncle Jotaro.” His head hurts even thinking about the family tree, and that’s even discounting the whole situation Jotaro had discovered in Italy.

There’s silence. Jotaro’s probably glaring at the phone. Or, well. It’s probably not exactly a glare. He’s gruffly concerned, Johan’s sure.
“There was this whole thing with an evil priest. It’s a long story.” He doesn’t miss the hissed breath, nor the “What’s wrong?” from someone else he knows.

“Hey, Uncle Kakyoin,” he greets. There’s this weird sense of déjà vu, but he’ll figure that out some other day. There’s too much to do while he’s awake, right now.

“It’s nice to meet you, or at least talk to you,” comes the response. “How do you know of me, exactly?”

“Pretender. I can kind of relive the bloodline’s memories, and travel in dreams, as far as I can tell.” That definitely gets a hissed gasp in response, but Uncle Jotaro will probably bully the truth out of the cherry boy without his need to get involved.

“Oh, yeah, G-man, I found a mini-you!” Identical sighs issue from both sides of the line, and Johan just starts giggling.

“Very mature, Jojo,” Fitz growls, reaching over and lightly bopping the Higashikata on the head. Success; he’s starting to get a little more comfortable again.

“Fitz. I’ll choose to take it as a compliment. You must also be a man of culture and sense, unlike certain company.”

“Ahh, yes.” Giles coughs. He’s pleased. Good. It’s like his family is knitting back together, and it now even has real family there too, which—bonus! “I look forward to talking with you, Fitz. Americans are…an acquired taste, I suppose. It takes a while for you to get used to them. Particularly Californians, particularly those from Sunnydale.”

“Giles!” Willow, outraged—but it’s a mock outrage.

“He’s ticklish,” Buffy confides, and Xander gasps in shock, scandalized.

“Betrayal, oh Slayer friend-of-mine. How dare—you—” It’s in the middle of his highly theatrical slumping over that he remembers with startling clarity what he’s been trying to forget, and he instantly sobered. It’s a good thing he’s put this phone on speaker, too. His hands are starting to shake. “Buffster—God. I am so sorry.”

He wishes he were there, to hold her hand, hold her as she cried. She really did love Angel.

“Wh-what?” She’s trying to act like she doesn’t know, but they’re no strangers to loss. Her heart has to know what’s wrong.

“Angel. I saw him, too, and he said that he’d been killed.” He has to state it bluntly. No use in dragging this out any more than necessary.

He hears Buffy start to cry. She doesn’t bother asking him whether he’s sure.

“Was it by some sort of water Stand User?” Jotaro, already ready for the next battle, thinking about the next battle. It’s almost easier to deal with.

“He mentioned something about water, and stronger than a Master Vampire. So, probably a demon or something.” He closes his eyes and searches those unfamiliar memories getting catalogued in his brain. “I honestly think he’d have a fair chance against a Stone Mask-style vampire, though if he was caught unawares or something…” Then he remembers something else vital. “He might’ve ended up with the Arrow. Or Wolfram & Hart. I’m not sure.”

“You’re coming here, right?” Josephine asks abruptly, and he hates having to contradict his mother, but.
But something in his blood is telling him that this is important. That he needs to do this.

“There’s something going on here. Do you want to say hi, Violetta?”

“Hi!” she squeaks, Whisper stirring restlessly.

Fitz lets out a loud sigh. “It’s been far too long. Time was, this wouldn’t have taken me long at all.”

“Oh, yeah, you should probably talk to Willow on hacking tips,” he mentions.

The witch shakes her head at the phone. Not that he can see it, but he can tell, just from the sound of her voice. “I’m a little rusty. Though I suppose that would be a way I could stretch my legs.”

“I suppose, then, that interesting conversations await, but for now, we have work to do.” He sounds like he’s reading, now. “It says that it’s just like a stabbing that happened in the same location fifteen years ago, down to every exact detail. But the original murderer is dead, and there are quite a few details that weren’t released to the public. I suppose I could call a few people to verify the death, and of course, any skilled hacker could get their hands on the information the same way I’m doing.” He glances at the thief girl, who’s begun to shake, and shakes himself out of it. “My apologies.”

“It’s fine,” she says in a voice barely above a mouse’s squeak.

“A Stand User murderer?” Jotaro’s voice is sharp. “I’ll come.”

He’s also probably not the only one. It’s hard to tell whether Buffy will get her wish, but she’d probably volunteer in a matter of seconds, anxious to do anything to avoid thinking about her grief.

“We’ll try not to attract attention,” Johan agrees. Maybe it’s overly cautious, but having other Stand Users at his back, particularly ones as powerful and dependable as Jotaro, would make him feel more confident. The others probably aren’t happy that he’s not staying where he is, but there’s also a pressing time component to this whole thing.

“Dad might also come, depending on what he says when we get ahold of him again,” Josephine adds. Then, “…Be careful.”

“You too.” He salutes at the phone, even though no one but Fitz and Darling can see him do it. “I’ll let you know where we’re at when you’re ready.” It’s hard to tell what’s going on, but if Wolfram & Hart is involved, their phones might be bugged. Wesley isn’t necessarily to blame—it’s probably hard to keep information out of the hands of the bad guys when you’re working in the middle of Evil Guys Central.
Try to Fight It

Chapter Summary

Johan, Fitz, and Darling continue their investigation into the death of Darling's parents...

“He’s a professor that does research in the local aquarium-slash-zoo,” Fitz explains as they walk, and a broad grin breaks out on Johan’s face.

“Ooo, does he work with sharks?”

The blond blinks, obviously confused as to the source of the enthusiasm. Then again, Xander’s had a long-standing tradition of confusing Brits with enthusiasm, so this is no different.

“Shark week is a mandatory holiday,” he elaborates, and Fitz continues to stare before, in the end, giving up.

“Americans are strange.”

Behind him, Darling is nodding fervently, which just gives Jojo a bigger grin. Confusion and misdirection is fun.

When they get there, Fitz has some trouble getting in contact with his contact, but then, it’s crowded, and the man prefers to work in the thinned crowds of the late afternoon. Johan badgers the blond into buying him food and gives an innocent smile at the annoyed glare. “If you’d thought to kidnap me with my wallet on me, I wouldn’t have to keep bugging you for money.”

The green eyes roll skyward, but he still senses a little relief that Jojo has an appetite again.

It’s not exactly as easy as it looks, but he’s had practice with compartmentalization and dealing with the grief when they’re not likely to be attacked anytime soon.

They wander around for a bit, Darling exclaiming at all the animals, seeming years younger. It’s heartwarming to see her lose her pinched, scared look. Xander stays far away from the hyenas and doesn’t plan to explain his behavior to the others.

“You were wanting to speak to Dr. Ackerman?” A voice interrupts them. A man in a lab coat. “I work with him in the aquarium. I can show you where we work if you’d like to wait there.”

“Do you work with Carcharodon carcharias?” The words roll off his tongue, and he doesn’t even realize that that might be a little strange.

“Yes. Fascinating creatures, aren’t they? We’re currently working on intelligence and schooling instincts.” The man talks, and he purposefully needles the man about the (highly inaccurate) films he’s seen. Fitz is torn between being amused and rolling his eyes, and the thief girl isn’t bothering to try to hide the giggles.

He gasps at the deep tanks they have—they’re not large, length or width wise, but they might actually be accurate in other aspects of simulating the ocean. This place must have money, especially as they aren’t being displayed, back here in the employees-only section.
“He called me shortly before I heard you were looking for him. Apparently the traffic is ghastly.” There’s a smile. A smile like a shark. Typical arrogance of an academic, Johan thinks with the slightest of irritation. “I have to retrieve my wetsuit, but if you like, you could see me at work, before you talk to the professor.”

He heads toward where Jojo assumes the employees’ personal lockers are, leaving the room, and he turns to the others. “Come on, lighten up. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity—”

Something sharp and heavy slams into Xander’s shoulder, and his breath leaves his body in one big gust. His legs stop working, and he stumbles backward a little.

He has time to see Fitz’s and Darling’s shocked and worried faces as he falls, think ‘I really need to stop getting attacked in zoos’, and hit the water. Or rather, the water hits him. It’s as if it’s a giant fist at his back, after all, and he’s pretty sure he did no damage to the water in general. Disturbed it a little, maybe, but then it’d just go back to its usual placid nature like nothing had happened.

It’s freezing. It’s probably not as cold as it feels, because they’d just been hanging out in the hot and humid tropical area. And the burgundy substance leaking out, spreading like he’d dropped a few drops of food coloring in a glass of water, gives a clue to what happened.

He’s not sure how long it takes to sink, but it certainly feels like he’s falling faster than just through the air, which isn’t possible. Then again, he’s a little confused, disoriented. Time isn’t working right.

When he finally slows down, he realizes something’s wrong. The light’s coming from every direction. Where did he come from? Where’s up? He tries to swim around, re-orient himself, but the pull at his shoulder hurts with every jostle, and he has to grit his teeth harder. The light’s being obscured by the red.

He’s moving slower than he should be. It takes a little while for his body to obey what he tells it to do. Which is why it takes him a few seconds to process the sudden jolt of danger that thrills through him.

He’s in danger, yeah. He needs air, desperately, but…

These are the research shark tanks.

He turns just in time to catch a shoulder full of razor teeth. The uninjured shoulder. Well, the previously uninjured shoulder. He’s pretty sure it was aiming at his head, but he doesn’t have time to be grateful as the pain rips through him, leading the last of his breath that he was saving to burst from him.

It makes no sound, if you scream underwater. No one can hear you scream.

You have to save yourself.

He’s getting lightheaded, but oddly that makes it easier for him to call Pretender. The jolt as his Stand punches the shark makes him jerk in pain. He fights the urge to breathe in.

A shape looms nearby. Probably another one. He can’t tell what direction it’s coming from, exactly where it’s blocking the light, but there’s a shadow from somewhere and he needs to move. React.

He grits his teeth and jerks out the thing from his shoulder. The agony electrifies every
nerve, and he really is going to pass out soon. But he can’t do it just yet.

Okay, so allowing more blood to get into the water, starting a frenzy, possibly not the best option. But it’s the only plan he’s got. If he keeps bleeding with it in, it’s an inevitability anyway.

He has to make a better target.

It’s a harpoon. He’s not sure exactly how it got here, but he’s pretty sure who was responsible. That researcher. He’d seemed shady, but they didn’t exactly have a lot of options, and Fitz’s contact would be here soon. Right?

That’d probably been a lie. But he’d seemed harmless enough.

He waits until the shark is close, then spears it with the last of his strength. The movement is an anguish he doesn’t really care to repeat, so he uses Pretender to jerk the harpoon back and forth, cut up the shark more, spread around the blood, make the wound bigger.

And then he starts swimming in the opposite direction. He doesn’t know whether it’s up, but away from the feeding frenzy that’s about to begin is a good place to be.

Eventually, the pain starts fading, the light dimming.

*Jotaro would be...*

It’s too much effort to try to catch the end of the sentence. He lets it drift into the water, lost. He doesn’t notice when he loses consciousness.
The aftermath of the attack continues...

It’s a lot easier to notice when he wakes up. The slapping on his face tells him that he’s alive, and someone’s worried about it. Fitz, probably.

He coughs a little water out and sits up. Surprisingly, he hasn’t inhaled the entire tank when he was down there.

Fitz doesn’t have a hat on. It’s weird. He’s also the most relieved Xander has ever seen him.

The girl also looks happy.

They’re all sopping wet. He blinks, trying to reorient himself again to a world where up and down aren’t directions to move, to the world outside of the water. And he looks around, trying to work out what happened.

It’s a little shocking when he notices that there are four or five reddish blobs at the bottom of the tanks. The other sharks look a bit agitated. Wary, which is weird. But not completely so, because sharks have shown the ability to learn and react to the environment, figuring out what’s dangerous and what’s not, and display curiosity and…okay, just when did he get these facts in his head? He doesn’t really pay attention during Shark Week, it’s really just sort of a tradition.

“They got too excited,” Darling explains sheepishly.

He looks at Fitz. “Luckily, I was able to get to you before you breathed in too much water.” That doesn’t really explain how Fitz was able to keep both of them from getting brain damage.

A loud noise startles him, and he looks over just in time to see Lotus Juice, which has a somewhat pleased look on its face if he’s not mistaken, blow out a lot of air into the water and go shooting across the tank. “My Stand inhaled a lot of air and also stored some in its shell, and we dove down to get you. Lotus Juice then acted like an oxygen tank. It wasn’t the best, but it worked fairly well as improvisation goes, and we didn’t really have time to do more than improvise.”

Fitz got him, while Violent Whispers held off the sharks. And then Fitz healed him with Lotus Juice.

“Thanks, both of you.” He takes a moment to just breathe and appreciate how nice it is. But they really have to start figuring out what’s going on. “So…who speared me?”

The blond frowns darkly. “Given that the scientist disappeared before I dove into the water, I’ll guess he’s the one.”

“Marine biologist,” Xander corrects absently. “I think you’re probably right. Question is, is your friend okay? Because that guy probably lied about a lot of things. He might not even work here.”
“He knows the building pretty well for not working here,” the girl points out.

“We should probably find him,” Fitz agrees, green eyes again flashing with worry.

The research area is probably the first place to look. It’s half an hour before the locker finally swings open after a lot of gentle prodding, and Xander stifles his response. “I—I found your friend,” he manages eventually. The tone even almost doesn’t sound horrified, which is pretty impressive. “I’m sorry.”

Nobody deserved this, practically filleted and then stuck into a locker. The blood was oozing. He swallows and manages to keep down the sausage he’d eaten back in the little zoo café.

“I-it’s not your fault, Jojo.” He’s pretty sure the hand now on his shoulder is meant to steady Fitz more than himself. “We probably shouldn’t stay here too long, o-or touch too much, but notes on the Stands are probably important to find. If that murderer hasn’t taken them, of course.” He turns to the girl. “Keep an eye out.”

She rolls her eyes. “Thief,” she reminds them. “But it’s probably better that all of us don’t get our fingerprints on everything.”

Xander winces. “Whoops. To be fair, the Sunnydale police were useless, so we didn’t really have to worry about that.” He pulls his hand away a little. As if that’ll really help anything. “W—what should we do?”

“Try to wipe down everything you’ve touched. Especially here and back in the pool. Touch nothing else with your bare hands. There’s nothing you can do about all the blood you got into the pool, but at least it’ll make you look more like a victim, not a suspect. The police will still be looking for you, and want to ask questions you can’t answer, but being the suspect isn’t good.” It’s shocking, the change that comes over her. She might really not deal too well with violence, preferring to distract witnesses with Violent Whispers and make a run for it, but when it comes to breaking the law in non-violent ways she’s suddenly in her element, calm and collected. “Whisper can see heat. I’ll try to wipe down anything that’s been touched recently, so that should cover everything we’ve touched in this room and maybe during our search, but everything else has probably cooled down too much for me to see it. I’ll try to go from memory, too, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

When she’s finished with the room, Fitz mutters, “I’m glad she’s on our side.”

“So, what are we supposed to use to make sure our dirty mitts don’t get all over…” As usual, Jojo gets a strange look from the Englishman for his word choice, but it doesn’t invoke comment for once.

“I think I might have a pair of gloves in…aha!” He pulls out the gloves—white leather—with a flourish that reminds Xander of a magician. He starts clapping quietly in response.

Fitz flushes. “This is a dress jacket, and I work in a bookshop. Do you know how common paper cuts are when you’re working with certain volumes?”

“I’d think white wouldn’t be your color of choice, but…” The reply is finished with a shrug.

“I’d lend them to you, but you look like you have the hands of a giant. And you’ve already got your DNA at the scene, even though I’m not sure how easy it would be for them to extract it.” He searches his pockets once more.
“Do you have a sonic screwdriver in there by any chance?” Xander asks curiously. It’s clear that Fitz is flattered by the comment, but doesn’t exactly know how to respond, so just hands the handkerchief he produces over.

“I’m not exactly comfortable with my blood just lying around for anyone to do anything with. It’s the easiest stuff to use a spell on, for one thing,” Xander comments as they get back to work.

“If you want to go back down there with the sharks, be my guest,” Fitz gestures, irritated at the interruption.

“I wasn’t complaining, it was just…a comment.” He pauses, then grins. “If anyone starts using anything that looks like blood control on me, you’ll step in and save me, won’t you?”

“How would I tell? You’re always acting strange.” The blond sounds annoyed, but Jojo knows better. He’s slightly amused, which means he’s starting to relax. “And of course I would. I’ve risked my arse enough for you before now.”

Well. That hadn’t been exactly the response Xander had been expecting. Fitz was usually pretty proper about things. But it meant that he was starting to relax, to see him as something more than just a Joestar, which was of the good.

They work in silence for a little longer before Fitz speaks up again. “You know, Jojo, if I’m remembering the stories correctly…the Ripple carries underwater.”

Xander stops completely and thinks about that. He’d basically been operating off of instinct. He wasn’t sure how much breath he’d had left by the time the sharks attacked, but still, he probably could’ve mustered up something. “Uh. Right. Yeah, it does that.” He tries not to sound as embarrassed as he is.

“I’m glad you didn’t consider it, though.” He doesn’t mean to look up, but the Englishman isn’t complaining about how thick he is sometimes. And, yes, he’s pretty sure he’s not hallucinating from having nearly drowned or anything, that’s a hatless grinning Fitz in its natural habitat. Whatever that means. “I’m not sure what it would have done to Darling or I.”

“I’m glad I didn’t accidentally fry you. Or harpoon you.” Fitz actually does frown at this, and he’s probably about to ask about the Feeding Frenzy Plan, which is not of the good, so he quickly buses himself to have an excuse to look away. He goes back to looking for…whatever they’re looking for, absent-minded, and then realizes he’s pretty sure he’s been staring at what they’ve been looking for a while and not processing it. “A blood-stained bunch of papers with Stand as a heading on one of them wouldn’t happen to be why we were meeting this guy, would it?”

“Well, not directly, no.” Fitz is frowning. “It looks like there are pages missing, but it’s not like we really have the time.”

As if on cue, Darling pokes her head around the corner. “We need to go.”

“Leaving,” Jojo agrees.
Morale Officer

Chapter Summary

Johan tries to cheer up the others.

Fitz grumbles a lot when confronted by the leftovers in the fridge. He dutifully gets portions for Xander and Darling, and only under intense glaring from the newest Jojo does he get some for himself, too. Johan’s head is spinning with theories, anything from the fact that he’s one of those microwave conspiracy theorists to the much more probable explanation that he’s hurting in the Patented Stoic British Way about the death of a friend, but he’s not about to start speculating out loud. That’d be rude. It’s better to question things in your head where no one can hear you. Or something. It’s probably more like non-social gossip, but hey. He’s not completely calm himself, despite the fact that that’s hardly the first dead body he’s seen, let alone the bloodiest, but his mind is still spinning in useless circles and his hands are trembling from need to do something. His shoulder still aches, even from Lotus Juice’s healing, and he tries to clear his mind and breathe properly and let the hamon run through him. It’s not really working, which is annoying. He curses the fact that he’s had hardly any practice woodworking since the… since the priest. It’d be something productive to do. And calming. And he could just let his mind stop being quite so useless and just do something for a while and relax. Which may sound heartless, but it’s survival and it’s hard to argue with that. If they were in Sunnydale, there’d be broken stuff in the house, probably, and he could fix that.

The apartment building isn’t perfect. There are broken windows and stuff everywhere, but even if anyone wanted him to fix it, he doesn’t have the tools. They were lost in the crater that was once his home.

But despite everything, he’s the practical one. Not that anyone would believe that, but still. It’s a way he could contribute, make himself useful. He probably should’ve been more persistent about going for some type of martial arts or something, just so he wasn’t totally useless back then. The one time he’d tried, Giles had put his foot down. No civilians getting hurt!

And he’d stopped, because Giles was the closest thing he’d had to a real dad, and because having anyone else disappointed in him hurt.

Focus. No one’s okay after that, but someone’s got to get us through this. Fitz is too busy brooding. Darling’s probably seen a lot on the streets, although he probably shouldn’t assume that her childhood is comparable, even with some similarities he’d noticed. Not everyone learns home first aid when they’re fifteen, or how to tell someone’s bleeding to death. And the scene in the locker was pretty gruesome on the scale.

Point is, he’s the practical one. The morale officer, if anyone was inclined to notice. Someone had tried to kill him. Okay, big deal. Not like that hadn’t happened before. Someone had died. Concerning, but not the end of the world. He’s seen that enough to be qualified to know. Time to distract them entirely. They’re picking at their food, which, yeah, while it makes sense, it’s also bad. They need their strength in case they get attacked again.

“Do you happen to have money or more favors or something?” Xander asks again, mouth
full. It earns a giggle from the girl and a roll of the eyes from Speedwagon, and…it’s starting to feel like home. For an instant he pictures Dawn and the girls spoiling the thief girl, Fitz and Giles geeking out about ancient books. It hurts, and by the way green eyes narrow at him, Fitz hadn’t missed the look in his eyes. He hurries on. If he can distract him from the subject, it’ll be something. “I’ve been wearing these same clothes for a while. Went to sleep in them, and then everything changed. It’s probably time I get a change. Never mind the fact that as fugitives, or people the police will be looking for anyway, it’d probably be good to ditch these clothes anyway.” He doesn’t mention the blood. It’d mostly come out in the water, but there are weird holes he can’t just explain as your average wear-and-tear.

Fitz is distracted from staring gloomily at the bloodied sheets of paper. His shoulders slump a little.

“I have access to some funds, but I don’t exactly…”

“Shopping trip!” Darling bounces like Dawn, and it’s another hurt. He missed them, before, in Africa, but now he really misses them. It’s been a while, but suddenly things are happening again and they’d always talked their way through stuff like this. “I’ve got money, don’t worry.” It’s probably ill-gotten gains. Yet another similarity to Dawn. But it’s not out of boredom, or a need for attention. It was for survival. Xander understands that.

Besides, he’s getting really sick of these clothes, even with the impromptu wash. Especially with the impromptu wash, actually. Uncle Jotaro might be used to the smell of seawater, but the shock of finding…stuff…had kind of knocked that out of his head. And, well, to be honest, nearly drowning kind of dampens the appeal.

“I’d use my Watcher funds, but I don’t know with everything that’s still going on if they’re still working, or whether the police are watching already,” he continues, apologetic. If there ever was a use, now was the time. (So it’s mostly for emergencies. Good to know. The shipment of magical bananas should’ve taught him that, but Africa feels like a different world, a different life.)

“It’s not a problem!” Darling still seems ridiculously happy, and it’s adorable. He ruffles her hair, and she pouts, Whisper slithering onto the table and glaring.

He puts his hands up. “Sorry about that, my bad.” …She’s probably not used to touch. At least, not friendly touch. And he’s the guy that gives the best hugs for his friends and high-fives them and he’s stuck with two people who really don’t like that sort of thing when it’s second nature.

Well, he can try to stay in their comfort zone at least.
Let's Go Shopping!

Chapter Summary

Darling and Johan are a handful, even in an outdoor mall.

It’s probably odd, Jojo agrees, for a grown man to be quite so distracted by the earring display, but suddenly he’s feeling off balance and the shinies in the case look like they might just have something to do with it.

It earns a Concerned Fitz Eyebrow, but he ignores it, staring fixedly, trying to pinpoint the cause. It turns out to be something simple. He’s flipping through memories like they’re a book, and thinks ‘oh, yeah, it’s because I always wear earrings’ and then realizes that the memories aren’t his own and blinks a lot.

He hadn’t really thought about it, which is stupid, but you can’t really blame him for being a little distracted by everything that’s going on. He needs to tap into a Joestar’s memories in order to copy their ability, but hadn’t really thought about the fact that those memories weren’t exactly just staying in the dream world.

That explains all that marine biologist stuff that was coming out of nowhere. Something was off. I just couldn’t get why.

He’s…channeling them. Their personality, their memory. Maybe at some point figuring out who he really is will be a problem. He needs to not lose himself in that.

Then again, he had just been stuck in the Colour and the Shape for a while, so maybe that was why…?

Whatever, it doesn’t matter now. Thing is, he’d just been Jotaro, who’d had pierced ears. So does granddad, his mind adds absently.

Maybe it is a little concerning, given their talk earlier about sharp pointy objects and survival instincts, but he kind of wants his ears pierced now.

And meanwhile, Fitz is having to play the adult, rushing between the two children who can’t stop running off. In an outdoor mall, no less, which is even less confined.

He’s concerning the lady behind the counter, though, and they really need to avoid getting kicked out, so he nods with a smile and moves on, noting that the star earrings are kinda cool.

“I’ll go find Darling,” he says, and then he’s off again.

Fitz next finds him standing in front of the bargain bins.

“What have you got…there…?” Fitz blinks several times, then sighs, adjusting the hat on his head. “You are a complete and utter child.”
“Hey! Just hear me out, okay?” Yeah, okay, so while a squirt gun may not seem the most dignified or whatever and hardly would qualify as a weapon in most people’s hands, Speedwagon was hardly most people. “It’s kind of unassuming. It’s good to carry something to defend yourself with that most people wouldn’t confiscate because they don’t see it as a threat. And with LJ, it actually could be, right? You pulled that move with the water bottle.”

“LJ?” He reaches out and takes the water pistol. At least it doesn’t look really kidlike or anything, and the plastic isn’t completely flimsy.

“Lotus Juice.” Jotaro would be fascinated and probably want to take a few samples, even though Stands don’t really follow science. It’s kind of adorable, honestly. Like a puppy. Not like he’s ever saying this to Fitz, of course, but he can think whatever he wants in the privacy of his own mind.

Fitz stares at it for a while before nodding. “You have a point.” He places it in the basket and sighs. “Weren’t we here for clothes? And try not to get an eyesore like that shirt you wore to the store. It was atrocious.”

“Says the man in the land of tweed,” Jojo teases good-naturedly. He thinks about adding something about giving no promises, but Fitz is going to have to dash off in a minute to find Darling, again, and he does feel a little sorry for his friend. “I’ll try to get something you won’t be ashamed for people to see your friend wearing.”

Fitz is torn between rolling his eyes and thanking him, and ends up sighing instead. “Thank you.”

There’s fingerless gloves. Maybe it’s the inner nerd in him, but he’s always wanted a pair of those. Honestly, everything else is a little harder. He’s been dressing himself the same way for so long, it’s hard to break out of the habit. And he can’t just go for a copy of one of the other Joestar’s outfits, even if that would be comfortable.

Ahn…how would she have felt about all this? She probably would’ve found it sexy. But again, there went her dream of a normal job for him and the American Dream life, so…she probably wouldn’t have been happy. Still, she would’ve loved picking out his outfit. What would she have gone for?

Maybe a leather jacket. He could even accessorize and have it match the eyepatch. Which, on that note, a big thank you to my favorite witch for using a spell to make sure it doesn’t get infected or anything. I’d hate to be a normal person with no eye knocked into that. …On the other hand, if I was a normal person in that situation, I probably wouldn’t have been in that situation in the first place, or I would’ve died, so the point is kinda moot.

And then he sees the camo pants, and another thought occurs to him that hadn’t before. Way back, that Halloween. Everyone changed because of that spell, but I was the only one who actually kept all that soldier stuff. Buff still failed that history test, even though, for a bit, she’d actually lived through that. I wonder if, even back then, that was Pretender. Still, that solves a few of his problems. Kind of casual soldier is a look he can pull off, and it won’t drive Fitz insane. Besides, it’ll solve the issue of people staring, too. They’ll think it’s a war wound. Which, yeah, it kind of is, but not in the way they’ll think. Still, though, it’d be an improvement.

If he’s going for the leather, though, he probably should get leather of the fingerless gloves. Hopefully Darling’s budget will cover it all.
It’s getting dark outside.

“I’m thirsty,” Xander whines again, and this time it’s enough to break through Fitz’s calm.

“All right, all right! There’s a vending machine around the corner; here’s some change. Go buy yourself something.”

The utterly goofy and grateful smile that he gets in return is almost enough to erase his annoyance at Americans. Almost. “Thank you!” Xander shouts as he sprints away.

Fitz massages his forehead and realizes that the Joestar had been wounded little more than twenty-four hours ago, and maybe he can make allowances, if only for a bit.

He sees a goofy looking large lunchbox or something next to the vending machine only when he accidentally nudges it with his foot. He really is thirsty. And hungry. It doesn’t matter. He eagerly takes the bottle from the machine, but doesn’t get to take a sip. One of his Slayers approaches and snatches the soda bottle right out of his hands. “I wouldn’t take that one,” he warns it lightly, though it doesn’t listen.

All it takes is for the cap to pop off for a fountain of soda to come streaming out, knocking the jaw out of place and tearing out a couple of teeth. The Slaypire falls, howling and clutching its jaw.

“Yare yare. That’s why I told you.” The words aren’t his own, but he’s tired and they’re all beginning to merge together. He feels like he’s said those exact words a thousand times before, that they’re worn, familiar company.

It’s happening again. At least he’s aware of it this time.

She yells and charges him, and it’s almost second nature to form a fist, breathe, and move. “I’m sorry,” he says to the dust being carried away by the wind, and he is, but the way to fix it is to deal with Simone, and someone’s doing that. He assumes. That’s a question he probably should’ve asked them, but there’s always too much to talk about. He always forgets something. Well, he should get back to the others now.
Johan makes his way back to the others and finds that something’s wrong...

He bumps into someone on the way, and they look at him somewhat vacantly before walking on without even an apology. It’s rude, but it’s been a long day, even though he’s the one who’d been causing most of the aggravation in the first place. Well, a good portion, anyway. He’ll be the good guy here and give the bloke a break.

When he finds them again, Darling’s getting an ice cream under the watchful eye of Fitz, sitting at the bench and massaging his forehead as he stares fixedly down at the water pistol, as if wondering where it had come from.

That’s kind of odd, but Fitz is probably just wondering how his life got to this point.

He sits down next to his friend, sighing. “I don’t suppose you’d be very happy if I asked if I could have an ice cream, too.”

There’s…no response. None. At first, he just thinks that Fitz didn’t hear him. Or maybe he’s just pretending not to hear, because that outfit had been expensive (hey, he could have gone for the Hawaiian, that would’ve been cheap) and this day probably sucked for the stoic Brit. He tries again.

“There was a Slaypire. She wasn’t expecting me to fight back, I think.” He leans back, lacing his hands behind his head. “I just…this sucks, you know. It’s probably just whining to you, but I…Every single one of my Slayers, they’re like family. I didn’t really have family. Do now, but that doesn’t mean any of them mean any less.” Still nothing. Not an encouraging word, not some sort of sound of acknowledgement, nothing.

He glances over, somewhat concerned now. Is Fitz really that ticked off? He sits back up, reaches over and waves a hand in front of Fitz’s face. “Moshi-moshi?” He’s channeling again. That’ll need a name. Stranger Things Have Happened, maybe. But that’s not the point now. The point is that those green eyes haven’t even blinked.

And then, in that horrible moment, he’s back in the haunted house. For all intents and purposes, he’s Marcie. At least he’s not homicidal on top of getting actually socially invisible.

Get ahold of yourself, Jojo. This is magic, or a Stand User. Either way, there’s some way to fight this. Some way to get out of it. So stop sitting here like an idiot and get your butt in gear to go out there and kick some butt.

This isn’t like Violent Whispers, where he had the excuse of being affected mentally by the Stand’s power.

He has to try to get through to Fitz somehow, to warn him. This is probably meant to isolate them, pick them off one by one. It’s a risk, but he reaches over and starts shaking him. “Hey, Fitz, listen to me! There’s a Stand—”
And then he’s flying off the bench, cheek stinging. His friend punched him. “Get off me, you bastard! You said you were a Stand User?”

*He’s swearing again,* is his foggy thought, before another voice joins them.

“Mr. Speedwagon? Who are you talking to?” It’s Darling, licking the ice cream, and Fitz’s eyes turn vague again.

“I…I’m not sure.” He looks frustrated, like he’s on the verge of remembering something, which is good. It’s something. If he can count on someone whose loyalty and stubbornness would be helpful in this situation, it’s Fitz. “I,” he pauses again, then sighs. “I get the feeling that there’s a Stand User around. Be careful.”

She nods fervently, looking more than a little shy, and they begin walking off.

*No, that’s wrong. I should be there.* “Yeah, that’s right, I’m a Stand User! I’m right here!” he screams, standing again, and gets a kick to the gut for his efforts before Fitz stands up looking at his feet in distaste and confusion. This time, they’re hurrying away faster.

He pulls out Pretender as he coughs crouched on the floor. Hamon might have been enough earlier, but right now, he needs the use of his Stand if he’s going to make it through this.

On direction, Pretender runs in front of the two, but they walk around like they’ve seen him and he just doesn’t matter. Pretender tries to go after them, but he runs into something like an invisible wall.

*This isn’t my range. Something’s wrong.* There’s that voice again, the voice he knows as well as his own. Deep, powerful. It’s Pretender, and it’s not quite obvious whether he’s actually speaking or whether he can just hear the voice because he’s the User.

He supposes it doesn’t really matter, now. Two choices—defeat the Stand, defeat the User. He’s vulnerable now, but intel is probably the most important thing here, so he asks Pretender to do a quick sweep of the area.

There’s sudden, harsh stabs of pain as he breathes, as people walk into him, and he has a feeling that his ribs are bruised if not worse. He tries to get his breathing under control, but Joseph had a point. It’s a lot harder than it looks to keep your breath normal when you’re in such pain. If he can just get a good rhythm going, he can heal a little, enough to at least stand up.

*There’s a distance. It appears to be square in character, and slowly getting smaller. I cannot travel beyond this point, and I would guess you are likewise incapable of traveling further.* Wow, Pretender’s downright chatty when he wants to be. Then again, as Xander’s Stand, he’s not sure why he expected anything else.

*There is no sign of anyone suspicious in the vicinity. I suspect this is an Automatic-type Stand, so the effect is powerful but limited, and the User is outside the area I can reach. The Stand is probably close by, but I haven’t seen a sign of one, either. It must be vulnerable, but if we delay, it may get out of reach.*

True enough. Somehow Jonathan had been able to breathe, despite a hole in his arm. He concentrates on that, tries to recreate the feeling, and it’s enough for him to be able to push to his feet, wincing as he does so. *I’ve been through worse. Push through it, Xander.*

“Well, it had to have been somewhere out of sight, or Fitz would’ve noticed, and given how he reacted to me, he probably would’ve used whatever LJ uses on it first and asked questions later.
And he probably wouldn’t have been as careful about destroying it, like he was with me.” It hurts to talk, but he ignores that. “So, maybe in an employee section? It’s going to set off the alarm, but….well, it’s not the first time.” He gets to his feet and hobbles to the door, takes a deep breath, and pushes it open. “At least we don’t have worry about being arrested. They couldn’t get me out of the mall anyway.”
Stereo Love, Part I

Chapter Summary

Johan looks for the Stand and User before they kill him.

He doesn’t make it far before it feels like he runs into a solid wall. Johan runs his hand along it, but it doesn’t seem to have any seams. He realizes quickly that he probably looks like a mime, and that’s too close to clowns, and clowns are creeps, and quickly returns his hand to his side, frowning. “It’s probably useless, but you didn’t try punching it really really hard, did you?”

He moves out of the way as Pretender charges the wall with a flurry of fists and a cry of “Torarararara!” He concentrates, trying to feel for the pulse of life. It’d worked for Darling and vampires and random passers-by. Beyond this point, it’s vague and hard to concentrate on. Fitz is still alive, as is Darling, but he can’t tell much more than that, and anyone else is vague, since he doesn’t know them. Apparently, only his connection with the two Stand Users is enough to overcome whatever Stand Effect is cutting him off from the rest of the world. Well, that’s useless, he thinks, realizing that since Stands are weird and maybe not actually alive, he might not be able to sense them, either.

And he’s startled out of that by a pain in his hands. He has to shuffle backward a bit as the wall pushes against the toes of his combat boots. He glances over questioningly, and Pretender looks a little sheepish.

“It’s okay, buddy.” His mind is racing. How can he get out of this?

He looks around, and Pretender catches his thoughts and looks around too. Nothing obvious. Nothing even non-obvious, like a gun or a strange wall (other than the invisible one) or a plug in a rock. It probably was used when he was separated from the others and more vulnerable. But he hadn’t gone far, so it would’ve had to have been quick. The Slaypire? (He’s proud of Dawn for that name, but now’s not the time.) But how? Surely, even if they were working with Wolfram & Hart, it would’ve taken longer to get the Arrow to them, or work out the contract. Unless they were using some weird teleperty or time magic.

If that had been the User, he might be out of luck, because it’ll turn out to be like Notorious BIG or Anubis or something, and unless he finds the Stand soon…

The vending machine is a good place to start. He runs back out and in that direction. He narrowly avoids someone who drops their shopping and then looks confused and vaguely upset, but doesn’t bother apologizing, since they either won’t hear or will forget two seconds later anyway.

And there’s…there’s something weird. It looks like a boombox. A couple of people had brought those to school, but they had been changing to portable CD players. Of course, he couldn’t really afford either of them. Willow had gotten him a CD player on his birthday, and he’d carried it around everywhere until he’d accidentally broken it skateboarding.

It’s blue and purple and has glitter and sparkles and goofy stickers all over. How hadn’t he noticed it?
Oh, that’s right, he had, but he’d been a little distracted by how thirsty he is and by a fight with one of the Slayers he’d recruited. It’s a pretty powerful effect, but does that mean it’s indestructible? He can get Pretender to Tora it a lot, or maybe just pour Hamon into it until it breaks. Then he can rejoin the others. It’ll—

He falls flat on his butt maybe a foot and a half from it. It took him too long to realize. The invisible wall’s crept in enough he can’t reach.

“Looks like you realized Stereo Love’s location, but it’s a bit too late for you. How’s it feel to be a helpless, mute mime, unable to affect the world around you?”

And with that sneering tone, a teenager steps from the shadows. He sneers.

Bronzed skin, like he’s been spending way too much time at the beach or in a tanning salon. Metal curls around his ears. Badly bleached hair, a hoodie and jeans that are falling apart, bare feet.

*I should’ve noticed there was someone else around who didn’t react to a Slaypire dusting. This isn’t Sunnydale. People don’t just pretend nothing happens as a survival mechanism.* He notices the kid is staying outside the wall. So both User and Stand are outside the range of effect... for the moment. *There has to be a weakness, though. Every Stand has one.* “Why attack me?” he asks calmly, even as Pretender picks up one of the potted plants and hurls it at the User. It smashes against the invisible wall with a tremendous crash, and the User flinches.

He’s got an ego. He came back to gloat. But he’s not confident which is why he’s staying carefully out of range like a coward.

The User shrugs, squatting and staring with cold, cruel eyes. There’s something on his wrist, but it’s too hard to see. “Guess you could call it a final. I pass, and I’m in.”

“In what?” *Some kind of group that requires a confirmed kill? Why am I suddenly thinking Magneto’s mutants, that has no relevance on real life at the moment. Dio? No, as far as I know he’s dead. I watched him dust myself. Well...Jotaro did, but same thing, pretty much. Dio worshipers? Jotaro’s been worried about that for a while, and even Josuke is although he’s a little more laid back about it all. Who’s collecting Stand Users? Because if he’s the only one trying to pass this ‘final’, I’ll eat Speedwagon’s hat. With a little salt and lots and lots of water.* He puts his hands over his ears, hoping to block out any sound the Stand boombox might have, but when he moves forward it has no effect. The wall is as solid as ever.

Another shrug at the question, a sneer at the action. The kid’s aching to tell someone. He’s nervous about this, whatever it is. Isn’t sure whether it’s the right thing, isn’t sure whether he’ll survive. But he also is afraid of talking about it. “You’re going to be dead soon enough. And if you think I’m the idiot who’ll spill all his plans, think again.”

Stalemate. He has to make his move soon.
Stereo Love, Part II

Chapter Summary

The fight with Stereo Love continues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neither of them are ready for what happens next. A voice interrupts their little ‘conversation’. A familiar voice, English accent and all.

“Excuse me! Who are you talking to?”

Fitz. He came back. He might not remember exactly what happened, but it bothered him enough that he just had to come back and check. Of course he would. That’s how Speedwagon is. Thorough. Meddlesome. He couldn’t just shrug off something like that. He could walk away, but it’d just nag at him until he found out the answer. That’s what had led him back to Xander, after all; led him to step in during the trial.

*Keep talking. Just distract him long enough for me to think of something.*

“I was just singing along with my rap. What’s your problem, old guy?” The User stands nervously. If this is handled wrong, he’ll just grab his Stand and run. And he might not get out of range in time to save Xander’s life.

He looks around. He can’t get anything out of the box…but maybe he doesn’t have to do that. If he can get Fitz’s attention, keep him here, but not quite sure this is a Stand?

*I’ve always wanted to play a poltergeist. Well, that was mostly to terrify Buffy and Willow, although given their powers that might have been a suicidal move. Instinctual reaction to attack, and all that. Still, here? It might be just what I need.*

The teen isn’t paying attention, nervously watching Fitz since he apparently thinks that Jojo’s out of the running. It’s a mistake, but it plays into the plan, so he makes his move. There’s a produce stand just there on the sidewalk. It’s just in reach. Pretender catches his thought and runs to the place, grabbing a few of the oranges. The man gasps as the fruit raise, and Johan closes his eyes. *Joseph, probably, because if this isn’t a stage trick I don’t know what is.* And slowly, with the farmer and Fitz gaping, Pretender manages to juggle.

Fitz is frowning, massaging his head as he tries hard to focus on something that’s out of focus. The farmer wants to start yelling, anger on his face, and yet he’s already starting to forget, looking at the missing fruit with a puzzled expression and quickly draining anger.

“Don’t take that attitude with me, young man,” Fitz says, and it’s a call back to Giles, but he doesn’t have time for that.

He’s standing with one hand on the wall, thinking as fast as he can, trying to hear the conversation, since anything outside is kind of muffled. And he expects to be pushed back.
...And isn’t. It’s been long enough it should have contracted again, just a little. Maybe longer. He hasn’t been paying the most attention to the passage of time, which is silly in a case where the fight is literally timed, and this is real life. He doesn’t get a retry button.

“Oh, so I should listen to every adult who thinks they know better than me and wants to lecture me.” There’s strain in the voice.

Out of curiosity, he pushes and feels a little give. And sees the teen wince.

*Of course. It’s mentally based. It may be ranged, but it’s not automatic. It requires input—in this case, mental concentration—to maintain.*

And then he realizes something else. *So that’s why he doesn’t want to fight two of us at once. Not only can his Stand probably only affect one person at once, any extra strain caused by fighting the other Stand User would probably break the prisoner free. Maybe I can use that.*

He pushes a little harder and watches the sweat roll down. *He’s panicking at the thought of fighting Fitz, too, and that’s enough to weaken the effect. I just need to push him further.*

“You do realize that if you run, that’ll just make you more suspicious, right?”

The teen doesn’t even turn around, but the wall doesn’t feel like glass anymore. It feels like what Xander had imagined those ochre jellies DM Andrew the Breaker of Players had thrown at them.

“It’s hardly a lecture. I suppose I was asking for that by saying ‘young man’.” Fitz may look more relaxed, but the way his green eyes fix the Stand User in a steel gaze, he hasn’t let up his guard at all. He’s being a touch friendlier.

You figured out making him run was a bad idea. Good job.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen anything strange around you, have you?” he continues conversationally, earning a half-strangled snort.

Then the teenage Stand User has to rush to cover up the mistake. “This is the outskirts of London. Mate. Of course things are weird.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Fitz agrees, watchful eyes sliding past toward where Jojo’s waiting. Just out of curiosity, he adds a flurry of punches.

“TORARARARARARARARARARARA!” Pretender yells, and if he’s not mistaken, there’s a hint of joy in that tone. The kid definitely flinches, but by this point no one is hearing it other than him.

Fitz notices, but the look in his eyes at the moment is almost…sympathetic? “Is it drugs?”

“Shut up!” the kid yells, and suddenly the invisible wall moves in by about a foot, throwing him into the opposite wall. He hadn’t realized it had gotten this far. “You don’t know me at all, so don’t pretend you care. And don’t think you have any authority over me. You’re just a nobody.”

Fitz frowns, putting his hand inside his coat. The air is thick with charged tension. It almost feels like breathing pure hamon, or maybe that’s the pain in his back making it hard to breathe from how hard he slammed into that wall. “Well, that may be, or it may not, but that’s not very nice to say to someone you don’t know, is it?” It’s mild, but Johan who’s come to know that man and the tone he uses knows that it’s full of the promise of danger. And then he realizes what Fitz is playing with
inside his coat, catches the slightest glimpse of blue plastic. He’d figured that out, too, on his own. The kid shifts, hands balled into fists, trying to decide whether to run. That’s another problem. If he goes for the boombox as he runs, it’ll be obvious. If he leaves it behind, it might be vulnerable. He’s safe for the moment, but it comes down to a race against time for the both of us.

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively titled Can't Take Me.
It's a good thing I was ahead on writing, considering how unmotivated I feel this week...
Stereo Love, Part III

Chapter Summary

The fight with Stereo Love’s User continues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And that’s when it feels like time stops. It’s not timestop. Johan knows what that feels like. Can remember the sound of the clock and the utter silence that follows. It’s something else.

Slowly, he sees the kid fidget, and that’s when he puts the pieces together. This feels like another type of Hamon, like all those stupid martial arts movies he’d watch where the disciple would get good enough and the perception of time itself would slow down, to the point where they had those lightning fast reflexes. That’s what this feels like.

It’s not quite, the deep voice corrects him, and Pretender is kneeling over him, looking concerned. In case you didn’t notice, my innate powers—and yours—have to do with Hamon. And yet, we’re also in an unstable version of the Colour and the Shape.

Oh, yeah. He can smell the sakura on the wind. And, faintly…ashes.

The power of breath. The power in a dream. They’re connected by promise, by hope, for what comes next. You’re seeing through my eyes, but we don’t have much time and we can’t expend the energy like this, so we can’t stay here.

You have the power, inside. To overcome this obstacle. You’ve used it before on the familiar. Now it’s time to step into the unknown beyond the door.

Xander wants to complain about all the riddles, but he’s suddenly thrown back into the real world gasping. That might be a migraine. He’s been pushed a little along the ground, though it hasn’t been as long as he expected.

He has two choices. To use whatever it was instinctually, or to bend under the pressure.

A Higashikata’s stronger than that. Anyone of Joestar blood is stronger than that. I want to actually meet Mom and Gramps in real life, not just speak to them over the phone. I refuse to die here to this asshole, so what do I do. How does it work?

He finds his lone eye drifting to the kid. The Stand’s probably more important, and yet…

His heartbeat, the rush of his blood. I can match it, beat for beat, but what will that accomplish?

…A scared punk. That’s what he is. Wants recognition, wants to not be a nobody. Got a Stand; his first chance. A bully, but too scared to be one on anything but online forums at first. Still not quite confident, but oh, does he want it. He wants someone to beg for their life. He wants to break someone’s face until there’s blood coating the floor. He wants respect. Wants women to admire him.
And suddenly, the emotions are his own. The memories are his own. It’s not quite the depth of, say, Jotaro or Joseph, but it’s still immersive, and if he focuses on this he’ll lose himself. He wants to throw up at the alien thoughts rising in him. *Quick.*

Movement behind them. Fitz is still standing on the sidewalk, cautious but ready for violence. The kid…isn’t. He’s in the middle of the street.

A driver, distracted behind the wheel. Talking into a phone in his hand. It’s large, a relic really, but *he’s not wasting money when he has a perfectly good phone.* *Truck delivery, running late.*

Jojo wrenches his eyes from the man and back to the kid. Concentrates. *Those memories.* *Make him see you for who you are.* Powerful. *Not something to be forgotten just like that.* Make him beg.

He pushes, and his head hurts even more and the walls slide closed further. He can’t straighten his legs fully. He tries to push himself up a little so it’s more comfortable.

He sees the kid’s eyes widen as he raises a fist and pounds on the invisible wall that has slid into place, making exaggerated gestures, but any sound he makes is faint, fainter than that of the normal area outside the box, and he feels…satisfaction. There’s sound, like that of an announcer, but it’s about as muffled.

And then confusion. That’s his mirror image, out there. How is it out there? Was that the Stand he was fighting?

And that reminds him of a wooden doll, and he snaps out of it, the effect sliding out of place like it had never been, and the driver looks up and screams, only there’s no sound for that or for the horn that has to be honking, and slams hard on the brake. It won’t be enough.

Fitz is yelling something, alarmed, reaching out a hand, but all sound outside has vanished. Pretender grabs him like he’s a doll himself and crouches, then pushes hard in a dizzying jump straight up, hoping that he’s not going to just crack his head open above. At least the box seems taller than it is currently wide. He touches for a second, but can tell the minute that the car hits the User because the wall abruptly disappears.

He hits the top of the vehicle and rolls, falling off of the end and slamming against concrete. He hears a loud crack and groans. And then there’s suddenly a gasp and a rush of footsteps to his side. “Jojo! Jojo, what happened? Are you all right? How did I forget—that was the effect of a Stand, wasn’t it? Hold on, I’ll heal you.”

Johan buries his head in Fitz’s shoulder, starting to shake with the pain and the effort and the headache that has yet to go away. “Kid was a Stand User, and if not for your paranoia, I’d be dead,” he explains, adrenaline rushing out of him now that he’s not in danger and he’s *drained.* That was a hard battle.

“Let it never be said that there isn’t someone out to get you,” Speedwagon jokes, but his voice is shaking as badly as Xander’s hands as Lotus Juice sprays the youngest Jojo with a refreshing mist. “Damn it, Jojo, I thought…I thought you were dead.” Cursing? Wow, he’s rattled. Better defuse that a little.

“Takes more than that to kill me,” Jojo explains with what smile he can manage, and then his stomach rumbles.
That, at least, provokes a laugh. “You never change, do you?” It’s fond, and that kind of friendship is something Xander craves.

He sits, gingerly at first, then faster when there’s barely any pain. It’s still a little weird, like it’s freshly healed or something, and there’s bruising, but otherwise he has more energy than before.

The headache’s the only thing that’s still there, and it’s probably because all the mental strain was due to Pretender. Still, it’s better than dying. Thanks. He gets a reassuring surge of affection in return, and figures it’s a silent ‘you’re welcome’.

“Let’s go back to Darling. I figured that if there was a Stand User around, I should take care of it myself.” Fitz helps him up with the same concern, and Jojo shakes his head.

“I’m sure she didn’t appreciate that. I know you’re trying to protect her, but leaving her by herself isn’t any more helpful. What if she has to take on a Stand User all by herself? It might not be so honorable, but ganging up on some tougher or more experienced opponent might be all the chance you get.” Yet more Xander knows from experience.

Speedwagon’s shoulders slump, but his hands are still strong as he helps his friend along. “Well, we don’t want to get mixed up in the accident report.” He pauses, then continues, “Did you kill him?”

“No idea. Don’t want to stick around to find out,” he replies, and that earns a nod.

Behind them, they can still hear the panicked delivery driver proclaiming his innocence to the world. “He came from nowhere!” he yells at the top of his lungs.

Jojo snorts. “I’m sure he did.”

「Scott Cain (User of Stereo Love) retire」

Chapter End Notes

Alternate Chapter Title: Talk of the Town. So there we are, the end of the first 'serious' Stand Battle! ~Dreamer~
Chapter Summary

Picture of Stereo Love (yes, you could get it through the Stands So Far, too, just covering all bases...and I completely forgot that I did this in previous volumes to better match Jojo's format).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter End Notes

oKAY WHY IS EVERYTHING BREAKING WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME ARGH
I'M NOT SURE WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE PICTURE AND WHY IT'S NOT SHOWING. I SUSPECT IT'S HAPPENING WITH THE OTHER PICTURES, TOO. SERIOUSLY, NO IDEA WHY IT'S HAPPENING, I'LL INVESTIGATE LATER, I'M TRYING TO FIX EVERYTHING RN.
SORRY FOR THE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES
~dREAMER~
PS it's fixed. also it was apparently just this one chapter?? IDK
PPS CAn things STOP BREAKING
Whispers in My Head

Chapter Summary

Darling Violetta waits for Fitz to return and thinks about her parents...

Darling sighs, ice cream mostly neglected and dripping onto her hand, staring after where Fitz had gone.

He was a weird bloke, with his hat obsession and the way he talked and how awkward he was dealing with her and everything.

Not a bad bloke; she was sure of that. Someone had told her that. She didn’t quite remember it, but she didn’t quite remember a lot of things, so that was fine. She was sure someone trustworthy had told her that Fitz wasn’t a bad bloke, so Fitz wasn’t a bad bloke.

He’d been gone a while, though. And the two of them had had a vague sense that something was wrong and were trying to figure out what it was that was wrong on a bench for a while as they ate their ice cream, even as Fitz complained about the state of his wallet (and looked confused, like he’d accidentally spent more than he thought). Who had suggested the shopping trip, anyway?

“Do you think an enemy Stand User found him?” she asks Whisper in a low voice, and in reply Whisper slithers comfortingly around her hand as if to say “It doesn’t matter, because I’ll protect you from anything”.

That’s why he existed, honestly. That’s why he was one of the most reliable things in her life.

She glanced up at the TV on the opposite wall. It wasn’t loud enough to hear, but the subtitles said something about a bunch of people dying similarly, and that the police had yet to figure out whether it was an accident or homicide (or maybe suicide). Fitz had been trying to keep the answers from her, as to what had happened to her adoptive parents. Trying to protect her. But Whisper understood the way he didn’t that she didn’t want to be protected by ignorance. Because if anything ever happened, she wouldn’t be able to do anything about it, and she was stronger than he apparently thought.

Someone else understood that too, but she didn’t remember who. Whatever. It didn’t matter.

Fortunately, he hadn’t taken into account her being a thief.

Her head feels funny. Empty. Like it’s missing something. She shakes her head. That dizziness came out of nowhere. It’s just…stress, maybe. Or hunger. She probably should eat the ice cream, however much she’s not hungry, and licks halfheartedly. She feels a little better. It’s just her imagination. Nothing is wrong.

Maybe he hadn’t figured that part out yet. But no, he’d chased her without backup and almost died. Because she’d been stealing from his hotel room. He still wasn’t on his guard enough, though.

She’d managed to get the printout he’d been staring at. She even managed to return it to
exactly the position it’d been in before he’d fallen asleep, head on the desk, snoring loudly. And what it said.

Well, it was scary. She didn’t spend too long staring at the pictures. It was bad.

Apparently, though, a stabbing of a man and a woman had happened in the same exact house ten years prior. The details hadn’t been released to the public, and the bloke had been shot by some other bloke when fleeing, so they’d considered the case closed. They’d managed to put the shooter in prison, and that was all they really bothered with. Well, the bloke who was shot was suspected criminal, anyway. The evidence was pretty good, but they didn’t bother to look into it any further, which is why they were freaking out so much when it seemed like the murderer was back. And all of the details (the MO or whatever? she doesn’t remember the Latin but it looked super hard to pronounce) were the same, so it probably wasn’t just some copycat unless he’d left behind detailed instructions or something for an accomplice or whatever.

She sighs again. It’s probably been at least ten minutes. That’s way too long for just a quick search. Which means that there probably are Stand Users here, which scares her. She has to get ready.

But what if they’re sociopaths and they don’t have any emotions? Will Whisper even work on someone without emotions?

“Stop that. You can’t talk yourself out of a fight that hasn’t even started yet,” she tells herself sternly.

And then staggers a little as she realizes something crucial that had been missing. Something that she’d forgotten and hadn’t seemed more than a vague curiosity until now. “Jojo!” she yells, and earns a few curious or annoyed stares. She sticks out her tongue childishly, and they look away and hurry on.

At least she’d not in her old clothes, or they would’ve tried to have her thrown out.

But seriously, it’s something that deserves to be yelled. She forgot he existed. Of course Fitz didn’t come after her on his own. He would’ve died without Jojo. Which was her fault, so maybe a little of the awkwardness is of the ‘I almost killed you’ variety, but.

But it’s Jojo. Jojo, who understands what it’s like to be in a family that’s not that picture-perfect kind you see on TV. Who’s funny and switches between accents all the time and seems like a big, gentle, clumsy goof and actually can get dangerous and serious. And who knows how to deal with younger people without being patronizing. How had she forgotten him? That’s scary!

Whisper curls tightly around her arm, almost enough to cut off circulation, but it’s enough. She heads to the bathroom, using a few coins she’s picked up during the trip, and tucks herself into a corner. Fitz will be angry, or just disappointed, later, because it’s filthy and these are new clothes, but she needs to calm down.

It only takes about a minute of sitting wedged in with Whisper moving as she breathes to calm, partly because she realizes that Jojo and Fitz might need her help. She stands, walking to the sinks quickly, and washes her face.

And sees something behind her. Movement, really. She whirls around, and Whisper moves off her arm to float in a position to strike, just the second the enemy shows themselves.

There’s just mocking laughter.
Chapter Summary

Darling converses with the voice she hears.

Darling continues to look around, paranoid, but the laughter continues. “There’s no point, looking around like that. I’m just a whisper. Your conscience, if you will. And I’m curious. Why do you even care? You were the first to say that they were horrible people. They probably even deserved what happened to them, so why do you care?”

She shrugs at the mirror, careful. “Yeah, they—they hurt me. They weren’t good people. But did you see how they died? No one deserves that.” It has to be a Stand User. Or magic. Jojo had told some funny stories about magic earlier, but he’d also made it clear that magic could be just as deadly as a Stand and she shouldn’t just mess around with it. Still, it’s the way he says it. He doesn’t treat her like a kid. He gives her the facts, a warning, but it’s up to her to make the intelligent decision. She likes that. Nobody’s ever treated her like that before.

“What if I assured you that the one who did it would get their punishment? Would you leave Harris and Speedwagon behind? Because they’re the ones poking their nose in when they shouldn’t. You’re intelligent. A survivor. Get out while you can.” The voice is persuasive. Like it really cares, doesn’t want to hurt her. And then she realizes part of why it sounds so alluring is that it’s doing the same thing Jojo does. Giving her reasonable options, having the faith that she’ll make the right decision given the facts. Mum and Dad just said “because I said so” or threatened her or just went and hurt her instead of warning about her beforehand. It takes her a minute to dredge up what ‘Harris’ means, though, because Jojo’s right, the name really doesn’t suit him at all.

Fear rushes through her, but instead of running like she would have before, she glances up at the mirror again. Is it her imagination, or does she see the faintest glimpse of glowing red eyes in the mirror before they’re quickly gone? She doesn’t crank her head around, though. That might give away that she saw anything, assuming that this enemy isn’t in her head and doesn’t already know that she saw something. She finds her courage and shakes her head firmly at the mirror, or whatever might be lurking in the mirror, or anything. Is there such a thing as a mirror world? Or is it really in her mind? “They’re some of the first decent people I’ve met.”

“But they’re marked for death,” the voice answers, chilling her to the bone, but it wasn’t like it wasn’t an answer she was expecting. She got the idea that this would happen.

“For trying to find a murderer?” she asks. What kind of killer could inspire such loyalty? Then a thought occurs to her. She’s used to seeing Scotland Yard as the enemy, because they would report her to Mum and Dad or label her evil and a thief just for doing what she had to so she could survive. But she doesn’t want them dead, either. Are they also marked?

The chuckle is kind and compassionate and therefore insidious. “What, you think it’s all about her? Oh, if she wanted, she could get whatever she wanted from whoever she wanted, but she doesn’t bother with me, or most of us really. No, this is about something else. Something you really don’t want to know, not if you want to live.”

Whisper crawls up to her arm, comforting but in a position where it’s easy enough for him to
strike, assuming they get any targets to attack. Something tells her that this could be a trap. The voice could be telling her what she wants to hear, news of the killer, trying to draw her in and kill her, but the easy way the voice says it...the voice doesn’t care about some murderer they even work with, does it? So then why does it care about her?

And then, as if hearing her thoughts, the voice answers. “I’m telling you all this because I don’t want to fight you. I saw you fight those two. You could have killed them easily. I don’t relish the idea of fighting you. And in you, I see a reflection of myself, no pun intended. We’re both survivors, practical people. We don’t pick battles we don’t have to, do we?”

Her eyes narrow. There’s something wrong with the scenario as presented. “If that’s the case, then why are you going after Jojo and Fitz?”

The laughter’s friendly, but it sends chills up her spine. The whole situation is creepy; why doesn’t the disembodied voice realize that? “A calculated risk. You’ve made those yourself. The reward’s worth it, and they’re both lazy. They haven’t had to deal with what we have, have they? Ungrateful, taking everything for granted. Who cares if they get hurt in the process?”

There’s the hint of ugliness she was looking for, and it strengthens her weakening resolve. “You’re wrong about Jojo. He didn’t want to talk about it, but the way he reacted...he understood what we’ve gone through. And no, it wasn’t just a ploy to get my sympathy. Most of his family’s awful.” After she says it, she feels guilt gnaw at her. Is it betraying a confidence, to tell this voice about Jojo’s life? When he doesn’t even want to talk about it?

There’s a long silence, long and empty enough she wonders if she’d scared it away. Then it’s back. “All right, you’re fairly convincing, and it takes one survivor’s pain to know another’s. Very well—I’ll leave your Jojo of yours to someone else. Sound fair enough?”

She sighs, thinking about how awkward Speedwagon is. It sounds fair enough, true, but at the same time she can’t just stand by as someone’s killed. “Fitz is awkward, but he did look out for me in a way no one has before. He’s not Jojo, but he still cares and tries. Which is more than people have done before.”

There’s a sigh in response. “If that’s the case, I’m afraid we’re at an impasse, destined for conflict.”

She readies Whisper, hardens her gaze toward the mirror. “I’m afraid so.”
Chapter Summary

Darling Violetta has to fight the hostile Stand User...

Darling sounds all strong, but she doesn’t feel the confidence in her voice. She’s hearing this Stand User’s voice, but she doesn’t actually see anyone. It’s a disembodied voice, so what can she attack? Whisper’s really strong, but only if she has a target. She’d even almost dealt with Jojo, which had been a mistake, which meant she’d almost accidentally killed a person, worse a nice person, but still. He was strong. And so was Fitz. So if she’s strong enough to deal with Jojo and Fitz, if she hadn’t held back, and they’re really strong, and all those people who had tried to deal with her when she was just trying to survive, then she’s strong enough to deal with this person, whoever they are.

Except that she has nothing to attack. She can’t just randomly use Whisper on the whole room in the hopes of finding an invisible person. Whisper is fairly strong, so she’d probably just succeed in destruction of public spaces, or whatever the police are likely to say. If they catch her, which they’re on the run, so it might make their lives more difficult, even as the three of them might get away.

Where are Fitz and Jojo? Maybe they’re being attacked by a different Stand User at the moment; she can’t count on them riding in as cavalry to save the day.

There’s another laugh, right behind her, and she glances over her shoulder. There’s nothing. So maybe it’s in the mirror. Can Stands even exist in mirrors?

She points at the mirror and instructs Violent Whispers, “Attack!”

And the laugh grows louder. “You have no idea how Sons of Dixie works. No idea what you’re facing.”

And Whisper rears up and hisses, feathered wings flaring out to their fullest extent, and strikes, breaking the glass into a thousand splinters. It looks particularly impressive, and the voice goes quiet for a moment, so she thinks that she wins for a moment.

And then the hiss comes again, and she only has a second to react before there’s a snake wrapped around her throat, choking her. Whisper is attacking her. She can’t breathe, and it’s all she can do to not remember old memories, rising to haunt her. *It doesn’t matter, it’s not now, she’s dying now.* She’s dizzy, fighting for breath. “What’re you—Whisper??” she croaks and doesn’t even recognize her own voice.

Which makes sense. After all, she’s unable to recognize her own soul.

She tries desperately to remember what had happened when Whisper attacked in the throat. She’s fairly sure she only used that particular attack once, on a security guard when she was really young and really scared that he’d catch her and throw her in jail. That was before she realized that Whisper wasn’t just an ordinary snake and could make people hurt or feel emotions. What had happened? What was the side effect?
It wasn’t the despair she feels for a bit. Her only protection is gone. That’s hands. Worry is associated with the back. Hunger with the stomach.

Is it the crushing sense of betrayal? Would Whisper even affect her, like he affects other people, because it’s part of her? Is betrayal just the natural response of a person suddenly being attacked by their own Stand? Or is it really Whisper? Though even if Whisper isn’t making her feel this, she needs to get him off her throat soon or she’s going to pass out. Her scrabbling fingers manage to find some purchase, enough to give her a few gasps of air. The pressure slowly increases, like it’s trying to crush her throat completely. *This isn’t how I want to die. I don’t want Jojo or even Fitz to find my body like this.*

There’s the anger. And if Whisper was working, then she’d be feeling blood trickling down over her eyes, but no. Apparently Whisper’s effects don’t work on her. It makes sense, considering she pets Whisper all the time, and it’s possibly touch that does it. (Or an attack, in which case it’d work now and not before, but the effect isn’t kicking in now, so Whisper just doesn’t work on her.)

“What is your Stand?” she gasps, barely audible, but the creepy, chuckly voice certainly hears her.

“I’ll give you a hint—I already gave you one. It was one of the first sentences I said to you, in this little conversation of ours,” the User responds.

She’s incapable of thinking back and concentrating on that. It seems so long ago, and her mind is a vague abyss.

And then she realizes something. There’s something hollow in her heart, like something’s missing. But at the same time, there’s something there, something deadened and hid from the world, but it is there. And as she scrabbles at the scales, broken and wet from blood cut by the glass, her hands and body are untouched, even as her head swims.

She hates violence but usually has a knife with her, because usually it’s practically useful for cutting cords or as a makeshift screwdriver or whatever. And it’s worth a try now, especially if it’s part of her. That’s more justifiable.

She pulls the knife out and slashes. It’s not very long, but it’s enough to cut the scales. She waits for the inevitable pain. Nothing. Though that might be because she’s about to pass out. She uses the flat of the blade to pry Whisper off her, even slightly, and gasp for air. The air smells weird. Sweet, but weird. Her head’s still spinning.

If she’s not feeling the pain, then…

He’d said something about being a whisper. Her conscience. She’d thought he was just being metaphorical, but he was also quite possibly being literal as well.

*Then that isn’t Whisper. So what’s beside her, attempting to strangle her to death?*

“That’s your Stand, isn’t it?” she manages, prying it off with one hand and a knife.

The laugh, this time, is gentle. “Well done, Darling. Meet Sons of Dixie. Sons of Dixie can replicate any power, including that of another Stand. And since one person cannot have two Stands, well…you’re limited to the Stand under my power. So, what are you planning to do now?”
Sons of Dixie, Part II

Chapter Summary

Darling Violetta has to fight the Stand Sons of Dixie without her own Stand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not the best idea. She knows that. She’s tried the move on security guards before and only barely managed to escape thanks to Whisper, but that’s not an option here, and if she passes out, well.

She has no idea if the User plans to kill her. Doesn’t want to give him the chance. But in any case, it’ll hurt him, too. Probably.

Only one way to find out.

She headbutts the snake.

Her brains rattle around and it hurts, but she doesn’t miss the hissed surprise. It’s not like when she tried it on an adult. The snake might be as strong as Whisper, so the bones don’t break, but she also doesn’t feel like passing out and doesn’t see any weird shapes. The other, though…

“I suppose that’s an approach you could take,” he admits, voice strained, Sons of Dixie pulling away from her.

Unfortunately, from where it curls up, floating above the ground, it can strike out at any moment and it’s out of reach. She might be able to deflect it using the dagger, but that’s only if her reflexes are faster. And Whisper is pretty fast.

Besides, she’s pretty sure she’s holding back, subconsciously or not. That’s not really Whisper, she tells herself, but her eyes still see her oldest friend. Her only friend, for a while. She’d found Whisper outside, wounded and struggling, and even though she’d been hurt, too, she fed him and nursed him back to life. He was her pet. Her secret. He was there for her, curling up with her when she cried herself to sleep, alone. He had her back when she had to steal to survive. He kept her safe. He liked her for who she was and didn’t try to change her or yell at her or judge her for trying to survive. Maybe that was required for a Stand. If it really was a part of you. She realized, early on, that he wasn’t exactly a normal snake (normal snakes didn’t float when they felt like it, even if he could pretend when they needed to blend in), but this whole ‘he’s a part of her soul’ is new to her. It probably did mean that it had to like you. But that didn’t mean that she didn’t like him any less, or think of him as less of a friend, and that means attacking him hard. It’s like if the Stand took the form of Jojo or Mr. Speedwagon. She’d have a hard time attacking something wearing their shapes, too, even if she knew for sure it wasn’t them.

Holding back isn’t going to help her win this fight.

While she’s distracted, Sons of Dixie strikes, and it takes falling to the floor to get out of the way. At least she’s practiced that, when getting out of places she isn’t supposed to be. She hears the
warning hiss again and dives into one of the stalls, pulling the door shut behind her, hearing the body slam against the plastic. She quickly clambers onto the toilet seat, pulling her legs up. It won’t work forever, she knows. It’s only stalling for time, which isn’t exactly her friend. She might have friends now, but she can’t count on them to show up and win the day. Not because they don’t care or they’re false friends or anything. Because this is the real world, and last minute rescues aren’t realistic.

“Hiding like a coward isn’t going to help you. It’s a lesson we’ve learned too well, haven’t we?” he asks. She hasn’t noticed a sign of him being in the room, but she holds her breath and listens really really hard, just to be sure. If he’s here, he’s doing the exact same thing as her. Not that she’d exactly want to fight him, either.

She sees scales peek under the stall. She strikes out with the dagger and it vanishes with an annoyed hiss. “We could come from so many angles. That isn’t exactly a fortress you have there, Darling.” Frankly, if she wasn’t so scared the platitudes would begin to tick her off. Not that he’s not being charming and persuasive and all that stuff, but the attitude like she doesn’t even have a chance is really getting annoying.

And that’s when the idea comes to her. It’s a crazy plan, but it just might work, because he seems to have trouble thinking of things when they seem unlikely or out of character.

That also explains where he’s going to attack from. He came in from the left, and was rebuffed. So he’s probably going to attack from the right. And above, because it’s something a normal person wouldn’t think of, given that it’s a snake after all, and it’s what she’d do. So she waits, trying to still her breathing and staring at the spot.

She only has a second to prepare. It’s actually coming from the front to the right. She sees it out of the corner of her eye; the movement as it strikes over the edge, and she doesn’t flinch or dodge out of the way or slash out with a brilliant blade. Sons of Dixie actually dodges like it was expecting an attack and then sinks fangs into her shoulder.

It’s a good thing that Whisper isn’t physically poisonous. Or this Stand would probably have been able to copy that, too. That’s not to say it doesn’t hurt. It does, a lot, but she’s not unused to pain, and it’s not going to stop her from grabbing the snake around the throat.

It surges its muscles into staying in the wound, like she’s just going to try to brute force drag it out. Which is wrong. While it’s biting her, it can’t do other things. Like dodging.

She holds the dagger carefully to the thing’s throat. “What would happen,” she asks quietly, “…if I cut the throat of your Stand? Or took off Sons of Dixie’s head? It won’t be easy; Whisper’s not exactly a weakling. But the scales aren’t like Lotus Juice. It’s the power that makes them hard to touch. And since you can’t copy that too, it just takes a little strength to deal with that. Even if it takes a little while, I bet it’ll hurt.” She didn’t miss the pained reaction to the snake. If he was completely unconnected to his Stand, this wouldn’t work, but given that he reacted to the pain when Sons of Dixie got hurt, he was hardly unconnected to his Stand.

Sons of Dixie freezes, like it’s trying not to antagonize her. They remain a frozen tableau for a full minute before a chuckle meets her. “I can feel your fear. You don’t want to do this.” No, she doesn’t, but if she doesn’t back off she doesn’t have a choice. He wasn’t wrong; she is a survivor. “…But I can also feel your determination,” he adds quickly, as if sensing her resolve. “I wasn’t wrong about your strength. I believe you’ll survive this, too. Just as you’ve survived me.” Sons of Dixie begins to fade in her hands, just as the voice does. “Just a warning while I can. One of Harris’s relatives is on his way, but he’ll be waylaid.”
She opens the stall door and almost expects to see eyes again, but there’s nothing. “Wait, who? Who’s attacking him?” she asks, but the feeling of watchfulness is gone, as is the heaviness on her heart, of her Stand, and she’s alone talking to an empty bathroom again.

「Anthony Kiedis (User of Sons of Dixie) retire」

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively titled Beautiful Moment.
Well, it's now time to wait for that Vento Aureo announcement.
~Dreamer~
Patience is Unbreakable

Chapter Summary

Josuke tries to deal with this new world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Josuke might be Officer Josuke, self-appointed peacekeeper of Morioh, and have a better hold on his temper than when he was a teen. For whatever reason, none of the criminals he arrests have a sense of self-preservation, which means exactly none of them have the sense to not diss the hair, and he can’t just beat up normal criminals no matter how annoying they are and no matter the fact that Crazy Diamond means that he could hurt them without anybody ever even realizing it. He has to set a precedent, especially with an impressionable infant in the house and a woman he loves with all his heart who trusts him not to take justice into his own hands like that unless there’s no other options left. After her death, there’s still a kid who needs a role model better than a certain cranky mangaka and a good habit to have in memory of her. In general, he’s a lot better at this patience thing and doesn’t get the urge to punch someone just for looking at his hair funny.

Well. That’s actually a flat-out lie, but he’s better about not following up those sorts of impulses.

That doesn’t mean that it was a wise idea to leave either him or Okuyasu in the hotel. By themselves. With nothing to do.

He’d been angry at Jotaro-san for being the loose cannon and running off. The guy might be his nephew, but he was the…well, older adult, at least, he should be responsible. Then again, maybe as the uncle it’s his duty to be the responsible one.

However, having listened to Okuyasu growl ever darker threats at anyone who would hurt his favorite ‘niece’ and realizing that punching the TV into a smoldering husk was beginning to sound pretty good, he’s starting to get the idea that Jotaro probably had the correct idea. The last time they’d accidentally trashed a hotel, the Speedwagon Foundation had been there to clean up the place and smooth over what probably would have been an incident, and they’d been having issues getting ahold of the Foundation in this universe. Not getting kicked out is probably a good place to start.

He got pretty used to Josephine running off, particularly to check out shining objects. She’d been creating portals to escape her crib. She beat up a kid at school for having the audacity to kiss her. He’d gotten used to the idea that she could take care of herself, but he was still her dad and so he had to balance the worry and the pride. She could kick ass, with or without him, though he was pretty sure she really enjoyed fighting alongside him.

He probably wouldn’t have come directly if not for the single fact that the two most unshakeable people in his life had panicked. Neither Jotaro nor Josephine did panic, as an emotion. At least not at this level. Koichi argues that those tense moments with Sheer Heart Attack counted, but he wasn’t there so he can’t really judge. Anything that could get his little girl to panic enough to not just jump between two doorways using a ‘looks like it belongs in a horror video game’ hallway
but actually jump *an entire universe away just to get away*?

And he’d gotten something about Gordon Sarde, the sleazeball. He didn’t really like the guy, and neither did Josie, which showed she had taste. He wasn’t sure how the guy was involved, yet, but to join the Speedwagon Foundation, be a *trusted* employee and then betray them all in some unspecified way?

He doesn’t think he was even this enraged at *Kira*. He’s having to comb his hair just to keep it down, just like his temper.

“*I’m starving,*” Okuyasu whines at top volume, and they’re probably going to be getting a complaint from the neighbors but if that’s the least of their problems they’re lucky. As in, they’re still alive. To complain.

“Well, that’s probably a good idea. We’re no use to Josie or anyone else if we’re too hungry to fight.” It’s just using an excuse. Jotaro-san would never need an excuse, but then, he’s awkwardly straightforward like that. Josuke could call it ‘reconnaissance’, since he’d recently heard that in a pretty cool movie and felt like using it. Of course, young Jojo could call him on that, but then, she can call him on any of his crap. She always could. She had her mother’s intuition.

At least she was fine. And seemed a lot calmer than before, but he hadn’t really had that long of a conversation with her, so he couldn’t be too sure. He hadn’t gotten another phone call to assure him that “Yes, Mr. Higashikata, everything’s fine, your daughter’s just causing trouble again,” which makes him worry about Mercia, but, well. One thing at a time.

He’d asked her to stay in the hotel, which he’s *fairly* sure is this hotel but Jotaro-san had been the one to coordinate the plans to meet up and is now missing (read: looking for a fight to deal with the aggression and maybe even deal with the one who made the darling of the family so scared). He’d frantically asked the staff but they nearly called the cops on him, which was both alarming and highly ironic. He wasn’t about to go knocking on all the doors, but he pulls out Crazy Diamond and has the Stand go into every room. He’s *very* careful to put the walls back exactly as he found them, thanks to his Stand’s power. He doesn’t find her, but he does find a lot of extremely confused people who are probably all starting to wonder whether they’re hallucinating. So she probably left, even though he asked her not to. It’s not like he’s not used to it, but she could’ve at least mentioned it before she left. Then again, for a woman whose Stand allows her to cross the world in just a few steps, it’s probably not that big a deal in her mind.

At least Koichi had thought ahead and gotten him a change of clothes so that not everyone was staring at the uniform. Though, to be honest, that’s one of the reasons he likes looking like a police officer—people are usually too busy staring at that to stare at his hair. Still, he’s trying to blend in. For now. If he needs the authority, he can whip out the uniform again.

He’s distracted by thinking about stuff, so doesn’t notice the giant monster that also ‘looks like it should be part of a horror video game’ when it tries to smash his face. It’s Okuyasu who saves him from that particular fate using The Hand, erasing space to ensure that he’s not in the way when it tries to shred his head with meter-long claws.

It’s just an unfortunate side effect that this also happens to end up with his head colliding, hard, with a fairly solid metal fence. He winces and stares at what is probably the ugliest Stand he’s ever seen. It’s made a dent in the concrete, which is better than a missing arm, but his head still hurts.

“Thanks for the save, Okuyasu,” he responds.
“Like I’m going to let my best friend get hurt,” Okuyasu replies gruffly.

And then the Stand gets friends, which reminds him of memories of another Stand, bittersweet even after all these years. Whoever this is has a swarm Stand, like The Harvest. And… and the street’s a lot emptier than he remembers it being.

“Great,” he grumbles, but quickly pulls out Crazy Diamond and moves toward Okuyasu so they can have each other’s back.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I don’t have to say that the title is ironic. Celebrating Diamond is Unbreakable, and tying in previous chapters. Ones of particular interest might be Omakes 2 and 3 and War Council from Volume IV.
~Dreamer~
Chapter Summary

Josuke tries to wrap his head around the aftermath of the conference call.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Okuyasu grimaces as he stares at the demon corpses. Josuke never thought he’d be able to say he’d fought demons, but then, they do happen to be in another universe, possibly with different rules of reality. It’s easier to guess that demons exist only in this world, rather than being in his world, too, and he’s just oblivious. Though for all he knows, that’s the truth. He didn’t quite catch everything that had been said by the team of Stand Users or whatever they were—he and Okuyasu had been in the middle of a fight at the time, and despite the fact that it sounded like the projected sound followed him around rather than being concentrated in one spot or anything, he also couldn’t spare all the concentration to listen even if he could hear them.

Still, he heard enough to know that he’s a grandfather.

Grandfather. He rolls the word around in his mind, but it doesn’t feel real. It doesn’t feel real if he thinks about it in English or Japanese. ‘Grandfather’ just calls up pictures (that still hurt, even after all these years) of another man in a police officer’s uniform. Of a man to whose memory he had promised to keep Morioh safe. Josie’s kid apparently has a Stand and knows how to use it, now, and is apparently twenty or so years old.

Which is the same age as his daughter. Or would be, if not for this weird time jump thing. The age she looks after he’d saved her from looking half-dead, a soul-tearing parody of herself. He wonders how Josie’s dealing with that. Probably not that much better than he is. Seriously, that’s just weird. He’s young. Too young to be a grandfather.

And wait. That means that, if not for Crazy Diamond, she’d be around his age.

Josuke’s seen some pretty weird things in his life, but that’s probably the weirdest thing he’s ever encountered. It’s probably best if he doesn’t think about it too much.

Still what’s the kid like? He grew up in America, right? Would he join in on the video game tournaments that sometimes got out of hand, alongside Kakyoin, himself, and Josie? What’s his name? He hadn’t even asked. Or expressed his congratulations. Just kind of roundabout indicated he didn’t want to miss any of it. He wanted to be there for his daughter and any future kids. But that could go without saying, right? What had he even said? He’d been in the middle of battle and it was kind of a lot to drop on anyone. Not that Josephine hadn’t felt any differently, probably. She probably got that he was family, of course he was, and they’d all get whatever support they needed.

“Demons aren’t that weird, right?” Okuyasu asks quietly. He’s staring at Josuke like Jojo’s going to lose his mind at any second and Okuyasu’s going to have to deal with the fallout.

“No.” He quickly shakes himself out of the daze. “It’s just that I’m a grandpa. Apparently.” That sounds a little better than grandfather, but not by much.
“Nice!” Okuyasu yells and slams him on the back so hard he’d fall over if he didn’t have practice not doing that.

“B-but,” he mutters, not meaning to say much of anything. He’s just a little in shock.

“Hey, you raised Josephine and you got us,” Okuyasu points out, the voice of reason. For once. “It’s nice to have more family,” he adds, and as bright as the words are there’s a dark undercurrent that Josuke understands completely.

Josuke smiles and nods and they start walking again, looking for food, now that fighting has made them really hungry. They finally find a place that looks like St. Gentleman’s Bakery, and they’re too hungry to be too picky.

Okuyasu realizes that Josuke’s still off kilter, since he tells his friend to just sit down at one of the tables outside. He probably should argue. Okuyasu’s English is hardly the best, so it’ll probably lead to confusion and a longer wait, but he’s feeling too mentally exhausted to argue, so he sits obediently.

“Hello, sir?”

He shakes his head and glances up. It’s an old man, complete with a cane. It reminds him of his own old man. But he’s clearly not Joseph.

“I’m sorry to bother you when you’re in thought, but I was wondering if you could give me directions?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “I’m not local,” he answers politely. “I’m afraid I won’t be of much help.”

The man looks so dejected that he automatically stands up. It’s an instinct trained from babysitting Joseph Joestar and from years as a police officer. “Is there anything else I can do?”

The old man looks reluctant. “I don’t think I should trouble you any further,” he states hesitantly.

“I’ll help how I can,” he promises. “I can try to get directions on my phone.”

Black eyes slightly unfocused by age squint past him. “Is that a map across the street?” he asks, voice wavering.

Josuke turns to look and then nods, smiling again. “Do you need help across the street?” Given the reluctance, he can tell the man’s about to refuse, fearing he’s a burden, and Josuke shakes his head. “Never mind; I’m helping you across the street.”

“You’re such a nice young man,” the elder acknowledges. “As long as I’m not bothering you.”

“It’ll take a little while for the food to get here, trust me,” he reassures the man and takes his arm and walks to the crosswalk. He’s regaled with a few tales of grandchildren (which he listens to with a lot more interest than usual, and he usually listens to elders out of respect, due to the fact that they’re now personally relevant).

They make it to the sign, and then they’re out of sight.

Okuyasu walks out of the restaurant carrying two plates. And frowns. “Josuke? Where’d
you go?"

There’s the sound of a slight wind but otherwise nothing stirs.

Chapter End Notes

This volume is otherwise known as 'the one where all the Stand Users attack'.
I'm having a blast so far.
~Dreamer~
Back in Time, Part I

Chapter Summary

Josuke wakes up in a snowstorm with little idea of how he got there. (Hint: it's a Stand attack, because it's always a Stand attack.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Josuke’s freezing. And that’s possibly an understatement. His mind’s a little fuzzy as to how he got here or what he was doing. There was something important, something that he had to remember, but it’s gone now.

At least he’d taken to carrying around a couple of the buttons of his gakuran once he’d finally graduated, just to have something to remember his school years by. It was enough he was able, using Crazy Diamond, to recreate the whole thing and pull it on. It was warmer than the really thin long-sleeve he’s wearing. And he hasn’t grown too much, in any direction, which means it still fits pretty well.

It’s hard to trudge through the snow, which is most of the way up his calves. Even harder to see or hear. It’s practically a blizzard, with zero visibility and a muffling of all sound. He pulls his arms to himself, teeth chattering.

It also feels vaguely familiar, but he can actually sit down and think about why after he gets to some shelter.

He has the weird feeling that he’s being watched, but he can’t see anyone through the near sheet of white and isn’t sure how anyone else could see, either. Unless it’s a Stand. He sends Crazy Diamond out as far as his Stand can go to look around, but doesn’t see anything different, just a wasteland. Jotaro and Star Platinum would be really useful right about now. But they’re not here, and he can’t remember why they’re not here. He starts shaking even more violently when Crazy Diamond is out scouting around, though, so figures he’s using up vital energy and recalls his Stand, continues trudging.

Something looms out of the dark, and on instinct his Stand punches it. It turns out to be a snow-laden tree, and the impact is enough to shake a good chunk of snow onto his head and shoulders. Where it starts to melt, and make him even colder in the icy wind.

He’s really tempted to steal his nephew’s catchphrase right about now. But there’s no use grumbling about it. He quickly brushes off what he can (and punches the clothes, again, with Crazy Diamond, trying to get as much of the snow off as he can). There’s nothing he can do about the snow resting on his pompadour, though.

The wind slows, a little, and he can see little posts like the ones you’d see along the side of a road, and that’s at least a place to start. So he starts following them.

He finally sees what look like car tracks, and that’s definitely a good sign. Before this point the tracks had probably just been covered by the snow. If he follows a road long enough, he’ll find
shelter. Hopefully, he doesn’t die first.

And then he makes out a car, or what looks like a car, in all the snow, and breaks into a run. And promptly trips on something hidden by the drift of snow and falls, face-first, into the snow.

His face hurts. It feels like he was attacked, but he doesn’t have time to wipe the blood away. It bites at the hands he uses to prop himself up, so he uses Crazy Diamond (which hurts a bit less) to push himself up and get to his feet. Maybe it’s a little weird, but it’s nice to be able to give himself a hand. He sees the drops of red in the snow, and then looks up at the car, an actual destination, somewhere he can maybe get warmth at the very least, and begins walking again, brisk but more careful, because he’s not sure how many more spills like that he can take.

And then he slows.

The car is stuck in the snow. Why does this seem so familiar? There’s a memory trying to crawl out of his mind. He just can’t quite make it out.

He sees the woman in the front seat, and his brain short-circuits. There’s…there’s no way.

But no, he recognizes the woman at the driver’s wheel, and it’s enough to get him to stop, stock still, in the snow. “M-mom?” he whispers, word torn away by the wind, and then knows: this is a Stand attack. And also: he can’t mess this up.

All this time, his hero, the one he’s been imitating, is…himself. That snowy night when he was four, the time he almost died…

And if I freak her out too much or don’t get her and younger me to a hospital, I’m dead. But I’m not sure if I can even touch younger me without it being a problem, according to fiction and video games, so…plan B.

He can tell the minute she sees him in the rearview mirror. Her head swivels around to stare, and he can tell she’s taking in the uniform and the blood. “Wh-what do you want? Go away!” she yells.

She probably thinks he’s a punk, and is going to try to rob her or…something. He’s not really sure, and he’d really like some warmth right about now, but there are more pressing concerns, like making sure he doesn’t die in the past.

He glances in, and it’s a little alarming to see himself, sweating and feverish, so vulnerable in there. He can’t be too familiar or too…anything, though, or she’ll just freak out.

“That kid is sick, right? I’ll push your car for you,” he offers. It’s not really an offer, since he’s not about to listen if she says no, but it seems more polite and won’t have her attack him or anything. And this is his mom.

“She doesn’t know, has never really known, how to act when someone does something unexpected, but he gets to work.

It’s freezing, but he can fix his gakuran after he gets her unstuck and on her way, so he pulls it off and lays it in front of the wheel. He moves to the back of the vehicle and begins to push, helped (not that she can see) by an extra pair of white-and-pink hands. He doesn’t trust his physical strength right now.

And she’s just staring at him, confused. That’s not really going to help the situation, at all, so he raps on the window to get her
“Hurry up and step on the gas,” he advises, because he needs her to get going. “Once you get moving, don’t stop. Just keep going, or your tires will get stuck in the snow again.” And he’s not sure his strength will last long enough to help a second time.

“O-okay.” She nods and faces forward again, stepping on the gas.

He can feel his own gaze, but the kid’s so young and (he can say from experience) so out of it that the memories will be vague. He won’t realize that he’s seeing himself.

He gives one last push with the last of his strength, and the car’s finally moving.

“Thank you!” she shouts in joy, and he has Crazy Diamond fetch the coat, placing it gently in his hands. It flies a little, in the wind and the snow.

He smiles, weakly but it’s there. It’s a triumph. “You’re welcome, mom,” he mutters.

It’s a Stand attack. He’s still not sure when he got attacked or how the rules work, but he survived this once. He’s fairly sure it’s not over, though.

And then he falls forward into the snow, all strength gone, and it’s as if it swallows him, because two seconds later even the imprint has vanished.

Chapter End Notes

I know this isn't really a new headcanon but I wanted to write my own take on it (and get Josuke out of the way for a bit, and play around with Back in Time because it's a seriously fun Stand).

~Dreamer
Josuke gasps and sits up abruptly. That just makes him dizzy, so he sits for a moment quietly breathing before attempting to move again. It’s time for him to catalogue what he remembers.

A Stand! That’s right. He doesn’t remember having seen the Stand, but he’d ended up on that snowy night, and if he’d messed up that encounter he’d be dead. Or worse.

And…that’s right, he’s a police officer now, not a student, despite the gakuran. Which is now dry, as if nothing had happened. And he’d gone after his daughter, Josephine, because she’d freaked out when she’s not the type to freak out and escaped from something into another dimension, and, he’s pretty sure, got herself hit with Incognito, which means there’s a Dora with Sarde’s name on it. And he’d been with Okuyasu, and they’d gotten anxious waiting for the others to get back, and…

He frowns.

There’s something else that’s hiding on the edge of his mind, a vague memory, but he might not figure that out until the next jump.

He looks around, trying to place himself.

It’s…it’s Morioh. He doesn’t completely place the neighborhood—it’s kind of surreal, really. He’s been there on a beat before, but it’s different, like some of the shops changed or something. And there are less trees than he remembers. He thinks.

People are staring at him curiously, including an old woman, a middle-aged man, and a woman with two children. It’s a busier street than he remembers, with a more diversified age range, too. He guesses he looks a little shocked and is just standing around in the street. He puts his hands in his pockets and starts walking.

It’s a little aimless. Mostly he’s just trying to get a grasp on what’s going on, where he is. Well, when, really, to be specific. He tries to remember everything he knows about time travel. He knows that Josie really liked one trilogy in English, but it was after a really long day and he was only half awake.

And then he hears a really familiar yell. “Hazamada!”

It’s his voice. It’s no less disturbing after years and years, since the last time he faced a doppelganger like this, and what’s worse is, he doesn’t remember this happening at all.

That realization hits him with the impact of a train and he nearly screams. There’s something like a vice on his head, putting pressure on until his skull breaks and ends up some disgusting goop.
He can’t let that stop him, though, or it’s only going to get worse for his past self and his current self. So contradictions could quite possibly kill him. And he can’t use Crazy Diamond. Instead, he just mutters “great” under his breath and starts running.

It’s lucky that the light hasn’t turned so his past self has to wait a bit to start chasing him. It’s also lucky that he’s in better shape as a police officer than he was as a teen. And that he’s got a better knowledge of the city. He finally manages to lose the other and practically collapses on a lawn.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to cause any trouble for me,” another very familiar voice warns, and he tenses, feeling panicky, before realizing the Stand induced headache is going away, though it’s like he can still feel the echoes of it in his skin or something.

Of course he’d manage to lose past Josuke around Rohan’s house. But just because the bastard was hostile meant that this might actually be helpful—the mangaka wouldn’t (likely) bring this up in a casual conversation with his other self at any point simply because the two didn’t do casual talk because they hate each other’s guts.

“Stand User,” he answers accidentally, before flinching again. The headache doesn’t return. He sits up cautiously.

“Of course it is.” Rohan sips his tea, glaring over the top of what looks like a foreign newspaper disdainfully. “Are they likely to attack me, too?”

Josuke can’t quite believe his ears. “Are you really that selfish?”

“I happen to have a deadline to meet. Something a reckless brat without a job wouldn’t understand.” He places the paper carefully on the table.

Josuke feels his hair beginning to stand on end and begs himself to calm down. Losing his temper here helps nothing. Besides, Rohan won’t believe him when he explains he’s a police officer, especially given what he’s wearing.

He stands, ignoring the man, and walks inside the house, because he feels like he’s being watched again, and it’s only a matter of time until someone decides to look here, since he was supposedly lost somewhere near here.

“What do you think you’re going? I didn’t invite you—” Rohan complains, and he ignores that too. He feels like someone’s watching him, again, but he hasn’t gotten attacked yet which means that it isn’t any of his friends. Still, he has the feeling that he’s not going to be lucky enough to avoid them forever. It seems like the Stand is putting him in situations where it’s hard to avoid changing the past, so he heads up the stairs without stopping. He doesn’t pay too much attention to the mangaka currently yelling something about trespassing at him.

He has good instincts, at least. The doorbell rings after he’s upstairs for no more than a minute and a half.

“Don’t get the door,” he hisses.

The mangaka calls down, “It’s unlocked!” (At least he got Heaven’s Door out; he’s not a complete idiot.)

He looks around frantically for somewhere to hide. “Why did I expect you to help me at all?”
Rohan shrugs. “I don’t know.”

He runs into the workroom and breaks through the window, and Rohan yells after him, “You’ll pay for that window!” Josuke tries desperately to remember if he’s messed something up but his head isn’t killing him and all he vaguely remembers is one day when Rohan was being annoying and kept saying something about a debt.

Chapter End Notes

I might revisit this chapter later; I'm not 100% happy with it. I've had a headache (probably due to stress and/or lack of sleep) for most of this week, and tests are coming up that I really need to study for. I've also had a bunch of ideas but when it comes to actually writing any of them...so head's up if this series goes on brief 'I'm in school' hiatus that's why. Also because this Stand's awesome and I don't feel I'm quite doing it the justice it deserves (compared to part I).
~Dreamer~
Josuke starts planning a counter attack.

Josuke is really starting to get sick of the snow.

It’d always been…well, a novelty. It’s not like it snowed in Morioh all that often, which made that blizzard that much weirder. And, he supposes, he’d always kind of associated it with comfort. Being safe. Just like a pompadour was a hero’s hairstyle.

Maybe that really had been him. Depends on how the Stand worked, whether he actually had been messing around with reality-as-it-had-been, or whether it only changed things if it managed to erase him from existence, and now that he thinks about it, he’ll never really know.

But now he’s learning that snow is treacherous. It promises comfort, but it’s sometimes a lie.

Being someone else in the snow was fine. Being the hero in the snow was a lot colder and more uncomfortable, and he realizes that the wound on his face still hasn’t healed.

Damn it, Rohan. Of course the mangaka had noticed and not asked him if he was okay or anything else.

He pulls the gakuran tighter around himself and sticks his hands in his pockets and keeps moving to stay warm. He’s cursing Kishibe (not an uncommon thing) and trying to remember when in his life he’d been in snow like this again. Is it possible that the Stand sent him back to the same time twice? So far, it seems like it’s slowly throwing him forward in time, from when he was four dealing with the side effects of gaining a Stand to when he was sixteen learning about Stand Users and trying to save the town. Then again, two moments is hardly enough to make a pattern from.

It’s a shock when his phone rings. He didn’t remember he even had it on him, let alone think anyone would call him. It’s not like someone can place a call through time. Can they?

He checks the caller ID. And groans. It’s Jotaro-san. If anyone’s not going to give up, it’s his nephew.

But, wait, what if he answers at the same time as his past-self? That would definitely be a problem. He decides to ignore it on the first couple tries, because usually if the other person has to redial two times or so, he’s not by his phone.

And then be very careful about what he says. On the other hand, if anyone can help him fight this Stand User or at least give him an idea about where he is and when he is, it’s Jotaro-san.

His nephew keeps calling, most likely muttering ‘yare yare daze’ under his breath. When he’s as sure as he can be that his past self isn’t going to answer, he hesitantly hits the button to answer the call.
He can hear the frown in the man’s voice. “Josuke. Why are you in Russia?”

He blinks and feels his heart seize uncomfortably. “What?” His breath is coming faster. It’s getting colder. Not another blizzard. He’s going to have frostbite if not worse after this. But…

If this Stand is giving him his own personal tour through memory lane, there’s only one reason he’d be in Russia.

He instantly falls, burrowing himself into the snow. There’s no other way to hide himself effectively, since there are no trees. It’s barren. If not for the snow, they probably would have seen him already.

And, hang on if it’s Russia, why does he feel like someone’s watching him? With Rohan’s house, it made some sense, because he was a guy with blood on his face running through the city like he was being chased, which he was, but…and then, in the snow of Morioh-cho…

“Yesterday you were in Morioh. I know you’re worried about your daughter, but…” Jotaro-san continues, and it’s about the level of emotion he expected from his nephew, but there’s something off about it, in a different way than Jotaro-san’s weird mood for…months? “…while Josie could have gotten you, we’ve lost contact with her.”

“Stand attack,” he explains, and doesn’t even feel the world tremble. “And be quieter. I don’t want to draw his attention.” If there’s a point where he’s tempted to change things, it’s now, because he knows there’s not a moment that his Jojo regrets more, even if it turned out fine, and he reminds himself of the pain and if he breaks space-time, there won’t be him or Josie or even his grandson. The only time more tempting would be when that bastard Sarde scares his daughter and her best friend into another dimension, but again, he can’t change things. He can’t.

No matter how tempting.

It might make things even worse. Or break the world entirely. Or other not-so-great things to be avoided.

To his credit, his nephew instantly shuts up. “How can I help?” he asks, and Josuke tries to decide exactly how much he can tell his nephew.

He hears movement on the snow and scrunches down even further, the cold biting through his skin. “I keep being teleported.” Nothing. Then again, he can probably tell Jotaro-san anything and he’ll keep it secret and not tell anyone anything because that’s the kind of guy he is. He’s actually kind of lucky it was his nephew that called and not anyone else. “Even if I defeat this Stand User, I may not remember.” Again, nothing but a gust of cold wind and snow. “I’m trying to figure out how to defeat him without messing anything up.” He gasps a little as the four come into view—he recognizes Jojo and Mercia and that bastard Sarde, but not the fourth with the Arrow and really dorky looking glasses. Still, he knows exactly what this is, despite the innocent appearance, and how it plays out. How it has to play out.

At this, Jotaro-san snorts. “Time travel Stand, huh?”

Josuke gapes at his phone and takes it away from his ear, staring at it. There’s no way he heard that correctly. None. The world doesn’t waver. “E-excuse y—”

Running. Other more noticeable noises.

“Who’s a living expert on Stands that manipulate time?” Jotaro-san’s amused now.
He stops to think about his experience fighting Stand Users. Thinks about the eyes he keeps feeling on him, even when it makes no sense. “What’s the likelihood this is a distance Stand?”

He glances over and sees the man dance out of the way of B3’s rush attack, glasses askew, and pull back the bowstring in a smooth, practiced motion. He’s aiming directly at Josephine. His heart stops and he almost doesn’t hear the reply.

“Almost nothing,” his nephew responds immediately. “That kind of power requires a lot to maintain, if Star Platinum or any of the ones I’ve fought or heard about are any indication.” He pauses and then sounds thoughtful. “Actually, all the ones I know about are close-range Power Stands.”

“I keep feeling someone watching me,” Josuke explains.

He hears the twang of the bow even above the howling of the wind, hears the desperate scream of his daughter and the crunch as the arrow strikes through Mercia. He remembers the same panic, the same terror, with Koichi.

He can’t interfere.

It helps that he knows how this ends, because it’s the only thing keeping him from bolting to his daughter’s side.

“How far in the future are you?” Jotaro-san asks, and when Josuke makes a noise of protest mutters his signature “yare yare daze”. “I’m trying to calculate range,” he elaborates calmly.

The problem is that when in the future he is makes almost no sense, given the whole dimension travel on top of everything else. He tries to work it out. It’s been about twenty-five years at this point since he was a student trying to find the asshole murderer in Morioh-cho (well, before the police badge joined the other pins in his collection) if he’s going by his own age, but only about… hang on, if he’s counting from the point he was at where he’s got a grandson, he’s in the future by nineteen years.

His head’s starting to hurt. Math is even harder when you’re trying to ignore the trauma your daughter’s going through, because stepping in would be worse than saving her friend.

“Josuke. Still there?” Jotaro asks.

But if his nephew’s asking about this, it’s the furthest he’d gone that’s important. So that’d be the first jump, to 1987. Going by age, that’s thirty-nine years, or less if he goes with the date he left from. “The most it’s been is thirty-nine years, though honestly it’s probably less,” he answers eventually, making a face. He’d laughed along with Okuyasu when his teachers had told him he’d need math in his daily life.

“Answer quicker next time.” Jotaro-san replies, sounding annoyed. He’s probably actually worried, not that he’d say so. “Probably not your first jump. If it’s that far out, there’s absolutely no way it can be long range, not with the amount of energy it’d take. Even if the Stand was near you all the time. How does the teleportation work?”

He sees where his nephew’s going with this. “It doesn’t look random, no. I have a close call, I manage to avoid it, I get teleported. Which means it’s not a remote Stand, because that’s a higher level of control than just a Stand would be capable of.”

He hears another scream and can’t help but glance up. The man has crossed the distance between himself and the three. He apparently pulled the arrow out of Mercia and immediately
plunged it into Sarde. “So,” he whispers, trying to stay calm, “…find the User, beat him up, don’t be noticed in the past.”

“I’d wish you luck,” Jotaro-san replies gruffly, “…But you don’t need it.” He hangs up.

“Thanks anyway, Jotaro-san,” he mutters into the wind as he puts the phone away. And then he closes his eyes, because he feels a little dizzy.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm back! Until the end of Back in Time at least.
The previous chapter came from a point in time where it was planned that he'd be dodging his cop self with the help of Jotaro. Whenever I reach the end, it may get added in a second draft, I dunno.
Once I reach the end (there's material for a month) there might be another hiatus. Depends on how busy volunteering + job searching goes. Still, I'm excited to introduce the newest character.
The User of Back in Time steps up his game.

When he opens his eyes again, he’s hiding in some bushes. That’s an awfully convenient place for the Stand to drop him, which makes him instantly suspicious. If he’s in some bushes, he won’t be seen, which is the exact opposite of the point of the Stand, so there’s some sort of trick here. Still, no one’s looking at him directly, which means, for the moment, he has the advantage.

This is the time to look for the enemy. He still feels that gaze on him, which means the User has to be close by. He’s not sure of his window of time, but he’s not just going to wait and try again. Not when it’s jeopardizing the ones he loves. For all he knows it’s not going to go consistently forward in time and will teleport him to his wife’s funeral—or, worse, the hospital beforehand.

Whoever or whatever is stalking him has to be hiding in the same way he is, or they would’ve been noticed, too. Unless the User going unnoticed is a characteristic of the Stand itself…but no.

The User can’t be invisible. That would make the Stand invincible, and no Stand is invincible. It could be that he just has to make it through all these jumps without changing the past, but he’s not willing to wait that long. If nothing else, he’s had close calls the last two times. He can’t keep relying on luck to keep him from breaking the past as he remembers it.

Unfortunately, they’re either hiding in bushes or behind that concrete wall over there, so he hasn’t spotted them yet. He nearly starts to get up to check and maybe get some sort of reaction from the User, but he hears footsteps and gets back down just in time.

An unfortunately familiar blond man walks past, and his hairdo stands on end with the force of his hatred, but he wills himself back. It’s only the fact that he knows he pounded Kira’s head into the pavement and then the monster got run over by an ambulance that lets him stay calm and in place. He doesn’t have his comb to get his hairdo back to normal, either, but movement would probably draw attention right now and he can’t afford that, despite the urge to make sure everything’s in place.

And then someone else he recognizes jumps over the concrete wall, and his heart jumps into his throat and he can’t quite hide the gasp of pained surprise. It’s Shigechi, alive. The guy could sure be annoying when he was alive, but then he’d died, yet another of Kira’s victims, and Josuke’d realized that he should’ve been nicer. He and Okuyasu had been thinking about how to trick him and use him and—seriously, using someone else’s friendship like that was anything but great.

“Found it. Why does someone I don’t know have my sandwich?” Shigechi asks, and yeah, of course he’d still be obsessive and stubborn about his food and—really? Was that what it took to find Kira? Where had he been hiding, anyway? Had he been—had he been five feet from them at the time and none of them knew? Yeah, okay, maybe Kira would’ve killed them all, but—

Maybe, maybe they might’ve saved Shigechi? Is that what this Stand is showing him?
He’s biting his lip hard enough to draw blood, and oh yeah, there’s still blood crusted on his face, and he can’t interfere, can’t—

Harvest just pulled that bag apart. That’s a hand. That’s one of Kira’s—what the hell, who does that, who just kills people and carries around their hands in a paper bag meant to contain food—

*Criminal scum like Kira, that’s who.*

Shigechi’s just as freaked out as he is. And actually asks a good question, about who carries around hands in bags, and gets a creepy feeling about Kira, and even if he hadn’t been *intelligent*, he’d sure had a lot of common sense. Maybe even more than they did, back then.

And then Kira starts telling Shigechi about the little, mundane details of his life, and Josuke tries to hold his breath, because the suspect only ever does that if they know the hostage isn’t going to make it or if they have an ego and Josuke suspects it’s a little bit of both. Those mundane details are a decent way of tracking down a suspect.

He clenches his fists when he hears that the serial killer says he has no stress. And that he wants to live a quiet life, because he doesn’t deserve one, at all. And he talks about elimination, and Josuke is completely, utterly still, because he can’t risk moving.

Shigechi’s a second from killing Kira, slicing the carotid, but the killer tricks Shigechi into taking the coin, and Josuke knows, knows without a shred of doubt, that it’s been turned into a bomb, and Shigechi gets exploded.

“No!” he screams, and a second later realizes what he’s done. Shigechi’s bleeding face turns to his, disbelieving and confused and in agony, and Kira turns, too, shocked and a little angry, and the next thing he knows he’s falling to his knees, barely catching himself with a trembling hand. The sheer screaming pain that slices down every nerve leaving an inferno in its wake leaves him breathless, and Crazy Diamond fades back into him.

He finally manages to take a breath, and it subsides to a new kind of pain.

The pain is different than anything he’s ever experienced. If he had to name it somehow, he’d say it’s the pain of a phantom limb, only he’s not missing any limbs. It feels more like he’s missing part of his soul. He glances down and his arm is already seethrough, like a ghost.

(Calm down, Josuke-kun, it’s not like you’re turning into one of those creepy ghosts from a haunted house. More like…Reimi-chan. And it’s temporary; it has to be. It’d be too powerful otherwise. Though I probably only have until I disappear completely, if that American movie was any indication. I just have to figure out how to beat it and this’ll all go away. The User’s still a good bet. I just have to beat up the User. This isn’t the end. I won’t let it be.)
Josuke figures out how to get back to the future.

This time, it feels almost natural to fade out, and it’s fading back into existence that feels unnatural. He glances downward to see that both hands are see-through, and it’s getting harder to breathe (although why that’s true if he’s disappearing isn’t clear, given that he’s pretty sure ghosts don’t need to breathe, though the stories hadn’t really focused on that and neither had any of the anime).

He’s on a street, huddled under an awning. It’s raining. He’s pretty sure it’s Morioh, too, but it also looks familiar for some other reason he can’t quite tell. Of course, it should, if he’s visiting moments in his past subject to change.

It’s hard to think. It’s hard to look around and figure out where he is, but it’s required and just because he has a headache and it’s hard to think doesn’t mean he’s not going to do everything he can, because Josie and her son are counting on him.

His poor hair really needs a brush right now, but he’s pretty sure he doesn’t have one and even if he did, as much as it hurts to think it, he doesn’t have the time. That’s enough to get him thinking and breathing and feeling again. He can fix things—his grandkid who grew up without a great grandfather, because if the dad was a bastard like the one he met when saving Josie, then he doesn’t have much hopes for the rest of the family either; his girl who grew up way too fast and she still should be in college, not forty years old and dealing with the consequences of a life she didn’t have to have lived.

And then there’s pain again, because, well. He’d been unplanned, the result of adultery, and it wasn’t good, it wasn’t good at all, but he was here, and without that Josie wouldn’t have been here either, and he now had a grandkid and given Josie’s interest in people in general maybe he wouldn’t have had a grandkid at all without all of this, and he’s sure the kid has to be a good person and he wouldn’t just wish him out of existence, right? He’ll just hug the stuffing out of him instead and treat him to ice cream and movies and video games and make him feel wanted and loved because anyone great deserves that.

But now he’s actually thinking about all of this, and processing it, and it’s motivation and feeling enough to get him to move past this, which is maybe what he needs.

And then lightning strikes a Pepsi sign, and rain or no rain he moves out of his shelter. It won’t bother a ghost, anyway. Even the crusted blood is barely noticeable.

He glances down the street. That’s—isn’t that Rohan’s car? And there’s the bastard of a mangaka—

Who explodes. First it’s just blood, gushing out like it’s decided evacuating the jerk’s body is the best idea he’s heard all year, and then he just explodes. Like Shigechi.

Only there’s nothing left. Which they never find, later, but it’s one thing to know about the
modus operandi and another thing to *witness someone explode until nothing’s left.*

And then he has to hide behind the car, because everyone else is coming, and this time he doesn’t get to see everyone explode, but he hears it. There’s a sense of déjà vu, terrifying and inevitable and it aches in a way that makes no sense. Even the dialogue, the questions, are achingly familiar despite the fact that he’s pretty sure he’s never heard any of them ask those questions before. And he knows the explosion’s coming, wincing and bracing himself for disappearing any second now and being teleported to the past where maybe it’ll be easier to find the User—

And—hang on, wait a minute. He’s still here. His other self got exploded for knowing about Hayato and Kira, so why is he still here? Why didn’t he get detonated along with his other self? He’s not complaining; living is a great thing, but—

He cautiously peeks over the side of the car, and—

Yeah. Hayato’s still standing there, looking shocked and confused. It wasn’t a sure thing that he’d be there, of course, but he’d had a hunch.

“Just to check, Kira’s Killer Queen just blew me up for asking you questions about him, right?” he asks, almost cheerfully, and suddenly he has energy again. Great.

Hayato almost has a heart attack until he realizes he’s still standing there, and so is Josuke. He splutters for a bit before he settles on a somewhat lost, “I don’t understand.”

He glances down and sees that one of his hands is normal again. “Don’t worry about it, Hayato-kun. Kira will be dealt with soon enough. Right now, I need to deal with someone else putting Morioh in danger.”

He looks around. The User has to be panicking now. He’s been seen by yet another person, which should have altered his fate even further, maybe even killed him, but instead he’s here, alive, feeling and looking better than normal. It’s luck, but it takes skill to turn luck into victory, and that’s what he’s going to do.

There’s one man who’s sweating, and when it’s raining that makes no sense. He recognizes the face. Oh, it’s younger than he remembers, but it’s the old man he’d helped cross the street before this all happened. And having seen the difference now, the middle-aged man in Morioh-Cho earlier suddenly becomes familiar as well. As usual, Jotaro-san was right. The User accompanied him to every era, but as he changed age relative to the time period, he was less obvious, except in cases like this where an extra person would have been obvious, so he had to hide.

He grins, and waves cheekily, and begins running. In this case, all he has to do is use his mind, not his Stand, for victory. Specifically, he remembers Koichi warning him about Reimi’s alley. But the old man (or younger man, now) doesn’t look like he’s native to Morioh, so unless his Stand offers him a cheat code or something, the User doesn’t know about the alley.

The confident grin, the running, those are designed to make the User panic even more, to get him to chase after without thinking about the fact that this might be a trap. From the sound of the footsteps running after him, that little tactic is working.

Fortunately, he gets around the corner before the User does, and he pulls out Crazy Diamond. He punches the mailbox into the wall and slows down his pace.

The User follows after, panting. “What are you doing, Josuke? You can’t escape Back in Time. I’ll just teleport you to the next era, and the next, and the next.”
“Oh?” Josuke asks without turning, despite the urge to see the man’s face as he does so. It’s so tempting to see if the man is buying it, how he’s reacting, but from what Koichi says that’s probably the ghosts trying to trick him into turning around, and he’s terrified enough of ghosts that it’s enough of a deterrent. Well, besides the whole dying thing, and the fact that he’s not sure that the guy will undo it or even that undoing it will mean anything if he’s dead. “If that’s true, then why are my arms turning back to normal?” He holds his hands up and does jazz hands with them, just to demonstrate his point. “I avoided being exploded by Bites the Dust, too. If Kira were here, he’d probably babble something about defying fate. That’s how your powers seem to work, after all. Hayato said people were ‘destined’ to die, after we asked him. You play with the rules until someone makes a mistake, and then they’re ‘destined’ to fade away. And yet I’m still alive. Still here.” Maybe not looking back now will give away his act, but it’s hard to tell, and it’s not as if he has a choice. He’s not looking back.

“Why won’t you look at me?” the User asks, and, well, that’s an easy enough question to misdirect.

“Because of what’s behind you,” he answers, and fixes the mailbox he’s been keeping in stasis. The sound’s enough. He hears the man scream, but that’s all he really hears.

Josuke’s vision whites out.

The world fades back in, color slowly returning to the world like watercolor, and now he recognizes he’s on the other side of the street from the café where Okuyasu’s probably still waiting, staring at the map. He glances over.

The old man is wheezing on his back, and he feels a hint of guilt, but then he remembers what the Stand User put him through.

“Back in Time should have been able to deal with…” The man coughs. “I was promised… my grandchildren…”

“Josuke! There you are! Are you okay?” Okuyasu yells and runs across the street, ignoring the honking of cars.

He kneels at the old man’s side. “Who’s promising? Did someone kidnap your grandchildren or promise you money to give to your grandchildren in exchange for…a price on my head?” That sounds like one of the American spy movies Josie dragged him to, but it also sounds like it describes the situation.

The man passes out before he can answer the question, but the light in his eyes looks very much like the acknowledgement of truth he gets when he’s interrogating someone. He may be a victim, but he’s also far too dangerous to be left on his own.

“He’s a Stand User. I beat him, but I’m not sure that there’s a Speedwagon Foundation to take care of him,” he tells Okuyasu and takes out his phone.

Crazy Diamond appears to heal the man, too.

“What did he do?” Okuyasu is looming, but then, he always does that when one of his friends is hurt.

“And…why are you wearing your gakuran?” He sounds confused, now, but Josuke ignores him.

“Hello, Jotaro-san. I have a rogue Stand User here.” He pauses. “What do I do with him?”
“I’ll send Rihan and Sakura. They should be close enough.” Jotaro-san sounds a little concerned, but better than before.

“Actually,” a voice he’s heard twice before interrupts (and that might be a growl in the background from his nephew), “…a few of my Slayers should be close. We don’t have quite the worldwide presence we did, but we’re trying to be your Speedwagon Foundation.” She sounds more cheerful than during the meeting. “They should take him off your hands soon. I’d think a witch would be able to hold one, right?”

He thinks about that and shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever met one.” The thought that ghosts might be real occurs to him, but he shrugs that off with a shiver.

“Good luck finding Xander. Even if he has weird powers now he’s still a trouble magnet. By the way, you’re way cooler than his paternal grandfather, and you better stay that way or else.” She hangs up.

「William Kaulitz (User of Back in Time) retire」
Chapter Summary

Picture of Back in Time.
Jojo, Fitz, and Thief Girl (Darling) meet back up again, discuss Stand Attacks, and then see something else bizarre.

Jojo feels a little worried when they finally find Darling emerging from the bathroom, tears in her eyes. “Are you all right?” he asks her, enveloping her in a hug, and his instincts are correct because while she flinches a little the way she hugs him back means she needed this more, for once. “One of your relatives is in danger,” she manages, “…and he was gonna kill you both and I like you…” She bites her lip to stem the flow of words. “But I saved you, so no need to worry.”

“We fought a Stand User too.” Fitz looks worried, but Xander sees something different about her. She’s…stronger, in a word. Doesn’t look quite as scared. It’s strength in her eyes. “But good job.” An afterthought. Are all British people so socially inept? Johan rolls his eye.

“He turned Whisper against me,” she whispers, and the snake curls close to her shoulder as if to reassure, “…and Whisper’s been my only friend for so long, but it was okay, because I managed to fix it. Me.” She finally pushes him away, and her eyes are watery but still with this new confidence. Probably because she hadn’t managed anything like that before. She’d overcome her fear. Jojo remembers how liberating that can be.

“Thank you.” He gives her a honest smile and a thumb’s up, and she smiles, shy but genuine. Then he looks at Fitz. “And besides, my family, adopted or blood, are strong. I have to believe in them, right?”

Speedwagon should definitely smile more often, Johan thinks. It makes him look less like Giles and more like the younger person I’m pretty sure he is.

“You get another gold star,” he agrees.

“Yipee!” he yells and laughs at the way Fitz’s expression freezes. “You really need to loosen up.”

“Forgive me if I don’t fully trust your judgment there,” Fitz states sarcastically.

“As much fun as it is, I think I’ve had enough of the mall. What about you?” he asks, realizing that so far they’ve been lucky, but if they keep being attacked in a place with a lot of people, there are bound to be casualties.

“Let’s go!” the other two respond together.

Fitz is clearly a little impatient as Xander briefly gets sidetracked by buying a duffel and tools, but he feels odd about leaving the Stand information by itself even if the place is abandoned, and he’d like to fix a few things like doors and locks if only as a meditation-like activity. He’s had practice carrying around his life in a duffel lately, and to be honest he kind of misses it. He’ll wait to start fixing things until after he reads the Stand information, though, since judging by recent events that actually is more than a little important. And he won’t fix anything too obvious—including the windows, unfortunately. No reason to give people the idea to start poking around.

They start walking back to the abandoned apartment building. Xander’s still on edge, which is why he jumps when Fitz taps him on the shoulder. “Did you see movement?” he asks, unusually serious, and in response Jojo slows his breathing until it’s steady, mindful, and reaches out with his mind.

“Whatever it is, it’s not alive. But that doesn’t mean that it can’t be a Stand,” he warns, when he’s fairly sure he’s not missing anything.

“There!” Darling calls, and they glance over in time to see a stone gargoyle duck into the
shadows of a building.

Johan blinks. “Uh, Doctor, are Weeping Angels actually a thing?”

“You know that came in the form of a short story first,” Fitz lectures before sighing at the blank look. “Never mind. It’s good reading. I recommend it.”

He feels someone else approaching at a decent speed, only it feels like it’s up. It could maybe be a flying gargoyle, but he hadn’t sensed the other one, so if the Stand or witch or whatever is at all consistent, this means it’s someone else. He turns and looks up.

And blinks. (There’s a pun in there. Probably. But this isn’t the time.)

There’s a woman flying in on a metal hang glider. She’s much higher up than anyone just on a hang glider has a right to be. It’s really hard to get that lift (and now he’s got the slightest image of Joseph trying it, the big goofball), so she probably had to have jumped off the top of a building. Her blonde hair is cut short, regulation even, and the black leather looks like something someone in the army would wear on their days off (well, not that he’d really seen that from Riley, but Riley was kind of a stealth army man, so maybe that didn’t count?). The leather boots are seriously awesome. She has a sword, a metal pair of binoculars, and a pistol at her side and a sniper rifle at her back.

He points silently, just in case he might give away her position to the gargoyle (assuming she’s not controlling them, anyway) and watches Fitz’s jaw drop.

“That’s illegal,” Fitz mutters quietly, and at Johan’s questioning eyebrow elaborates in a whisper, “…This isn’t America. Gun rules are much more strict.”

Even as they watch, she glances in their direction and then in ease switches to one hand holding herself on the glider, the other pulling out the binoculars to get a better look at them. She’s supporting her whole weight on one hand. There’s something very familiar about her, but he can’t quite place it. She’s definitely not Buffy, who he’d recognize anywhere, anywhen. Is she a new Slayer, maybe? She doesn’t look familiar, but it’s not like he knows half the Slayers since he was in Africa, and they’d kept him out of Council affairs since he got back.

Johan waves cheerily.

“Jojo!” Fitz hisses, even as the blonde looks confused.

“What, she’s gonna see us anyway,” he points out reasonably. “We’re just standing in the middle of the street, in plain sight. It won’t mean much now if she’s an enemy, and if she’s a friend, this’ll tell her we’re at least friendly.”

“You’re still a lunatic,” he mutters, but there’s a grudging respect for the plan that honestly Xander had thought out for more than a few seconds.

She secures her binoculars at her side again and reaches back up to the glider, effortlessly turning it and pulling it into a dive towards them. They’ll meet her and figure out her intentions soon enough.
Stand At Attention

Chapter Summary

Jojo, Fitz, and Thief Girl (Darling) meet a new Stand User.

Whoever this lady is, she clearly is either a Slayer or has military training. Though, the soldier still present somewhere in his psyche points out reasonably that the two aren’t mutually exclusive. Being a Slayer was being drafted to a military post at which point you learned everything you possibly could in the hopes that at least some of it could keep you alive for just a little while longer.

And, man, he’d thought he’d been getting better about being in his own head after years Watchering in Africa, but this was as depressing as teenagerhood. Maybe Whisper really had shaken a few things loose. At least he had Pretender and even a few new friends he’d picked up along the way to keep him on an even keel, especially when he can’t Tora any of the previous (dead!) Watcher’s Council bastards in the face. He debates for all of two seconds before he decides that yes, defacing the tombstones or smashing their skeletons up would be too cruel, too morbid, even for him. Which reminds him, vampire nest; he should pass the warning along, although he suspects that both he and the shinily new ISWC had more pressing concerns than just a stray possibly vicious pack of vampires, and really, his life might be kind of messed up when he can wish for the simple days of patrolling for supernatural bloodsuckers every night after, shudder, homework.

Point is, when he watches the way the blonde moves as she maneuvers midair with appreciation, he’s admiring her strength, her technique.

Goddess, he’s really hoping she’s not an enemy, because he’d hate to face that, someone with that control, that much awareness of their own body and how to use it and, presumably, how to hurt others. And, oh, Willow’s got him doing it now. Well, she’ll probably be happy that he’s swearing to her standards, or something, and he misses her and they really need to talk, but not now. Obviously.

Fitz has misread the situation, though, because he sighs. Loudly. Pointedly. Like he’s checking her out, and, yes, he kind of does have a thing for blonds, especially strong, confident blonds, but that’s not important right now. It’s easy enough to misread the situation, though, especially when bad timing is a Harris family tradition. Though he’s not really a Harris anymore, huh? Not really. Which will never not be awesome. “Please, Fitz, I’m not Joseph,” he mutters just loud enough for his friend to hear, and the eyebrows raise pretty high in response. Although that’s unfair, because Joseph…

For all Joseph behaved like a hyperactive child on candy, for every bit of that act that was genuine, there was also…it was also a smokescreen. Nothing new there, then. Playing dumb, playing the fool, to get others to underestimate you, to like you better, whatever was needed for the situation. ‘Course, Joseph probably would be checking her out even as he evaluates her fighting style from simply her gliding in, or something. Which he’s kind of doing, but more of the latter than the former.

When she’s fairly close, he reaches inside for where Pretender hangs out, and feels the Stand stir in readiness. If she plans to use any of her admittedly pretty weapons on them, he’ll be ready.
She touches something on the crossbar of the glider, and the wing retracts, sending her falling. By the way she controls her body like it’s a simple dive into your average neighborhood pool and rolls into a short run toward them, unhurt, Johan can tell she’s an expert. That she’s done this, regularly, and for some reason no one’s filed a report with ISWC.

That he knows of.

He gets that being in Africa was important and all that, but seriously, he was out of the loop for way too long with stuff like this.

She gives a short bow, like she’s an old-fashioned duelist and they’re all going to draw old-fashioned foils or giant pistols or something.

And then in the space of a blink there’s a cyborg behind her, guns at the ready. It’s weird enough to be a Stand, but there’s something awfully familiar about it. He hasn’t dreamt of it recently enough to recognize it, though. Maybe he’ll schedule that, if he can figure out how. Then again, it’s Pretender who’s somehow involved, so it doesn’t really matter if he consciously knows how as long as his Stand does.

Of course, that doesn’t help him if he gets shot now. He feels the weird invisible water to his left, so LJ is out, and he feels both Darling and Whisper shuffle closer behind him, clinging.

He swallows. It’s probably good that he’s here and not Buffy or Willow, since they would completely wig out at the sight of a gun, but he’s not all that comfortable with them either. He has a theory, though. Or, well, it doesn’t have enough substance to be a theory. More like a fleeting instinct.

He raises his hands. A careful surrender. He doesn’t call out Pretender, even when he can feel his Stand stirring restlessly in his mind, worried for his safety.

“What are you doing?” Fitz hisses under his breath, but he doesn’t look, doesn’t dare take his eyes off the woman.

“If she was our enemy, one of those Stand Users we’ve been running into in this ridiculous Team Tryout, she would’ve just shot us down in the street, and there’s probably nothing even you could do about it,” he responds, feeling sure about this. Maybe, like the others, it’s just that she has an ego. Maybe she wants to gloat.

It’s a gamble. “She pulled her Stand out as a test, isn’t that right? Figure out if we were Stand Users?”

She stares with piercing blue eyes at him, face a blank mask (and there’s a few nightmares that’ll come back to haunt) before she demands, with an accent that he almost but doesn’t quite place, “Show me your Stand.”

He blinks, lost. “Excuse me?” Maybe he’s wrong. Maybe she’s the type who has some sort of weird, ridiculous honor code about not killing an opponent who hasn’t called their Stand, or something. Can the Ripple stop a bullet? But no, even if it could, that looks like some sort of automatic weapon, and he can’t stop that many bullets. There’s The World via Star Platinum, but he hasn’t dared try to stop time, not with the growing dread he thinks originates from Pretender any time he gets a little too close to those memories of Jotaro’s.

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“Show me your Stand,” she repeats, even colder, spine ramrod straight, and—yeah, that’s a regulation at ease stance. He recognizes it from Halloween so many years ago. She’s military
trained.

He bites his lips quietly, nervous, vaguely aware that’s a new habit, and calls to the Pretender to appear, without any sudden movements that could be construed as an attack. He’s not sure how trigger happy she is, after all, and it’s not just him in the firing line. At least the added solid presence at his back is a comfort.
Echoes of the Past

Chapter Summary

Johan, Fitz, and Darling have a chat with the new Stand User.

She takes a quick look at Pretender and instantly relaxes. It’s not that obvious to an untrained eye, but the relief and the way her eyes soften is a big clue. “You have not been harming civilians,” she states, but he’s pretty sure it’s actually a question.

“Trying to save them, actually. It’s what I’ve been doing for seven years,” he answers, honest and respectful, and tries to dredge up every memory of The Soldier and shove it into his demeanor.

It must work, because after a long moment of merely eyeing them all, she relaxes further and reaches to her belt, replacing the gun at her side.

Fitz nearly rushes her, but Xander casually elbows him, sending him reeling and coughing for air.

She raises one blonde eyebrow and pulls what looks like a short-range two-way radio from her belt. “Cyborg to Hood, do you copy?”

They hear a sigh from the other side. “Do we really have to use all the military—” There’s something about his voice, too, that’s familiar, but Jojo can’t place it, either.

The man’s cut off. “Do you copy?” she repeats impatiently.

“Copy, over,” her partner responds, and if the tone is any indication he’s rolling his eyes.

She sighs and rubs her forehead a little, the Stand fading away. “Hood, they are non-hostiles, over.”

“Oh, good, I don’t have to shoot people today,” the voice responds cheerfully.

There’s an awkward pause before the voice adds sulkily, “Over.”

“You haven’t seen any sign of the User, correct?” she asks, a little frustrated.

“I would’ve called you the second I noticed anything. Which I haven’t. Though it’s affecting all the statues in the city, so it must be here.” Instantly Xander realizes what they’re talking about—they’re looking for the Stand User creating the moving stone gargoyles. Which has apparently hurt civilians. Which means that the only thing to do is to offer to help. And as much as Fitz might grumble, he’d agree that it’s the right decision.

Of course, there’s Darling. He doesn’t want to make her uncomfortable. This isn’t her fight, and she’s only a kid. It’s not like he’s going to forbid her from joining in, because he knows he hated that coming from Giles or the other Scoobies, but he’s going to give her a choice. He would’ve appreciated that. If she doesn’t want to join in, he’ll ask Fitz to protect her and go with the military lady and the voice over the phone to deal with this. After all, she’d just lost her parents to violence, was (while a thief) opposed to violence, and had participated in her first Stand battle, which
certainly had helped her overall confidence, but he didn’t expect it had made her more likely to seek out or enjoy battle.

“And I didn’t see your grandfather, either,” the voice continues, and all of Johan’s rapidly moving thought processes grind to a halt.

“Hello, Non-hostile #2 here, you said her grandfather? What about her grandfather?” he asks loudly, before he can double-guess himself.

“You seem like you’ll fit right in,” the voice welcomes him cheerfully. “Stand User, or student of Sendo?”

“Both,” he answers honestly, ignoring the suddenly appraising glance and long, impressed whistle coming from the radio. “Though new at the use of both,” he adds, honestly. “If there’s someone hurting innocents, I want to help stop them.”

The woman looks him over, probably assessing his use as an ally, and he salutes her instantly. His clothing isn’t quite right, but he manages to get if not a completely perfect salute, a close enough approximation.

Although Fitz messes up his heel placement a little when he kicks sideways at him like a restless horse.

And then she starts laughing. Like Buffy, it’s not a small, feminine laugh, but a large, body-shaking, everyone-in-the-street-can-hear laugh. “I like you,” she announces to the world, almost bellowing. “You have spirit.”

He manages to mostly hide his smile. “You didn’t explain about your grandfather.”

“Her sense of priorities is sometimes a little…skewed,” her partner explains. It’s long-suffering and it’s fond. “I’ll see you all a lot closer. We’re going to have to strategize with more people, anyway. Hood out.”

“We’ll talk as we go.” She’s softened the bellow to just slightly above average. “We’ve been receiving surreptitious communications about ‘opportunities for Stand Users’. I don’t think they realized Robin was not a Stand User.” Probably Hood. Robin Hood? Was that an actual name, or was that a joke? Then again, he’s heard the Slayers call him Sergeant Fury, so it’s not like he has room to talk. “Joining an organization, getting benefits. It mentioned a ‘test’. Robin and I were investigating the source to learn more. There have been a lot of attacks on Stand Users lately, so we believe that this organization, whoever they are, are trying to gain total control over Stand Users. Either you’re with them or against them.”

“That matches what we’ve learned so far,” Xander agrees, effortlessly dodging another elbow coming in his direction. He stumbles a little as Darling practically buries herself in his side, but spares her a reassuring smile and throws an arm around her shoulder. It’s scary, and they haven’t really had time to talk about it, but that’s okay. They will.

“Opa Kaulitz was in the hospital with a fever for months. He disappeared from the hospital, but we found a similar envelope in his room. He must have, what is the correct term, developed a Stand?” The slap is loud and startles him, until he realizes she’s slammed a fist into her own hand. “I’m German and proud. I can take care of myself! But my father’s side of the family never wanted to know much about my mother’s side, so he never knew how strong I was. I’m still the little blonde girl stealing some of his beer on holidays.”
Oh, yeah, before we go any further,” he interrupts, not wanting her to get into a ‘I am Slayer; Must Roar’ rant if only because he’s heard it a thousand times before and it never gets any less intimidating from women who could easily twist him into a pretzel and break every bone. “This is Fitz and Darling. You know what the Stand you’re looking for looks like?”

She pivots on her heel and bows to the other two, walking backwards without breaking stride. “Yes, though I’ve only seen it from a distance through my binoculars. It’s a large Western stone dragon, larger than any normal statue.”

“Those are some nice binoculars,” Fitz admits grudgingly, still quietly furious. That Xander had acted without even asking him, probably, although he’s fairly certain that following his instincts saved them. Hopefully, he won’t end up storming off, because the last time he’d done that Jojo had barely survived the emotional fallout of losing a friend—

“Of course they are!” she exclaims, back to firmly outdoor voice again. “German manufactured goods are the best!”

Johan suddenly stops walking, feeling like he’s walked face first into a solid wall (and, given the loudness of her voice, maybe it was made of her very words). At least Fitz is getting over that weird British thing against touching, because he’s got a steadying hand on Xander’s shoulder which honestly he needs. “Are you all right, Jojo?” he asks, not bothering to hide his worry behind manners.

“Von Stroheim,” he gasps, and he’s pretty sure he’s in shock and is really pale. He’s not sure why he’s so surprised about this.

“I share my grandfather’s belief in the beauty of Germany, but I am no Nazi!” she snarls, and the anger in her eyes helps pull him a little out of it.

He’s still shaky, but he can manage a smile at her. “I know. Pretender helps me tap into the memories of my ancestors. Let me properly introduce myself—Johan Higashikata, though you would probably better recognize me if I said Johan Joestar. Joseph, though he never said so out loud, and probably used some less than complimentary words too, considered your maternal grandfather a friend.”

It’s her turn to be surprised, though she handles it better. They stand there, a pathetic parody of the stand-off from earlier, and then she hugs him. She actually picks him up and drives all the breath out of his lungs. He’s half convinced she’s a Slayer as well as a Stand User, because that much strength isn’t normal, unless—maybe, German science?

“It’s possible to love people even when they’re imperfect, or maybe even awful. Because no one’s just one thing,” Darling says thoughtfully, voice a whisper, and one-handed Jojo pulls her into the hug too.
Promises for the Future

Chapter Summary

Fitz, Jojo, and Darling meet von Stroheim's partner.

“How, is this a scheduled group hug, or can anyone join?” a new voice asks, except—it’s not really new, is it? It sounds familiar, and given the coincidence from earlier he’s half certain he’s right here, too, but he doesn’t need to confirm that now.

Stroheim reaches out and pulls both the newcomer and a protesting Fitz in, of which Johan definitely approves. Fitz, being a Brit, probably hasn’t gotten enough hugs in his life, and Darling, well. She needs all the hugs she can get, because she’s probably deprived, and everyone needs more hugs.

“It was scheduled, but…” and Johan pauses for effect, staring down at his hand like he’s holding a page of paper and is the bouncer at some club or something, “…would you look at that, it looks like you’re on the list of invitees. You’re good.”

The newcomer grins and glances at von Stroheim. “I like this guy. Can we keep him?”

“He’s offered. I don’t see why not,” the blonde points out.

Fitz definitely growls. “Because you can’t own a human being.”

Xander places a calming, warning hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I think someone needs to tell you about metaphors and other literary…things.”

Green eyes turn to him, scandalized, and the Brit repeats incredulously, “Things?”

Johan shrugs, a smile playing around behind the serious expression. “I only learned a lot of things secondhand from Will.” He lets Speedwagon fume for a bit, directs the anger toward himself, and then speaks again. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you, Fitz, but I’ve been fighting for a long time. We didn’t have a lot of time to react.” He casually leans against the nearby wall. For whatever reason, it’s as easy to put one of his feet in a yoga-like pose as he’d failed miserably at yoga in years past, but it doesn’t really matter right now and he doesn’t really care. “Besides, if I’d been wrong, LJ and Whisper would’ve been necessary. You were my backup plan.”

Von Stroheim nods approvingly, probably at the strategy involved, while Fitz doesn’t seem entirely appeased. Yet.

“How the hell do you just…just risk your life on a feeling?” the blond snarls eventually, hands balled into fists.

“I’ve risked my life on less,” he answers easily, and then realizes by the fierce flash in his friend’s eyes that’s the wrong response. “I managed to survive this long.”

“I have no clue how,” Fitz mutters, clinging to his anger jealously.

Xander just puts a friendly hand on his shoulder. “I’ve been lucky. I have the survival instincts
of a Sunnydale native. But most importantly—I’m not alone. I have my friends and allies who’ve got my back.”

“Damn it, Jojo,” the blond mutters, burying his head in his hands.

“If you’re in the middle of a panic attack, we’re at our destination, so you can at least sit,” von Stroheim’s partner points out helpfully, pulling out a chair, into which Speedwagon sinks, barely aware. He frowns. “Wait—Jojo—”

“The name you’ll probably recognize is Johan Joestar, yes. You wouldn’t happen to be related to a mayor of New York City, would you?” He’s grinning, because he half knows the answer already.

“Damn,” and he’s grinning. “Non-hostile #2, huh? You sure know how to pick ‘em, Cap. Robin Brown, nicknamed ‘Hood’ because my partner,” he nudges her, and she barely moves, “…has a weird sense of humor.”

“And, likely, it has something to do with that bow you’ve got dismantled at your back,” Fitz joins in, and Xander blinks and immediately glances at Robin. How had he missed that? Buffy would be jealous. She’d want a nice, stylish bag to carry all her weapons, too.

“Yeah, it does. Welcome back to the world of the unpanicking,” he chuckles. “I use hamon and a bow. It wouldn’t work half as well without natural oil.”

“Have you run that by the Major?” Johan responds automatically, and waves it off when he just gets blank stares. “It’s a reference, don’t worry about it. That’s pretty cool.”

“Captain Beefheart von Stroheim,” she introduces herself. “I am here by leave of the German government.”

Jojo narrows his eyes before realizing why. “Oh, yeah, isn’t Germany more aware of the supernatural than most nations on average? Since…the Grimm brothers, or something? And I vaguely remember something about taking up a Van Helsing style crusade to make up for the World Wars…”

He notices Fitz has completely lost his angry look, replaced by sheer impressed confusion.

Xander sighs. “I may have slightly misrepresented myself at your bookstore. I did read growing up, other than comic books, but most of that was, well. Not under protest, but not entirely voluntary, either. A means of survival. Your average Malleus malificarum? Well, actually, I wasn’t allowed to read that one, because I have this weird tendency to set things on fire or summon things or other nasty consequences when I read texts like that out loud, but books like that, history and specifics of the supernatural, I’ve read and practically memorized.”

Fitz flushes for some reason. Probably because he’s realizing he’s underestimated Johan again, not that Xander hadn’t enjoyed it. “What languages do you speak, Jojo?” He’s definitely a little bit in awe.

He laughs. “Speak? English, British, and…” He stops, then continues, slower, “Oddly enough, Japanese. And a little Italian, ‘cause of bisnonna Suzi Q and I don’t even want to count how many greats grandmother Lisa Lisa. Though she is pretty great.” He pauses, letting that sink in, because it’s still a little shocking, all this stuff he doesn’t realize he actually knows through Pretender. “But mostly, I don’t speak languages because bad things happen when I do.”

The blond raises an eyebrow, and he grins and waggles his in return and continues.
“Mostly, I read dead languages. Latin, Sumerian, Egyptian, Ancient Chinese, Aklo, Aratuscan, Primordial Sanskrit. A few things in other languages. I probably couldn’t be conversational with any of them if I wanted to, because I’m much less likely to know the word for ‘pizza’ than I am the words for ‘human sacrifice’.”

“Because any of the languages you listed are likely to have the word for ‘pizza’,” Fitz mutters.

“They don’t? Savages!” he reacts with shock, holding his hand over his heart, and that causes Darling to laugh.

A good sound. She probably hasn’t laughed enough in her life. Which he’ll fix as much as he can.

“I’m noticing a similarity between you and our newfound allies,” Speedwagon remarks, ignoring the last comment. “You seem to want to hold all your strategy meetings over food.”

“An army marches on its stomach,” von Stroheim declares definitively and loudly, and the remark effectively ends that line of thought.
The two new members of the team sit down to eat and strategize with Jojo, Fitz, and Darling.

“So, your Stand is…” Xander asks, mouth full, because actually fitting some of Fitz’s expectations is probably good for his morale, right?

Or, given the expression he’s making, maybe not.

“Panzermensch. I have access to a number of weapons, and my Stand is a robot or cyborg,” Stroheim answers before taking another forkful of whatever pastry she seems to have ordered.

Johan considers mentioning that that sounds a little like the other Stroheim, but as proud as she is of her other grandfather, he’s also a little bit of a touchy subject, and he does, occasionally, have the ability not to just say every dumb thing on his mind and a sense of self-preservation. “Do you know anything about your grandfather Kaulitz’s Stand? Is it the gargoyle thing?”

Hopefully the look of disgust isn’t a remark on the food, but he’s enjoying whatever he ended up ordering. He wasn’t paying attention, mostly, because Fitz was still upset and Darling’s still being really quiet and he hopes it’s just shyness.

“I don’t believe so. A few dozen civilians have been slaughtered. We only briefly saw the dragon statue. It was large enough it wasn’t from one of the buildings. I was trying to scout around it, to see if the User was following on the ground, but there was no sign of one, and I lost track of the dragon.” She sighs. “I have a hard time believing Opa has the will to kill others.”

Johan grimaces, before a thought occurs to him. “Well, that’s certainly true. A Stand User has the will to fight, or they couldn’t control their Stand, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they actually want to kill anyone, right, Darling?”

She starts, distracted from listlessly picking at her food. “What?” That look of hope, of gratefulness in her eyes, like she’s shocked anyone would include her in the conversation…

*Just treat her like she’s Dawn. I mean, not quite, ‘cause they have different issues and history, but I should’ve remembered to include her before now.*

“Oh! Oh yeah.” She’s smiling, wide and happy, now. “I’m a thief. I don’t want to actually hurt anyone. Your grandfather’s probably like me.”

Actually, it’s slightly less likely, given the will to fight that’s required to survive being hit with a Stand Arrow, and that an extremely peaceful person like Holly would get Stand Sickness instead. As far as he knows, either Darling was a lot more violent when she was younger, or she was born with the Stand. Which…wait, means that one of her birth parents probably had a Stand. Still, given the statistics of Stand User death, means that a Stand User orphan isn’t the most unbelievable thing he’s heard, and even if it was, he’s seen a lot of unbelievable, very clearly true things. But he doesn’t want to bother her with that, either, so he doesn’t say that, either.
“You probably shouldn’t be declaring your criminal status so loudly to the restaurant,” Robin chuckles. “Do you want one of these octopus appetizer things?”

“Sure, I want to try!” she agrees shyly, and leans forward, fork in hand, which makes Xander realize…

“Oh, hey, you were watching us way back when Fitz was telling his story.” He senses the movement and only ducks out of the way enough to lessen the pain from the Brit cuffing him. “Ow, what.”

“It really took you that long to notice, Jojo?” Speedwagon sounds annoyed, but with a glance over, Johan sees the fond expression in his eyes.

Robin laughs again, and even Darling giggles, and if nothing else, that’s good, that Brown might be able to get her to relax a little, because the Captain clearly isn’t going to do that.

“Whatever, Mr. Observant showoff.” He steals Fitz’s hat and promises to himself that he’ll play keep-away for as long as he can during this strategy meeting. It’ll be good training for multitasking. “So, we’ll have to check how efficient we are at fighting gargoyles. I’d guess that they’re still not actually alive, so our mysterious Sendo ways probably won’t do much, but it’ll be good to know that. Given the lack of statues and gargoyles I saw outside when we were walking here, the unknown Stand User probably has an army of them, so any way we can cut down on their numbers would be nice on the scale of knowing.” He switches the hat to his other hand and twirls it on one finger. The blond stops reaching for it, looking frustrated. “I might, possibly, be able to control a few, too, with Mirroring Your Stand, but I kinda have the idea that I have to have some clue of the User’s character before I can get in their heads like that. Pretender’s got the usual Tora rush punch, so I can, maybe, dust them normally, assuming the enemy Stand doesn’t give them extra durability.” He carefully transfers the hat to his elbow, trying to decide whether keeping it on the left side of his body is kind of cheating, since Fitz doesn’t have much of a chance to try to retrieve it unless he reaches further across the table than a private, personal space kind of person like the Englishman is willing to go. He suspects Captain Stroheim is letting him just ramble on to test his strategy-making skills. “I don’t know how involved you want to be, Darling. If you want to step out entirely, I wouldn’t hold that against you. We’d probably have you doing something sneaky, but I’m not sure what.”

Darling and Robin exchange glances. “We’ll figure out some way to help,” they decide in unison, and Xander nods at them, trying to stay solemn despite the smile that wants to break out.

“Well, it might not be the glamorous bit, but I spent years doing civilian rescue, and don’t discount it. Anything to minimize casualties is good.” A thought occurs to Jojo, and this time he doesn’t bother to hide the grin. “Actually, in addition to being our healer—which he can’t heal anybody back from the dead, so don’t get yourself dead—maybe Fitz could do something with LJ’s water stuff and Robin’s arrows?”

“I see they don’t have thesauruses in America,” Fitz responds with an eyebrow raise, but he’s smiling, which means he sees exactly what Johan’s getting at and just doesn’t want to acknowledge that out loud.

Or this is still payback for earlier. Given Giles and Ethan, maybe Englishmen just don’t let go of grudges easily, and deal with them in a different way than everyone else. It’s not like he knows; he hasn’t been here all that long, and he suspects Jonathan’s and Joseph’s memories aren’t the most reliable of survey groups. Also, that maybe Dio isn’t the most representative member of the United Kingdom, either.
“They do. We just don’t read them unless we’re stuffy old librarians. Who I think you should meet, besides putting him to sleep. I think you’d get along. I’m still a little surprised you’re not wearing tweed.”

What feels like a spray of water hits his arm and knocks the hat straight onto Fitz’s head. He now looks insufferably smug. “What can I say, I’m not a tweed sort of bloke,” he responds. If he’s not going to talk about how he just used Lotus Juice to get his hat back in a move that was…actually not cheating, given that your Stand is an extension of yourself, then Jojo isn’t either. “That leaves you and the Captain as our front line offensive.”

They all nod, and it becomes a more normal meal and conversation, with mostly Fitz and Robin speaking the most and occasional interjections from Darling. It’s kind of fun listening to them bond, and Xander’s hungry. He suspects Stroheim rarely talks, which makes the choice of Brown as her partner make some kind of sense—someone who can fill the silences like Willow but with the calm of Oz would be invaluable for a person like that. He’s still not sure how they met or why an American is working with a German army officer, but they’ll have time for more stories later.
Chapter Summary

Fitz has reservations about the plan (and how reckless Johan's acting).

Chapter Notes

Posting because my life will continue to be a mess but I do have a few chapters prewritten so I can maybe keep up and not hiatus again in the middle of the final Stand fight??
Posting now is a terrible idea (I don't have long before I have to be asleep) but I'm doing it anyway. Shadowed Suspicion is back (and can we get some part 5 hype?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’m not comfortable with this plan,” Fitz states quietly, so as not to worry Darling or the others getting ready in the corner of the warehouse. He’s not sure how they ended up in some random warehouse, but it seems like the question of why it’s empty or if anyone is going to come try to arrest them for this, too. It seems like the question hasn’t even occurred to Darling or Jojo, though he supposes a thief and a man who spent his childhood in deserted warehouses and sewers aren’t the best sources of reasonable questions.

“You were fine with it earlier,” Johan grins, checking the controls carefully despite his nonchalant air. The fact that he may continue to act like he’s not taking anything seriously but actually, maybe, knows what he’s going, maybe actually really is trying and is not just being trying…well, that is some sort of reassurance, if nothing else about the situation is. He looks ridiculous with the aviator hat and goggles and leather eyepatch, never mind where he found all of that, but there’s something…right about it too. It fits his new outfit better, too. The one that’s not an eyesore.

“Yes, well, this was before I heard you were throwing yourself into a cockpit with no training. I’m the one who has a pilot’s license,” Speedwagon worries, and…well.

It doesn’t get the desired effect, which is Xander not recklessly throwing himself into danger without thought, but it does at least get his attention. “You’ve got a pilot’s license? What were you, part of the Lithuanian book smugglers or something?”

That actually makes Fitz speechless for a few seconds. Despite the question, Jojo really does seem interested. Maybe that’s his way of asking for the truth, but giving him an out, just in case he doesn’t want to talk about it. That’s also a reference he didn’t expect. “I suppose I’m not the only one full of surprises.”

“I’m not sure why you’re surprised,” Jojo states quietly, briefly far away. “I told you all those stories about Sunnydale, after all.”

“I’m not sure I even believe all of them,” the blond confesses, handing his friend a wrench. He
rolls his eyes at the look of shock. “Just in case.” He pauses, then continues, “…then again, I’m not sure I understand why you’re surprised, either. The man in tweed you talked about earlier—that was Buffy’s Watcher, right? Giles? Who also turned out to be far more than you thought?”

Johan’s face twists into a fond grin. “Seriously, Fitz, stop having good points.”

That manages to startle a chuckle out of him. “Never.”

“Well, seriously, Panzermensch’s plane is going to be great, and if its guns aren’t up to snuff, we can have Pretender reenact *Nightmare at 20000 Feet* and mess up the day of a couple hundred gargoyles. Thanks to that nap and *Same Old Story* I’ve got piloting down. I’ve got really great backup. I’m not going to invoke the Great Comic Book Writers of the Sky by asking dumb questions, but I am going to ask you why you’re so worried about this.” He starts a little when there’s suddenly a hand on his arm. He’s not used to touch, but he’s just going to have to get used to it when he has an American as a friend, now. “I’ve made enough mistakes by not asking friends what’s wrong or trying to fix it, so, this is me, right now, being blunt. What’s wrong? How can I help?”

Fitz inhales deeply, tempted to roll his eyes but knowing that Jojo is entirely serious about this whole thing. “I’m not used to having a friend, much less sharing them.” The look the brunet gets in his eyes tells him that Xander understands, wholly and completely, where he’s coming from. He’s not comfortable talking about this for long, though, so he quickly changes the topic. “And if you’ve had those dreams, you know this—I have only rarely heard, in all of the stories, of anyone of Joestar blood not having their plane go down, and certainly not in combat. None of them have attempted to pilot a plane with a lack of depth perception.” It’s a recipe for even worse disaster, but he’s not very confident that he’ll be able to get Jojo to understand exactly how dangerous it is.

The cocky grin returns. Unfortunately, that’s likely to continue to be a theme when he’s channeling the most reckless Joestar, aside from perhaps his own mother. Danger draws the Joestars. “If you remember that, you’ll also remember the part that *no Joestar has died in a plane crash* and I don’t intend to change that trend. Ripple-fu should be able to even the gap.”

He clenches his jaw. “If you lose any limbs I will be *furious* with you. I’m not sure what I can heal, exactly, and I’d rather not play this game of whether or not I can heal you.”

“Joestar, are you ready?” Captain Beefheart calls, and he stares at Fitz until the blond sighs and nods.

“Ready. Let’s do this!” He pulls the goggles down over his eyes and hits two switches in succession, leading to a purr from the plane. He seems professional, like he knows what he’s doing, for all of two seconds, before he punches the air and whoops loudly, unable to contain his excitement.

“Darling, you might want to open the warehouse door before the maniac just drives through it,” he calls loudly.

“We better all meet up with the same number of limbs and lives as we left. I’m looking forward to eating to our success!” Jojo yells above the engine, and waits until the door is barely open wide enough before he’s taxiing off and gaining the lift to fly, pulling off a barrel roll before he’s out of sight.

“Showoff,” Fitz mutters under his breath, before a thought occurs to him. “I’m not sure I ever heard how Joseph Joestar learned to fly a plane in the first place.” And he’s certainly heard the Speedwagon family story of how Joseph purposefully crashed a plane before a group of kidnappers
could. He’s also heard all the stories of the man being involved in other plane crashes. Of all of his ancestors to emulate while he’s flying a plane, Johan shouldn’t be copying Joseph. There’s Jorge, maybe, but he’s not sure that even occurred to the lunatic.

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively titled Our Bloody History.
Chapter Summary

As expected, there are certain dangers about putting a Joestar in a plane.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Xander’s nowhere near as confident as he sounded. That’s nothing new. Sure, he’s been doing it practically all of his life, and it’s not like that’s not a trick the Joestars have been playing for hundreds of years. This time, it’s him that has to pull it off, even though he’s never fought a war, persay, before. He didn’t even do much against the First, which is probably the closest the Scoobies even came.

Still, his new confidence (or Pretender…are they the same thing?) says that he can pull off even the craziest moves, whether or not he knows what he’s doing. He has to trust himself, trust Pretender, and believe in the power of his bloodline.

He’s lucky he managed to get fifteen minutes of rest in the restaurant. He really could’ve used Jotaro’s precision, but Pretender seemed to think knowledge of flying was more important, and he can’t disagree. Has to trust his Stand, because if not your Stand, who do you trust? What he can feel of Joseph is excited. Jorge is just confused, more than anything, but willing to lend a hand.

What’s reassuring is that he finds that the controls feel intuitive, like he’s used them before. The barrel roll isn’t that hard, and he can’t stop himself from whooping even if it isn’t that helpful when it comes to stealth. He’s enjoying the feeling through his hair a little too much. It’s a little like distracted driving at the wheel, never mind the fact that his license, technically, probably would’ve gotten pulled if Sunnydale wasn’t a crater in the ground. He hadn’t learned to compensate for the eye, yet. Jojo has to pull a hard right to prevent himself from crashing into the nearest building, though. Fortunately, he’s left himself just enough space to execute the maneuver.

“Just as I planned!” he yells even though no one can hear, punching the air.

Ironically, the fact that Stroheim’s Panzermensch could only create equipment circa World War II was a bit of a blessing in disguise. More modern safety equipment or not, he probably wouldn’t have known how to fly a newer plane.

The thought occurs to him, though, as he stares at the oxygen level indicator that old-style aircraft aren’t airtight, so breathing so he can use hamon might be a bit difficult. That’s a bit of a problem, given that otherwise the metal construction could probably conduct the Ripple enough to be a weapon of its own. He might be able to manage one breath, but it’s a last resort only.

“Cyborg, you there?” He doesn’t hear anything directly from her, but then, she might by trying for radio silence. As he plays around with the radio, he hears something that sounds like air traffic authority.

“Can anyone confirm the readings? It looks like an air raid, but the planes keep disappearing off radar.” They sound a little desperate, but then, some of them might still remember the Blitz.
In response, Jojo glances at his own radar and finds that they’re not making anything up. There really are a ton of random signatures out there. Though he’d guess a Stand would be better at tracking another Stand than your average equipment, however much more advanced it supposedly is.

This time, the turn to avoid a skyscraper requires little conscious thought, which is good, because he’s a little distracted by making absolutely certain that these things, whatever they are, don’t show up to Ripple-fu senses. They don’t. There’s a couple close by, but not close enough they would’ve seen him yet.

“I’m here,” she answers eventually. “I’m trying not to give away my position, over,” she responds, which makes him blink.

“What, gargoyles carry radar now—” he begins, but he’s suddenly tipping to his left and he hadn’t initiated that motion. He glances over with his good eye to see a stone dragon clinging onto one of the wings. It’s not making dents, which is good. It probably means Panzermensch’s durability is higher than, at the very least, one of these gargoyles. If the enemy is using a swarm Stand, though, one gargoyle doesn’t have to be enough to win on its own, and he doesn’t relish the idea of what it could do to one fragile human trying to pilot. In fact, if they crash, it’s probably much more dangerous for him than for the Stand.

“Hey, you! Party crashers! Who invited you anyway?” He knows the answer; it’s the dumb User, whoever it is, but he feels like he should ask anyway.

As he watches, a stone lion shakes its mane, as if waking up from sleep, and pounces, making his wing even heavier. The abrupt sinking feeling in his stomach is the loss of lift. If he doesn’t do something about this quick, he’s going to fall out of the sky—and he needs both hands to control the airplane. He can’t use the machine gun. Pretender’s weight might be just enough to make him fall right out of the air.

At least it isn’t Kars. Seriously, having a Pillar Man, especially an ascended Pillar Man, here, now, throwing piranhas and feathers and who knows what else? Would suck, and as much as he’d like to say he’s ready, he’s not, and he knows it.

The lion begins prowling carefully toward him, while the dragon flashes a toothy grin that promises death. Your next thought will be, ‘I don’t like that shuddering’ flits through his mind, and, well, it’s not wrong. The shakiness and metallic groans coming from the wing aren’t sounds of the good, he’s certain. If he doesn’t act soon, the entire wing might come off, which would do wonders for trying to fly the dumb hunk of metal.

He tries something even more desperate, even as Captain Beefheart yells “Johan!” into his ears, aware that something’s gone wrong. Jojo throws the plane into another barrel roll, this time with all the built up momentum he can muster, pushing the throttle as far as it will go, aware that he might be throwing all control he has. The added weight actually helps add to the force of the roll.

He glances over. The gargoyles are still there, though at this point they’re hanging on for the love of existence. At least they’re not coming for him again, just trying to stay on. He’s going to need more speed, and the engine’s straining itself enough just trying to keep the unexpected weight in the air. At least he’s flying a German aircraft, so he can perform these crazy stunts without the engine stalling. That really probably would kill him.

He glances over, and there’s a long stretch of road to his right between two buildings that he could use for his purposes. Excellent. He executes a sharp turn, as sharp as he can manage right now.
Only one thing to do. He yanks the control yoke to point skyward to give him more room for his run, climbing as high and fast as he can without pointing the nose of his plane directly away from the earth below. When a particularly strong judder happens and he glances over to see they’ve started making their way toward him again, he knows he’s out of time.

He inverts the angle so he’s falling, lets the gravity add to his speed until he’s rushing at the ground, and then rolls again, letting the weight of the gargoyles add to the maneuver. The ground’s rushing up at him, but Johan feels even more like he’s flying. Everything’s moving in slower motion. In his frame of reference. He realizes he’s started screaming at some point, but not in fear. It’s some sort of primal war cry, honestly, because as crazy as it is, he feels calm, relaxed, in control. The plane might be Beefheart’s creation, but it feels like an extension of himself right now. The wind whipping past his face is cold, and he’ll probably be shivering once he finally comes to a stop, but right now he just feels alive.

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively titled Combat Rock.
Chapter Summary

Fitz, Robin, and Darling do what they can to help their 'main guns' out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A quick chat had confirmed that two planes was too much for Captain Beefheart to make with her Stand if she’s going to have any capability to defend herself as well. She can only make a certain amount of creations through her Stand, and even one plane is a strain. It’s utterly frustrating, since, in this instance at least, Fitz would feel nothing against acting as Jojo’s wingman (he’s been around the man rather too much if the ridiculous joke or play on words is coming to him with no effort), but, unfortunately, circumstances are just against the possibility. He’s just going to have to trust in his friend, get used to acting, once more, with allies. It’s been so long that he’s been on his own that it’s hard to remember, and of course in his position in the past he’d had more control over what his allies were doing or not doing. Then again, he told himself he’s done thinking about those times, and certainly right now isn’t the best of times for distracting himself with such thoughts.

“What can I do?” Darling asks anxiously, and he’s already thinking, already moving on. Johan certainly will be upset if Darling is injured, and he won’t be any more impressed with himself, so he should concentrate on the fact that he has allies of his own that he needs to shield. He’ll help best by completing his own tasks to satisfaction.

“Well can travel further than LJ. Lotus Juice, I mean.” Silently, he curses Jojo for making him use that stupid nickname, despite the trace of amusement he feels in the back of his mind from his Stand. Fortunately, his current companions say nothing, though Robin has a look on his face like he’s going to start snickering at any moment. “We could have your Stand act as a sort of scout.”

She shivers a little but nods with determination, hand tightening into a fist. “Okay! Whisper, you heard him!”

The Stand starts flying away, which hadn’t been Fitz’s intention. They really needed to talk tactics before they made any actions. “If you see anything suspicious, especially that dragon statue Stand, pull your Stand back quickly, okay? These things are dangerous enough to people without Stands. We don’t want to find out last minute how effective they are against Whisper when he’s too far away for us to aid. It’s probably most important to find any injured civilians, as Johan pointed out. I can heal them, if you can find them.”

Her lip trembles a little. She bites it to hide the motion. “Those’re good points. Thank you, Mr. Speedwagon.”

“I assume your arrows don’t do much against stone?” he asks. He’s fairly certain that his Stand has hidden potential he has yet to unlock, but so far his only even vaguely attack-worthy power is Have a Nice Dream, and he’s not even sure gargoyles sleep. In humans or other breathing things, the razor arms might do damage, but he’s worried they will only scratch up the enemy Stand. Not the desired outcome.
“Unfortunately,” Robin agrees, sighing. “It’s part of why we haven’t moved against the User, yet. Even hamon just stuns them—though that’s just what I can get on the natural oil-covered arrows. I haven’t gotten near enough to try close-combat hamon attacks, not like that’s my specialty anyway. The gargoyles don’t show up on radar reliably, and I’m not willing to let the Captain rush in when I can’t even have her back.”

“Understandable,” Fitz agrees, glancing back to make sure Darling’s still following them. She looks subdued and a bit out of breath at the brisk pace, but is keeping up all right.

Without hesitation, he and Robin help up a couple of people that have been knocked over by something. It’s not much of a leap to say one of the pieces of the Stand has been this way, any more than it is one to know this isn’t typical. “Are you all right? Would you mind telling us what happened?” he asks them both politely. Robin stirs at his side but settles down, apparently having decided to let him take the lead on this line of questioning.

“Of course I’m not all right! How could I be all right after that? Or grandmother? She has a heart condition, you know,” the young man snarls, and it takes everything Fitz has not to roll his eyes. The arrogance and belligerence reminds him more of all his conceptions about Americans (very few of which, other than being loud and chatty, Jojo actually matches).

“Don’t be rude,” the elderly lady responds, stern. “We’re mostly just shaken, I think. There was…well, it looked like a stone dragon. Knocked us both over and flew off. That direction,” she points helpfully, and Fitz nods respectfully.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he states courteously, and with a flourish produces a peony, presenting it to her. Manners should be rewarded, after all. She smiles and claps her hands in delight, along with Darling’s joyous gasp.

“Yes, thank you!” Darling manages, and he tips his hat as they resume walking in the indicated direction. “Is that part of your Stand’s power?”

He chuckles, amused. “No. I just would get very bored when I was younger, and had to find some ways of entertaining myself. It’s actually easy to learn some very basic magic tricks from books, believe it or not.”

He expects some sort of thrilled response, a demand that he teach her how (and yes, with light, nimble fingers like hers, she’s as likely to pick it up just as well as he had). He doesn’t expect the ‘thump’ in response as they turn into the alley, and glances over. What he sees freezes him in place. There’s a demon-shaped gargoyle sitting on top of Darling’s body. It looks like it tackled her into the wall. The scene is surreal enough, between the speed and the silence, that it almost doesn’t feel real. Robin is likewise staring, struck dumb and immobile, bow still slung in the carrying case at his side.

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively titled Tactics.
Chapter Summary

Johan figures out why Joestars should probably not be put in planes, but manages to be cool anyway.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The rapid change in weight tells him that his plan worked, partly. He doesn’t have time to see what happened, though, because the ground is coming up fast enough that he’s going to have to stop the roll and pull up if he’s going to have any chance of surviving this maneuver. Jojo does, immediately, hands moving over the controls confidently. The engine’s starting to overheat, but he can’t ease up on the throttle yet. He needs that power.

Doing the calculations in his head calmly, he realizes that he’s not going to make it. Not quite.

“Pretender!” he yells, his Stand coming forth beside him and then, because it’s a part of him and no words are needed, launching itself out of the plummeting aircraft with a roar. He winces a little as he feels the impact throughout his legs when Pretender hits, but at least it crouched a little when it landed, absorbing a bit of the force. Instinctively he breathes in, hard, in the last couple metres.

He feels rather than hears the shouted “Tora!” as his Stand grabs the plane and launches it, almost like redirecting one of those foam airplanes he and Willow bought when they were seven and promptly lost playing out in one of the town graveyards. There’s pain in his arms that tells him the action wasn’t without cost. Pretender’s not exactly Star Platinum.

Still, he’s close enough that Pretender can fade back into his mind, which is good, because he wasn’t looking forward to finding out their distance like this. He breathes in evenly, breathes out, and words come into his mind. “Metal Silver Overdrive!” he yells with the rest of his power as he slams his fist into one of the metal sides of the cockpit not covered in controls, and the entire structure lights up with the electricity-like glow of the Ripple. It’s a few seconds before the left wing jerks up as if freed by a sudden weight, and he glances over to see a rocket, of all things, carrying away a panicked-looking stone dragon before it explodes, causing a light shockwave that he just rides through.

Jojo giggles a little, grinning. He punches the air. He survived. The face on that driver was pretty spectacular, if he had to say so himself, and he’s glad he didn’t accidentally run over the woman, because that would’ve been bad. “Thanks, Captain,” he manages. The adrenaline’s fading a little, and his fist has started throbbing from where he punched metal. That probably hadn’t actually been necessary, but he felt like not punching something.

“You’re going to have to apologize to the office workers you just threw a stone lion into,” she responds, but there’s a little humor and relief in her answer, too.

“Are they okay?” he asks instantly, concerned, because oh yeah his dumb move might’ve put other people in danger, too.
“They’re fine, from what I could see with Angel Eyes. The drivers, on the other hand, are having a few accidents trying to avoid it. It jumped out after you and is running, chasing you on the ground.” She sounds a little breathless, but then, she’s having to follow him and keep up, too. “I think you’ve got its attention, so at least there’s that. Before you ask, I would have to reload, which would take a while.”

He almost giggles at the really juvenile joke again, but another jolt brings him to his senses. Luckily, not another gargoyle landing on the plane, but the combination of the engine overheat and the damage already done. He quickly reduces throttle, hoping he’s not going to have to jump from a burning plane anytime soon.

“I’m surprised you knew where I was,” he continues, more mature, and she outright laughs at him.

“That plane is part of my Stand. I would know anywhere you flew with it,” she replies, and, oh yeah, that’s kind of a dumb assumption to make, isn’t it.

He feels a little light-headed, now that he’s thinking about it, but then, he’s used a lot of strength, plus he didn’t have the oxygen he would’ve liked, sitting in this cockpit, plus of course he’s going to feel light-headed when the adrenaline begins to wear off. He’s dealt with it enough to know that.

Fitz is going to be furious that he’s going to need healing again. At least he’s used to the pain, so he should be able to keep going for a while. List that under things he never thought he’d be thanking his father or how dangerous Sunnydale used to be for.

“Right, okay. So I’m guessing this was a once-only trick. No letting other statue-like personages hitch a ride.” He notices that she’s not using the military trappings. It’s entirely possible she just uses them to annoy her partner.

“I can’t help you with a missile again, no. I don’t expect that the plane will survive another move like that intact, either. I can’t create anything more substantial until the plane is no longer in operation,” she agrees.

He glances at the radar, looking around again. The most difficult part about this is that neither Joseph nor Jorge ever had to deal with issues in depth perception any time they were flying. Joseph did have a few issues, but, well. A missing hand is very different from a missing eye. Fortunately, easy breathing or no, he can still sense lifeforms, which helps him detect occupied buildings at the least. “The only one I see around is the one still chasing me. Otherwise, they’re all heading in the same direction. Maybe where that dragon is? Joining up probably isn’t a good sign, is it.”

“No, and I wouldn’t recommend a strafing run down a crowded street, either. It would make short work of the lion and all the cars on the road. Even opening fire on a mass of them flying would be risky.” Thanks he hadn’t been planning on that, either. It’s kind of like talking to Buffy, when she’s in one of her ‘I am the Slayer I know what’s best’ moods.

“So, what’s our next move? I probably can’t sense the User with Ripplefu, since it’s not like they’ll stand out from anyone else in town. It’s like they’re holding the whole town hostage.” It’s not like he can research a specific User and know what kind of move they’ll make next. They might’ve been able to do so, if the page on this User hadn’t been missing from the research. Which reminds him, they really should be going through that soon, if they’re going to keep being attacked like this. He doesn’t remember anything about statues or gargoyles when flipping through briefly, though.
“Could you copy the Stand with Pretender and get some idea of what the User will do next?” she responds, and—

Well, yeah, that’s a good question. “Won’t know until I try.” A thought occurs to him, belatedly, and he cringes. Fitz will definitely chew him out for this one. “Y’know, other than a few times in training I don’t think Joseph has ever successfully landed a plane. Well, that once, in the ocean, but that’s…that’s the ocean. Which is miles from here, and you probably couldn’t keep the plane going that far. What am I supposed to do?”

She sighs. “Let me work on it.”

“While you’re at it, work on how you’re going to keep a statue in place long enough for me to mirror it without getting hurt,” he replies, swiveling his head to look for any more statues coming to life, or places to land.
He only watches in horror for a moment. For large creations of stone, these, what, parts of a Stand? Inanimate objects affected by a Stand? Are certainly much stealthier than one would expect. The sudden crunch and Darling’s scream of pain throw him into action.

Robin starts breathing in a way that is entirely familiar. From what he’d said, though, it would only stun the creature, which isn’t what they need right now, and also makes everything more difficult for Jojo. Maybe that’d been why he’d had to use the plane, if the Ripple didn’t work, and he’s not sure the mirroring would even work on one.

Thinking of Johan—that water gun! It’s in his bag. She sobs as he tries frantically to find the purchase in his bag. I wouldn’t mind a holster for this, Jojo, but let’s see if it’s actually useful first. He finally finds it. Hang on, Darling. He aims the water gun at Lotus Juice and fires a stream. At least it has a nice pressure to it, but then, he wouldn’t be surprised it Jojo turned out to be some kind of expert on water guns. His Stand catches and absorbs all the water, swelling slightly and then spitting it out with greater force from its beak. The liquid covers the gargoyle, hissing and spurting from the contact. He watches with some awe as the stone creature lets out a harsh sort of scream and begins to melt, enough to make it fall to the ground.

“Why didn’t you mention you could do that?” Robin asks in a hushed voice as he stares at the water gun in his hands dumbly. That’s not—what did he just do—

“I didn’t know,” he answers reasonably, voice sounding harsh and feeble even to his own ears. He feels a little sick at the thought that he could do this to a person, if he wanted. The thought is terrifying. Putting someone to sleep is very different from melting them. He’s seen pictures in books of acid damage on skin. That’s not a human, but if it had been—

“M-Mister Speedwagon? I think my arm is broken…” Darling sobs, controlling her voice as much as possible, and it shakes him out of the shock.

He can lose his mind later. Right now, they’re sitting in an alley, they could get attacked at any minute, and Darling’s laying there with a broken arm if not worse. “I’m sorry about that. Now, I can’t fully heal it, so it’ll still be a little sore.” He retrieves one of the water bottles from his bag, tossing it gently to Lotus Juice without even looking.

She coughs a little in shock at the cold when the now tinted liquid drenches her.

He smiles ruefully. “More careful application is a little hard, and I didn’t think you’d mind me healing those bruises while I was at it.” If he pushes up her sleeve, he’s afraid it would tear off, and taking the shirt off, particularly in the street, is not a viable option. It’s not like she’s Ella.

He takes another water bottle out, while it occurs to him, and refills the water gun carefully. Now that he considers it, the decision had been a good one. He might want to consider getting at the very least a second, so he can dual wield. It’s much more practical to switch out weapons every time he uses them up rather than trying to refill during the middle of combat. It’s unfortunate that it’s only useful against one opponent when they’re fighting a Swarm Stand, but on the other hand, a larger area probably makes it too easy for him to cause unwanted collateral damage.
“Hey, you two? Maybe you should look at this,” Robin calls, and Fitz finds him crouching next to the half-melted stone remains. Darling’s soon standing behind him.

“What about it?” Can the statue actually tell them anything? It’s not as if it’s they haven’t seen gargoyles leap off buildings.

“This is an actual statue. Free-standing. Look.” He pokes the bottom of the piece with his foot, and he’s right. That base of solid marble hadn’t been there before, when it’d been attacking. It would’ve been too awkward, too obvious. “We’ve been trying to find this guy for five days, and he’s only ever used gargoyles. This might mean something. If we can get something else from this —”

Fitz grimaces a little. “I might’ve messed up there, a little.” He tries to use Soul Drive on it, and the results are only that the acid slows down a little. He’s not sure whether it’ll stop eventually or just keep going until the thing is nothing.

Robin easily waves that off. “Don’t worry about it. Better that than Darling got more hurt. I think I can—hang on…"

He slows down his breathing, and what looks like a slight net made of hamon weaves itself over his hand. “I’ve only tried this with burning coals, not Stands. Hopefully if something goes wrong, you can heal me.”

Given the results with the statue, he’s not confident, but he doesn’t voice that. Robin, like Jojo, would probably just laugh or joke it off, but Darling probably deserves a little more morale than that observation would offer.

He tips what’s left over, causing a crash that echoes down the alley. The protection and increased strength seems to have worked. There, on the bottom. It’s an actually decently carved outline of what looks like—is it four horsemen?

“There’s actually a library nearby. We were using it for research earlier. That looks unique enough it’s probably the maker’s mark,” Robin suggests.

Fitz can’t help but be a little more skeptical. “What if it’s just…escalating? That might have nothing to do with the User.”

“It’s better than just standing around here, or feeling useless. Let’s do it, Mr. Speedwagon!” And…well, Darling has a good point.

“True. Let’s go,” he agrees, and hears Darling clap behind him, like he’s performed some sort of magic trick. She winces sheepishly when he turns to look. “That arm’s still healing. Careful.”

Chapter End Notes

Also known as Killer Figure.
TIMES IN WHICH I WISH I WAS PREMIUM OH MAN THE HYPE IS REAL YO
Chapter Summary

Johan now has to deal with the consequences of putting a Joestar on a plane.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He’s been reduced to circling a few buildings, trailing that dumb lion, because he figures his best chance is to attempt to crash-land on the roof if necessary. The whole structure is groaning now, louder and louder, which really doesn’t bode well for anyone ever.

“Cyborg. I’ve come up with a plan,” finally crackles over the radio, and he tries not to sigh too loudly in relief. By the annoyance in the Captain’s voice she heard him anyway, but hey, at least he tried. “I’m going to give you a parachute, then get rid of the plane.”

He winces a little at the thought of that plan. Of course, it’s a little late to be whining about crazy maneuvers by this point, but still, he does have some sense of self-preservation, thank you Fitz, even if it kicks in at the weirdest times. It’s only been consistent when trying not to get in trouble with pretty women who could cheerfully murder him without much effort, and even then his lack of mouth-brain communication gets in the way more often than he’d like. “Uhm. What about Mr. Persistent Lion down there? I’m not keen on being mauled.”

“Don’t land within mauling range,” Beefheart suggests with a definitely Slayer-like air. “I would suggest aiming for one of those rooftops you’re circling if you can manage it.”

Well, it can probably climb buildings in the most destructive way possible by simply smashing its paw through the wall until it’s made itself a foothold, but at the very least it’ll buy him some time. He consults the echoes in his head. Apparently Joseph is a lunatic who’s never once tried to use a parachute even when it would make sense to do so (what, the plane seats worked fine, you worry too much Johannia he doesn’t even bother arguing the name thing) and Jorge…well, Jorge never had to, either. But he’s at least had training, which is an overall improvement. For instance, he knows how to put it on, and make sure it’s not going to just come off with the velocity as they rush downward with gravity. Again. So he’ll call that an improvement.

“I’ll try my best, which is generally pretty good.” It appears on his lap, and he realizes there’s a slight problem—he’ll have to take his hands off the control yoke to actually put on the parachute. On the other hand, he doesn’t have that much choice, really.

Unfortunately, the nose dips the second he takes his hands off. He tries his best to achieve some sort of balance between speed and diligence, because like he told Fitz, he has absolutely no plans to die today.

“Ready?” comes over the radio, and, well, he’s not, but if this plane continues to dive, especially with the kind of ripping sound—

The entire plane shudders, the screaming of metal loud in his ears, and he starts to plummet. “Now, now, now!” he yells, even though he’s pretty sure she’s got to know, and suddenly he’s in
freefall all by himself. He doesn’t have any time to waste if he has any plans to slow down his speed whatsoever. Too quick and the parachute will just rip and be of no use to him anyway. He pulls the chute. It deploys, thank goodness, and despite the sudden strain and noticeable change to his velocity doesn’t tear. At least, not immediately. He tries to spread out his body to try further the effect as much as he can without tearing the fragile fabric and cords and calculate a quick exit strategy. If nothing else, Joseph’s a good one for thinking on his feet.

He remembers something random from when he’d been training with Caesarino. One of those times he was trying to train to hold the water in the glass. He’d had what the Italian had graciously called ‘a unique failure’—he’d managed not only to expel the water from the glass but to crack the glass entirely, raining them both in glass shards. He’d still been sending Hamon out from his palm, not the tips of his fingers. And I’m right in front of a building with a lot of useful glass windows. I can probably use Ripplefu to break it, and, well, if not, just my fist should do, even if that’d probably hurt worse.

There’s not really time to consider his plan, think about the best way to do it or anything. If he dangles here double-guessing himself like a sissy he’s just going to end up a smear down there on the pavement, either because he hits too hard or because a gargoyle takes a dislike to his face. He reaches up and pulls ropes until he realizes how to steer himself and aims himself at the building.

Jojo bounces off it lightly, on the tips of his toes, and breathes in deeply as he swings out. He starts to exhale as he swings back toward a window two floors down, concentrating the crackling energy through the entirety of his feet and hoping that boots don’t do too much to dissipate energy. Which—wait. Both Jonathan and Zeppeli had managed to send Hamon through a wall and, well, a frog, so—

Smash.

He has enough presence of mind to roll, coming to a stop a couple feet from the window, kneeling and half-posing. Johan’s breathing hard and covered in cuts, but he’s grinning from ear to ear. That went well.

And then he starts being dragged backward. It takes him one panicked moment wondering whether that’s a gargoyle pulling his shoulder to realize no, it’s just the weight of the parachute. Things are a little heavier than he would’ve expected. It doesn’t feel like it’s enough to pull him far, but just in case he hastily pulls off everything he can and soon it’s falling back away from him. Hopefully the Captain realizes he’s not attached to the parachute anymore, because he’s already freaked her out about his survival too much.

And then Xander hears something behind him, like the flapping of wings, and turns very slowly to look, because he’s pretty sure that’s not a thing Von Stroheim really can do.

He refuses to believe what he sees for all of five seconds, before he just has to voice his complaints to anyone who might be listening.

“What sort of crazy cultist has a giant statue of Cthulhu in their yard?” he screams, because that’s just cheating. Even if it’s actually that the User carries around the statue in their truck or something and pretends they’re an art dealer or something, that’s still cheating.

Chapter End Notes
Finally got to see Giogio in all his glory AND I HAVE HYPE FOR DAYS PEOPLE
oh yeah
Chapter also called Freefall.
Fitz tries to tackle the problem using his book skills.

It takes Fitz a minute once they stroll into the building to realize that he hasn’t been relaxed like this since when he was back at the bookstore, having an absurd conversation with his idiot of a Jojo. *I’ve gone soft,* he realizes with only a little amusement. There’s something painful, there, too. Gracie. It doesn’t hurt as much as it had, but then, neither had his mother’s death, had it? Distracting himself with gloriously dusty volumes and posh words and literary conversations. Pretending the past wasn’t real. Running from his mother’s death to the streets, running from Grace’s death to the bookstore.

And there was Jojo. Johan, Xander. Given the stories, he had assumed that he would continue the glorious tradition of rearranging his life in the wake of a Joestar, because of the noble legacy, of the intertwined destiny of their lives, but the specifics had been rather vague. Much along the lines of a knight finally meeting the liege-lord to whom he pledged everything.

He had been unprepared for the reality. Xander only when they had met, but over time he had quickly become more, started to step straight out of all those tall tales he’d told and Mum’s own stories. Xander, carrying his own loss and his huge heart and his recklessness and sometimes plain stupidity. Xander, who he’d believed to be academically challenged and yet knew random facts about history and could read Sumerian and very possibly might have read or been able to read *Gilgamesh* in its original form. Johan, who told jokes to boost morale and made a lot of references and risked his life to save others. Johan, who pretended he didn’t have an inferiority complex or an imposter syndrome but whose mask slips when he thinks Fitz isn’t looking. Johan, who is ridiculously good at using his Stand for someone who’s just gotten one and is neither the perfect Jojo Fitz had imagined nor the unlikeable, flawed individual he believes himself to be. Johan, who is, after all, only human.

*I’ll stop running away, Jojo,* he promises silently, even as he turns to the others. “I am very familiar with libraries, so I’ll search the physical volumes.”

“I’ll look online,” Robin responds immediately, with an approving nod and a smile. “I’m pretty good with a computer.”

Darling bites her lip but nods. “There’s what appears to be a large clump of grey. I think they’re all joining up.” She shivers a little and adds, “This is definitely going to be in the news.”

*I’ll stop running from my past. I’ll become that warrior again, though this time not without thought or reason. I’ll take great care with the new abilities I find. It won’t be easy, but if you can struggle to learn from your past and not let it haunt you, the least I can do is the same. From now on, my future is fighting at your side, and with any luck, the two of us can learn to become friends when we’re not fighting for the sake of the world.*
“Keep an eye on them using Whisper. Tell us if their behavior suddenly changes.” He realizes suddenly that they don’t have a way to contact each other, and—

Robin holds out cell phones.

Fitz raises an eyebrow.

“I was the supply sergeant for us. Kind of,” Brown explains with a grin, which isn’t really that much of an explanation. But, LJ help him, what with Jojo around, Fitz is getting used to it. “Try to only text. I didn’t buy many minutes, and we also probably don’t want to get kicked out.”

“That would be for the best,” Fitz agrees dryly. “Should we meet up again in, say, half an hour, by that…” He pauses. He’s not sure if the Stand works on metal, but in any case, the dragon curled around a book is something he would’ve picked up without a second thought, up until the point when it might come to life at any moment and start murdering patrons.

“I’ll watch it,” Darling offers, before looking offended at his sharp look. “From a safe distance!” she adds.

“Of course. You’re not Jojo. You have some common sense.” She looks even more offended at that, but then, she’d really become attached, hadn’t she?

Even narrowing it down to the modern art books on sculpture (735, the first floor, though if Jojo was here, he’d have to explain that the first floor was what uncivilized people called the second floor and the inclusion of the ground floor and he’s getting sidetracked even in his own head), it takes Fitz longer than he would’ve liked to find the symbol. The worst part of it all is the idea nagging at him that he’s sold or shelved at least one book with the—

His eyes momentarily unfocus. Here he is, monologuing in his own head, and the answer is staring at him from a page he was just about to flip.

Courtney Love: Self-Proclaimed Artist Bitch

Those who had known the woman all her life would not be surprised to hear her description of herself. Love may have a friendly name, but her own demeanor is anything but. She’s well known for flipping off photographers, using her deadly heels on the feet of reporters, and blowing smoke into the faces of fans.

I personally know several of the reporters and photographers, including one whose toe was broken by the incident. Interestingly enough, my editor suggested a pattern: all of those who had previously tried to talk to her had something in common. They were all male. My book was meant to cover modern art all over the UK, and I could see if gender really was the problem. I had a feeling I was reenacting a scene in the classic Lost World film, but it was worth the try.

Spoiler alert: yes, gender was the problem, and yes, Love probably suffers from misandry.

She was downright rude to me, yes, and swore like the proverbial sailor. For the most part, the years chain-smoking had given her that ‘smoky’ voice, but occasionally it cracked. For all anyone knows, she is currently dying of lung cancer.

“And what of it?” she asks, eyes glittering. The only light streams in from the apartment/studio’s
windows and the fire of her cig. “If I’m gonna die, it’s my right. Don’t deserve to have doctors f’in
telling me when I’m gonna live and when I’m gonna die.”

She has her own tragedy. Her parents were part of the Sunflower Alliance, a cult that was shut
down for its practices but not before it could poison her youth.

She is, however, remarkably well-aware of the exact effect it’s had on her life, and how
unreasonable her behavior is. “I don’t blame all men. I just don’t want to bloody talk to them.” She
doesn’t particularly like the world, or talking to women, either. At least, not in person. Apparently,
she does so just fine online.

Her hero (which she refuses to let me call ‘heroine’)? Lady Constantine.

She loves the subversive nature of the *Hellblazer* comics, but prefers to think of her hero as female,
and why not? She seems to be following in the same footsteps, just as rude, antisocial, and
controversial, and yet, as we talk in the dilapidated apartment, the same belief in humanity despite the
cynicism shines through. She refuses to live by the rules others set for her, refuses to mince words to
avoid hurting others’ feelings.

Other than buying her work, fans can interact with her on a better basis by not talking about her or
admiring her work, but rather discussing the meaning behind the work. As a rule, go with your most
morbid impression and you’re likely to be right. She only willingly travels outside her apartment
when she’s delivering a statue, though, and it is not recommended that you try to catch her when
she’s at her abode.

Her personal makers’ mark depicts the four horsemen, each holding a staff of office (scythe, sword,
withered wheat, and a bow), and the choice is not a deliberately edgy one—the subject matter is
often dark and bleak, forcing the viewer to take a hard second look at the nature of the world they
live in.

And there’s the symbol from the statue. No sign of the dragon statue, unfortunately.

He’s on his feet before he even finishes processing what he’s found.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also called Revelations of a Literary Kind.

Man, I made a dumb mistake at work today. Oh well. Hope your Jojo's Friday was
better than mine.

Oh, and I really like what they did with the Bucciarati fight. heheh...can't wait until next
week for Polpo.

~Dreamer~
That Horseman, War, Part I

Chapter Summary

Xander is cornered by quite possibly Cthulhu.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The radio crackles. “Odin,” she calls, and—

You know, actually, for a call sign, that’s not bad. He prefers General Fury, of course (and has to tamp down the pain and fear in his throat, because there’s absolutely nothing he can do for his Slayers now, and he needs to concentrate on surviving), but a guy who gave his eye for knowledge isn’t the worst person to be compared to. Honestly, he wishes he’d given his eye for something so good, but then again, hadn’t…the priest said something about The One Who Sees, in all caps because it was important somehow?

“I realize that stealth is not your forte, but you might want to consider it given that I was able to hear you from a nearby building and you might have just given away your position to a literal Cthonian monster,” she hisses into the radio, and that tone—

He rolls behind a desk, hoping that on this occasion the office splurged on sturdy, strong furniture that could at least slow down a giant flying statue. Maybe he acted fast enough to get out of sight so it didn’t see him and they don’t even have to test the sturdiness of the furniture. Maybe. (Honestly, he’s not that lucky.)

She’s afraid. Von Stroheim, of all people, is afraid, but then, she’s clearly not her ancestor. For the good, maybe. A little fear might keep them both alive. And given that they’re facing a Lovecraftian monster, even if it looks like it’s just a statue, she might have a bit of a point. Glory might, maybe, count, since Hell Dimensions are kind of Lovecraftian, but even the First, terrifying as it was, was still a part of this world. He’s not sure he’s ever seriously faced an eldritch abomination before, even if it’s just in statue form.

It might be just a statue. But it’s bigger, more lifelike, scarier than the others, and it’s not clear if it’s a true swarm Stand possessing a bunch of statues or if it’s just one Stand waking up other statues. If this is the true Stand, who knows what it can do? Did Von Stroheim mess up her observations, to the point she thought she’d seen a “large Western dragon”, but in reality, she’d just seen Cthulhu? Surely she’d be better able to identify her monsters than that, right? Right? Considering how freaked out she is by this.

The weird noise it’s making is somehow beyond hearing. It feels like it’s settling into his bones. There’s a weird sort of screeching, as one might expect from a stone monster, but it’s making him definitely feel weird. Like he’s not sure what reality is, even though he’s been perfectly aware of what reality is and that it includes a lot of weird things that most people get to not think about. He feels a little dizzy. He feels like he’s floating. Rule…okay, not one, because that’s don’t die, but rule maybe number two of the Scoobies is that when something feels off, more than just ‘this is a flying stone monster trying to kill me’, your instincts are probably right.
He glances out from the side of the desk. It’s searching now, its head turning. What a nightmare.

Had it seen or heard him, or is it just generally looking around for something to attack? Figuring out whether it’s deaf or blind is probably important. It’s flapping its wings in a way that doesn’t quite look right, head moving.

“I mean, I’m pretty sure it knows I’m here, Cyborg,” he whispers quietly, hoping she’s turned up the volume or something on her end because he’s not sure what sort of senses it has or how they work. “Be careful. I’m pretty sure that pretty tentacled head is for more than just looks.”

That strangled noise on the other side…he can’t tell if she’s panicking about actual Lovecraftian monster which to be fair, he is too, he’s just figured out…how to make his panic attacks low-key, he’s pretty sure is the best way to put it, or if she’s upset she’s using flirtatious wording about it. Which, hey, it’s probably not the time to discuss preying mantises or mummies.

The Joseph part of his brain at the moment points out he’d probably do it if she was there in person, even if he’s having to potentially Solid Snake his way out of this situation, which…isn’t really something he needs to dwell on at the moment.

Hey, no one can accuse him of not having his priorities straight. Survival first, panic and uncomfortable conversations second.

“No sign of the giant dragon?” he speaks quietly into the radio.

“No.” She sounds frustrated. She’s also forgotten entirely about the radio etiquette rules, but the Joseph part of his brain was getting tired of them anyway. “And no, this is a distinct statue, but it’s also larger than the others.”

It has yet to attack. It’s hard to tell whether it saw him, and is toying with him, giving him false hope, or it saw him, has no idea where he is, and is waiting until it knows that before it makes its move, or whether it hadn’t even seen him in the ends and his heart is jackrabbiting for no good reason. It’s possible that if he moves he’ll alert it to his presence somehow, but for the other two possibilities it’s better to get out of his immediate area as long as he survives.

He gets down on his belly and starts trying to crawl quietly. Fortunately, it’s similar enough to his—Joseph’s—trick in the mines that he doesn’t have to put too much thought into it. “You mentioned something about a plan. Can it be modified for refugees from R’lyeh?”

The silence seems to go on forever, and before he starts to worry that she’s been eaten alive by some gargoyle, she replies. “I…I think so.” She seems like she’s slowly regaining her will, which is good, because in his experience that’s the only chance any of them have, even against crazy odds. Half the time that’s the only reason Slayers get anywhere—sheer stubbornness.

He glances back out again and shivers a little at what he sees. It hurt his eye, but just for a second, it looked like there was some sort of overlapping image that disappeared. “Good. If you could include something to deal with something that exists in multiple dimensions, that’d be appreciated. Otherwise, I think we’re just going to tick it off.”

“Jojo, we have access to the advances of German science. Who do you think I am?” she asks, every inch the arrogant Von Stroheim, and that—

Well, that’s welcome. “All right. You’ve got the lead. Where to next, Cyborg?”
Man oh man, London Calling was meant to be a short Stand battle, but that's...definitely not happening. But you know what? I'm good with this, because it might quite possibly be my favorite Stand battle in Shadowed Suspicion, followed closely by the Stereo Love fight and Angel's last stand (haha). There are definitely a few chapters left, so buckle up.
I am absolutely loving what David Productions has done with the place, though my only response to that ending is a meme: get a feeling so horny.
...I stand by what I said.
(I also, today, finally caught up completely [you know, aside from the actual anime, because I'm non-premium on Crunchy]. That's right, I've read every single chapter of the manga up through Jojolion. I'm gonna post a reaction on my dreamwidth.)
Thanks for reading!
~Dreamer~
That Horseman, Famine, Part I

Chapter Summary

Fitz, Robin, and Darling encounter another sinister statue...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What’s slightly concerning is that, as Fitz begins to walk back to the meeting place, the library suddenly feels deserted, and some of the lights are off, like they’re encouraging patrons to leave because they’ll be closing soon. It’s not the first time. He’s been to libraries and spent enough time reading that he doesn’t notice the passage of time and suddenly it’s eight o’clock, but when there’s an enemy around it’s a little more concerning. The silence in a library is usually comforting, but the instant it turns sinister, it’s an oppressive feeling, weighing down every step down the staircase. He sees Whisper before he sees the others. ‘Shh. We’re not alone.’

He’s usually quiet enough in libraries, but if there’s an enemy here, he’ll be even quieter.

It takes him a moment to realize that it’s not Whisper talking to him. It’s Darling, talking through her Stand. He pulls out Lotus Juice to reply. If there’s an enemy watching, they’re already aware there’s a Stand User present. ‘What, the dragon came to life?’ Could it be the original Brown and Von Stroheim had seen, hiding in the library all along, pretending it was normal?

‘No, we’re hiding from another one. A normal statue, maybe we would’ve...been able to take it on, but...but this one looks...weird.’ She sounds a little worried, but then, she’s getting used to the idea she has to fight. ‘None of the rest of the statues we saw had glowing eyes, right?’

It’s easy enough to think back and recall, even as he flattens himself against a bookcase in order to hide. ‘Not at all. This one does?’

‘It’s a giant, demon-looking horse with glowing red eyes and green...not skin, because it’s a statue, but if it was alive it would’ve been skin. There’s something else weird about it.’

He nods and waits for her to continue.

‘It doesn’t look like it’s eating enough. But it’s a statue. It doesn’t need to eat. So someone made it like that.’ He...doesn’t like the implications of that. But Darling doesn’t look any skinnier than any other kid. He’s certainly seen actually starving children on the streets, and she doesn’t look like that. Perhaps even more disturbing, how did Jojo know?

You can see the ribs on the statue, okay. Of course, any giant horse statue in the area is suspect, but it’s in keeping with what he learned in the article. Love is the type of artist to create such a perverse work of art showcasing the suffering of a horse, so it is likely that she was the creator. While the fact that the other statue was also hers might have been a coincidence, she also doesn’t make too many, if her reputation is correct, and her personality fits that of the Stand User, so it’s entirely possible.

‘I’d use the cell phone, but I don’t want to get attention from the Stand or User. Tell Robin
that while his ability may only stun them, that’s more than enough for me or you to get a hit in if we’re quick. We’ll need to coordinate our attacks, though.’

He glances out. No sign of it. No sign of anyone else, either. Where did everyone go? There was no sort of announcement, as would occur with most emergencies. Even if there’d been a man or woman with a gun, he would’ve seen people running, or heard them. There had been people around when he’d been wandering around attempting to find the books he was looking for, right? Honestly, it’s hard to tell for sure, but it’s probable he would’ve heard the running because it doesn’t fit in a library.

‘I can do that,” she responds through Whisper.

‘Where did it go? Where did everyone else go?’ he asks. Did the Stand already kill people? Did it scare them off? Did the librarians usher everyone to safety?

‘They ran. I think they thought it was a runaway normal horse. I’m not sure where it went,’ She sounds confused, and yes, it’s certainly an odd idea, but then, civilians like to explain things away rather than face the idea of the unexplained.

He listens. It’s deadly silent when no one’s speaking. No hooves, or the sound of rock on wood. Even the fluorescent lights seem to have stopped making sound. It’s honestly kind of terrifying, like a well-set up Spielberg. Since when was a giant statue-horse stealthy?

‘Well, tell Robin to prepare, and if the bow and arrow cause a problem we’ll deal with that. With no one around, it probably won’t be, but it’s better to be prepared and survive.’

‘True,’ she agrees. ‘I’m going to pull Whisper back, just in case it appears,’ and he nods. It’s a good idea. Honestly, out of all of them she probably needs the most protection. Whisper begins flying away, sticking to the ceiling, which is a good idea. Hopefully the horse can’t reach it there.

He carefully inches along, quietly, along the bookshelf and glances around the side.

And comes face-to-face with it.

It’s entirely unfair that a horse statue can be stealthy, but he doesn’t waste any breath on the surprise, even as he feels a little frozen in shock. The statue is frozen as well, nostrils wide as if it was a real horse, eyes wide and wild.

They’re red and glowing, and yes, it does honestly look possessed. The ‘skin’ is, in fact, tinged green. Honestly, it looks Chinese, like it’s made of jade. The effect is more subtle than it’d be if it was jade, but it’s still noticeable without too much inspection. Its mouth opens in shock, and those teeth don’t look right on a horse, like it’s some sort of predator instead. They’re sharp and pointy and could probably tear the flesh right off his bones. He should assume that the stone is sharp as a razor and not allow it to bite him. The ribs are indeed showing, and it’s thinner than a horse should be, as if it’s a horse that’s been starved. The legs look like skin has been stretched over unnatural bone structures.

It rears up, hooves at the ready, and he falls back on the floor, caught unawares. He’s been in this situation once, with his cousin. Hopefully he can roll out of the way in time, but his responses feel sluggish.
Chapter also entitled Devil With Hooves.
Chapter Summary

Johan and the Captain try to plan for Johan’s escape and their further fight...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She already has a response, not that he’s surprised. The Captain seems to be an individual that likes planning and control. Similarly, her control over her voice volume on the radio is phenomenal, which he appreciates given that the statue hasn’t charged the room yet, though it does seem to be inspecting the broken glass from his explosive entrance with interest. “So, what have you read of Lovecraft?”

She’s probably expecting him to say ‘nothing’, like Fitz, and maybe if his friend was here he’d get a kick out of lying and playing up his lack of reading, but there’s no real reason to do it now. “I got bored one of our research sessions and snuck in one of Giles’ books.” They’d expected him to keep working (well, actually, it was an open question as to what Giles, Buffy, and Willow expected of him on the best of days, but that wasn’t a good thing to think about right now as it’d just make him moody and not put him in the best frame of mind for defeating a literary Cthulhu statue) even when he’d exhausted all the books in the languages he could speak, and they didn’t have anything remotely helpful anyway, so he just kind of ignored it to go off and do his own thing. Sneakily, so nobody yelled at him. It worked pretty well, honestly.

She’s taken aback. It’s a second before she asks her next question. “The Call of Cthulhu?”

He shrugs, not that she can see that. “I don’t honestly remember. I don’t think so. I know what Cthulhu is, but I don’t think he showed up in that one.”

It’s possible he can sneak off now if he’s really sneaky and quiet about it. “There was a boat,” she explains, and that sounds cool. Except there’s a problem.

“That might work, but how are we going to get there?” He’d already kind of broken the plane, and she probably needed a bit of rest before she could create anything large again.

“If you could get downstairs past it, I could commandeer us a vehicle. Perhaps not recommended, but I can always make sure the individual is compensated after the fact, and I prefer it to dying.” From the sounds in the background, it sounds like she’s already working on getting them that vehicle.

“Yeah, Scooby Rule Number One is don’t die.” Given the noise she makes on the other side, she’s confused, which—oh, yeah, he hasn’t explained the Scooby thing, but now’s really not the time.

“I’m not sure if it’s irony or fate that the main character is Johansen,” she muses, and he’s about to reply—that really is weird.

Unfortunately, he hits the wrong button, and the radio lets out a loud screech. He freezes for
all of a second before he yells into the radio, since its use as stealth has entirely failed, “Uh, yeah, about that, you probably should hurry up. I’m bringing company!” He’s up on his feet and propelling himself faster with Pretender yanking on the door frame with all of his strength. It makes the previous ache howl, but there’s not much he can do about it, other than giving up and letting himself be killed, and that’s not really his style. There’s an unearthly screech that makes his bones shiver in an uncomfortable way and he hears the crashing of glass before he’s dashing down the hall, aching a little at every push and pull of Pretender trying to speed him up. If he falls now he’ll go skidding for feet. He only barely manages to snatch a glimpse of a map on the wall, and finds…oh, crap, he’s heading in the wrong direction, if he read that right.

There’s a crash behind him. It’s not like he can look, but he doesn’t need to in order to picture the splinters of door frame and wall hitting the opposite wall with the force of a furious chthonian, nor the way the further sounds of destruction are heading in his direction.

He calls Pretender to him and lets himself be spun. It’s dizzying and it makes him fall, but that was the whole plan of it. It hurts. About as much as being thrown into a mausoleum. He hears a screech as the statue barely misses him. He can feel the breeze above his back. Fortunately, it’ll have issues turning around, too.

There’s a gentle touch and the pain hurts less and it’s easier to breathe. Pretender’s face, concerned and protective, in front of his gaze. Your path is not yet over. Get up. He’s apparently taken a second too long to follow the (extremely good) advice, because an instant later, his Stand yells, Get up!

He’s still not sure if it’s just an externalization of his internal thoughts, his subconscious, or if Pretender is actually talking to him. (On the other hand, isn’t a Stand just an externalization of a subconscious? He’s thinking too hard about philosophy when he really should be moving.)

He takes the hand up and instantly the run is back to its frantic, ready to fall-over quality, with the heave and half throw Pretender manages. It hurts again, but this time it’s more of a brain-ache, and he really probably is pushing himself too far. Still, it’s interesting to learn Pretender can use hamon too, kinda (or he’s somehow channeling it through his Stand), and if he manages to pull this off, it’ll be useful in the future.

It’s trying to remove itself from rubble behind him. Pretender glances back, and the sound he makes is not encouraging. I’m not sure it fully exists in our world. It flickered a little, and a rock fell part way through it.

That’s entirely freaky. How do you hit something that isn’t actually physical?

Energy, maybe? Not even Pretender sounds sure about this one.

Fortunately, at this point, he’s actually to the stairwell, but an idea occurs to him and he veers off to the elevators instead. Even luckier, he doesn’t have to wait for an elevator to show up, or his plan would’ve been useless—it’s already at the floor and opens as soon as he hits the button.

There’s a potted plant in the room. “Your sacrifice will be remembered, Charlie,” he whispers to it, and pushes it into the elevator with Pretender’s help. It’s a little easier to breathe, and it turns out that channeling hamon through Pretender amplifies it (why didn’t I use that more effectively Joseph whines in his head) and he uses a precious few seconds to pump the plant and metal as full of the power of the sun as it’ll go.

Then he pries open the opposite doors, braces himself for a moment, and then launches himself out into the elevator shaft. Ground floor, here he comes.
Chapter End Notes

Chapter also known as This Is England.
Chapter Summary

Fitz starts his counterattack...

Chapter Notes

Also entitled Return to Ogre Street.

He doesn’t quite manage to roll out of the way, and screams a little as a hoof comes down on his shoulder and there’s a cracking sound. He bites the sound back. It’s better if civilians don’t come and investigate and get killed. It’s a good thing he’s left-handed because otherwise what’s probably a broken right arm would be more of an impediment. As it is, Johan’s probably going to be a pain, when they both make it through this. Because they will.

He’s not crazy. He knows practically all the stories; knows that the body count of those who hang around the Joestars is pretty high, but if nothing else, he knows he won’t die here. Robin’s good, probably, but he alone can’t protect Darling on her own, and in the afterlife, how could he face Jojo if he dies here?

It’s merely a promise; a promise he had made to Johan, and that Johan had made to him. They won’t die to this arse of a statue Stand User. Not before Jojo can make a dumb joke about Weeping Angels and be utterly annoying about the fact that he’d managed to fly a plane without a license. After Gracie, he keeps his promises. He’s learned his lesson. Breaking promises never leads anywhere good.

It takes him a moment, two, before he realizes the reason he’s not smeared over the hard wooden floor is the quickly fading golden energy twisting around an arrow. It’s broken part of the stone skin like it was normal flesh, so it appears that somehow the hamon had managed to do something useful, despite the previous failures. It had knocked the horse into one of the shelves, making it lean precariously. The momentum had been redirected, and rather than smashing through his sternum and breaking his heart in his chest, it had merely broken his shoulder. Still, he can’t move it. It’ll be a disadvantage in the fight.

He rolls further out of the way and doesn’t hesitate to pull out his Stand. The thought occurs to him that he could—no, probably should—use the new power, the one that melts things. Mass Destruction.

No. It’s too dangerous. He could damage the books, or anybody remaining on the floor. It’s pure luck he didn’t hurt Darling, earlier.

Reverse the Destiny and Soul Drive won’t do much either—it’s not like he’s out to heal the Stand. It’s not likely Have a Nice Dream will work on a statue—he’s pretty sure it only works on living things, and he’s also pretty sure statues don’t sleep, but it’s worth a try.
He sprays Lotus Juice with water, and his Stand spits it back out and hits the horse statue. It whinnies and thrashes a little, but its movements are definitely slower, something he plans to take full advantage of. It seems that between that and Robin’s hamon, while they might not have damaged the statue persay, they’ve evened the odds, if only by a little.

He smiles, eyes cold. “It’s just your luck Jojo’s not here,” he tells it, merciless. “I’d hate to show him how coarse I can be, when the occasion…” he produces a blade from his sleeve, stabbing the thing in its glowing demonic eye, “….calls for it!”

It’s a bad habit from his old life, keeping that thing around, but it’s saved his life more than once, and now appears to be just another instance of his attachment to his less than stellar past paying off. He’s not sure how intelligent a statue can be, but if it believed him to be a posh rich brat merely living off the legacy of an oil magnate, it can think again.

He quickly runs around the corner, holding on to his painful shoulder desperately. LJ uses a little extra of the water, now tainted a color that can barely be seen in the inconsistent lighting, to use Soul Drive on his shoulder. He can’t heal it completely, but he can at least dull the pain and make the rest of this fight a little easier.

Wait. No. No no no. The article, the maker’s mark, the four horsemen…it’s a four-part Stand. They have to take out this part as quickly as they can and see if they can’t head to Love’s apartment. She rarely leaves, and she’s certainly not out of London—the Stand is powerful, yes, but it probably has some sort of radius or something. London’s a large area, though, so it’s possible it doesn’t even affect all of London. Hopefully, if they take out at least one of the Horsemen it makes the effect of the other statues coming to life less powerful. Bloody hell, there’s no way they can take out all the Horsemen, especially split up like this. Especially not with Robin’s powers weaker due to the fact that it’s not technically alive, and Darling…what can Darling even do to it?

Hang on, Robin’s powers are weaker, but not incapable of doing anything to it, despite the fact that hamon is only supposed to work on living creatures. Have a Nice Dream also worked, despite only being effective against living things…so the Stand counts as pseudo-alive, does it…?

“Robin, aim for the hooves!” he yells. He’s not sure if the Horseman can comprehend the human language, but even if it does, it’s not like it can know what they’re planning, and even if Robin fails to hit it, that will keep the horse from galloping and trampling him again. It probably has secondary effects than just the physical, and might be waiting for reinforcements, but he’s not going to give it that much time. He’s going to wear it down, but not for too long, and he plans to defeat it quickly.

It’s going to regret coming after a Speedwagon.
Johan tries the Joestar Secret Technique.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Johan’s doing his best not to panic. It’s not that he’s claustrophobic, persay, but he’s seen far too many horror movies and played far too many horror games, and falling down an elevator shaft is not the way he wants to go. Falling with the plane was a lot less scary, because he felt more in control. Plus, he wasn’t injured. For whatever reason, that seems to have an effect on his morale. Still, if he wants to make the rendezvous with Von Stroheim, it’s the quickest and honestly safest way. He could follow the same strategy of slowing his fall in the stairwell, but he couldn’t have set up that neat hamon trap with his ripplefu, and Cthulhu would have caught up to him and done… whatever horrible thing Cthulhu does to his victims. Sentenced to death by hentai, maybe?

Yare yare daze, echoes in his head, and yeah, okay, maybe that joke was a step too far, but he’s freaked out and so he’s not working with his best material, all right?

He only gets to slow his fall twice using Pretender to grab the slight ledge on every couple floors, wincing at the strain on his already painful arms, before he hears the loud crashing indicating the Cthulhu statue had flown into the waiting elevator at high speed. It’s making that loud unearthly screeching sound again, only this time, it’s echoing and growing in sound as it reverberates through the elevator shaft. He can’t help but add his own scream to the mix as he tries his best to block out the sound with his own hands and feels something warm and wet drip past his palms. Crap. Blood, probably. This thing is a menace, but then, what did I expect from fighting a Cthulhu statue?

He glances up to see a golden flash fade—so the hamon did do something, even if it probably just ticked it off rather than did serious damage—No, wait, maybe energy’s more effective when it’s in between worlds, as the only thing that can reach it—physical stuff isn’t going to do anything when it’s there—and has a second, stretched out to a million moments as his sendo mastery appears to slow down time, to react. He and Pretender reach out with their feet and hands blindly, wincing at the shock of the landing upon their already aching joints, and flatten themselves against the elevator doors as the elevator, statue and all, falls past at incredible speeds. One edge catches Pretender’s shoulder, tearing a chunk out of the non-armored flesh, and he screams again, struggling to catch his own ragged breath. He can’t dull the pain if he can’t catch his breath, but he can’t catch his breath if he can’t dull the pain…!

Fitz will be furious, he thinks vaguely. I don’t think I’ll die if I can just at least make it to Von Stroheim. She has a plan. But that doesn’t help much when I’m wasting time here because I can barely move…

He reaches out a shaky hand to try to pry the doors open with Pretender’s help, only for his shoulder to shriek in agony at the doubled pain. He doesn’t even have to look to know that the cold soaking his shoulder is most likely also—

He hopes Robin’s been taught the healing hamon, because he’s not comfortable with Fitz
taking on the wounds he’s sustained, even if it’s easy enough to heal him with hamon afterward. *Maybe it’ll teach you to be more careful in the future, Jojo.* He starts. That voice sounded so real, so lifelike—is he starting to hallucinate?

No. He refuses. Pain is an old friend, deeply ingrained into even his childhood. It won’t be pain that brings him down, especially as pain is all in the head. He can think away the pain, if he tries, or at least make it manageable, enough that his breathing can do the rest. He just has to have something to hang on to—two somethings, if he thinks about it.

One—the statue’s being really quiet. He’s not sure how he knows it’s not just wishful thinking, but he does—he did manage to injure it, somehow. Still, it’s not as if he could do much with his breathing to hurt it, now. Whatever hamon he has would only be an accessory to whatever Von Stroheim’s planning.

Two—that thing ruined his clothes. His new clothes. He really likes the leather jacket, and stuff like blood really ruins leather, and he’s not sure if he can even talk Fitz into another shopping trip given what happened on the last one. That’s really rude.

He breathes in. It’s shaky, but he’s not trying to get a ripple pattern going, just enough to give him strength to open the doors. He grits his teeth even as he exhales as he and Pretender pry open the doors, and they run as best they can to the stairway.

Fortunately, Cthulhu’s not waiting there with an ambush.

Unfortunately, he can’t afford to slow down his speed much, since speed is of the essence. Just enough that the impact won’t kill.

It hurts each and every time he slows it down, and the impact as Pretender hits the ground, knees bending to absorb some of the impact, jars itself all the way up his spine, but at least he’s still alive.

He limps to the building entrance, and—

Woah. Johan wishes he’d been paying attention the last time Captain Beefheart had used her Stand, because that just looks cool. She’s stolen a car, and now an armored cyborg behind her—that reminds me of the Old Von Stroheim, the part of his brain that is Joseph muses, and he can’t disagree—slowly fades into a green outline. At the same time, a green, futuristic outline—like Iron Man or Tron or something, cool!—builds itself around the car. She’s going to turn it into a tank. Good choice.

“Well, what are you doing, Jojoooo? Get in and stop standing there!” she yells at him. Ordinarily, he’d object to being yelled at, but since it’s good advice, he just gets inside as fast as he possibly can.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter alternatively titled Courtesy Call.
Fitz continues trying to carry out his plan of attack.

Fitz continues to run between the shelves, trying to lead the Horseman Stand through Robin’s line of fire. He’s not even sure if Robin heard him, since he didn’t respond at all, but he has to hope. He’s going to have to make up an entirely different plan without Robin, since there’s no way either he or Lotus Juice are getting close enough to injure the hooves or ankles without him. Maybe if they had caltrops…

And there it is, the sound of a bowstring. From the thunk and the whinny, it’s clear that at least one arrow hit, though he’s not sure if it hit the right part of the horse’s body. If he can only lead it on a little more, he can be sure Robin hit the right part of the body…

Suddenly, there’s a shelf falling on him, books pelting him hard enough to leave bruises. He cries out in pain as his injured arm automatically reaches out to catch himself and he collapses, unable to hold up his own weight. What had—

The Stand. It ran into the shelf and knocked it down on him, sick of this little game of cat and mouse.

“Darling! Attack and retreat!” he screams. Now’s as good a time as any, but Violent Whispers has to be good at striking and retreating, since it’s not a very durable Stand and they can’t afford for any damage to return to its User.

Unfortunately, LJ isn’t a very strong Stand, and isn’t much good at dragging him out from underneath the rubble. It’s making panicked squeaking noises, which in any other situation would be adorable, but in this case he kind of feels like joining it.

He sees the glow of the eye peek over the side of the shelf. It feels like it’s gloating, laughing at him. It steps down harder, and his breath leaves him in a whoosh. He’s going to be bruised, if not worse.

Whisper flies in, hissing, strikes and flies away. One hoof catches it and throws it into the shelves behind, and he hears Darling cry out, but it flies around the shelf and out of sight before the Horseman can decide to go after her Stand instead.

Fortunately, it appears that his plan worked. Not to the extent that it had on Jojo, of course. It’s not fully living. But hopefully it will be enough to dissuade it from any further clever plans, like knocking shelves down on—

Wait. What.

He’s not sure if his eyes are playing tricks on him, but it looks like its good eye flickers green for a moment, and it reaches its head down delicately, baring its teeth. For one horrifying instant, he
believes that it’s going to take a bite out of his face before it carefully bites the rim of his hat and flips it up to land on its head.

For an instant, he stares blankly. It’s an odd move, to be sure. “I…I don’t think it suits you,” he manages eventually. It’s one thing for Johan to be stealing his hat all the time, but on a stone horse, when the eye is now dripping some sort of disturbing, clear fluid…

The horse bellows and lunges, nostrils flaring, but dodges to the side as an arrow whistles past. It’s only inches from Fitz’s face. He has a sudden new appreciation for Robin’s shooting—clearly, the man knows what he’s doing. The trilby tumbles off elsewhere during the struggle, but as much as he feels naked without any hat, he’s not about to go after it, particularly as he still has to extricate himself from the bookcase.

All right, so perhaps the plan had not completely gone to plan. The listless way the horse is eyeing him now was the intention. He hadn’t taken into account the fact that other wounds would mean other emotions. Still, perhaps this will work even better. He couldn’t lead it around if it was disinclined to move.

It’s a little unfortunate that all of his fighting after meeting Jojo had changed to a more reckless style, but then, he hadn’t been involved in Stand battles, and anyway, Johan was some sort of influence. Truth be told, he’s reluctant to call his friend a bad influence, at least not when it’s not to his face.

“Hey, you!” The good eye turns to him, utterly disinterested. “You look so scrawny, I bet you couldn’t even lift me!” If he thinks about it, it’s likely that this particular part of the Stand is meant to be Famine, with those ribs.

Its nostrils flare again, and he hears the distant sound of Darling gasping out ‘what’ before it’s muffled—she probably clasped her hands over her face.

It stomps over the shelf, bruising him further in the process, positions itself behind his head, reaches down and grabs a mouthful of his shirt, and begins to yank, forcefully. It’s not gentle—it’s grabbed part of his hair and some of the skin at the back of his neck and it hurts but it is actually pulling him out from under the shelf, which is shifting on top of him. He groans. There’s splinters digging into his arms. Finally, he’s out in the open, and in a few moments he’s dangling midair. Time for him to make his move—again.

“You don’t learn your lessons, do you?” he asks rhetorically, only this time, he’s not attempting to hurt the statue, since he doesn’t have a good view of what he’d be targeting. Instead, he produces the dagger again, hoping it doesn’t have anything weird on it that would infect him or anything, and cuts, ruining his hair the collar on the back of his outfit and the bit of his skin caught in the thing’s teeth.

It hurts. Not as much as being stabbed, thank goodness, but it stings, and he can feel the blood. He’s also feeling weaker than he should—has he gone soft, or is it some secondary Stand power? Honestly, if it was following and not paralyzed by indecision at the moment, he’d be in trouble. He catches a glimpse of the blood on the thing’s lips and teeth as he sprints past. Honestly, if horses can be confused, it looks that way. Not ideal, but then, fights rarely turn out that way.
Chapter also entitled Deadly Dance.
That Horseman, War, Part IV

Chapter Summary

Captain Beefheart and Johan continue their running battle with the Stand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Stop being useless and sitting there,” Captain Von Stroheim mutters and hands him a German rifle.

He has to swallow down the urge to punch her, because that would distract her from driving, but seriously, you do not use that word. It is a banned word.

Of course, given how she’s driving what is, at least on the outside, a tank, and doing so through crowded city streets with a bunch of abandoned cars as well as statues likely to see them as a ‘threat’ and attack them, never mind staying out of Cthulhu’s attack radius while getting it to follow them to set it up for the attack, she’s probably not too concerned about being rude or echoing ancient vampires at the moment. Given all the cars abandoned on the streets, too, steering is particularly hard, especially given the size of the vehicle. It doesn’t exactly turn like a motorcycle.

Joseph, help? He doesn’t like guns, no Scooby does, there’s traumatizing memories of Buffy being shot in front of him and Tara dead, so maybe on occasion it can be good to be able to become someone else. Someone without those memories, who won’t panic and be…and be helpless.

He realizes that it’s only an echo he’s putting on in his mind, not really Joseph or another personality or anything, but it’s kind of nice to talk to himself and pretend it’s someone else.

Or maybe it’s Pretender, really? It’s hard to say. Even so, he finds his breathing even out, focus taking over. He’s going to need it; he can’t afford to be too inaccurate with a gun, not in a crowded city like this.

He stretches his neck and takes the rifle, handling it with some familiarity. It’s almost second nature. Of course, it’s not exactly like it’s Joseph’s favorite firearm, but he’s still pretty good with it, especially given that it’s semiautomatic. Which is really helpful given his wound, even if the pain in his shoulder has calmed down a little to a dull throb.

He sticks his head out, has to duck back inside for a moment as a griffon, screeching, flies by and attempts to rip his head off. It’s just an average-sized statue, so it’s not as if it’s like the Cthulhu statue, but it’s still got enough strength and momentum to break a fragile little human like himself.

True, he probably could use the tank’s gun, but it only points in front of them, or at the most to their sides. Use—you’ve got him doing it now. Jerk.

That’s not very helpful when the monster’s behind them.

Plus, it probably does too much damage. He doesn’t want to take chunks out of buildings or cars or passersby, and as excited as mind-Joseph is about the possibility of trying a tank’s gun out on a giant flying statue (I mean, it probably wouldn’t do too much, since a plane’s guns weren’t too
good against Pillar Men and these guys are kinda like that, if just a little less durable, but it’d be fun to try), he’s never tried it before, and neither has Jorge or anyone else in the family that he can think of, so he can’t guess anything about how good he is with the aim. Also, they’d have to turn to face it, and from what he can tell, Von Stroheim’s attempting to get them out somewhere where not only can she satisfy her desires to reenact literature (seriously, Fitz’ll be jealous), but there won’t be civilians around to get hurt. Making a stand here in the middle of a street won’t be the way to ensure people don’t get hurt.

Making a Stand. Ha. Buffy would appreciate that one.

He pokes his head out again, breathe in, breathe out halfway, and hold. Shoot. It’s not perfect aim, but he still hits the wing with multiple shots, and feels the roar of anger reverberate not even through his ears, but even through his own soul. Still, it looks like it’d partially phased into reality at the time, so he did manage to hurt it a little, even if, ultimately, it’s little more than a small bee, buzzing around and stinging, over and over (one of the ones with more than one stinger, and don’t die when they sting, and he’s getting mentally sidetracked).

It doesn’t matter how little you think of us or how unafraid you are of the possibility of us taking you down. Underestimating us will be your downfall, he thinks with a smile, ducking back inside. Unfortunately, the rifle seems to have jammed. He thinks about making a crack about that superior German manufacture (doesn’t; Captain Beefheart needs to concentrate), or asking her how to un-jam it (again, she’s got better things to do), so he just fiddles with it for a bit, until he figures it out.

She’s definitely sweating. “I might be pretty useless after this, Jojo.”

He nods to show he’s listening, even as he works quickly and carefully with his fingers. It’s not like he’s in the best of shape, either.

“Creating large things, like planes and tanks, is difficult. Using something already existing, like the car, helps, but it’s still difficult. Creating this many things at the same time is also stressful, or this many things one after the other. Adding additional attributes, such as the speed of this tank…” She trails off, and yeah, he’d wondered about that, “Overuse of your Stand has a high possibility of putting you in a healing coma. The more you push yourself past your limits, the longer you’re stuck. If you allow yourself to relax and recover, you can avoid that, but I’m not sure we have the time.” Her voice…there’s just the slightest of tremors below the surface, but her hands are perfectly steady.

“It’s a good thing we’re not in this on our own, then, right?” he asks, trusting in her faith in Robin and his own in Fitz, and she meets him with a knowing, tight smile and goes back to her work, as he does with his.

Rinse, repeat. His ears are bleeding a little from the screams by the time they come into view of the docks, but in the end, the tactic seems to be working. Nobody else has the attention of that giant hulking half-dragon half-octopus, that’s for sure.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also called I'll Stand By You.
Fitz uses newfound and barely remembered skills in his effort to bring the fight to a close.

There’s only one other thing that needs to be done to set the stage. Perhaps the Stand will appreciate the set dressing upon its downfall; it seems a very theatrical fellow. “Robin, Darling, I don’t care how, break the fountain outside. Get the water everywhere,” he yells, running up the stairs as quickly as he can.

It’ll probably be long enough. He might be pushing himself to his limits, but he’s not about to let himself or the others get killed and let Jojo down.

He hears the sound of the horse statue following him, hooves clattering on the wood. He’d been reluctant to say that part out loud, but then again, why should he worry? The Stand doesn’t know his own abilities. It can’t avoid what’s coming. The fact that it hasn’t shapeshifted into the dragon form to try to get to him more easily indicates that he’s right about the multi-part Stand.

He ducks out of the way just in time for the jade horse Stand to slam into the wall, and wobbles a bit himself. Wait, is it...the more damaged it is, the more weak I become? ...But I won’t let that dissuade me from my plan, or my resolve.

When he reaches the top of the stairs, as expected, there’s a lock on the door. Fortunately, he’s dealt with similar situations *(perhaps I have matured, Grace; I’m not looking at that time as a problem anymore, only as a wealth of experience that can help Johan)* in the past and hits the chain in a precise way with the hilt of his knife. As expected, the chain was weak, and it falls, lock and all, useless to the floor. He kicks open the door, hearing the gallop begin in his direction again, and runs to the edge of the roof. It’s fortunate he has a good sense of direction, so he can head directly to the side closest to the fountain.

When he glances down, he sees the absolute mess they’ve made of what is probably a historic, beautiful fountain, and watches as another hamon-filled arrow strikes the water, sending a ripple through amplified by the water, and more chunks of stone go flying. Whisper and Darling are throwing some of the chunks of stone back in to attempt to do more damage. “That’s good enough! Get away from the fountain!” he yells, as the gallop continues toward him and he hears Darling scream.
“Sorry,” he mutters ironically, and easily…

Sidesteps.

The Stand lets out a sudden, terrified whinny and falls, unable to stop its own momentum. Fitz picks out a path and goes for it, even if he is a bit rusty—he’s not the delinquent youth that climbs every building he can find anymore, after all. LJ follows him easily, sliding down like it’s on an invisible water slide. The handholds and footholds and jumps come back easily enough, though he’s certainly weaker than in the past, and he can feel his arm starting to give out a little. Still, if Stand users keep attacking them, he’s pretty sure it counts as a rather unorthodox training regimen.

His landing is definitely a little rusty, but he only stumbles a little, and while there’s a bit of pain, it’s not bad. He did, of course, remember to bend his knees. LJ slides in front of him to the limit of its range.

It’s unfortunate—for the Stand, that is—that it shares similarities with real horses. Specifically, it had landed on one of its legs, and has issues standing, screaming in pain and fear. As with real horses, a leg injury is bound to be fatal, even if that happens to be by his own hand.

He certainly feels even more exhausted, so it’s probable he’s correct. Even if it has a secondary effect, though, even if it hurts him badly, it’ll go away when the Stand is gone.

The entire pool of water the Stand is laying in, thanks to Lotus Juice’s touch and the new power, Mass Destruction, turns to acid, eating stone and metal and coins and the Stand, which starts screaming even louder. He has to steel his heart to the sound. It’s not a real horse, after all, and if he hadn’t killed it the statue would’ve killed them.

He turns with the running footsteps to see Robin, who instantly tells him, “Way to go, man!” and begins examining his wounds as the screams begin to die.

“You’ve been on the streets,” Darling states hesitantly as he joins them.

“I don’t like to talk about that,” he snaps back, and feels a little bad at the way she shrinks away. “But then, no one does, do they?” he adds, quieter, and earns a small, shy smile.

“Whisper’s telling me I’ve been missing something,” she moves on, which is very kind of her, but then, she’s street smart, isn’t she? Despite the fact that she’s only been a foster child, as far as he’s aware, never having lived on the streets in the past. “We can make your emotions heal you, or your emotions be healed by your body. We’ve just never done it before because there was never a use. There wasn’t really a use…” she pauses, looking guilty, before she corrects herself, “…well, not an ace use, anyway, on myself, and there was no point in healing people I was trying to steal from. You feel powerful, in control right?”

He manages a smile. “More than I’ve felt in years.” The only thing that would make it better is if Johan was here so he could keep an eye on him. The last time he’d been elsewhere during a fight he’d nearly gotten killed, but then, he had an ally who, if anything like Robin, was trustworthy, and in any case he should concentrate on the happy emotions, if he’s correct about how Violent Whispers works.

Whisper slaps him lightly, and it’s not perfect, likely because he can’t fully calm his heart, but his arm does feel better than it had, and even his bruises hurt less.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter also called You Better Run.
Chapter Summary

Johan, much to his dismay, doesn't have the monopoly on crazy stunts in this partnership.

Chapter Notes

Chapter also entitled Unexpected Maneuvers. There was a mistake with my schedule (for whatever reason there's an 'am' and a 'pm' button that people can hit and mess up things...sometimes military time is less confusing), so I'm here, posting!

~Dreamer~

Johan expects the Captain to stop the tank. For them to make a dash for the nearest ship in the harbor. He can’t really see the docks they’re heading to, given that he’s only looking backward at the statue chasing them. It’s been joined by its buddies, flying alongside it—gargoyles, demons, dragons. He’s mostly just further angering the Cthulhu statue by, essentially, just slapping it with bullets, though it looks like something he’d done in the actual skyscraper and subsequent elevator chase had done something to that behemoth, as one of the areas on the torso near the wings is nigh-constantly flickering in a way that’s really starting to give him a headache. It’s pretty likely that they can only really damage it when it’s fully phased into this reality. At least, that’s the theory he’s pretty sure Pretender has, and he’s also pretty sure Pretender’s smarter than he is (which is a weird idea, given that Pretender is pretty much his soul). Fortunately, the other statues respond better (or worse, depending on if you’re actually the statues in question) to being hit with rifle shots. Shooting them out of the sky might be destroying more than a few parked cars, but given the entire statue invasion (he’s glad he doesn’t work for the Speedwagon Foundation news division trying to contain that utter catastrophe) it’ll probably be the least of people’s worries. And they’re more likely to survive, which is better for everyone because they’re the people most likely to stop this thing and get everything back to normal, so really, it’s a win-win for most things, aside from the fact that they’re still going to have to replace their vehicles.

But the thing is, he has reasonable expectations. Maybe all his travels in, say, Africa have made him unprepared for people doing ridiculous things, because he’d maybe gotten used to people not doing ridiculous things like kidnapping him to protect him.

On retrospect, this is the relation of Von Stroheim, the man who begged for his leg to be cut off and attempted to use a belly machine gun against a Pillar Man of all things. Expecting her to do the normal or expected thing, in hindsight, is more than a little ridiculous.

“Get inside, and close the door, Jojoooo!” she screams at him, and he pulls his head inside just in time. The rifle disappears from his hands, turning back into the blue glowy outline before that, too, fades. He feels the entire tank shake from an impact, but the impact isn’t at the top, it’s below, like they’ve fallen onto something, or…
Something wet on his injured shoulder. It doesn’t hurt, much, but it’s enough to startle him, enough for him to notice right away. He glances over just in time to see another drop of water fall from the top down onto his shoulder—

She drove a tank into the water. If they can keep catching the statues off guard, that’s a plus. They’re probably expecting the two of them to not behave like absolute madmen, which if it’s a mistake for him to make, it’s also a mistake for them to make. Unfortunately, this means that they’re also on a sinking tank in the water, and opening the hatch will lead them to sink even faster. What’s she planning next?

“You can swim, right?” she asks, and—well, there’s the answer to that question. Hopefully the insurance will replace the car that’s been stolen and turned into a tank.

“California kid,” he smirks, gesturing at himself. “I can even surf—a little.”

“Good,” she responds, and the tank instantly begins melting around them in the same way as it had grown around them. They’re in a car now. Fortunately, they’re not trapped in by crumpled metal or by seatbelts. Of course, a car is less structurally sealed than a tank, and the water starts flooding in much quicker. The hard part is getting out with the pressure of the water at the doors. Johan takes a couple normal breaths, to try to oxygenate his lungs before the water goes over their heads. He starts kicking at the door, all while pressing down on the door handle. It hurts, but at least his legs are less in pain than his arms.

The Captain summons her Stand, Panzermensch, and Jojo finds himself distracted for all of two seconds. That armored, cyborg shape looks awfully familiar, but that’s weird, because can dead people even come back as Stands? Or is it that she looks up to both of her grandfathers so much that the dead one is now her Stand? Then the gravity (or water pressure) of the situation comes rushing back, and he remembers to start trying to escape again. The idea of using her Stand to escape is a good one and a novel one, but Pretender is almost as wounded and exhausted as he is, so it wouldn’t be much of an improvement. As if Pretender notices the thought, he feels a burst of encouragement, which is something anyway.

“We’re trying to swim to that ship,” she points in a direction, and, well, that’s easy. Swim in a direction, grab a ladder, climb up, don’t get grabbed by a giant statue or his hentai tentacles. Easy enough instructions for him to follow, with how tired he is. “It’s big enough it shouldn’t tax me too much to change, and it has a ladder on the side, so it shouldn’t be too difficult to get inside,” she tells him, and he nods.

And then she gets the door open, and he hesitates for a moment before swimming over to the driver’s side and swimming out that way. If he felt more awake, he’d be annoyed at her showing off. She’d managed to do it first. On the other hand, he’s wounded, almost to the point he doesn’t care anymore, and it enabled him to take the easy way, so he’ll just settle for focusing on swimming instead.
Interlude: Freaking Me Out

Chapter Summary

The narrator introduces you to one of the new characters.

There comes a point in each of our lives where we are tested and must find where we fall, selfless or selfish. We can talk all we want about where we’d fall theoretically, be absolutely certain until we find that moment, but when push comes to shove, our true nature is revealed—are we selfish? Are we cowards? Are we glory hounds? Or, rather, are we the type who would never call ourselves a hero at all, say that we’re just doing what others would do, yet act in selfless, courageous ways that others label ‘heroic’?

Whitney Houston, a young lady labeled ‘African American’ by most of her college peers, encountered one such destiny-defining moment.

When she was young, she encountered a fake gypsy woman in a carnival telling fortunes. She saw the makeup and fake gold flaking and knew it was all fake, but she was curious as to what a fake fortuneteller would say to her.

From everything she had seen on television, such people tended to say gentle, pretty words that would make their targets very happy and give a nice tip. Things like “you will soon meet the love of your life” or “you will come into a fortune”. For a child, she expected something like “your parents will buy you an amazing toy”. If the gypsy lady had maybe been real, she might’ve expected the change to ‘your mother’, but she wasn’t, so she didn’t expect that.

The woman ranted and raved and didn’t seem altogether sane. She ended up sneaking out of the tent and calling emergency services, suggesting that no one had gone in or come out in a while and she was concerned.

There were all sorts of insinuations—that the devil was on her heels and would eventually catch up and devour her soul because she couldn’t run forever, that she’d abandon her little brother to his death. She didn’t know about the rest of it, the religious stuff, besides the whispers against her family in the city because of the color of their skin, but she did take her big sis duties seriously. There were, of course, her stepbrothers and stepsisters, but she’d never met them, unlike her real brother, currently with her mom. She’d never abandon him.

When she found them, her mother was very worried and asked her whether the strange lady had hurt her, but all she’d done was say words, like practically everyone else did, and besides, Whitney had just felt sad for the lady. Hopefully, she’d be all right, with help. She definitely needed help, but the 911 people should be able to help her, even if they couldn’t always help everywhere.

Now, for most, that would remain an isolated incident in their youth, a strange tale with which to regale friends around that spookiest time of year. Whitney’s story, however, does not end here. (Of course it doesn’t, or it would have no reason to be included with a tale of Stands and tragedies, and you’d begin to wonder, too, if your own narrator wasn’t possibly a bit mad.)

You see, her brother became ill. Cancer, a plague far too common in these troubled times. She searched for the best treatment everywhere, took on multiple jobs in an attempt to pay the bills (and,
neighbors whispered loudly, as if she wasn’t standing right there, what seemed like a concerted effort to kill herself). No matter what, though, she refused to abandon him, even when the act of merely keeping him alive was enough to nearly destroy her, and might be futile in the end. She is a woman of strong ideals, and the idea of abandoning family just as her father had, no matter how much easier the decision, is entirely foreign to her. She had subverted one of the lady’s big predictions.

But, unfortunately, only one, for the devil on her heels caught up to her at this point: three devils, in fact. The Wolf, the Ram, and the Hart. The devilish law firm owned (once traced far enough past even the board of directors, also by the aforementioned three devils had been eyeing her burgeoning cyber security career with unholy glee and an unhealthy level of interest, and had smelled a chance when she began to work seventy, eighty hour work weeks in places below her talent. And as all devils do, the smiling, besuited ghouls employed by that firm offered her a deal she simply could not refuse. They would save her brother. They said money was no object, that all she had to do was sign the contract and come work for them.

Of course, there was a catch. Whitney knew this, of course. It was a literal deal with a devil, so it would naturally be dangerous. Destructive, even, but she was desperate, and as too many who take such deals, she believed that when it went wrong she alone would pay the price. Desperation drives even love to terrible, grasping places.

When she realized the truth, it was too late. She had signed the contract in blood. They owned her brother, and they owned her soul. With one angle, they had saved her brother. With another angle, they had doomed him to a living death. They trapped him within time. He would never die, but so, too, would he never recover, and as long as they had his body, she would do everything they asked of her as one of the employees with a hostage buying her loyalty.

Most of her work hurting others was done from a distance, and she did her best to distance herself from the results, which was almost impossible given her morals and situation. Several times she considered suicide, but they owned her beyond death (she’d met some of her shambling colleagues), and she had no idea what would happen to her brother should she try. This was Wolfram & Hart, and she knew, perhaps better than anyone, what they were capable of. What lengths would they go to, to keep one of their employees with their company?

Eventually, she’d been signed up for a trial. One that possibly killed the test subject. She eagerly signed up, for it was something they’d wanted. To her dismay, she’d survived being impaled by the golden Arrow artifact, no matter how much it had felt for the longest time that she would, instead, die. She had a power, now, a Stand, and that worried her, because it usually meant that they might use her for such in-person cruelties as assassination. As with the rest, she was paired with a Stand User (that was the term used, apparently) who had passed the entry test. She didn’t know what exactly the entry test involved, only that she could guess, given the nature of the company. She was terrified she’d hate her new partner, but shockingly despite the rough appearance and the fact that the newcomer must have had to kill someone, she found she liked the new girl, but that didn’t help the apprehension about the future, and for good reason. Whitney was trapped in an awful situation she could not escape nor control.

Now, was this entire sequence of events the right thing or wrong thing, heroic or cowardly thing, selfless or selfish thing to do?
Interlude: I Hate Everything About You

Chapter Summary

The narrator introduces you to one of the new characters.

Chapter Notes

CHAPTER WARNING: This chapter contains offscreen non-con to an unnamed character.

Antonia Ellis likes to think of herself as a vigilante.

Her favorite superhero is Batman. When she was a child, she quickly learned that she had to be ruthless if she was to stand up for herself against her big brothers in real life or in the shooters they preferred. She got good at hiding, at setting up a sharpshooter’s nest and waiting for that moment of the kill. They might’ve been stronger, but they weren’t as creative. She used pens on joints, kicked ankles and knees. Her brothers might have been a little stupid, because they didn’t learn to stop picking on her for a long time, and you know the saying about people trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome.

Once, she pulled the legs off a grasshopper, but she felt bad about it. The grasshopper hadn’t done anything. Now, if it had been picking on others, that would’ve been one thing. She liked causing pain, but there had to be a good purpose. Because bad people deserved to suffer. Good people, sometimes, too. Because when she burned her hand on the oven, her mom told her that was a learning experience. The pain told her to not do that again. Good people, when their actions caused hurt, would notice that they’d hurt other people and not do it again. Or, if it was an off day and they hadn’t been paying any attention, would be hurt in retaliation, and realize why and not do it again.

The class autopsy of the frog was okay, but the frog was already dead, so it’s not like they were hurting a living creature with its own life ahead of it, and in the end, it had even died for a good purpose. If she didn’t get to grow up to be a vigilante, or, well, if she had to have a day job, because even Bruce Wayne had a secret identity, she could always be a mortician. She could cut into things and discover how people died, and her work could even catch the bad people. And she’d give them their day in court, and if the jury was made up of incompetent people, or good people not paying attention, or bad people, or a mix of all three, and they gave the wrong verdict—well, that’s when she could step in with her other career.

She was in martial arts and loved it. Here was a way to train, but more than that, here were people who understood that causing pain could be an art form, but it was all for a purpose. Training, learning who you were, becoming better people. Only the idiots messed with her then. Depending on what they wanted, she was more or less lenient. She didn’t tend to get in trouble, only from the girls, because none of the boys could admit that a girl beat them.

When she was fourteen, one of her friends went to one of those parties. Antonia knew it was
going to be a bad idea, mostly because they always were. It would always seem like the end of the world if you weren’t in the in crowd, if people didn’t know your name or they did but for all the wrong reasons. Nobody made her friends cry, especially by taking things they didn’t deserve from someone who was passed out. And then when she made sure her friend was okay, and went to see what they had to say, the guys were still a little drunk. They drove off in their truck, and she followed them. And then when she caught up to them getting a few more supplies at the grocery store and laughing about it, about what they’d done, she knew they were bad people and they deserved everything that was coming to them.

It was self-defense, she said, because of course it was a public place and even boys whose pride was wounded couldn’t keep that a secret. Antonia was crying. It wasn’t hard when her friend was crying too, and anyway, they were tears of red-hot rage, not that any of those people on the jury could tell that. They’d been making jokes to the female clerk, too. The clerk backed her up.

She hadn’t known, but the defense lawyer had been one of Wolfram & Hart’s. She came onto their radar, then. Absolutely ruthless, he reported at the water coolers, eyes burning bright with a covetous fire. Creative with the truth. Would fit right in, assuming they could project the image of actually caring about the justice they profess to care about, given that they are a law firm and everything.

Devilish plans arose. An attack with an arrow, a little entrance test, all the while telling her that the target was a Bad Person who deserved everything she had coming to her. If she failed, well, they’d know more about whether Slayers stood a chance against Stands. Perhaps a departure from the usual Stand User recruitment method, but, well, violence like that deserved to be nurtured into a raging bonfire. And those plans were set in motion.
Life Starts Now

Chapter Summary

Wolfram & Hart gets involved.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I’m gonna go with Untitled Episode 13.5 is mostly just useful for music video makers. Which, y’know, I appreciate, despite the fact that I don’t much, but also, why. Also, be aware, this chapter has yet to be beta’d. That’s what happens when you write it hours before posting. My bad.

~Dreamer~

Most of London, by this point, is panicking. A perfectly ordinary day has become a nightmare, a waking dream, only there’s no waking up from this. Not when it can’t be escaped. Some, of course, will never wake up. They’ve seen the bodies.

“So, you think it was one of the targets on the list that did this?” Antonia asks her new friend. The lady might be a bit subdued for the honest amazing work that they’re doing now, but that’s all right, she’ll cheer her up soon enough.

Whoever’s doing this now, they’re a bad person, obviously, because putting an entire city in danger? That’s the kind of bullying that has to be stopped.

Whitney doesn’t feel like she can say anything, really, so she doesn’t. She’s seen pages of a list stolen from a group at odds with Wolfram & Hart, and what she’s seen looks like Courtney Love’s Stand London Calling, but it’s hard to be sure. Love herself had been approached for recruitment, but showed no interest, and as she was, generally, a shut-in artist with a dangerous power, Whitney didn’t remember any talk of what to do with her.

“Whoever it is, we’ll find them and stop them,” Antonia promises, grinning at the thought of the violence to come, and it’s only the realization that arguing would put her brother’s soul in danger that prevents Whitney from replying. The partnership might be an odd one, but she knows it’s a test, to determine her loyalty. She can’t dampen Antonia’s enthusiasm or stop her bloodlust to save lives.

Though, judging by the scene around them, this is certainly one instance in which they might be saving lives by stopping this Stand User. The only problem is if Wolfram & Hart would prefer such a dangerous character be pressed into service, though even in this, the demonic law firm is lucky.

Contracts are null and void if signed unwillingly, so situations such as this are avoided altogether. She’s looked into this for her own reasons and found disappointment each time. Wolfram & Hart can decide to cancel a contract themselves, should they feel like it, though that’s relatively rare and it’s not like she’ll be that lucky. “There’s another way to get out of the contract, not that it’ll be available to someone like you,” the new favorite Wesley had told her once in the cafeteria with a sneer. “If you do a great service to the Powers that Be, you can be pulled out of your
contract, but only one person has ever managed that.” According to rumors told around the water cooler, that would be the infamous Angel, but apparently that had involved a massacre of many of the Senior Partners, work alongside The Slayer, and the prevention of multiple apocalypses, something that’s indeed likely out of her own reach for several reasons, not limited to the fact that Wolfram & Hart owns her more thoroughly than any human ever owned a slave and the fact that while her Stand is useful, it’s not likely she’d be able to use it against the particular types of demons employed by the company. It’s rather unlikely they’ll get Love to agree to anything, either, meaning it’s not a concern either she or the company will have to worry about.

Still, there are irregularities about what’s happening here. Many buildings are missing their gargoyles, and more still come to life as per the Stand’s power works its magic, but if it was meant to be deadly, Courtney would have been able to kill off most of the city’s population by this point. She’s not sure what the sculptor’s plan must be—drawing targets out? Causing fear? Whatever it is, yes, it has to be dealt with, because otherwise the rules of engagement will be forever changed, if they haven’t been already. The war they fight is a secret war, kept out of sight of the populace, but this—it’s big, it’s noticeable, it’s hard to just merely explain away. Wolfram & Hart’s PR division will have its work cut out for them, and she doesn’t envy them their headaches.

Of course, they haven’t been told exactly why they’ve been sent, just something about Antonia not having completed her test, yet, and a teleport from one of their witches to London. There’s more that’s not being shared, but it’s not like they’ll be told any of that.

“Why is the User just trying to scare people?” They’ve seen quite a lot of trashed cars and buildings and roads, many terrified citizens, but bodies have, so far, been relatively rare.

“It’s a bully thing,” Antonia states dismissively. “They want to you to fear them before they actually hurt you.” She doesn’t seem that interested. “It’s only a matter of time. We’ll start finding bodies soon enough, make no mistake.” She turns her head, distracted, and then nods in a direction. “See?”

She doesn’t really have to sound smug about it.

Whitney turns her head to see a few bodies lying on the street—a few bodies, and one Terracotta soldier that looks like it’s been stolen from Emperor Qin’s tomb. Or maybe just the British museum. The terracotta soldier lies on its back as if it’d just been tipped over and left where it was placed. She runs forward to kneel beside the bodies and sees that they all have something brown and wet like dirt in splotches on their bodies. Like mud, but—

“Don’t touch that!” she snaps at her partner, who has started to reach out toward one of the bodies. “We don’t know what the Stand does. For all we know, it eats you alive in thirty seconds.”

“We know what the Stand does. It brings statues to life,” Antonia scoffs, but at least she’s listening and doesn’t touch the mud, which is good.

“Yes, but sometimes Stands have secondary effects. And sometimes, case in point, mon ami, Stand Users do not work alone.” At that, Antonia looks sufficiently embarrassed and thoughtful, which was sort of the point.

“I’m glad you’re here to explain these things to me,” Ellis states with a grateful smile, and at this, Whitney can’t help but smile grimly back.

Practically all of this sucks. She certainly doesn’t want to be working for Wolfram & Hart, and the situation with her brother’s soul is also a terrible one, but on the other hand, Antonia is just so reckless. And also potentially has psychopathic tendencies, but still. Without her, Ellis would
probably just end up finding herself dead, one of these days, simply because she didn’t think it through. Honestly, in the end that might be a better circumstance for everyone involved, but still, she can’t quite bring herself to wish death upon her naïve partner.
That Horseman, War, Part VI

Chapter Summary

Johan and the Captain make it to the ship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Despite his brave words, he hadn’t been quite as confident as he’d sounded. Fortunately, there’s no sharks this time. It’s a lot harder to swim with the wounded shoulder, and it’s kind of messed up this has been the second time in years he’s been swimming under bad circumstances. And at least he’s not lost underwater, with no idea of what’s up and down. His entire body aches. No matter what he’s told Fitz, this isn’t exactly like it was in Sunnydale. No matter the fact that they’d dealt with all sorts of enemies and villains over the years, he wasn’t exactly on the front lines for the whole time. He was more like Darling and Robin and Fitz right now, support class, looking out for the civilians and serving as backup for the heavy hitters. Most of the time, when he’d been fighting with a group. He’d had a little more experience, fighting on his own to bring in Slayers, and he had to survive and manage on his own. But it’s still not quite the same. An untrained Slayer is still capable, especially as backup, and he’d mostly run into serial killers (crazy humans, he’d dealt with before, more than once) and vampires, most of which were fledges or otherwise relatively new. Even then, he didn’t have to push himself quite like this. When he’s been wounded, he’d usually dealt with the wounder before, and had time to wrap his own wounds and rest. Maybe talk to associated Council witches or shamans to heal up if it was bad. He’d never had to keep going without a rest.

This time he’s pushing himself past his limits. At least water is a better cushion for his poor, aching legs than walking absolutely anywhere.

He feels Pretender’s guilt at getting hit, which is utterly ridiculous (like they could’ve dodged a falling elevator while hiding in the small recess of a floor opening, that’s crazy—but then, that’s a reflection of himself, he tends to blame himself for everything these days and everyone else when he was an idiot teenager), but they’re also both fairly certain he can push himself at least a little more. Where he doesn’t have the physical strength, he can rely on his inner strength, his Stand. Even if it’s also wounded.

And at least actually swam when they went to the beach, unlike Willow, who would just walk along the shore collecting shells and starfish and almost tried to pick up that jellyfish before they stopped her, and Jesse, who just wanted to stay on the beach and check out the bikinis…

No, not a good line of thought. Think about friends that he wants to keep alive, not the ones who are already dead or aren’t present. They’d had fun, but it’s irrelevant now, during the middle of a life-or-death combat. Remembering isn’t as painful as in the past, but it’s still distracting, and he needs to keep a clear, focused mind to deal with this. To deal with a Cthulhu statue out to kill him. And this is fairly normal for a Scooby. His life is definitely weird, based on purely objective standards.

He’s already made it to the ladder and starts to pull himself up, but it hurts a little too much, and he grits his teeth against the pain. If he stays out here, he’d certainly be good bait, given how much
he’d angered the thing, but it’d be a suicide mission, and Fitz definitely wouldn’t forgive him that. They’re both supposed to return alive, with all their new friends also intact. He flounders for a few moments but realizes there’s an easy answer.

He pulls the Pretender out, uses his good arm and his Stand’s good arm to slowly pull himself up rung by rung as fast as he can go onto the deck.

For a moment, he thinks Captain Beefheart is going to yell at him, but she looks at him, worried, and nods respectfully at him. “Creative thinking.”

“I do my best,” he responds with a smile. That’s the strength of his Stand, and coincidentally, for him. “Your turn, though. I can’t take your spotlight when the crowds are cheering.”

She shakes her head and smiles back and calls Panzermensch, the armored form familiar once more before it turns into a blue, glowy, cyberpunk outline, disappears, and starts to form around the ship, forming lines all around it and I glance up to see them forming over our heads.

It’s enough for Joseph to have a clue of what she’s planning, particularly when it starts filling in. “I thought you said it was a ship.”

“In the original, yes, but we’re not following the story specifically. The Germans used far more submarines.” In other words, it’s probably easier for her to create it. Probably. She’s having to add more to it, again, like making a tank out of a car, but more familiar German weapons and vehicles might offset that. Or maybe it’s not even a choice. Maybe it’s a limitation and she can’t make anything else.

And then there’s a splash, big enough that water sloshes up onto the deck through the still hardening hull, and he realizes they’re probably out of time. Most things don’t make quite such a splash when they enter the water. The scream comes, like a crack in reality and he finds his vision blur, stumbling with his hand to his head. Images flash before his—is that his eyes? Is that his mind?—impossible geometry, alien vistas, oozing outward to engulf him.

Johan, stop listening—concentrate only on my voice. It’s ironic that he’s being instructed to only listen to a voice in his head, but his mind’s here and able to think such thoughts so he’s not entirely lost. He closes his eyes and flashes back to a mansion and sakura blossoms and feels a touch of strength return. His is a legacy he has to live up to, emphasis on the living.

“Hurry up!” he calls to Von Stroheim and starts running, following her to the control room.

“Easy for you to say, Jojo!” she screams back.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled Sky’s the Limit.
Whitney thinks over Wesley's words, and together with her new friend spots the newest Horseman.

There’s no statues in the area, at least, not that she can see—which only makes Whitney even more paranoid. Antonia had certainly enjoyed smashing up statues on the way there, letting out what seemed like an endless, consuming lust for destruction. If she also had a creative mind, knew her powers well, she would be even more terrifying, but as it is, she comes off as a little kid, mentally. A little kid who loved hurting people and things.

There’s a secondary point to their presence here, and the order is one she can’t share with Antonia. Dr. Walker had done his job, retrieved a list of names of interest to Wolfram and Hart and disposed of nosy investigators, but it had come to their attention that the list was incomplete, and when they’d gone to talk to the man he was nowhere to be found. “It’s likely he’s selling the lot, perhaps even including copies, to the highest bidder,” Wesley had informed her with a nasty smile. “If there’s anything I hate more than a betrayal, it’s a sloppy betrayal. He should’ve just made copies of the entirety—then it would’ve taken longer to learn of his duplicity, at least. Find and eliminate him, and retrieve any trace of the list—if possible, without reading it. We wouldn’t want you to become another statistic.” He patted her on the head, and she’d outright shuddered at that. “After all, anyone who would engage in corporate espionage deserves corporal punishment, wouldn’t you agree? Particularly ones that might serve as dangers on multiple fronts, such as Alexander Harris.”

She gathers together her tatters of courage and manages to speak up, to ask a question, because she really doesn’t understand. “I’d gotten the idea from office rumour, sir, that you’re a hands-on type. Why aren’t you dealing with this directly?”

It’s probably a good thing that she’d managed to get across the fact that it’s just curiosity. She’d also heard the rumors of how he’d beheaded one of the firm’s most prominent lawyers, and the fact that the two like to hide fatal traps in each other’s houses. Perhaps he’d been on the side of the “good” once, but after his death he’d become rather sadistic.

“Oh, I am. I’m sending one of my most promising new members of the firm.” That statement alone is enough to terrify her, but she doesn’t voice that. “As important as our new Arrow project is, there’s another matter that’s come to my attention, and I’m wanted to coordinate efforts in Italy.” He pauses, before continuing, “…Apparently, while the Mafia still contribute to our mutually beneficial relationship, another gang, the Passione has declared war on us.”

She makes the mistake of giggling nervously, and he frowns.

“That wasn’t a euphemism, Miss Houston. Do try not to get yourself shot—one of their members is said to be a crack shot.”

When Ellis barges into her office exclaiming about the catered crepes in the lunchroom, she
finds she’s been staring at the wall for a few minutes. It’s probably shock. She doesn’t let on.

From the comments, it’s unlikely that this Xander is quite the danger he’s been presented as to Antonia, but on the other hand, it’s useless and possibly deadly to argue the point with her, so Houston doesn’t plan to try. It’s possible he has a copy of the missing documents, which, quite apart from the price on his head, would easily spell his death. From everything she’s heard of the Joestar family, this whole statue thing isn’t their style. They would have a very specific goal. If there’s a goal here, it’s more of a general one, because as this goes, she would bet her soul (which technically isn’t hers to bet, but that’s beside the point) that for all its strengths this Stand could only be given very specific instructions, if the User’s control even reaches that far. It has to have some type of weakness, and that’s the most likely. (Then again…is it even possible for the User to put the genie back in the bottle after that?)

Besides, from everything she’s heard, there’s also another problem with the scenario as presented—the Joestars wouldn’t go after uninolved citizens, no matter what Ellis might think. If this mass of statues wasn’t harassing random passersby and headed for W&H’s headquarters directly, perhaps she’d consider the idea, but as it was, no.

She’d almost think it was an employee acting under instructions, considering this is almost bound to draw out not only one but multiple Joestars, because they’ll see people in trouble and come to help out innocents. In fact, despite the instruction to find and either stop or recruit the User, she can’t rule it out, because she’s not even close to being told everything. If nothing else, they would probably think it a happy accident if they can kill one or two. A prepared employee takes advantage of opportunity, after all.

Fear might help Wolfram & Hart’s business practices, or it might hurt them. It’s hard to tell at the moment—she’s not one of those statistics number crunchers. She’d almost prefer that, but she’s no good at math and knows that.

“Are you seeing anything useful?” Antonia asks, leaning over Whitney’s shoulder, and she shakes the thoughts off, pulling herself back into the present. She hadn’t actually been paying attention to the body she’d knelt next to, not that Ellis needs to know that.

On the list of ‘need-to-know’, Ellis isn’t one of the people with access to just about anything.

And she frowns, because if she just saw what she thought she did, this is bad. “Did you see the clay grow?”

“No…you think it’s alive?” Antonia hides just a little further behind Whitney’s back, which is kind of funny—the bloodthirsty woman’s made nervous by living clay. Not that she doesn’t have a point.

She glances between the man in front of her and the terracotta statue and a terrible idea dawns on her slowly, like the realization she’d had about her own soul not too long ago. “I think it’s a disease. Definitely don’t touch it.” And there’s something worse. “I don’t know if the terracotta soldiers are also contagious but don’t touch them either. We’ve got to hurry. I don’t know if they can come alive like the soldiers but I don’t want to delay and find out. Now we have to look for the Stand. Keep your eye out for anything that stands out.”

Antonia straightens suddenly. “Does a giant glass scorpion kaiju qualify?”

Whitney gets up and is about to respond, following Antonia’s gaze, only to find it’s barreling down on them.
(it’s likely that one of whitney’s friends got shot at some point. It’s also likely that Wesley knew this. He’s a jerk like that.)

we’re so close to the ari. i can feel it in my bones.

~dreamer~
That Horseman, War, Part VII

Chapter Summary

Johan|Xander finds there are dangers in Mirroring Your Stand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s when they’re halfway to the control room that Johan realizes he’s being dumb. It’s not entirely uncommon, particularly when he’s this wounded. He’s gotten better at working through the pain, but right now all he wants to do is sleep. He can’t, though. There are people counting on him.

He puts on a burst of speed, feels lightning-like hamon course through his veins. An interrupted current, maybe, due to his current wounds, but still flowing sporadically. It’s not just him in his head, anymore. He feels them all—Jonathan, Jorge, Joseph, Jotaro, Josuke, Josephine. And with that comes a new strength.

He’s done enough watching. Time to do what the Xanman does best. Act as bait. The tastiest, nummiest treat this jerk of a Lovecraftian statue has ever set its eyes on. Power, a threat. Anything to get it to attack, to stay firmly anchored in this world to get rid of him. He’s bluffed before. And what he’s about to do, mirroring this Stand…well, it’s not the best idea he’s ever had, but they’re both wounded and long shots are all they have left. Ticking things off is, however, a talent of his, and he’s already made a start, probably, what with wounding it with a hamon elevator and a lucky rifle shot.

“What are you doing, Jojo?” the Captain asks as he makes a beeline to the periscope. She sounds frustrated. Probably had planned on putting him on the torpedoes, which while it sounds cool and all Star Trek of them, won’t keep it from phasing out.

“Staring into the abyss.” He’s not entirely sure where he’s heard the phrase, though his money’s on either the X-Files or the G-man. The thing is, while it can mess with their minds perfectly when it’s phased into the other dimension, it can’t physically affect them. If he can get it to stare back… He’s already hurt it with hamon, and since it’s a type of energy, he’s hoping he can sense—no, wait, he can do one better. “I’m going to make sure you’ve got a target to hit,” he adds absentmindedly, already steadying his breathing. The pain is dull and distant, and he feels invincible, though there’s a hint of concern—wait, no, it’s gone. That wasn’t his.

He pretty quickly finds the tentacley mass on the horizon, approaching. If he’s not mistaken, it might be bigger than it had been, which is a problem. It’s gone seethrough, and he feels the prickle of an unfamiliar presence, unfamiliar thoughts in his head, only instead of willing the voices away, he welcomes them, world narrowing to the slow, steady beat of his heart and the vision before his one good eye.

He’s slipping away into a world of pure concentration, a world where thought and motion are one. There’s a second of panic of a part of him soon swallowed by the whole.

My world. Don’t touch what isn’t yours. Technically it’s insignificant. Technically he wouldn’t care, if not for the fact that it had caught his attention for reasons he can’t quite remember at
the moment, but then, the reasons aren’t exactly significant now. He can look again later, and if it fails to amuse him he can end it easily. He raises his hand, slow and careful, and touches the periscope. It’s metal, conductive, and he fills it with every thought, every breath. I wounded you at not nearly the height of my power. You wounded my vessel, but I wounded yours. Tell me, which is the greater triumph?

A roar, the roar of the sea, strong and powerful and unknowable, and yet he knows it, knows its heart, and it has never known fear but oh it’s afraid and that’s delicious. The sea begins to roil and foam, a storm boiling up from the depths, the electric-sunlight-power clashing with the unseen tendrils of war-madness-blood and he bares his vessel’s teeth in fierce joy, because while the water is as much his element as sunlight, as the metal encasing his vessel and the insignificant animal directing the metal, the crawling chaos before him had been imprisoned, dreaming, and oh if there is another element that is his, it is the Dreamlands, and this is his Hunt. It is the work of a thought to have the power within the metal match the roar, match the beat of his dreaming sun.

The desire to run, to destroy, war within the beast—it cannot do both where it is, but he takes even that option away, because as a hunter there is nowhere it can go that he can’t follow. If it stays where it is, tries to destroy his vessel, he will meet it with fangs and the power of word and thought, and if it tries to run, well, other dimensions are not out of his reach.

He Sees the world as it truly is with his mind and his vessel’s missing eye, the monstrous eye that presides over the fragile world, only catching a glimpse of the miasma of combat, the venomous seething of the tentacles of madness and the burning touch of the rippling water. There is no up, no down—such quaint concepts, but they mean nothing to him and only a little to his vessel.

He feels a touch of desperate determination, a relentless anger, and knows it belongs to the insect in proximity to his vessel. It’s admirable in its own way—it has no chance, not alone, and yet it tries anyway, to postpone the death of its world, however futile a gesture.

There’s a bursting noise, a green cloud in both air and sea, sound and stench for a moment matching the shriek he can hear without his vessel’s ears, a psychic scream that hurts his vessel’s mind and that of every insignificant being in the vicinity (and he can feel all of them) before the presence disappears and in its place is left the dust of something insignificant, spreading through the water.

He feels a sudden loss and confusion. How had disposing of the interloper hurt him? Why is his hold slipping? And then, further, the speck speaks to his vessel, to a part of his being, and he feels the threat a second too late. How dare—

He is in both places, and he won’t let this be the end, won’t let the path end here, and with full intent and choice punches the vessel in the face, and he falls, being snuffed out as easily as his rival’s.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there are direct Lovecraft references here, and yes, they’re on purpose. /grins
ARIARIARIARIARIARIARIARIARIARIARIARIAR!
ARRIVIDERCI!
Oh yeah, chapter is also called Gaze of the Abyss.
~Dreamer~
Stars of the Show

Chapter Summary

Allies step up to deal with the statue infestation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Living statues have very little on a Slayer, particularly when armed with swords. Of course, the usual swords have very little effect, since one’s not going to stay in place to be chopped to pieces, but the heavy longswords like the zweihanders seem to be especially effective. They’re more resistant to most magic, but telekinetically controlled bits of previously destroyed statues seem to be doing the trick, and fortunately as younger Willow had proved telekinesis was an especially easy spell to learn, even early on. Even better that it was a spell commonly used in the field, since it didn’t matter whether a stake was propelled by hand or by magic, all that mattered was finding the heart of the vampire. Most witches who were ever allowed in the field could probably cast the spell in their sleep. Of course, bashing statues with stone until they went down was a little inelegant, but if it worked, who cared, really? The only danger, really, is a bunch of the statues clustering up on a Slayer and doing damage, which is why most Slayers prefer a good offense as their defense, and have witches and Kakyoin watching their backs. Honestly, the Gargoyles of London would be a piece of cake if not for the recent reduction in Council numbers. At least it’s original. Buffy will give them that. She’s pretty sure that’s not even something that happened in Sunnydale, which is saying something.

Willow and Andrew seem to have figured out some sort of witch-fire bomb. It’s something she’s never seen Willow use, but it seems to be very effective. Willow throws what looks like another water balloon, only the murky green water inside flashes as it covers the target. She and Andrew chant for a few seconds, and the statue bursts into chunks of stone. They high five before Andrew throws another one.

“That all you got?” Faith yells. She’d taken a sledgehammer from a nearby construction site. They’re not very fond of the sledgehammer, either. She finds herself slightly nostalgic for Olaf’s hammer, but she doesn’t have it on her. It’s sadly still in the ruins of the old Watcher’s mansion, and after the deaths of yet more witches and Slayers they can’t afford in the wake of an unknown water demon or Stand User, she’d been forbidden to go back. Still, the metal bat is serving her well enough, despite the bittersweet memories it brings back. Memories of playing catch in the backyard with a father who has yet to try to contact either her or Dawn again. Does hitting a flying statue into…is that a giant frog statue, and if so, why?…count as a home run? She suppresses a wince at the thought that Xander probably would argue it was and be yelling all sorts of ridiculous baseball references as he joins her in battle. It’d be cool to fight alongside him, she thinks. Wonders if his is a more melee style, like hers. Or his…he’d decided to call him Uncle, right? Her eyes skitter over to a stoic Japanese man. She wonders if he’s ever tried playing baseball. If he’d even want to.

Terrifyingly, he has an expression on his face for the first time in a while, a deadly smirk. He’s enjoying it—not that Buffy doesn’t understand the feeling. Sometimes, when you’re feeling overwhelmed and helpless, sometimes the best medicine is a good fight. One hand rests casually in his pocket, the other on the omnipresent cap, as he follows the movements of his Stand with
interested, ruthless eyes.

His friend has found a roughly safe location on a rooftop and appears to be sniping off gargoyle perched on a gargoyle with the seethe that green jewels, sunglasses glinting as he turns his head. It’s appreciated, because that’s the only real danger they have to worry about.

Josephine has found two opposing doorways relatively close to each other and continues to bounce between them to catch enemies unawares. A few dare follow her in, and…well, that’s the last mistake they ever make. She also, at first, had somehow gotten her hands on fishing nets and had gotten a couple gargoyles tangled up long enough to deal with them. In an absolutely ludicrous move, she appears to be using brass knuckles, which have to be some sort of mystical weapon or something because getting that close to something that could easily tear her head off? Now she’s got some clue of what Giles is talking about when he chides her for being reckless. She’s also got some glow about her hands, but it’s not consistent enough, so Buffy suspects it’s an innate ability Ms. Joestar (she’s not going to even try to pronounce the Japanese version) hasn’t been trained in and doesn’t have full control over.

Speaking of Giles, he’s not doing a bad job himself, though he appears to be mostly trying to maim the statues enough they prove an easy target for the Slayers in his group. Unlike her, he’s not traveling between groups.

“I’ve known women all over the world, and I can tell you, your fiancé is a one-of-a-kind, Hirose. You know, Yukako is beautiful, but terrifying,” Mister Hol Horse remarks, curving his shot around Koichi and shooting a gargoyle sneaking up behind his shorter partner.

She turns with a shriek and her hair whips out, wrapping the statue like a cocoon and squeezing, tighter, ever tighter, until the stone cracks and crumbles. “That’ll teach you to try to hurt my Koichi!” she yells at the unhearing chunks.

“Well, I’m glad you’re intimidated. I’d hate to have to ask for a new partner from the Foundation,” Koichi agrees, Echoes Act 2 shooting the word ‘crumble’ from its tail to hit a lion leaping in Hol Horse’s direction, and it roars as it crumbles into dust on the wind.

Hol Horse suppresses a shudder. They’re uniquely suited to each other, really. Koichi might seem kind and innocent, and for the most part he is, but occasionally a cruel streak that would have delighted DIO appears.

Chapter End Notes

Fun facts: the sledgehammer actually comes from near the Templar HQ (Secret World). Mostly because I was like “what weapons should we use on living statues” and have done the mission where you steal a crowbar from the construction site recently. Also I didn’t watch the newest episode yet, but I got stuck with a bug in lotro and lost track of time. So much for stress relief.

~Dreamer~
“You’re sure this will work.” Von Stroheim sounds disbelieving even to her own ears, but then, she’s not illiterate, and the glowing multiheaded biblical angel monstrosity that had appeared overlaying her friend had more than a little of the Lovecraftian about it.*

She doesn’t care how angry Speedwagon will get—if he turns into that thing again on waking she’s going to shoot it in the face and damn the consequences. And if that doesn’t work, she’s going to have to delve further into her knowledge of literary stratagems. His work might not be such a good blueprint for living (Robin is every inch her equal; she wouldn’t allow him to watch her back if not), but it has good instructions for fighting eldritch beings.

The Stand nods. At least his Stand hasn’t mutated into something monstrous. It had directed her to go get chocolate once she had awoken from her near-coma, and hasn’t moved from its vigil staring at its User’s body. It hasn’t even talked to her, though she vaguely recalls Jojo having said something about its capability to do so. Maybe it doesn’t speak to others, or maybe it’s all in his head. Or maybe it, too, is affected by either the results of using its powers or having to turn on its own master and knock him out. When it had handed her the shopping list (consisting of solely ‘twinkies’ and ‘chocolate’), she had at first refused, believing it to be a request for itself, before it’d fixed her with a stern glare, glanced at Jojo, and waved a hand in his general direction.

Robin’s their usual requisitions officer, but she doesn’t mind getting food, in general. Being ordered around by a Stand to buy food she feels embarrassed to buy, though…that’s a new one. She gets herself a nice sausage and beer while she’s at it—English food might be bland, but nothing can weaken the taste of a good bratwurst—to replenish her own strength. Drinks a silent toast to their victory.

She may be proud, but even she can admit that while she is no stranger to Stand battles, her previous experience had been relatively easy in comparison. Tracking down the User was much easier, for one, and Robin and his sendo skills were invaluable, unlike in this instance, where they’d been relatively useless. Still, the battle, particularly how it had ended, had confirmed a suspicion she’d had, and as for the rest of it…

Jojo had served as a nice distraction, but then, considering how much he acted like the stories she’d heard of Joseph, that was no surprise. Perhaps driving a tank or submarine or picking off over a dozen statues along the way was not the glorious task it seemed, but it was crucial, and it was her plan and her driving skills that had, for the most part, prevented innocents from being involved. She
can feel pride for her part.

She texts Robin, telling him that it is likely the Stand User relies on, to some extent, illusion. If you believe you can destroy the Stand, you can, so the rest of the statues should fall more easily. Reenacting moves that have worked in fiction helps considerably—because it’s part of the Stand? Because it helps increase the confidence of the one fighting it? In the end, it doesn’t really matter why, since it works. Robin’s news, that they had found the name of the User and the location where she lived, is welcome (and he thoughtfully includes a picture of the woman, just in case by Users Attracting Other Stand Users logic she happens to walk by her on the street), but the fact that there are four of these things is not so much, particularly when neither she nor Johan are in much condition to fight. Fortunately, Robin, Violetta, and Speedwagon had managed to dispatch another of the creatures, so they are halfway done. It’s likely, however, that going after the User herself is the most likely plan, and that is where they’re headed.

She doesn’t go too far into what happened on their end, only that they had managed to take care of another one and that the two of them need to recover—no need to alarm them, really, just that they need to recover.

Then she heads back to the Stand who nods gratefully at her and brings the chocolate beneath his User’s nose.

As Jojo sits up with a wild-eyed look, the Captain watches closely for signs of a Lovecraftian monster, slightly amused at the idea of chocolate as smelling salts. “Gimme,” he states greedily, reaching out the hands of a ten-year old.

“Is that how you talk to the two people who saved your life?” Von Stroheim asks sternly, hiding her amusement.

Pretender doesn’t attempt to hide its amusement and leans on her shoulder, posing effortlessly. Jojo pouts in their direction. “Rude. This is gruel and unusual. You’ve stopped short of saving my life. You’re going to just let me perish…here…” Jojo topples over theatrically.

“I see you’re feeling better.” He’s entirely ridiculous, but then, it’s a Joestar, of course he’s going to be ridiculous and make a production out of it. “Which is good, considering you made a bad tactical decision. I’m sorry I pushed you to copy one of the horsemen.”

Jojo blushes, which is a shock. She didn’t think he’d be at all embarrassed about that, considering the current way he was acting, but no, apparently he is. “Yes, we all know, I’m dumb, could we please move on now?” he mutters, and Pretender pats him on the head patronizingly and hands him the chocolate. The User leans away slightly, but not much—it would take the sweets out of range.

“Well, it worked. I can’t say for sure it wouldn’t have without your stupid move, but…please, try not to crash any airplanes, jump down any elevator shafts, or copy any eldritch abominations.”

Johan pauses in chomping the twinkies enthusiastically to glance at her and try chewing faster to clear his mouth. “Well…maybe for today,” he mumbles through the food. Typical American.

Chapter End Notes

*think the Angels as they appear in Shin Megami Tensei or Bayonetta, but Beefheart’s
not a gamer so she wouldn’t make the reference.

~Dreamer~
Attack of the Killer Statues!

Chapter Summary

Others do what they can to keep the ever-growing horde of statues in check.

Josuke’s eager to get back to finding his grandson after being distracted by the old man Stand User. When they’d talked, he’d admitted that he’d been threatened by a law firm called Wolfram & Hart. No matter how much he visits old man Joseph or how many stories he’s heard, he’s never going to get how weird America is. He’s never heard of an evil law firm, but then, there are all kinds of criminals in the world, evil businessmen and all. The old man wouldn’t have cared if he was the only one being threatened, but he wasn’t prepared to let anything happen to his granddaughter or two grandsons. He didn’t mind being held by them or their allies, but he wrung a promise from Josuke that they would do their best to try to protect the grandchildren. William Kaulitz—his name, according to his introduction—is aware that he can’t beat Josuke now, barely escaped death himself in that alley, so he has no chance of completing the task and keeping them safe. Josuke finds it easy as a policeman and a grandfather to make the promise, but he’d feel bad if he didn’t—almost as bad as Kaulitz-san had apparently felt when trying to kill Josuke.

Unfortunately, the Stand Users seemed to have all decided to act at once, because no sooner have they delivered the defeated once-enemy and walked a few blocks before the flocks of statues had appeared.

“I didn’t know you had a head for art, Josuke,” Okuyasu states quietly, stopping briefly to admire the twisted horrifying sculpture Crazy Diamond has made by ‘fixing’ a few of the attacking statues together. He doesn’t get it, really, which is usually the criteria he uses to guess the art’s good unless it’s Rohan’s manga. It’s definitely not his thing, that’s for sure, even though he does take a little pleasure in seeing them like this given that they’re harassing the nice people of this weird Western city and trying fairly hard to kill them. Really kind of stupid, considering how easily Crazy Diamond’s dealing with them. Fixing them into the concrete was also equally as effective, and the concrete shield had also helped against a few of those flying gargoyles. They’d only gotten lucky once, hitting the police officer in the shoulder. The popping sound hadn’t sounded good, but his best friend had assured him it was just a dislocated shoulder, not as bad as a broken arm or anything. Hopefully his friend knew what he was talking about and wasn’t just trying to make him feel better.

Josuke snickers. “It’d drive Rohan crazy. We should take a picture and send it to him.” The Hand is also pretty useful, especially against the flying gargoyles. Swiping their wings away is a pretty easy way to stop them from flying, though it had taken pointing that out to get Okuyasu to actually get him to start trying. Honestly, if not for the fact that it was a swarm Stand that seemed to have no end (seriously, was it growing twice for every one they killed or what—and why did that sound familiar? Some show Josie watched as a kid?), there wouldn’t be any difficulty at all.

They weren’t supposed to meet up with the so-called ally Slayers, but they were close by and even if Jojo seemed to respect them, they’d never met these allies or tested their strength. Fortunately, dealing with the old man was no hassle at all, given that all the fighting spirit had gone
out of him. If there weren’t so many statues to be punched, they’d wouldn’t take their eyes off him—apparently he’d attacked Josuke-kun and managed to actually really put him on edge—but they weren’t alone, and there were a lot of statues around harassing innocents, and there were others, including one so-called Witch who’s doing nothing but keep an eye on the seemingly harmless old man. They’d kept an eye out for Stands and hadn’t noticed anything, but that doesn’t mean anything. It could be that it’s a Stand that’s really hard to notice, or something. Stands exist, so magic wouldn’t be so weird, but her friend isn’t so sure. Maybe the Stand is all the super strong girls called Slayers that also are here. They actually have names and don’t look as wild as a Stand, so maybe. “You know, this totally reminds me of a horror movie, complete with dumbass monsters,” a rough girl tells her friend. Her favorite set of brass knuckles lie untouched in her blouse. Her hands itch to hold them, to solve this all with a few well-placed punches, but punching stone is kind of stupid and hurts, which she’d figured out all on her own.

The older, more elegant girl frowns even as the jaguar warrior with a upside down chalice as a hat and an electric guitar sends out waves of sound. Some of the statues have an existential crisis out of existence. Some are merely left relatively incapacitated, easy pickings for Sakura’s Stand or the Slayer, which is potentially the Witch’s Stand. “Sakura-chan, please don’t say such things.”

“Watcha worryin’ about, onee-san?” It should be noted that the two are not actually sisters, despite the amusing trope of their rather opposite personalities and fighting styles commonly used for comedic effect. In actuality, Rihan is referred to by every single one of her classmates as onee-san due to her attitude and demeanor. (It should also be noted for the sake of accuracy that Rihan is a very different person from Rohan, and one should not confuse the two. They may both be artists, but Rihan values empathy while Rohan values technical precision. Rihan thinks Rohan’s work as a mangaka is pretty but soulless, while Rohan thinks that her music is talented without discipline. They both have respect for each other, but are so different in viewpoint that working with each other without getting on each other’s nerves is difficult. Note also that the same is not true of Sakura and Rihan—while they are very different to each other, the differences are largely those of approach, not belief.) All of them, that is, besides Jotaro, who views the idea as both stupid and something he got enough of at home from his mother Holly. “‘S not like they have a chance against your Cobalt Knight, not when they have minds for your sound to reach, and it’s not like I’d let anything happen to you.” Fortunately, it’s easy enough for her Stand to change—one moment a knight proper in all ways aside from the wolfskin over his armor, the next a beast bent over—and punch statues itself, only rather than the brass knuckles it has long, silver claws, all the better for punching arrogant statues and slashing them apart. “Night of the Living Statue, maybe, though that sounds dumb. Y’think you can vibrate ‘em to death, or get answers about the bastard of a Stand User, seeing as they’ve got their own minds and all?”

“Night at the Museum, I should think. I’ve been trying, but they’re even more hard-headed than some of our local delinquents. Present company excluded, of course.” There’s a hint of amused irony as she says the last words, and Sakura snorts out loud.

“Look, you ain’t gotta say that like I’m ashamed of it or nothin’. I’m proud of being a stubborn-ass loudmouth.” Sakura grins. “How else am I gonna keep up with Jotaro-kun?”

“Please don’t tell me you’re counting,” Rihan shakes her head.

“You shoulda mentioned that before. Not like I can exactly start now.” Sakura shrugs and wades back into combat.
That Horseman, Death, Part I

Chapter Summary

Giorno appears to lend a hand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A boy falls and screams at the stone demon looming over him.

“Excuse me,” a polite voice interrupts, “…but menacing an innocent, particularly a child, is the action of a coward.”

Behind him, a golden ghost that few passersby can see moves past him to float in front of the statue. “MUDA MUDA MUDA!” it yells, punching the statue several times.

Something strange ripples through the statue, like it’s resisting, caught in a state between life and unlife. Of course, it’s already slightly awake, having been awoken by someone else’s Stand, so imbuing it with life isn’t entirely a sensible action, but at the very least it’s not wasted effort. Something is happening, even as its new existence may remain caught between two extremes.

“You don’t have to follow your User’s instructions, you know,” the shining blond tells the statue. “You have your own resolve now. Will you follow the will of superficial evil?”

It appears to mull the situation over. Of course, London is not his city, and he’s the first to admit that it’s a very different place from Italy (though picking the pocket of that pickpocket, having both his wallet and the man’s turn into pigeons and fly back to him, he has to admit, was rather satisfying —almost as satisfying as outwitting those Wolfram & Hart agents), but his will to protect the innocent is still strong as ever. At last, it sprouts great wings and flies away.

He has no doubt an actual stand-off with the actual Stand will be much more difficult, particularly as he’s not sure of the outcome of the negotiation. In fact…

He cocks his head to the side, eyeing the trajectory of the statue’s flight. Ah. So it had merely seen more profit in going for a bus full of people once given its freedom. Well, that simply wouldn’t do. What a pity. It clearly hadn’t realized the futility of its actions, the fact that its existence hinged upon his whim and Stand from then on. “Gold Experience,” he sighs, and the demon ceases to be alive, plummeting like a meteor and breaking apart into chunks of stone as it slams into concrete, making a crater. He can hear the screams from a distance. Still, the people are alive, a better outcome than the other possibilities present.

“Th-thank you,” the boy whispers, looking awestruck, even as he seems to be in shock and held in place, and Giorno allows a small, genuine smile to cross his face.

He takes one of the beads from his pockets and transforms it to a clematis, offering it to the child with a continued smile. “Take care, young one. It’s not exactly safe at the moment, so bring this to your mother and protect her and yourself by staying indoors.” He’s only seen minimal building damage, and from what he can tell, that damage was caused by an actual fight—so he’s not the only
Stand User (or, given the odd rules of this new world, person with power) fighting this danger. Still, they have done little to lessen the numbers of statues alive and menacing the inhabitants of the city, while still more come to life every hour or so.

“Okay! I’ll tell her!” he shouts and runs off, and Giorno permits the smile to remain briefly before he returns his energy to the problem of the statues. This is the deep meaning of his golden dream. Moments like this make all of the struggle worth it, in the end.

Troubling, that he’s never seen such a massive swarm Stand. True, each of the individual statues are merely a reflection of the whole, but still, the thing would be troublesome to fight. If the User or the Stand itself could be located, he has no doubt that the rest would wither away like grape vines in winter, but they might prove to be bothersome as he attempts to do that. Given his experience fighting Stands and the odd timing the statues have been coming to life, he rather suspects that the delay in bringing the fight to the Stand User is to blame for the numerous half-living statues tearing up the streets and threatening civilians. The longer they wait before taking out the User, the more statues would come to life. And, of course, the swarm might attack him as an actual swarm if he goes for the main body of the Stand or its User. He has to find a way to get the statues’ attention…something big and flashy, a distraction that even semi-animate objects would not be able to ignore…

He spots an abandoned double-decker bus blocking an intersection. What poor parking. Moving it is only the responsible thing to do, after all.

It takes a while, but an Indian elephant is a complex animal to create. Fortunately, the payoff will be more than worth the delay in discovering the Stand User. Such an obvious creature like the elephant wandering the streets without being one of the statues will clearly draw alarm and attention, and from what he’s seen, the statues like to merely tease and torture their prey unless the target in question registers as a threat. The elephant will most likely do just that. He’ll have to visit the zoo later and make it appear as if the animals had broken out in order to maintain the delicate balance of knowledge and ignorance necessary to the operations of such different groups as the Passione and the Speedwagon Foundation. Perhaps he will also be able to visit one of the many gardens, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens. They are, after all, famous. A trip might be wasted without visiting.

The elephant, at last, trumpets its fear. No living animal would look upon the idea of being used as a distraction as a comforting one, after all.

He speaks calmly, admiringly. The elephant is incredible. “Don’t worry. You are protected by my power.” Once it’s calm enough, he reaches out to rub the trunk in a soothing manner. “Anything that attempts to hurt you will itself be hurt. That is the nature of your existence, and my Gold Experience.” He’s not sure how much it understands, but given that its brain is one of the largest in the world, it’s not impossible.

He allows for a moment of regret that he cannot simply ride the elephant where he wishes to go. It would be an amazing experience, but, in the end, after the Stand User has been defeated, there’s time enough for it, and doing so now would ruin the point of the whole endeavor. Instead, he turns the glass window of a nearby car into a raven—lack of glass would confuse any police, should they happen to be more efficient and less interested in working together for the common good—and begins to hotwire the car. How fortunate Mista had showed him how to do so. Fugo likely had known, but hadn’t been interested in showing him how, and Narancia had been too distracted chasing frogs. Whoever comes back later will find parking very easy, considering he’s just changed the rest of the cars into ravens as well. He’ll change them back later, when the police are unlikely to find the thief, considering he’ll have abandoned the car.
It will be odd driving on the wrong side of the road, and from the wrong side of the car, too, but if there’s one thing Giorno Giovanna loves, it’s a challenge.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled Golden Resolve. (Mostly, Giorno’s here because he insisted on actually being more important and coming back, because Wolfram & Hart is being a freaking pain, and also I couldn’t resist the symmetry of having the Stand User whose Stand is the power of Life fighting the Horseman Death.)

~Dreamer~
That Horseman, Pestilence, Part II

Chapter Summary

Fitz and company follow the clues to the next Horseman.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at statues the same again,” Darling shivers, staring at a statue with a military air leaning on his sword.

“No, probably not,” Fitz agrees quietly, “…but fortunately for us, it appears as if the statues in this area appear to be losing their lively nature.”

“How can you tell?” Robin asks, curious, and Fitz smirks. Really, now, try a difficult question.

He nods at the statue. “The Admiral’s a little far from Trafalgar,” he answers obliquely. They’ll figure out the implications easily enough.

As they walk, they watch as another humanoid statue judders into immobility, silent and unmoving now. It’s true. Each Horseman, then, brings the statues around it to life. Once defeated, their armies likewise are reduced to slumber.

“Well, no Apocalypse today, then. Not if we can help it,” Robin declares definitively, glancing back down to read a text. Their concentration, before dispersal, could be used to track the location of the Horsemen. He places the cell phone back in his pocket.

“Von Stroheim?” Fitz asks, feeling the nervousness that he hadn’t allowed himself to feel before, when he’d needed to concentrate on survival and could do nothing to alter the outcome of events.

Robin smiles. “Yes. As concepts, believing you can defeat them is probably how they’re best defeated. Using literature apparently helps, though she didn’t elaborate. Between us, we had defeated two of the Horsemen, though they’re in no shape to take on the next Horseman. We’ll either have to take out two Horsemen ourselves, or find Courtney Love ourselves.”

“Is Jojo all right?” His mind is instantly populated by all sorts of gruesome outcomes—no, stop that, out of the two of you there’s only room for one of you to be imaginative and ridiculous, and that would be Johan.

“Beefheart made sure to say that they were fine but needed to recover. She didn’t go into many details.” He’d heard enough stories about the Joestars to have a good guess as to the cause. Probably something along the lines of when Josephine had cracked her ribs throwing herself between Mother and a car. Nothing deadly, or that he was likely to die from in the meantime, but there would be some recovery time and a lot of whining. And he’ll continue thinking that for the sake of protecting Darling and Robin until told otherwise. Still, despite how absolutely deadly the water gun is despite how absolutely ridiculous he feels packing one, he’d also feel better with something more solid in his hands. As they walk—ah, perfect.
One of the statues had blundered through an iron fence, breaking and bending a lot of the iron bars. The statue itself is nowhere to be seen, thank goodness, but it’s easy at hand. It’s easy enough to retrieve a water bottle from the pack (retrieved, surprisingly unharmed, by the table he’d been researching at, once the Horseman was dead) and pour a little on one that only needs a little encouragement to break off. Easier to turn the water to acid with his Stand, and he has an iron bar with which to fight. He tests it—not the best balanced he’d ever used, but for an improvised weapon, it’ll do.

“Look!” Darling yelps, clutching at his arm and pointing, and he glances. Ah. It had been slightly surreal walking down city streets with dozens of unmoving statues deposited haphazardly where they’d stopped moving, but there’s one that’s decidedly alive and moving.

He hates asking, but he also greatly hates being ambushed. “Do you think Whisper could scout for us? We’re heading the correct direction, but it’d be better to have a more specific set of directions.”

Darling shivers, but nods decisively. Despite the danger that she’d been fighting that Stand User in the bathroom, she’d been a lot stronger, less afraid, after managing to defeat her opponent on her own. Whisper appears and flies away, and—

Wait.

He frowns and turns to Robin. “How do you see Stands?”

The man laughs. “Not the same way you do. They’re more transparent, I guess, and I can definitely see where they’ve been. That’s all Sendo gives me, I’m afraid.”

“It’s fine,” he insists, setting the fact aside for later.

And Whisper returns as quickly as it can fly, and Fitz readies both weapons.

When her Stand gets close enough Darling turns to them, starting to run in the direction it seems like Whisper had told her. They follow, running. Whatever this is, it’s urgent. “New enemies—clay soldiers, Whisper says. And a giant glass scorpion that looks like it’s from one of those Japanese movies, and civilians really, really close to it. Only a few blocks.”

They break into a run. Darling barely dodges one of the clay soldiers walking in their direction, arms outstretched like it’s from one of those zombie films Johan no doubt loves.

“Hey. You really know your books, don’t you?” Robin asks. “And maybe other trivia?”

Fitz sighs and resolves by the end of this, he’s sitting them all down and giving them lessons about literature so they perhaps don’t have such ignorant statements to make. “Yes, depending—though I know more about where and how to find information than I do what all the information is.”

“Zombie infection says Pestilence, but wasn’t there something about a massive army for some Chinese Emperor, or something?” At the astonished look, he shrugs. “Sorry, man, I’m with Johan on this one—got that from a movie. A bad one, unfortunately, but still, wouldn’t that say Death or maybe War?”

“If it wasn’t spreading…” Fitz pauses to smash one of the soldiers in the chest with a grunt, still feeling off-kilter without his hat, and the clay shatters and the soldier slowly topples backward, hitting concrete hard and smashing off even more. As they watch, the clay slowly starts to regrow over the exposed torso, which is less than ideal. “….I’d agree with you, but circumstances as they are, I’m guessing this is Pestilence. Don’t let any of them touch you—or, in all likelihood, your
“Okay,” Darling agrees, sounding scared.

Robin agrees with a grim nod.

“Fortunately, it appears even damaging the clay stops them, and they’re not more resistant to damage like the other statues—and that’s without hamon.” It’s a good thing he doesn’t have to elaborate, because Robin unslings his bow.

“This isn’t the movies. I do happen to have control of a secret, sunlight-related martial arts style, but I also don’t have an unlimited arrow supply.” That can be easy to forget, can’t it?

And then they see the civilians, two women, and Robin puts on a burst of speed, tackling them out of the way.

Chapter End Notes

DEVIL MAY CRRRRYYYYYYYY
Chapter entitled Clay Epidemic. I totally didn't have a clue what I was doing when I was naming this chapter.
That Horseman, Death, Part II

Chapter Summary

Giorno searches for the Stand, or Stand User.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Giorno had just been planning on driving around until he found a concentration of the Stand. It’s lucky that there are few other drivers on the roads, since some of the rules seem to be different than in Italy, and the other drivers seem more cautious and slower (an idea he does not blame them for, since he, too, would be cautious driving in a city full of statues which might at any second come to life if he wasn’t able to protect himself using the power of his Stand). Fortunately, the statues register as pseudo-life, so he can, to some extent, sense them. It’s more difficult than he expected, though, considering how much life exists in London.

A development had occurred that had briefly held his interest before he realized the officer was merely interested in giving him a speeding ticket, not beating him to death with her Stand. And, of course, it’s not as easy as it is back home to deal with one. The woman seems interested in seeing his driver’s license, a document he doesn’t have, and would have likely turned down a bribe. She’s slightly distracted by his looks, but not enough for effective interference. Fortunately, the officer’s metal baton turning into a boa constrictor and slithering up her body provides enough distraction to drive away, and he is able to turn it back before the officer tases the serpent and thus tases herself.

He drives around aimlessly for a few more seconds before he feels something wrong, a hole in the world, and it’s only fast reflexes that allow him to correct the jerk of the wheel before it sends him at high speed directly into a fence in a crash that would, at the least, injure him.

“Cosa c’è?!” he grits out as he presses hard on the brake pedal, left eye closed tightly as he attempts to determine the source. He summons his Stand—perhaps it’s an attack?—and almost instantly the feeling eases. He glances outside his driver door to see an awful sight.

Like the Italians, the British seemed to value the beauty of their streets, with more than just the omnipresent Kentucky bluegrass to decorate. Now, though…now every bush, every tree, is withered and dying, the life within them a flickering, dying flame.

He may have underestimated this Stand. Giogio had believed it to be a simple one that merely brought statues to life—monstrous, but manageable. Rather, he may need to use his ace quite literally up his sleeve to deal with this. This, the true Stand, seems to be sucking the life out of its surroundings, and an area like this is only the beginning.

Perhaps it is a weakness, but he cannot simply stand here next to such disease when the world, and life, are full of such beauty. It certainly had nothing to do with his presence here in the United Kingdom, meeting new allies and forging new alliances, dealing with the machinations of a so-called group of lawyers, but on the other hand, this would be a show of good faith, and he can’t merely leave this alone. He uses some of Gold Experience’s power to imbue the humble garden with life once more, and feels his spirit grow with the hope. If Gold Experience is the embodiment of life, then facing the embodiment of death is but another step along his path. He straightens up. “Mista’s
going to be frantic,” he mutters, amused, and follows the path of destruction, healing the world around him as he goes.

(Giorno will never know this, though he might be amused by it, but the inhabitants of that block of flats will, in the future, be very proud of their greenery, which flourishes more than other parts of the city with very little care.)

As he follows the path of death, however, a thought occurs to him that gives him some hope. He doesn’t feel the presence of any life around—plant, animal, or the pseudo-life of the other statues. As deadly as the essence of death itself might be, at least it does not have an army at its side (although, as with Purple Haze, it might not need one). Speaking of which…

He eyes one of the dead plants nearby distastefully. He’d rather be in good shape, not puking his guts out, but he can’t be sure how deadly the Stand is, or how strong his Stand of Life will be against its aura when he was actually in its presence. Better to be careful than dead. Pity, this was one of his favorite suits, but then, it was all his own fault, after all. He was the one who decided to wear the suit to a foreign, dangerous city.

When he finally has the strength to stand once more, he feels angry and weak. He hates feeling useless, but this was still the best of the options.

He feels a steady unease, now, that he can’t dismiss. It’s the result of infusing himself with something that is dead. And—that’s terrifying. Is that what Professore Kujo feared? If so, perhaps it was a fear to be shared, for it feels utterly unnatural.

Gold Experience appears beside him, solid and reassuring.

Keep forging ahead, never forgetting his purpose, for that’s what would truly be useless.

He continues to walk, until he sees the gardens. These would’ve been a wonderful place to sightsee, before the Stand had killed them. English gardens might be a little too ordered for his taste, but there’s no denying the sheer beauty of the variety and volume of plants. As it is…well. They will be beautiful once more, once they flourish again. After the Stand is destroyed.

He steps within and sees the Stand, dangerous and incredible. A dragon, spiky, bony, half-starved. Tattered wings are folded around it, scales dull and almost absorbing the light. It is beautiful, like the elephant, but it also is sublime, both awesome and terrifying.

“Well,” it rumbles. “What do we have here?”

Chapter End Notes

Aka Paths of the Dead.
Chapter Summary

The Stand Users from Wolfram & Hart and Fitz, Robin, and Darling come to an agreement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Get off me!” Antonia screams and smacks the person on top of her. “I’ll kill you! Call off your Stand!”

“Ellis, please. Do you pay any attention to the briefings ever?” Whitney asks, exasperated, rolling herself out of the way. She instantly pulls out her Stand silently, Simple Plan coalescing around her. She backflips out of the way of another hit even as Antonia screams in anger again. In times of relative peace (by which, she meant that Antonia had to distract herself by putting salt in the coffee and otherwise bothering the actual lawyers), her friend had called Simple Plan emerald, but emerald was a bit too dark. It was more like green fluorite, or at least, that’s what the bored pawn shop lady had told her, when she’d sold off the necklace to try to pay for her brother’s care. From what she can remember, the colors were similar, but then, stress.

Like now.

“I memorized their faces. That’s the only thing I needed to know,” Antonia snarls viciously, digging fingernails into his underarm with no intention other than to hurt. “Three Days Grace!”

Between the two, Whitney knows that Three Days Grace is certainly the more intimidating looking Stand—a humanoid figure with goggles and no other features, not even a mouth or nose. Even when it’s impossible for the Stand to have an expression, it appears like it’s scowling. In contrast, a crystalline armor covering her body and a sword in her hand is distinctly less terrifying, never mind stories she’s heard of other armor-Stands. Despite the fact that she has a better idea of what her Stand is and how it works.

“Atonia, stop,” she orders her friend, stepping aside at another attack from a terracotta soldier. “None of them is the Stand User for this statue infestation, and given the number of terracotta soldiers heading this way, they are as likely as we are to die if we do not join forces.” She swipes with her sword, breaking the clay on the warrior. It stops still, immobile even as the clay begins to grow back. As long as it only touches her sword, she’s fine. As long as her armor, identical but for the proportions to a male’s plate armor (other than the fact that it was made of magical crystal, of course) remained intact, her sword would as well.

Grudgingly, Antonia moves behind her, Three Days Grace waiting silently, gears inside visible through the “skin” of the Stand ceasing their turning. It’s motionless in a way that the Statues should be, which is an irony Houston does not pause to ponder.

“Robin Brown, expert archer and Sendo Master. That means he doesn’t even have a Stand, Antonia. He’s also skilled at finding supplies even in places where it should be impossible and using the environment to his advantage in a battle. The blond, Carter Fitz Speedwagon, is smarter than
stereotypes would suggest and is the User of Lotus Juice, with the appearance of an octopus in a seashell. Reports suggest he only has the ability to knock opponents out and heal, though he should not be underestimated, as a former gang member carrying a makeshift weapon. The last…” She moves into a dance, thankful that armor and sword are lighter than one would expect given their resilient properties, because otherwise she would not be able to wield a two-handled knight’s sword one-handedly, dispatching the soldiers gathering around her. She easily pulls Antonia out of the halfhearted zombie-like snatch. “I don’t remember you exactly, my apologies. The thief with a Mayan snake rings a few bells, but I’d guess you merely appeared in the list of Stand Users that has been stolen. I don’t know your name, or that of your Stand.”

“Well, if you’re going to join the party, it’s better to do that than just keep standing there,” Antonia growls, fists clenched white in the effort to stop herself from punching the newcomers or the soldiers. Punching or kicking things that are contagious is a bad idea, which is probably putting her in a bad mood. “If you’re going to accept the truce, you better do it quick.”

Without hesitation, Speedwagon moves to her side, smacking any soldiers that get too close with the improvised metal poker, nodding grimly at her resolve. It’s certainly less efficient than her sword, so the ones he attacks heal up quickly. “Each of the four Horsemen has a different side effect. The army is this one’s. Believing you can defeat it unlocks that capability. The last weakened us when it was weakened. I may have a plan, but it’s risky.” Under his breath, he mutters, “Jojo certainly is a bad influence, when it comes to ridiculous, reckless plans.”

She hadn’t been meant to hear that, but she quirks a smile. If there are any good at dodging fate, it’s the Joestar family. They’re one of her great hopes, then—assuming Antonia doesn’t kill them all in a fit of selfish rage before she can get there, of course. Though she has a little bit of trouble believing that a former gang member would never be reckless himself, even if he might be rusty in the attempt. “Enlighten me.”

“Tell me, is it my imagination, or are they all moving slower the more of an army it amasses?” he indicates the mass of shuffling soldiers ringing them with a nod.

“You’re insane.” Brown sounds half admiring, half shocked.

“I know. Johan will be insufferable.” She might be wrong, but it half sounds like he’s looking forward to it.

“I-If it’s Pestilence, and it’s gaining strength from the spreading of disease, then…” the teenager she doesn’t know speaks up, scared but determined. “Whisper could help.”

“Your plan is…sitting the Stand down to a buffet and forcing it to eat until it can’t move,” the requisitions officer clarifies, and Whitney grins. These people are ridiculous and have fought enough to be able to guess each other’s moves, just as she and Antonia can (though, of course, their fighting prowess is more that of training and theoretical). This just might work.

“Well, I can at least appreciate you as enemies, but I’m totally paying attention for the fight later,” Antonia warns. Hopefully they’re intelligent enough not to hold back enough to get them all killed just to protect themselves later on. Three Days Grace blurs into motion, pulling giant shears from its back. It reaches down to the pouch decorated with brass buckles and an ominously ticking clock at its side, rather than attacking with the shears, and then with feverish movements it starts chopping at the paper it’s retrieved.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter also entitled Reckless Endangerment.
I like the new Ending, but that opening is so spoilery.
That Horseman, Death, Part III

Chapter Summary

Giorno has a conversation with Death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There are very few things that can truly shake Don Giovanna's composure. He's good about keeping cool under pressure. The fight against the User of White Album had truly pushed his limits and brought to his attention that for all of his confidence in his dream and his power, he was, after all, only fifteen at the time. Weakness was useless, holding him back, and could never be shown, must not be tolerated if he could help it. He had truly panicked, but Mista had been a true friend during the fight, and he'd appreciated the trust and dedication (but then, Mista truly had accepted and welcomed him in a way the others had not, hadn't he?). He's had time to grow and mature since then. The final fight against the former Boss had been one such occasion, and he's very glad he had the way to fully unlock his potential. It would be for the best that he not have to use it on this occasion; he's not sure what continued use would do to a User, even one with such control over life as he.

He doesn't have Mista or another of the Passione to watch his back in the instance, but it can't be helped, and in fact, is probably for the best. He probably could use the same technique to inoculate them against the deathly aura, but given their losses years ago, he's been much more careful about what sorts of risks he allows his subordinates to take.

The dragon is another such. It is majestic, yes, even as the elephant had been, but there's something sad to its allure. And yet, it is a Stand, surrounded by death, a garden full of molding, rotting, the dying, the dead. It has by its very presence turned a garden teeming with life into a cemetery where the dead rest. The feeling of wrongness adds to the impressive size and scales and intelligence. Even the sun seems to be dying, leaving the area dark and cold. If he walks away from the area, it is likely that sun and life alike would return, but he is determined to deal with this here and now.

There's a touch of the ironic about the situation as well. One of the ridiculous conversations he'd had with the whole team so many years ago was one about their favorite fictional creatures (which might be Stands, who knew), started, of course, by Narancia, who enthusiastically declared the harpy (a flying creature with boobs, he explained enthusiastically, to which Bucciarati just smiled indulgently). Picking any living creature as a favorite was a difficult one, because life was fascinating in all of its forms and he didn't think he could ever study it enough, though, of course, there was little enough time for that as such an important figure of the Passione. He'd finally declared his to be a dragon, full of dignity and grace and yet such menace. He could do worse than a dragon. He mustn't let the admiration control him, however.

Many depictions just declared them raving beasts, killing indiscriminately for food (which was, after all, elegant in its own way, in the simplicity of form). Older ones spoke of the gold-lust, but the intelligence. Dragons were fond of riddles, highly intelligent, but great care had to be taken when speaking with them. It was good that he'd had practice speaking with dangerous, powerful
creatures (those former members of the Passione and other Mafia heads who were willing to deal with him, of course), but he shouldn’t let down his guard, not for a second. It appeared that this dragon, too, was possessed of intelligence. The words themselves could be those of a brute as well as a genius, but the fact that it could speak Italian despite the fact that it was not the Stand of an Italian Stand User (Passione would know) and knew to address him in the language that felt most like his native one is, indeed, a powerful indicator. He feels the urge to run, but if he’d given into that urge, he would never have achieved his goals, and refuses to do so.

“Ah. The Dhampir child. And yet you are full of such life coursing through your veins.” It has some idea of who and what he is, then. He refuses to be intimidated, however, to show this deadly creature weakness.

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with the term,” he responds, apologetic and polite.

“The son of vampire and human. I wasn’t aware creatures such as you could possibly exist,” the deep voice resounds through the hush of the zone of death surrounding them. A raven flies too close and falls, stunned, the life draining from it.

“I would say the same,” Giorno agrees.

The rumble of a laugh echoes loudly, and Giorno feels a hint of pleased pride, though he doesn’t delude himself. He’s merely earned a reprieve.

The most overpowered, albeit the most difficult and time-consuming, action would be to create another creature like the elephant, but his strength is already weakened by the effects of the vaccine, and in any case it would not remain alive long enough to reflect an attack. He could attempt to give it life, the same way he had done to the previous statue, but it’s chancy, as it might not work, and he has the feeling that if it *was* possible, it wouldn’t work unless the dragon wished it to. If it’s anything like fictional dragons, it’s going to want to play, not merely accept the fate, even if that’s what it wants—which, while frustrating, is a point of view Giovanna can respect. If it comes to it, he can use the power gained at the Coliseum, but that’s a last resort. Beating it in battle might be one way to win, but injuries gained as the result of an unwanted detour in the middle of business would be annoying. He has no illusions that a conversation might be just as deadly, given that this is a dragon with which he is talking, but it’s an avenue worth exploring.

“You amuse me, little dhampir.” Smoothly, it slips into Japanese, a move that makes a shiver run up Giorno’s spine, though he makes sure not to move an inch from his relaxed pose before the mighty creature. “You’ve earned some truth—appreciate it well, because it’s rare in this world.” The Stand sighs heavily. And then, just as easily, it goes back to Italian, for ease of conversation, Giorno suspects. “My User is doomed to die. I’ve felt the death hanging about her like a shadow.”

This feels oddly like a business chat in a coffee shop, all friendly words with guns and knives at the ready. “Perhaps we could help her,” Giorno offers, for he’s not above trying to gain a valuable ally. “It would be a pity for such a majestic creature such as you to stop existing.”

The dragon rumbles a laugh again. “There is no turning back the tide, though I have sensed that we will continue to exist after her death—within reason, of course. Two of the four have already been defeated, in a way that destroys the very idea of their existence. You may have noticed the statues that have awoken due to hearing our call.” It managed to amuse itself, this time. “The Four Horseman of *London Calling*. I am Death.”

It’s one thing to get the idea, another to hear the words said out loud. The atmosphere is oppressive. “You said that despite my heritage, you could feel the life within me. I feel the same from you. I could nurture that spark of life.”
“We must both earn that outcome, I’m afraid.” The dragon sounds almost apologetic, but it was an outcome Giorno had already predicted and prepared for. “I long for true life or true death, and have been unable to find either. I am a parasite, constantly draining the life around me, and yet no matter how much life I drink, I remain dead. If you do use your power on me, I wish to be certain it will not fade.”

Fair enough, Giovanna acknowledges silently, and in the same breath Gold Experience charges with a loud “MUDA!”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled Cemeteries of London.
That Horseman, Pestilence, Part IV

Chapter Summary

Whitney and her fellow Wolfram & Hart Stand User put their plan into motion along with their reluctant allies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whitney’s certainly going to worry about Antonia. She doesn’t have as thorough of a knowledge about how her Stand functions as the rest of them do, which is a liability in a Stand fight. Of course, Miss Houston hadn’t exactly used Simple Plan too often herself, but she had used it before (even if the targets had probably been innocent, which is a thought she hadn’t tried to dwell on, which was easier than she was comfortable with, given that they were able to fight back). Their allies are at least smart enough to avoid the paper cutout strings littering the battlefield, even if they aren’t aware of the nature of the danger or how diabolically inventive Antonia’s mind can be. Once Antonia got a real idea of what her Stand could do, how far she could push her little traps…it wouldn’t be pretty. Effective, but not pretty.

Whitney flinches, white noise filling her mind, as the cracks split the air. She isn’t able to backflip out of the way of another large glass leg that clicks down. Mostly, it’s because she’s distracted, because the giant glass scorpion does appear to be slowing down, no matter how slowly. From the force she calculates in her head, that would easily have fractured her collarbone without the armor. As it is, she’s been brought that much closer to the disappearance of her Stand.

“Whitney!” Antonia screams, voice full of fury. Even Three Days Grace’s menacing aura seems to grow, the eyes behind its goggles narrowed in hate, while the snip-snip of its garden sheers grows ever faster in tempo. It’s grounding enough to glance over and spot the weapons in the woman’s hands.

That’s right. These gunshots aren’t hurting people you care about. Her partner had to have stolen guns from the office. A bit different than her usual knife, but then, this probably means that she was at least thinking ahead, which is helpful. And another thought occurs to her—where are the police? Will they be drawn to the gunfire and get caught up in a Stand battle, or will they ignore this, particularly with everything else going on? The bullets pierce the clay, spiderwebbing cracks through the structure. She tries to focus on the fact that this will probably keep her partner safer, rather than trying to stab clay warriors within grabbing distance. And with the way she’s moving, Antonia fully intends to keep far away from the clay hordes, though being taken over by something forcing you to fight one of few people you actually care about would be enough to give anyone pause. At least Speedwagon’s long piece of iron that looks like it’s been yanked straight off a fence is long enough to keep him out of immediate grabbing distance, and while the Stand itself looks to be very fast (fast enough that she’s relying on all of her gymnastics and fighting skill to keep out of the way, trying to immobilize as much of the army as she can), the soldiers are more like those slow zombies than anything. The Stand does appear to be slowing, which is something, but it might not slow at a fast enough rate to be caught by the trap as planned. Brown, on the other hand, is probably one of the best weapons they have in this fight, as the arrows crack the clay as well as any of Antonia’s shots. And, well—as long as nothing hits her (again), Whitney could do this all day. The
unknown woman doesn’t even appear to have a dagger, unlike Antonia, and she’s climbed up into a
tree to get away from the clay soldiers. Which, well—she might seem like a liability, but at least she
is distracting some of them while keeping them in the area, which is useful.

“Now!” the English gentleman yells, and the Mayan snake charges in and smacks him harshly
on the mouth. It almost sounds like that time Whitney had had to smack a too-handsy guy at the bar.
What’s even more worrisome is that he sounds distressed—is he, in fact, not as confident in the plan
as he seemed?

(Little does Whitney know that, in order to get the plan to work, Speedwagon had been
 gambling on two things: one, that Darling’s new confidence and resolve found in the fight with Sons
of Dixie had led to her discovering new powers within, given that, as he’d discovered through a
conversation with her, she’d never been able to inflict sickness but rather just wounds through
Violent Whispers, and two, that stress would be the key, given its role in coming down with a cold.
He concentrated on his memories of discovering that Jojo was going to be put on trial by the ones he
later learned were the man’s friends and the pressure of not being too late to save Josephine’s son, of
knowing that the Violent Whispers-induced depression might take his friend’s life as he watches,
helpless, all the worry that he’d set aside about Johan and even von Stroheim’s current state, of trying
to live a respectful life as a bookseller even when his own past haunted him. He is incredibly lucky
that his plan worked at least thus far and didn’t give him another fatal back wound, but he won’t
mention this little detail when he talks with Jojo later and instead will claim it was all part of the
plan.)

He’s able to fend off a few of the clay animated statues, chipping their outer edge to freeze
them for at least a little while, until he doubles over, coughing like he’s about to hack up a lung.
He’s slow enough that one of the statues catches his hand, and though he stumbles away, there’s still
a slowly growing mass of clay on his hand. If this plan fails, he’ll be just one of the many terracotta
figures menacing them.

Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Just the sort of maniac Whitney’s proud to fight beside.

Hopefully, Antonia’s not taking notes.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled Outbreak.
Read early at your own risk. Hasn't been betad because I've been a) lazy b) sick c) busy
d) all of the above and didn't write the chapter until this morning. Contents may change.
I was discussing this chapter with beta senpai, though, and apparently according to him I
have ascended to being an immortal vampire mangaka because like Araki I have
somehow forgotten entirely what a particular Stand (Three Days Grace) was supposed
to do. I have notes from 2016 (and they aren't even all that useful), inhabitants of the
internet. what is my life.
~Dreamer~
Chapter Summary

Giorno’s fight begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Attacking the dragon might be a mistake, but Giorno is fairly confident that his ‘immunization’ will prevent him from dying, at least immediately, from touching the dragon. Gold Experience has never been the strongest Stand when it comes to direct attack, unlike the man he refers to as his uncle for the sake of simplicity, so it is highly unlikely that the immediate effects of his attack will win the fight (and, truly, he’d be slightly disappointed if that were the case). He’s gratified to find that his gamble pays off, and feels something truly odd as the flurry of blows connect with the massive side of scales. There’s something rather like a burst of energy rippling through the world around them, a second where they are standing in something other than a graveyard and there’s life all around them, dormant but waiting to be set free.

The impression quickly disappears once more, accompanied by the deep and unsettling laughter of the Stand at his seemingly feeble attack. He feels a hint of strain on the attack. If he keeps this up, he’s probably going to exhaust himself, but, well, he is fairly certain that his timing will be correct. The Horseman referring to himself as Death is like a black hole, consuming all around it. Formidable indeed, but if Giorno was easily intimidated, he would not have set out on the path to his golden dream in the first place, and he had others—like Bucciarati, who he cannot help but think of with a hint of sadness, like self-assured Mista and contrary Trish—who pushed him to greater heights by the very virtue of their belief in him.

He’s reminded of an odd assertion his Zio Jotaro had made. It had taken a while, longer than one simple conversation to remind the man that neither of them need be or become Dio Brando. They were at the least uneasy allies, though he liked to think the fascinating conversations about the majesty and beauty of marine life had made them more than just that. “Jonathan might have had a Stand like yours.”

No matter how much his new family (including adopted family, if you considered Polnareff) would talk about Dio in hushed tones in his presence, Jonathan was rarely mentioned. The man was intriguing, because from what little he could gather, his own path was more like a Dio that had chosen to be a Joestar, his two fathers informing who he was and what he could become. Thus, a small remark like that meant more than even the usual simple words from the Dottoressa di Ricerca (another characteristic they shared; neither Giorno nor Jotaro were likely to waste words on things that did not need to be said).

It had taken a little prodding and encouragement for him to get the story and a demonstration from Joseph, who despite his advanced age and possible dementia (at the way the man’s eyes twinkled, Giorno had gotten the feeling that it might all or at least mostly be an act to amuse himself, though he hadn’t remarked on such to anyone else). Hamon, the power of the sun, life and healing. The feeling was indeed similar, and a part of him that had before been restless became contented. He didn’t bother looking into it any further. He didn’t need to. Possibilities only, ifs and maybes.
He feels it now, with the cloudy, hushed atmosphere, the light dim and gloomy. If he is the sun, Death is his shadow, his opposite. Still, in the end, no matter how powerful, it is still a Stand, and every Stand, even King Crimson, has its weakness.

There is something different about the dragon now, he can feel it. The tiny spark of life within, grown ever so slightly larger, but a simple flurry of muda, as the word might suggest, is hardly enough to make the kind of difference desired. A mere demonstration of the least of his capabilities.

The matter might be impossible. The only solution, therefore, is to forge a new path, to make the impossible possible, to create the future he desires.

The two counterintuitive purposes, it seems, have been achieved, as the dragon makes its move, if a little slower. The effect is not as dramatic as it had been on Bucciariati, but, of course, he expects nothing less, not when it had absorbed his attack as if it were nothing. It does not breathe fire as expected, nor is it an entropic beam of decay. The spot freezes. He has already jumped to the side, because the intent if not the action itself is just what was expected and he has no intention of returning to the frosty desolation of winter. Perhaps it is cliché of him, but he is not fond of winter and likewise likes the hope and promise budding in spring. He can’t help but recall the fear he’d had facing White Album—and yet, in the end, he’s stronger than he was then, and no less capable of claiming his ambitions, despite what the wily words of a dragon would have him believe.

He is fairly certain that it truly did wish a release of sorts, as it stated, but despite its words he also believes it did not think he was capable. He has managed both to demonstrate his potential, for he has achieved something different than anything anyone else the Stand has encountered, and to put it at ease by appearing weaker, more vulnerable. Underestimation, however annoying at times, has been quite the useful technique in his repertoire. Many others had seen him as weak, to their disadvantage, for often others would expose their weaknesses in turn believing they had nothing to fear. If he plays his cards right, it will stop this Stand as well.

Further blows, even as the dragon’s voice rises further in mocking laughter, even as he keeps on the move, unwilling to be encased in ice, helpless as a fly before a spider. He is not about to lose. Gold Experience is growing frustrated, matching, to some extent, his own, but they have a plan, and neither are going to jeopardize that plan by acting prematurely.

The Stand itself is like the one in the airplane. It does not matter what happens to the User, if the Stand is telling the truth, because it will continue to exist after its User’s death. It must be dealt with one way or the other here and now.
this time.
I'm trying to stay away from writing any really clear spoilers about Golden Wind, but
there's only so much I can do.
~Dreamer~
That Horseman, Pestilence, Part V

Chapter Summary

Kaiju are difficult to fight.

Chapter Notes

Warning: chapter currently unbetta’d, contents subject to change
Ignore this warning, contents are now beta’d and HAVE changed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Mayan snake Stand proceeds to hit Brown and even her own User as well. She probably would have sent her Stand against Antonia as well if the woman hadn’t sent the unknown Stand User a glare warning her off of even trying. Whitney herself was hidden behind the protection of Simple Plan, so there was no use in even trying, not without uselessly damaging her armor and otherwise having no effect. Fortunately, the kaiju appears to be moving slower and slower, glass legs clacking slower against the concrete and pincers and stinger becoming easier and easier to dodge. The blows still have considerable force behind them, though, given the force with which they smack into some of the clay soldiers, knocking them over, fracturing the clay and taking them out of the fight briefly. Honestly, that might be cracking ribs. It’s hard to estimate whether the clay is as protective to the terracotta army as Simple Plan is to her, but she would guess that while the covering may regrow, the point is not to protect the “soldiers” inside, since they are probably no better than cannon fodder to the Stand (or User, if the Stand doesn’t have some sort of rudimentary intelligence of its own). She’d feel more guilty about it if it wasn’t kill or be killed at this point.

The sword is certainly useful, though it doesn’t matter how many of the soldiers she can take out of the fight if even for a brief amount of time if she gets surrounded every time—which happens far too easily, given the amount that have gathered by this point. Fortunately, Speedwagon appears to be fairly good at staying at the periphery of the fighting, though the clay has grown to his forearm and his right arm dangles uselessly at his side. It hasn’t affected his ability to smack clay soldiers around, but then, it wouldn’t, given that according to his Wolfram & Hart profile, he’s left-handed. Brown, on the other hand, is having greater difficulties, given that he needs to stay out of arm’s reach. It helps that he’s fast on the draw, but it’s only a matter of time. The unknown girl at some point had been grabbed by the ankle, probably when she’d been hiding in the tree, and she can’t move out of the way quickly enough with a leg she is incapable of moving, so a splotch of clay is also growing at her side and back. It won’t be long before she is completely converted to an enemy, rather than an ally.

The soldiers don’t seem to learn, even after they’ve triggered a few of Three Days Grace’s traps. They keep stepping on the paper chains, which rise from the ground, folding into various traps. A paper buzzsaw cuts right through the back of the soldiers’ legs, sending a spray of blood into the air. The clay doesn’t grow back over the wounds, which is good, because it means they’ve been permanently taken out of the fight, but Whitney has to suppress the urge to be sick. (Though, given the situation, maybe she shouldn’t be suppressing it?) Antonia would certainly enjoy that one,
creepily enough. She’s used a ton of bear traps, triangles folding in fast forward origami chomping at feet and spilling blood, but the soldiers don’t appear to be intelligent enough to figure out how to release themselves, so it’s worth it. It’s the first trap she’d ever learned to make, so it’s her fallback. It’s certainly a good thing that their allies seem to have figured out that avoiding the traps makes sense.

Interestingly, the number of “wounded” soldiers also seems to be having an effect on the Stand, albeit less of one. It’s possible they could have retreated to a rooftop and just waited as the unusual zombie army assembled, picking them off with well-placed shots until the Stand was as good as paralyzed, but they hadn’t known that going into the battle, and in any case it’s not like she could have held back her new partner from jumping into the fight. It was a miracle she’d been able to talk her out of taking on this glass scorpion kaiju Stand and the rest of these Stand Users at the same time.

A group of the soldiers start to run away, clunky and unnatural. It all happens too quickly. Whitney doesn’t process it all before she’s knocked backwards, flying through the air, and pinned against the wall of one of the apartment buildings by a claw. Through it, she can see Antonia scream, wordless and feral, face vicious. If Whitney didn’t know better, she thinks distantly, she’d say the Stand was grinning with a malicious satisfaction, but despite the fact that it’s a Stand, it looks like a fairly accurate depiction of a scorpion, if a scorpion was made of glass and taller than your average building. Shock, that’s right. She’d managed to avoid the panic attack on the sound of gunshots, but the pain was too much. She’s lost count of the hits (most, unfortunately, weak attacks by the soldiers, which feels like a waste), but she must be getting close to the limit, considering the first of the cracks has appeared in the jade crystal. The back of her foot—Achilles’ tendon, she thinks with a detached amusement. The afterimages flicker through her head as she tries to realize what happened. The cut paper footprint chain rising from the ground in the wake of the soldier’s seemingly panicked footsteps—ah. Three Days Grace. The trap had been a mistake, but then, Antonia’s just trying different shapes with her Stand. She doesn’t know what she’s doing. The decrease in the density of the soldiers, the disease surrounding the Stand, had been enough to increase its speed, enough that it had taken her by surprise. And now that it has her pinned, it doesn’t seem to want to let go.

There’s only one thing she can think of to do to escape. It’s crazy, but this seems to be the group to encourage that and if she remains here long enough, it will probably crush her like fly on the wall in any case. She hasn’t used her Stand enough to know whether an extended “hit” like this counts as multiple hits, or whether it would protect her if it pushed her through the wall and if parts of the house break and fall on her. It’s not worth risking. If it fails her then…well, it’s not worth the risk.

There’s a few inches between her actual body and the claw taken up by Simple Plan. Whitney lets her Stand go. The claw flies at her with the pressure the scorpion kaiju had been placing on it, and it glances her arm as she falls. She feels and hears the crack, screams, hearing the echoing screams from the others, and lands awkwardly, vulnerable and in pain. She’s definitely not running away, and if she doesn’t think of something quick, or if the others don’t step in to save her, it won’t matter how slow the Stand is if she can’t outrun it.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled Bitter Taste.
“Interesting,” the dragon states almost conversationally as Giorno rolls out of the way of another swipe of claws, panting slightly. He skids a little over the icy, dead ground, and it takes more effort than he’d like to stop. “I expected a dhampir to be stronger, but you’re rather puny, even as humans go. Your strength is average. You are not as durable as a vampire, nor do you heal as quickly.”

The cause, no doubt, is the malnutrition in his youth. Well, that and the rather odd situation involving his paternal line in general. He unleashes another flurry of blows with Gold Experience, pulling his Stand back within as soon as it hits because his back still smarts where the Stand Death had smacked his Stand through a wall with one tail swipe. Treading the line between cautious and reckless is more difficult than usual. Unfortunate.

Both Trish and Mista, and Sheila E, too, now that he thinks about it, when they’re alone and can’t undermine his authority in front of others, tease him about his height or how slender he is (though Trish will usually say something about how he’d make a better model than she does, and she’s pretty great). He’s certainly more muscular than when he joined Passione, but he’ll never have Jotaro’s body type, nor Josuke’s.

It doesn’t bother him often, mostly because he privately knows what happens to the others (particularly former Passione members) who underestimate him and try to challenge his position. It bothers him now, though that might just be the dragon getting to him.

He’ll be fine, after, but right now he can’t afford to heal the blood dripping down his shoulder. Can he? Perhaps he’s broadcasting too much weakness at the moment. Would it be better to heal himself now and put on a front that he’s fine, or is he better with just a little more underestimation? Can he even pull off his plan if he tries? He doesn’t have a lot of leeway for the plan to fail, and at minimum he has to last until the appointed time. Err on the side of caution, or go for broke?

He shrugs as well as he can, acting as if he doesn’t feel the pain. “Having never met a vampire, much less a fellow, what was the word you used, dhampir. I can’t say that I’m an expert on the subject.” He hesitates, then, in just as polite a tone, he adds, “I will say, you are less agile than I expected from a dragon, though that might just be that I didn’t imagine a dragon large enough.”

Is the dragon trash-talking him into making a rash move, or giving legitimate advice? This is, after all, a dragon, probably capable of beating him with mere words. “Perhaps the children of Masked Vampires are not true dhampirs. As your power goes, it’s bright, but it feels like a candle in a sea of darkness. Can you really defeat me? Can you give me life for more than a day, but a lifetime, an eternity?”
He could, probably. Within certain definitions, of course. But that’s the last resort if this
doesn’t work, given Zio Jotaro’s understandable concerns about overuse of the Arrow. He cocks his
head slowly as he feels the approach, and decides on his approach based on the current stage of the
fight. Calculated bravado, probably. An attempt obvious to the dragon. A show of ego coupled
with vulnerability. If he can appear a man too proud to admit fear, the dragon will hopefully not
expect any surprise moves up his sleeve (well, not up his sleeve, not unless this plan fails, of course).
“I’ve accomplished the impossible before. Once more will not be a hardship.”

He could list names, but has a feeling that the dragon would be no more impressed than by all
those who attempt to do the same to him. He won’t waste his time on such a useless gesture. He
believes in himself, and he believes in his dream.

The dragon chuckles, amused, but not intimidated. “Such confidence, young dhampir.”

He had managed to get Gold Experience behind the dragon without the dragon noticing. He
goes for another muda flurry, only the Stand moves out of the way, and before he can dismiss his
Stand several of the attacks connect. He grits his teeth against the pain. More to fix, but that’s to
worry about after the battle. A few broken ribs have nothing on losing both of his hands, after all.

“But perhaps it is overconfidence.” The grin is toothy and intimidating, but Giorno refuses to
let it worry him. “Are you willing to admit defeat, young dhampir?”

“Never,” Giorno smiles, posing with his Stand nonchalantly as if Death before him poses no
threat. As if he had not just hit himself. As if everything was still going to plan. “I am not the sort to
give up. If one way is ineffective, I try another.”

The darkened sun darkens still further, and it is now that the Stand sees the army descending
upon him.

“The statues awakened do not have your intelligence, but that does not mean they are
incapable of thought. Not all were open to the suggestion, but some were willing to recognize you
as a threat, particularly as a threat to their existence,” the blond explains. The rest are animals
awakened by his power. He’s not sure what the death aura will do to the Stand if it is turned against
it, but he’s ready to find out.

The laughter of the dragon grows, to the point the ground shakes. “You are willing to
sacrifice others to try to fulfill your part of the bargain?” Even now, a gargoyle here and a few
humanoid statues fall to the ground, breaking with the force of their fall and turning lifeless. The
flames of life in each flicker wildly. A number of ravens descend and begin to pick at the scales,
turning back to car parts one by one and falling to the ground in what is turning out to be a
graveyard. “Perhaps I underestimated you. Perhaps you truly do have something of the ruthless
vampire in you. But no matter how hard you struggle, in the end your efforts are useless.”

Giorno smiles, polite and deadly. “That’s my line,” he corrects gently, stepping aside as Gold
Experience rushes forward, gleefully attacking with a flurry of blows, joyfully yelling muda as if to
prove the point.

“Enough!” Death roars, knocking off most of the attackers with one beat of its mighty wings,
and with another frozen breath it already practically decimates the army Giorno had so carefully
prepared. Giorno only avoids the breath by dropping to the frost-bitten ground immediately, Gold
Experience following suit. Unfortunately, he can’t get to his feet quickly enough, and is easily
trapped underneath a giant claw, as if the Stand had merely been toying with him this entire time.
His struggles do little to remove himself from such a dangerous position, and Gold Experience’s
attacks do little other than slowing the dragon once more, which is of little use in the situation.
“Where are your plans now, little dhampir?” the dragon mocks, and Giorno feels the spiritual tugging, a little like Black Sabbath’s dragging his soul out. Despite his determination, despite his goal and all those counting on him, he can feel his consciousness being dragged beneath the icy waters of death….

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled City of the Dead.
I'd say I'm sorry about the cliffhanger, but... *shrug* sometimes things happen.
That Horseman, Pestilence, Part VI

Chapter Summary

The fight with Pestilence comes to an end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Whitney bites back a scream as the razor vines bite into her arm and weakly attempt to tug her away. She stumbles and falls just as the stinger goes through the fence where she’d been, and a clay hand misses her ankle. She scrambles along the ground as best as she can, but there’s only so much she can do when her body is screaming at her.

The terrified grip around her arm loosens, and she glances over just in time to see the Stand flicker. It doesn’t have an expression, because that’s impossible given the Stand’s anatomy, but the insistent, frantic way it’s pulling at her conveys the emotions it’s feeling just as well. It solidifies before her eyes, grip turning as strong as previous. It’s not that strong of a Stand, but the fact that it’s trying at all is a little endearing.

Its flickering, though…she glances over to see that the clay has engulfed the Englishman, coming after her slowly. He’d probably gotten grabbed again, leading to a much faster spread. Or something. She’s not entirely sure how it works, but if this all goes well, they won’t have to learn. She’s not sure what kind of willpower would be required to keep your Stand active when your mind is being taken over, but it probably won’t last much longer. Worse, the fact that he’s not completely braindead seems to be making a difference and not for the better—unlike the rest of the clay soldiers, he’s crawling at her, keeping himself out of the way of the Stand’s attacks. The others are capable of the tactic, given the ones that had run in panic, but for whatever reason it just hasn’t occurred to the others.

“Whatever you’re planning, you better do it quick!” she calls. It’s hard to breathe. It hurts.

“The last time we did this, Lotus Juice dropped the Stand into an acid pit with its new power!” Brown responds, sounding a little stressed, and with good reason. “I’m not sure if we can pull that off with Fitz like…”

He’s interrupted, probably by dodging more clay soldiers, but he doesn’t have to finish his sentence. The Kaiju Stand is moving at the same pace as most of its army, but now that it has her cornered without Simple Plan active, it doesn’t have to move quickly.

“Why are you all so useless? You’re our allies, act like it!” Antonia screams. “Whitney, I’ll get you!” She squeezes off another couple shots, and despite the fact that he’s now acting against them, Whitney hopes that Speedwagon isn’t one of those targets.

Whitney coughs, deep and wet and it just hurts. Something broke. Something important. She feels the stabbing pain in both sides of her chest. “No!” It’s a gamble, but she sees the manhole cover just a few inches from her scrabbling fingers. “Use Three Days Grace! Trapdoor!” With a flickering Lotus Juice’s weak help, she’s barely able to roll out of the way of another leg attempting to crush and/or pin her like a butterfly on a board, but now she’s trapped between that and the fence.
Trying to squeeze past is an agony she doesn’t want to experience, but—she’s still alive, she might as well take the effort to move.

“You’re in the same spot!” Antonia yells, arguing.

“I won’t be for much longer if…” And then the leg moves sideways, just a little, and she can’t move anymore, words choking off with the pain.

“Three Days Grace!” It sounds like Antonia has decided to stop arguing. Hopefully she’s going to actually follow directions for once. She’s never been so excited about hearing the sound of gardening shears, but it doesn’t stop when she expects. Did Ellis create two sets of traps?

Whitney hears the sounds of the arrows smacking on the glass of the Stand’s side. They’re fairly rhythmic at first, but then they falter—so he was grabbed, too.

“Hey, ugly! I wonder how fragile you are, being made of glass and all!” Suddenly the voice of her partner is a lot closer. There’s a few bullets followed by the sound of—is that a knife on glass? Is Antonia actually attacking a kaiju with a knife—actually, don’t answer that, it’s exactly the sort of thing she’d do so it probably is exactly what is happening.

She glances up, and there she is. Antonia sees her looking and winks. Three Days Grace places one of the paper chains delicately on the fence behind Antonia. They hadn’t known before this fight that the traps could be placed on non-horizontal surfaces, and Antonia’s going to exploit that, but then, fights are the best place to learn new moves, aren’t they? You’re not going to be pushed to your limits (like she is, right now) in just practice.

But then, of course she would be trying to get the Stand’s attention, to get it to move. She’s forgotten one of the most important limitations of Three Days Grace. The trap can’t be placed underneath its target. The target has to move onto, or hit, the trap.

Three Days Grace has already moved out of view, but Antonia stays in place, dodging the attacks of the frustrated Stand with a sneer on her face. Whitney can see its reluctance and annoyance from the way it’s moving. It’s slow, so it’s missing, and it has a perfectly vulnerable prey within reach, but there’s another refusing to let it just do what it wants.

Just in time, Antonia ducks out of the way of the tail smacking against the fence and activating the trap, which turns into paper stones that crumble out of the way to reveal a horde of paper streamers that sweep out, knocking Antonia aside as she reaches for Whitney’s hand and picking Houston and the Stand up and carrying them along. It’s a very strange sensation to feel paper next to her arm and yet still feel the pressure of gallons of rushing water washing them away. That’s a new trap, too—Antonia’s certainly feeling creative today, isn’t she?

And then the ground disappears. Folds away like walking through some swinging doors. They’re not made of paper, but she catches a glimpse of the edges, ridged in paper as she falls.

And then Three Days Grace catches her arm, strong and determined, and she swings into the ‘wall’ created by the trap as the Stand falls below her. It catches a glancing blow with one of its legs, and between that and the collision she bites back a scream.

Three Days Grace hauls her out, barely getting her onto solid ground before it closes beneath. The clay has begun melting slowly off the bodies of the possessed, which have all fallen like puppets without strings.

Speedwagon isn’t going to recover in time.
But if the army is disappearing, the Stand acknowledged its loss. A statue across the way judders to a stop.

Whitney shivers. She’s cold.

“Hang on, hang on, Whitney. You’ll be fine!” Antonia yells, running over.

A second set of running footsteps. A face in view. Brown. He elbows past to place his hands on her chest, controlling his breathing. Hamon, perhaps? Still, he’s out of breath, possibly partially from the clay slowly melting off his shoulder. That affects his ability to use it, doesn’t it? The pain eases slightly, but it’s hard to breathe, still.

Antonia looks scared. She looks pissed off.

Houston can’t let her stay like that.

She reaches out a shaky hand and pats a balled-up fist. It takes effort she doesn’t entirely have, but she can’t let this continue. “Don’t cry. Wolfram & Hart contracts last after death, so I’ll see you again.”

“Shut up. Stop…” Antonia begins muttering.

Whitney speaks over her. It feels like every breath is being measured out, so her words are important. “Don’t trust Wolfram & Hart. If I’m a monster…” She trails off, not sure what she’s able to say here. Even destroying the body isn’t enough, she’s heard. Wesley’s body, supposedly, was destroyed, and he’d merely returned a few days later. “Don’t blame yourself,” she manages to Brown, voice rattling. “Guess I just didn’t deserve a miracle…”

Darkness.

New York has rumors about alligators in the sewers. London has one about a scorpion kaiju, despite all of the disbelievers who point out that there’s not even a good explanation such as pet alligators being flushed down toilets, but there are those who persist in their stories.

「 Whitney Houston (User of Simple Plan) retire」

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled Unbreakable Heart.
Oh boy. Today has been a yare yare daze day of all days. I just. It sucked so much. I’m currently in chrome because firefox just broke all extensions. I was in the middle of updating this chapter, too. And who knows how long it'll take. At least I had STG going, so I've got a backup for my tabs whenever Firefox gets its act together.
I'm not sure I'm ready for this next episode, but it'll fit everything else about today, sooo.
~Dreamer~
It’s dark and cold, and he hates it. This useless feeling. He thought he’d left it behind, a snake shedding its skin and ridding itself of things best left in the past, and yet it’s as if that disembodied skin has snuck up on him, engulfing him once more, strangling him and making it hard to breathe.

He can’t see the dark. Opening his eyes will yield no difference. He doesn’t bother. It’s better to have the hope of opening his eyes and seeing something than actually doing so and having his hopes dashed.

He could call for help, but no one would come. He is alone. And he can’t even find his voice. He opens his mouth, tries to scream or say something, but nothing comes out.

He’s shaking uncontrollably.

“Come on, Giorno. Get up.”

He knows that voice.

“Don’t open your eyes until you’re back.”

If he concentrates, he can probably recognize the voice, but something in him—his Stand, probably—is saying not to try. Like the story of Orpheus, or any of the stories about Hades, really. Certain actions can trap you forever in this endless black.

“You’ve been through worse.”

They all have. He knows this. It’s hard to remember with this feeling from the past haunting him.

“So step forward with that golden resolve. You’ve faced the devil, you’ve now faced death. Don’t hesitate now.”

Yes. This feeling was useless. It’s a past he’s discarded in pursuit of his golden dream. Why is he letting this fear, this darkness, hold him back, the Don of Passione?

Giorno finds himself floating above the sensation of death, the pull on his soul weakening. The feeling is no longer one of an endless, hungry abyss, the sort found in the deepest places of the ocean, but rather like bathing in a warm, comforting stream. He’d gotten far closer to death than he’d ever intended, but the end result was what mattered. “You were dead. What did you do?” He doesn’t want to open his eyes just yet, as he can’t be sure he’s back—Death, surely, could exist in the world of the dead and the world of the living simultaneously. He doesn’t need to see to feel that the dark, gloomy atmosphere has lifted; he can feel the rays of sunlight on his skin between the
claws. He can hear the shock in the Stand’s voice, now warm and full of life, rather than empty.

He smirks. “You didn’t think I was fighting without a plan, did you?” If he wasn’t trapped beneath a claw, he would pose confidently, demonstrating how little fear he has at this moment. Sometimes, a plan did not require one decisive move, but rather a hundred small steps to reach the desired future. “I did attempt a head-on approach, but infusing you with life with a simple attack was like dropping a pebble into a lake. I wasn’t going to block the stream like that.” The first attack had been a test along those lines. He hadn’t guessed that it would have that much effect, but it had been worth the try, if only to verify the truth.

“However, a multipart ‘vaccine of life’ stood a chance.” Every yell of muda, every attacker infused with his power, the power of life, even ‘accidentally’ hitting himself to infuse himself with life energy, consequently slowing his reflexes and allowing himself to be hit, just as planned.

“You did well at convincing me that you were attacking at random. No one has ever died on purpose facing me, let alone when attempting to give me life. You’re much more intelligent than any other opponent I’ve ever faced,” the dragon muses, carefully scooping him up between his claws and setting him down in a sitting position on what feels like a stone bench. Of course it half feels necessary to carefully ensure the enemy’s movement and moments.

Birds are chirping. There’s the sound of wind, of life, and it’s beautiful. Is it safe to open my eyes now? Am I truly back?

There is no response from a familiar voice, so he opens his eyes. It’s still dark and he can’t see, but it doesn’t lessen the sound of birds or the feeling of sunlight on his cheeks. They’re probably not illusions, then.

If it had gone wrong, well. He did have a backup plan, but it involved giving up on the Stand entirely and merely destroying it using the power of the Arrow. Not having to use that last resort, was, however, a good thing. Not only was the power difficult and dangerous to control, but it would involve breaking a promise, and that was one of the things Giorno truly hated to do.

“That was part of the idea, after all. If you knew, you might not have taken the bait. As this outcome was in both of our best interests, it was better to leave you in the dark.” He has a number of questions, such as whether dragons read. It would be fascinating to discuss, for example, the merits of Machiavelli. But, as unfortunate as it is, he is still in London on business that he has yet to achieve. He’s protected the innocent as best he can, and it is well worth the effort.

He can finally see, and what a beautiful sight it is. The gardens are flourishing. The dead, decaying plants are now bursting into bloom, as they should, and his other senses were correct. The clouds have broken away before sunshine. (Sheila E assured him, before he’d left, that it’d be a miracle if he ever saw the sun in London, let alone if it stopped raining. But he’d earned his little miracle here through hard work and planning, just like he’d approached every other problem he’d come across.)

The gardens are beautiful, just like he’d expected. He’d been right. They were well worth a visit. There’s still that zoo, though, but that’s a thought for later.

The dragon is no longer bony or starved, but healthy and full of life, its scales of a glossy sheen, wings now healed or as good as new. It half feels like this is too fast, like the actual transition is too easy. “I no longer feel my User. I am free,” the Stand (former Stand? Free Stand? …does it have things in common with Notorious B.I.G.) explains. Well, if the Stand had facilitated this, made things easier, he’s certainly not complaining. “I’ve never felt life before. It is beautiful.”
“I have always found it so,” Giorno agrees. “Do you have a plan?”

“Take life as it comes. Just how actual living creatures do, I assume. I have much to learn, but I look forward to it.”

The dragon stretches its wings, and Giorno smiles kindly. “This is true.”

“I will not aid you in defeating my former master, but I will wish you good luck and continued life.” It flies off, and Giorno stifles a gasp of awe, even as he cannot repress the smile. He can look for the User, but after he’s done taking out the trash, he really should get to the more important errand for which he’s even really in England in the first place.

The dragon, meanwhile, continued to fly, eventually becoming the guardian of Abergavenny, a beautiful market and tourist town in the Brecon Beacons mountain range of Wales. Dragon-themed goods became more prominent souvenirs, and the city prospered under the dragon’s gaze.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter also entitled From the Abyss.
When Fitz comes to, he’s missing a segment of memories. He has facts in his head, like the fact that the Stand was defeated, like the woman was dead, and her name was Whitney (though neither she nor Antonia ever fully introduced themselves). He’d apparently contributed to her death as a mindless clay soldier.

But there’s no emotion attached. It’s an odd thought, but maybe this is how memories feel for robots or AI. They don’t naturally have emotions, or a sense of self, like “I really did this”. Or perhaps it’s like when memories are downloaded, say, in cyberpunk novels. He doesn’t really have the sense that he was really here, and even the guilt he feels is distant, like it doesn’t even really belong to him.

Antonia walks up and slaps him in the face, and even that feels dulled, like he doesn’t quite fit in his own body.

The other clay soldiers seem to be waking up, similarly confused. It has to be even more confusing for them when they don’t know what Stands are.

“I’ll give you a head start. I won’t even tell the others I’ve seen you. I’ll follow Whitney’s wish as far as I’m able. I don’t know why she wanted you to live, but I can grant you this. The next time we meet, though…” Antonia’s voice trails off, her voice trembling a bit with grief and rage, as she kneels to pick up the lifeless body in her arms, “…The next time we meet, it will be as enemies.”

The street feels deserted and silent as she walks away proudly, carrying the body in her arms. It’s not; there are other former soldiers who are waking up, groaning and stirring on the ground. He can see blood here and there—so the effects of Three Days Grace remained.

If they had time, they should stay and heal them. None of the wounds were, thankfully, fatal, but in any other circumstances, Fitz would stay. As it is, they’ve only defeated three of the four Horsemen, and given that they’ve barely survived their fights with the other three, they can’t afford to seek out and take out the final one. They need to find the User now and end it at the source.
“The apartment building was this way,” he tells the others, and sets off at a good pace. Darling’s having trouble keeping up, but then, she’d been wounded. Hadn’t she?

It’s hard to tell what’s real and what isn’t. But there’s a definite emotion he’s feeling—urgency—and he holds onto that for all he’s worth.

There aren’t any living statues on the way, only ones frozen mid-movement in weird places on the streets. It’s a good sign, but it’s happened before. Defeating the other Horsemen had also led to a decrease in living statues in the immediate vicinity, like it was their presence that woke the others.

Darling’s attempting to say something, ask questions perhaps, but he’s not understanding. At least Robin’s just there, a reassuring presence beside him.

She’s standing on top of the building. There’s outside stairs, thankfully, and the takes them two, three at a time, finally skidding to a stop in front of her.

“We’ve defeated three of your Horsemen. It’s over. You’ve lost. Call off your Stand, now.” He has Lotus Juice ready, just in case.

“You’re the first bloke I met I can stand. But then, you’ve seen, haven’t you? The way of the world, and you’re still here. Careful, though. There’s a price on your head.” She takes a step back. “Maybe they’ll all open their f’in eyes, now.”

That has nothing to do with what he just said. It must be relevant in some way. “We can help you,” Fitz tries, holding his hand out for her.

There’s a look in her eyes he can’t quite make out—sadness, pain, the weight of the world, regret, apology?

“No one can help me,” she disagrees, and steps backwards off the building, hair flying around her like she’s not falling to her death.

She’s the second person he couldn’t help, the second Stand User to die—no, don’t concentrate on it, that’s probably shock.

He can’t help but stare dazedly at the mangled mass of bone and skin and blood and viscera on the pavement below—definitely shock—

“What do you think you’re doing? Come on, we’ve got to get out; the cops are probably on their way…”

And Darling grabs his arm and starts to tug him towards and down the stairs, simultaneously trying to gently treat him like something fragile (because, he guesses, he kind of is right now) and hurry him as much as she possibly can. Whisper’s holding a few things, but he can’t make sense of them.

He doesn’t realize when they’ve made it to a safehouse, the world still stuck behind that strange unreal filter that he—

He’d like to say he doesn’t recognize it, but that would be a lie. He’s felt this twice before, this feeling of aimlessly drifting through life like a ghost. Once was when his mum died. Once was when Grace died.

He’s seen others die before; acquaintances, people he actually sort of liked, but the risk had always been there and it wasn’t the same. He was already partially braced from it, hardened his heart
because nothing mattered anymore.

How does Johan do it, he wonders? The man had faced so much, according to his stories lost so many, and yet he still keeps his heart open, ready for more pain. Is it bravery, or stupidity, to have your heart so open like that? And yet—

It’s what draws people to him. He’d been jealous, but how can he be upset with others for recognizing the same greatness Xander held within himself—

He stands abruptly, upon seeing the paper on the table. His reading speed is high—a pleasant side effect of so much practice—and skimming it isn’t a challenge at all—a receipt from the sale of a statue from Courtney Love. Handwritten, but he’s strained his eyes staring at more difficult handwriting in the past—Grace’s hadn’t been that good, either.

Darling had been trimming his hair. The clay, fortunately, was no longer living, and most of it had merely vanished in the sunlight, but a little had clung in his hair, necessitating a haircut. She hadn’t been expecting the sudden movement, so her next cut accidentally takes off a little too much. “Mr. Speedwagon,” she scolds, but at the moment, he doesn’t care. Because staring up at him is a name branded on his very soul with the hate he bears.

The one who had paid for the statue. The insistence of Courtney Love that no one could help her. The buyer had a part in her death.

Gordon Sarde.

「Courtney Love (User of London Calling) retire」
Interlude: The Tangled Web We Weave

Chapter Summary

When the volume summary just doesn’t cut it anymore--summary chapter.
I apologize for the lack of awesome Speedwagon Narrator Voice. If you want to read up on the Stands, though, there’s a post for that. I’ll mention which fights lead to new powers, but that’s it.

**Volume I**: Just like Phantom Blood, this all begins with the Stone Mask, following the events of Season 7 of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Well, the Stone Mask, *and* a prophecy revealed to Willow. The prophecy, from what she could remember from her vague recollection after the fact, involved Xander and his death, making Giles and Willow paranoid about what it meant. Rather than bring their concerns to Xander or Buffy, though, they try to resolve these concerns in private without worrying anyone. They also do their best to keep Xander out of harm’s way (which leads to a bored Xander; not a good idea).

Meanwhile, Xander sees the Stone Mask, which feels like something bad waiting to happen, and starts to feel paranoid himself, this time including repeating dreams of the end of Phantom Blood —Jonathan and Dio’s last battle. The nightmares are enough to start interfering with his waking life, too, so the matter is brought to the attention of Giles. When Xander passes out, Willow casts a spell to retrieve him from the Dreamlands. (Also, the Cheese Man appeared. Never forget the Cheese Man.)

With Giles and Willow seemingly ignoring him, Xander turns to a semi-outsider, former Watcher Wesley, to research the Mask, unaware that Wesley is no longer on the side of the Good. Wesley, killed during Angel’s campaign against the Senior Partners of the evil demonic law firm Wolfram & Hart, had since, bound by contract, come back after his death to serve W&H. Wesley’s research leads him to look into Xander’s bloodline, since all indications of his reaction to the mask point to a magical bloodline legacy. From what he can tell, Jessica Harris doesn’t exist. He finds notes on the mask written by a member of the “mythical” family of unsanctioned vampire hunters, the Joestars. The connection to his mother is unknown at this point.

Xander then goes to a bookstore on a whim to try to find out more about this secretive family and meets Fitz for the first time.

Simone Doffler, one of the Slayers, along with other Slayer followers steals the Mask and tests it on some of the other Slayers. When they use it, they become Slaypires (term coined by Dawn), Slayers with the power of Jojo’s vampires. She frames Xander for its theft, and he’s put on trial, as they believe him to have been replaced by a shapeshifter. Fitz then comes to his rescue, or so he thinks, calling him "Mr. Joestar".

**Volume II**: Buffy and the others try to deal with the aftermath of the trial. During a patrol to clear her head, Buffy finds a new redhead ally, who she believes at first to be a Slayer. The British lady introduces herself as Josephine Joestar and shows she has the ability to use hamon, a magical martial arts style incorporating the life-giving power of the sun. (This is not shown here, mostly because Buffy wouldn’t know the difference, but Josephine has not been formally trained and thus her technique is sloppy.)
Buffy takes her to meet the rest of the Council, and Josephine explains that a “spell” had aged her and placed her in a different life, and now, renewed, she’s looking for her son, as well as giving her old name, Jessica Harris. Josephine is also worried about Xander “awakening to his power” and not knowing how to deal with it (or not having enough fighting spirit and having it kill him).

Willow and Giles are uncertain about telling her the truth, but Buffy goes for it. She explains a little about the worry about shapeshifters when they’re alone.

The book on the Stone Mask written by Jonathan Joestar sent by Wesley finally arrives at the mansion, leading Willow and Giles to come to the conclusion that they’d been wrong because the Stone Mask really was a threat, allowing for the creation of vampires without siring.

While looking for Xander, Buffy and Josephine run into Jojo’s vampires and Buffy gets to see Josephine use her Stand, Bye Bye Beautiful.

Spike figures out that Simone was the culprit, and she pulls a gun. They survive, however, and vow to be ready for the next time.

Volume III: Xander wakes up in a hotel room after, from his perspective, being knocked out and kidnapped by Fitz. He finds that he, too, has the Joestar birthmark. Fitz refuses to let Xander leave, because he believes he’s in danger, and to keep him safe and “refresh his memory” Fitz uses the Stand Lotus Juice on Xander. When put back into sleep, however, Xander wakes up to his own Stand, The Pretender, which allows him to tap into memories and abilities of previous Joestars. They fight, and Xander wins, but collapses.

Given time to think, Fitz realizes he doesn’t know everything, and gives Xander a mobile to call his friends. Xander gets a bad feeling, however, and hangs up. They turn the TV on to see the aftermath of the fight with the Slaypires, and Xander tells Fitz he’s giving him another chance and explains the situation. He also explains the power of Stands—a manifestation of your fighting spirit.

They practice the use of their Stands a little, Pretender training Xander in the basics of hamon, and Xander tells a few stories of Sunnydale. In return, Carter Fitz Speedwagon tells the story of their mothers. Mercia Speedwagon and Josephine Higashikata were inseparable, particularly after Mercia got her Stand, Kiss From a Rose. (It is also not explained here and is not much of a spoiler, but she went by “Joestar” when she went to school in England due to the fact that no one could remember or pronounce “Higashikata”.) The Stand Arrow, the source of Stands, was used on Mercia and Fitz’s father during their travels with Josephine. However, Josephine and Mercia ran into an enemy they couldn’t fight, and the only alternative was the time tested Joestar Secret Technique: running away.

The enemy found and killed Mercia, but left Fitz alive. He cannot forgive the one who killed his mother or his father for having abandoned her to her fate.

Upon returning to their hotel, Xander and Fitz encounter Darling Violetta, the User of Violent Whispers, stealing from their hotel room, and in the ensuing fight both put their lives on the line. Xander uses Pretender to learn how to heal Fitz’s wounds through the use of hamon. Darling is not a violent person at heart and had only panicked at them using their Stands to prevent her escape, and so agrees to have them accompany her back to her home. However, they find police tape around, with her adoptive parents dead. Darling agrees to come down to the station shortly to answer a few questions with no intention of actually doing so, and Fitz and Xander agree to protect her and help her discover the truth.
Interlude: Devil Deeds

Chapter Summary

When the volume summary just doesn’t cut it anymore.

Chapter Notes

Notes: Thanks to everyone who’s read this far (hey, this isn’t Babylon 5; I appreciate all you lurkers too!), left a comment (CoreData, If they Cutie, Touch the Bootie), bookmarked (Yoshichao), or gave kudos (Onio, kickassanakin, CoreData, aja100, DaytimeChaos, Mahaiwe, Thrawn), and anyone else I might have missed! Thanks also to the Sunnydale Herald for reccing! And, of course, my gratitude in the form of ice cream to Beta Senpai, without whom I would have floundered a lot more in writing this (and also what I did have would be a lot more flawed). Continue to shine on all you crazy diamonds, and look forward to what is to come!!

I’d love to hear your favorite Stand (I really like Backstreet Boy’s design; Beta-Senpai prefers Back in Time) and fight (mine is probably Stereo Love; Beta-Senpai likes Back in Time as well). I can’t make a poll in Dreamwidth because I’m not premium but I’m still interested.
~Dreamer~

Volume IV: Angel arrives to warn them about Wesley’s position as a minion for Wolfram & Hart. After scouting with Spike, they return with news about something called “The Siphon”, which has all the demons they talked to extremely on edge.

Buffy, Willow, and Josephine find some news of Xander from the restauranteur that had provided Fitz and Xander a meal. Buffy follows a running vampire and saves a civilian from a vampire, ignoring his insistence that he could help. Then she encounters more Slaypires and Jojo’s zombies, twisted mockeries of life. During this fight she meets Jotaro, User of the Stand Star Platinum, another relative of Josephine’s, who helps her defeat them and treats her with an odd familiarity and pride. They are also joined by another Stand User, Kakyoin, User of the Stand Hierophant Green, Josephine, and Willow, and Josephine deals the final blow.

Willow and Kennedy have a fight.

Buffy also shares a dream with Xander, due to one of the powers of his Stand (which he reveals to her). He also heals her arm. They can communicate, but only when they’re asleep; however, this does enable her to inform him that she’s run into Josephine and Jotaro, and for him to tell her that he’s found ‘Mercia’s son’. She talks about the Slaypires and that not everyone made it.

Jotaro told Hol Horse and Koichi, who also came to help, that he was just going for a walk. While waiting, Yukako, Koichi’s girlfriend, finds them.
Josephine tells everyone her version of the story between her and Mercia. They were good friends, but she didn’t like the man she married, Gordon Sarde. They’re attacked in a museum, and they’re attacked, and they run into an adjacent dimension. Jotaro’s on his way, but Sarde finds Josephine first, and uses his Stand, Incognito, on her, causing her to lose her identity and become Jessica Harris. Josuke Higashikata, Josephine’s father, used his Stand, Crazy Diamond, to fix her and undo the effects of Incognito. She also gives Xander the name she would have given him when he was born if she had been Josephine at the time: Johan Higashikata.

We also see the flashbacks of Josuke rushing to come and help his daughter based on Jotaro’s call. He is now a police officer, and his wife died, though they loved each other very much.

Andrew and Willow then set up a conference with everyone—Willow, Buffy, Andrew, Giles, Faith, Riley, Josuke, Okuyasu and the other Slayers. They explain what they have discovered about the suspicion-causing spell (at least, how they believe it works)—it both undermined trust and pushed them back into bad habits. The source, they believe, is probably Wolfram & Hart, considering that Xander involved Wesley. In order to check for clues, a few Slayers volunteer to go to the old mansion. Willow uses the connection to all Slayers caused by her spell (in Season 7 of Buffy’s actual show, the same one that made all the Potentials become actual Slayers) to determine the current location of the Slaypire base—off the coast of Italy. Jotaro realizes that Italy is not the place for any such group to set up, and for a good reason—the gang called Passione, which includes a number of Stand Users.

We see one of these gang members, Grappa Calabrese, User of the Stand Backstreet Boy. With orders, she attends a demonic auction in order to acquire a Stand Arrow, only to have it acquired by Wolfram & Hart and get into a firefight instead.

The conference notices that the world appears to be changing, and Dawn reveals that she’d stabilized the world using her dimensional Key powers. Kakyoin also notices that the date is in the past of where they came from. Riley has also heard of the Siphon.

Jotaro also gets a call from Giorno, the Don of Passione, who confirms that he has seen the change in the world, using it to his own advantage, and found someone Jotaro had asked him to find, Johngalli A, who is now dead. Jotaro does not remember the request, however. Giorno only remembers that Johngalli A was a follower of DIO’s. Giorno confirms that Wolfram & Hart are giving Passione problems and the law firm has gotten its hands on a Stand Arrow. He has confirmed its location and tells Jotaro what he knows about the train transporting it.

Willow is capable of teleporting a few people to the train. The window to cast the spell is closing due to the fact that the train began moving again, so while the others argue about who should go Angel, a few witches, and a few Slayers are sent.

The group of Slayers and Witches visiting the mansion discover that someone has found an unusual way of keeping an eye on the situation and are all killed. The Slayer Sachiko is able to send a text before she dies, however—‘water trap eye’.

The group on the train gets a call confirming the deaths at the mansion as a warning.

Angel notices a vampire he remembers from Wolfram & Hart boarding the train and decides to question him. The vampire stops pretending to be scared and conversationally asks Angel about the Arrow and his own demise.

**Volume V**: For good reason, also known as ‘the one where all the Stand Users attack’.
To begin with, however, we get the conclusion to the fight on the train. Angel decides that the unknown ‘vampire’ is actually a demon with powers involving water. The demon explains that he’d betrayed Wolfram & Hart because serving Wolfram & Hart no longer served his purposes. The demon wins, though Angel fights well enough to impress him, and salutes Angel’s memory.

In the dreamworld created by The Pretender, Xander gets to speak to Angel, who explains that he’s dead-dead (and also tells Xander his new name, Johan), and warns him about the power of the demon.

The hotel caught on fire, and they move to a new location. Fitz was worried because Xander wouldn’t wake up, and he explains it’s a new ability he discovered with Pretender. They bond over loss, and Xander offers to help bandage Fitz (and sees his tattoo, which Fitz is embarrassed about due to its tie to his past). He and Darling talk and bond.

Xander gets to call his family, new and old, and tells Buffy about Angel. Jotaro is convinced that the culprit is a water Stand User, akin to N’Doul. And since it’s another murderer with a Stand, he wants to help. (They did, however, fail to warn Xander that Wesley was not to be trusted.)

Next, Xander, Fitz, and Darling go to meet Fitz’s contact, a Dr. Ackerman, for a list of Stand Users. They enjoy the zoo for a bit. One of his colleagues harpoons Xander in the shoulder, who falls into the research shark tank. Darling and Fitz are able to rescue him, but they aren’t able to save Dr. Ackerman, who has been dismembered and stuck in his own locker. They are able to find an incomplete version of the Stand User list.

Johan pushes for a shopping trip to get new clothes, and in the mall they encounter another Stand User, Scott Cain, who attempts to kill Johan with his Stand, Stereo Love. Johan learns of a new power of Pretender’s, the ability to copy another Stand (within a limited extent). Meanwhile, Darling Violetta fights Anthony Kiedis’s Stand, Sons of Dixie. She wasn’t really a fighter, but she managed to find new determination and win the fight.

Josuke freaks out about the fate of his daughter (and Okuyasu’s not much calmer). The conference call from the previous volume occurs here. Josuke then starts freaking out about the fact that he’s now a grandfather and doesn’t feel near old enough for it. He decides to help an old man and ends up taking part in his own Stand battle against the old man he helped, William Kaulitz, and his Stand, Back in Time. With help from past Jotaro, he manages to defeat the User and his Stand. It turns out that Kaulitz’s family had been threatened if he’d refused to attack. Kaulitz was then given to Slayer/Witch custody.

Fitz, Darling, and Xander then encounter another Stand User. They turn out to not be the Stand User endangering civilians, so she doesn’t attack them and introduces herself as Captain Beefheart von Stroheim. Her grandfather was Kaulitz, but she thought the User of the next Stand, London Calling, might have been her grandfather, hence her reluctance to deal with it. Her partner, Robin “Hood” Brown, is an archer sendō (hamon) master. They received an invitation listing “opportunities for Stand Users” as long as they ‘retire’ one of the people on the list. Fitz deals with his jealousy because he’s not used to sharing his friends.

They decide to split up, with Johan and von Stroheim looking for the User while Darling, Robin, and Fitz try to help the civilians affected. Xander pulls a Joseph with the plane, and together with Captain Beefheart manages to defeat one of the Four Horsemen of London Calling, War. He gets pretty hurt and learns that mirroring Stands isn’t necessarily a good idea, as it also makes him mirror the Stand or User, which is dangerous in its own right.

Fitz learns that he can use an acid that can melt a statue, and with help uses this new power to
defeat another of the Horsemen, Famine. He also learns the identity of the User, an artist named Courtney Love.

We meet two of Wolfram & Hart’s new Stand Users, Whitney Houston and Antonia Ellis. While searching for those on the List to kill, they run into another of the Horsemen, Pestilence. They defeat it with help from Darling, Fitz, and Robin, but Whitney dies.

We also see everyone else fighting the living statues.

Giorno also has traveled to London and ends up fighting and defeating the last Horseman, Death, by putting his life on the line.

When Fitz, Darling, and Robin find the User, she commits suicide, saying that no one could help her, and Fitz sees a receipt Darling had found saying that one of her statues had been sold to Gordon Sarde…

To be continued…

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