

What's the first thought you have when you think of a destination vacation? A nice sunny beach? A popular new tourist town? An exciting theme park? Or maybe even just the comforts of your living room?

Well in the case of the plans of leisure that our featured vacationers have – it's none of the above. Instead this group is headed off to the mountains for a weekend stay at a lodge in a winter wonderland in the Andes Mountains. Three days and two nights filled with snow, hot chocolate and toasty down comforters. Now I'm sure that one question is plaguing your mind. Who exactly are these snow-bound vacationers? None other than the Lupin Gang! Believe it or not even thieves get tired and need to recharge their batteries for the next heist. And as they sat down trying to decide on where to settle for their rest and recreation, Lupin came up with a fantastic idea. And for once it was fantastic in a genuine way – not a sarcastic one.

He reached out to one of his many contacts and called in a favor. The guy was the owner of a popular resort in the Andes Mountains. As in booked months to a full year in advance and you're lucky to get a spot in one of the supply closets type of popular. And anyone else wouldn't have even been able to get that much. Of course, Lupin the 3rd isn't anyone else. The resort owner not only booked the team of four in but he gave them a really sweet deal on the overall price.

So here they were – on a gondola ski lift that was slowly but surely guiding them upwards to the town where Lupin's contact would meet them to pick them up for the lodge.

"Man, it's been ages since we've been in the Andes! I forgot how beautiful it is here." Lupin said as he turned around in his seat to look out the window.

"I know. The last time we passed through here was when we robbed that antique dealer at his estate in Peru. But we couldn't stick around to enjoy the sights." Fujiko said as she looked outside the window of the gondola.

"The snow is simply immaculate up here. It's like a blanket made of freshly spun silk." Goemon commented as he observed the crisp, clean snow on the mountains and ground.

"And it sure beats being in a hot safe house with no AC. Speaking of, boss, what can you tell us about this contact of yours? You said he dealt in real estate." Jigen said as he turned to his best friend and leader.

"Oh yeah! His name's Ambrose Gatsby. He's actually one of the first contacts I ever made when I started out. Whenever I need a

sleek yet out of the way safe house – he's the guy I call. And in return I give him a heads up for prime spots of land to buy and build new houses or spas on.” Lupin explained.

“It figures. Only you would suggest to make a resort in the Andes, Lupin. And you can't get more out of the way than this.” Fujiko commented with an impressed smile.

“I'd say that's all the better really. It means that we'll finally get to enjoy some time off without being recognized by anyone. And even if they figure out our identities we'll already be refreshed and long gone once the weekend passes.” Goemon replied with an optimistic and eager expression. At this Jigen smiled himself and wrapped an arm around the samurai's waist.

“Glad to hear you're all for that, Goemon. Because I got a few ideas on how I can help you 'refresh' for the weekend.” Jigen replied as he pulled his boyfriend a bit closer, which made the slightly younger man blush.

“Hee, hee, hee! Not that I mind the preview show, fellas, but I think it's only proper vacation etiquette to save the hanky panky for when we get our rooms at the resort.” Lupin replied with a mischievous giggle.

At this Goemon cast a glare to the master thief and struck him in the knee with the hilt of his Zantetsuken, which made Lupin yelp dramatically in pain and clutch his knee.

“Another remark from you, Lupin, and the next preview you get will be for a martial arts exhibition.” Goemon stated, trying to look serious despite his blush.

“Ah! That actually reminds me, we need to go over our cover names and backstories one last time.” Fujiko said.

“Geeze, again Fujiko? We went over this twice back in Japan, three times when we boarded the plane, twice more when we got off it and another two times when we got on the gondola.” Jigen groaned.

“Well consider this our chance to round it up to an even ten, Jigen. Besides – the last thing we need is a slip of the tongue that could tip off any police.” Fujiko pointed out.

“Fujikakes is right. Last thing we need is to blow our cover while we're blowing on our hot chocolate, after all.” Lupin said.

"Exactly! So let's start from the top. Lupin, your name is Paul Sernine and you come from old money that's a mix of archaeologists and winemakers going back generations. You're here to vacation incognito to away from nosy paparazzi." Fujiko said, gesturing to the master thief.

"Nice! Cultured and adventurous. The very foundation of my family name!" Lupin exclaimed as he gave a proud smile.

"Tch, right. Your foundation is gaudy taste in furniture and food combos that would make a pregnant woman vomit, boss." Jigen said.

"Hey! Don't knock popcorn with marshmallow fluff and chili oil until you've tried it! Me, dad, mom and grandpa had that every movie night for years as our traditional snack. It's a regular Lupin Family recipe. Other thief families even tried to steal it, I'll have you know." Lupin stated.

"Respectfully, Lupin, I don't think that other thieves wanting to take a recipe that can only be useful as a form of chemical warfare is the type of thing you should brag about." Goemon said with a light grin to which the master thief blew a raspberry in response.

"Alright, back on topic! Jigen your name is Jericho Moore. You're a Marine veteran who was honorably discharged and you came into millions after your dearly departed great uncle passed away and left you stocks that matured and a lot of real estate. Now you're traveling the world and knocking off all those things you wanted to do from your bucket list. One of those things being staying in the Andes for a snow trip." Fujiko explained as she gestured to the gunman.

"Eh, never really been into stocks. They're like roller coasters. They go up and down, and that rush is only temporary. Real estate ain't too bad an investment, though. But I would only go for places that have the best bars in their towns." Jigen commented.

"Well just pretend that the real estate is for areas with good bars and that the stocks actually turned out good. As for me, I'm going to be my chief and editor of Tokyo Life persona, Aiko Kawasaki. I'm taking a break from reporting to recharge my batteries and follow up on recommendations given to me about many cute little local mom and pop shops and restaurants." Fujiko explained with a smile.

"Speaking of Tokyo Life, how's little Maria doing? Must be pretty intense acting as the boss when you're not around." Lupin said.

"For anyone else it would be, but not for Maria. She's got the spirit of a real news hound. She absolutely nailed the last three celebrity interviews covered in this month's issue – and she secured exclusive coverage for Tokyo's biggest embezzlement case that's going on." Fujiko replied proudly. Then she turned to Goemon. "Now as for you, Goemon, your name for this trip is Tsubasa Hagihara. And you're a cosplayer rising to fame after your recent debut at a convention in the States. You also go by Tsusu and you have a cutesy accent. You're here to get inspiration for a new winter themed cosplay for your next convention."

"Ugh, do I really have to be a cosplayer Fujiko? Just the persona alone makes me roll my eyes and feel an immense embarrassment. Why can't I be a Kabuki actor? I'd even accept being an Onnagata." Goemon said.

"I told you, Goemon. A cosplayer is the least suspicious option, and it'll give your sword a pass so it doesn't get confiscated since everyone will think it's a well-made prop. Besides – you need the practice. You always play serious roles for your disguises with our heists. So a vacation is the perfect chance for you to play a more easygoing role." Fujiko explained with a smile.

"Hmph. I suppose you have a point...but still! I can't imagine being such an airheaded person." Goemon said with a cringing expression.

"Don't be like that! You're not some airhead. You just live in the moment. Now – onto how we all came to meet. Lupin, I interviewed you while I was at a news conference in Paris. Our relationship slowly evolved from professional to personal – and now we're having a romantic trip in the Andes." Fujiko explained.

"I like that cover! What's say we practice, Fujicakes?" Lupin asked as he reached down for a kiss, only for the cat burglar to move to the left and flick his nose. "Ouch!"

"Nice try, but I'm sure people will get the gist of it, lover. As for you and Goemon, Jigen, you two met when you decided to go to a convention out of curiosity. You went to Goemon's booth and got a photograph with him. Goemon found your whole presence cool and interesting and you both had a date after the convention. While you're polar opposites you can't help but adore one another! So you wanted to fully commit to the relationship by taking a trip together." Fujiko explained further, gesturing to the two men.

"See Goemon? You're not an airhead at all. Just a silver fox chaser. That make you feel better?" Lupin asked with a mischievous grin which made the samurai glare at him, although it looked less intimidating with the blush on his face.

"So much better, rich boy. Thanks a lot." Goemon said sarcastically with a roll of his eyes.

"Hey, don't be mad. After all even though I come from old money – I could never afford the VIP shows of your 'exclusive cosplays' that Jigen gets to enjoy. Hee, hee, he---YEOWCH!!" Lupin's signature laugh was cut off by a wail as a sharp pain shot up his leg from the sudden kick that Jigen landed on the knee opposite to the one Goemon struck with the sheath of his Zantetsuken earlier.

"I'd be careful with what I say up here, Lupin. Not many knee specialists in the Andes. And you're already two for two." Jigen replied as he casually lit a new cigarette and took a breath of smoke, completely tuning out Lupin's pained whines and Fujiko's eye rolls while silently reveling in Goemon's chuckles.

Eventually the gondola cabin slowly came to a stop, the haul rope letting out a low hiss as it wound tightly around the wheels as if it was letting the passengers know they had arrived at their destination. The Lupin Gang stood up from the couch seats and smiled at one another eagerly before walking to the doors. The automatic doors let out a soft ding as they slid open – unveiling a picturesque scene of the open air landing port for the gondola filled with people happily chatting away, a cafe that you could smell the fresh grounds from even at a distance to the left, a gift shop with all sorts of novelty and quaint little trinkets lining the shelves and displayed in the window to the right and a massive ice sculpture on top of a stone base at the center. Lupin looked around at the area for a moment, took in a deep breath and exhaled with an excited smile.

"Oh yeah! This is gonna be an epic vacation. Now we just need to find Ambrose out of this crowd." Lupin said as he squinted his eyes and searched around for his contact.

Just then a cheery, posh sounding European accent cut through the space.

"Well now! Is that a certain third of his name that I see, or do my eyes deceive me and I just happened upon someone else with freakishly long sideburns?" Asked the voice.

Lupin immediately turned to his right and was greeted by none other than Ambrose Gatsby, striding over to the group with literal open arms. Ambrose was a handsome man; a toned physique that was decked out in designer winter apparel, vibrant blue eyes surrounded by a chiseled diamond head shape that matched the wintry scene and shoulder-length dark red hair and sun-kissed skin that contrasted but also suited his look. His teeth showed as he smiled to Lupin – revealing rows of pristine pearly

whites. If Lupin didn't tell them that Ambrose was into real estate Jigen, Fujiko and Goemon would have definitely mistaken him for a model or celebrity. Upon seeing his friend and contact Lupin met Ambrose halfway and opened his own arms to give the other man a hug.

"Ambrose! Good to see you, old man! It's been way too long." Lupin said happily as he hugged Ambrose.

"Ha, ha, ha! Old man? Just because I have five months on you doesn't mean I'm retirement homeward bound, you know. Now let me get a look at you." Ambrose said, pulling away to look at the master thief. "Goodness, you look good man. It's like you're the same as you were when you first started your 'nightly work' and we met."

"What can I say? All of that 'extreme evening cardio' does a body good. Especially when you have 'dedicated spotters' making sure I don't slack off." Lupin replied, subtly hinting at the many runs from the law he had across many a rooftop with police hot on his heels.

"I'm sure. Now then, shall I assume that this charming entourage are the friends you spoke of?" Ambrose said, looking over Lupin's shoulder to look at the other thieves.

"Sure are! Ambrose, this is Jigen Daisuke. The best marksman across all points of the compass. Fujiko Mine – the person who Aphrodite took heavy inspiration from. And Goemon Ishikawa the 13th, the number one swordsman out there. And gang, this is Ambrose Gatsby." Lupin said, introducing everyone to Ambrose and vice versa.

"Hey there." Jigen greeted casually.

"Charmed to meet you." Fujiko greeted with a wink.

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance." Goemon spoke politely as he gave a bow.

"Well met! The honor is all mine. And to keep it even, allow me to introduce a friend of my own. Get over here, Percy!" Ambrose called, turning behind to speak to someone.

A new figure then approached the small group. Another man. This one having a lankier figure, and his face was rather gaunt

compared to Ambrose's chiseled features with his pale skin almost matching the color of the snow. He had short brunette hair that was slicked, brown eyes and wore a dark blue ski outfit with the logo of Ambrose's resort stamped on the upper right chest part of his ski jacket.

"Hello, all. It's a pleasure to meet you." The man greeted, his voice even and sounding American in accent, giving a small smile and bowing in greeting.

"This is Percival, and don't let his plain style fool you. This main is basically the machine that runs my whole resort. While I just sign off for bills and look cute Percival is the head of security, runs the housekeeping staff, is the head chef for the kitchen and is basically my external conscience. He can also play a mean saxophone." Ambrose explained with a wide smile.

"You're too kind, Ambrose. I'm just doing my job – same as anyone else." Percival said with a humble smile.

"Just doing your job? Percy, you had your pick of any of the premier, luxury resorts even with your background as an expat in high demand. But not only did you chose to work for me in such an out of the way place but you even help out around the town here by chauffeuring people in the snow coach." Ambrose replied.

"Wow. Sounds like you're a regular Samaritan up here, Percival." Fujiko commented with a look of awe.

"Eh, I do what I can. And besides – I was all too happy to accept Ambrose's job proposal. The location of the resort is what hooked me in. It's nice and out of the way. You can do just about anything you want and no one would ever know." Percival replied, then paused as a peculiar smile crossed his face. "And places away from the public eye makes people more...honest about themselves, I've come to find."

The words made Lupin, Fujiko, Jigen and Goemon all blink a bit in surprise by Percival's words. And they shared a look with one another, silently asking what the man could have meant by that. But before they could try to ask Ambrose clapped his hands together enthusiastically, which got everyone's attention.

"Well then! Now that we've all exchanged names and the like, let's get you four to your suites at the resort. Percival and I will get your luggage. You all just settle into the snow coach." Ambrose said, gesturing to the ferrying snowmobile three yards away.

"Okay, but I want it in writing that you won't sue us for on the job injuries when you throw your backs out getting Fujiko's bags." Jigen said with a grin.

"Hardy, har, har! Real cute, Daisuke." Fujiko laughed sarcastically which made Lupin and Goemon chuckle in amusement at the two.

Once all of the luggage was packed into the back seats of the snow coach, everyone else huddled into the seats up front while Percival took the driver's seat and Ambrose sat next to him on the passenger side. As they made the trek up to the resort Lupin stroke up a conversation with his old friend and contact.

"So Ambrose, how's business been treating you? Last time we talked after sorting out the logistics you told me that I was lucky to call you when I did." Lupin said.

"Ah yes! This month it seemed like we'd have a slow season, but suddenly a rush of customers were booking us at every turn. If you had waited even a day longer and called I wouldn't have been able to secure a broom closet for you, my friend. They all arrived at different times over the course of two weeks, and the last batch of guests actually came here a day before all of you." Ambrose explained.

"Wow, talk about a turn out. Can you tell us about these guests?" Fujiko asked.

"Certainly! Hm, let me see if I can recall the order in which they arrived...There was was a couple that arrived in the early morning at the start of the first week. Newlyweds from Ireland. They sounded so cute on the phone when they first booked with us. I gave them a nice honeymoon deal. Then two days after the couple checked in a new seasonal worker from Italy came along with his chaperon during the early morning. That same day a small group came during the evening time just before dinner. A man, his two adult children and his attorney. After that it was all quite for the remainder of that first week." Ambrose explained.

"So then who showed up?" Jigen asked.

"A day after the second week began, a very well to do lady whom I've been in talks with for making a substantial investment in the resort arrived. She wanted to see the place for herself, she said, and make sure the investment is a sound one. The day after that three individual people checked in throughout the time of the late morning. The exclusive entertainer I hired, a

businessman who deals in imports and a celebrity doctor. Then finally another group arrived the day before the second week ended, which was a day before your own arrival here. They claimed to be 'master detectives' and were 'on leave to flex their mystery solving muscles to keep their deductive skills fresh'. I personally think they were disgraced improve actors who fled from their theater in shame after botching the Nutcracker." Ambrose explained, rolling his eyes as he mentioned the last bunch of guests.

"Hm. It sounds like we'll have quite the menagerie roaming the resort halls and going down the slopes." Goemon commented in surprise.

"If by menagerie you mean asylum escapees, Goemon, then yeah. We got a real fun bunch." Lupin said with a chuckle.

"Are there other guests besides the people you described?" Fujiko asked.

"Not really, no. Some people do come to the slopes near the resort – but they stay at other resorts closer to town. Our slopes just happen to be bigger than what the town offers because they're naturally developed. So long as they pay the ski lift fee and don't enter the resort without a reservation, I let them ski and snowboard to their heart's content." Ambrose explained.

"So pretty much it'll be us and fifteen other people?" Jigen asked.

"Well, technically sixteen. A specialized officer will be staying at the resort for security detail." Percival answered.

"Oh right! I completely forgot. In light of the esteemed people that booked a stay here, I wanted to make sure that we have the best protection that's available. And Percival can only extend himself so much." Ambrose said.

"What's the rent-a-cop like?" Jigen asked.

"I can't for the life of me remember his name, but he came highly recommended and was described as hardworking. So I was all too happy to request him. Actually, it's funny." Ambrose said, pausing as he recalled something.

"Funny how?" Lupin asked.

"Well I did speak to the man for a short moment, and I remember apologizing to him for hiring him to do security during a time when he could be taking a vacation of his own. But he just laughed and said, 'compared to this long and drawn out case I've been working on – acting as security for a resort is a vacation for me'. I just couldn't help but find that funny in an odd way. I mean, how much work does someone have to do for a small job like security to be a vacation?" Ambrose asked.

"You can ask him yourself when I pick him up, sir. The agency that sent him said that he would be landing very soon. Which is just as well, now that we've arrived." Percival said. At this the resort owner looked ahead and beamed with pride.

"Ah yes! Welcome to your lodgings for the weekend, my friends! Home sweet chilly home at the one and only Utopia Lodge!" Ambrose exclaimed.

At this the Lupin Gang all looked up and saw why Ambrose spoke so proudly. The place certainly lived up to the name Utopia. The Andean Baroque architecture of the building was striking to behold. And the twelve story height was equally impressive. But was the slopes that was the true draw of the place. As Ambrose said the slopes were naturally developed, and by heavens were they well developed. The slopes were almost as high as Utopia Lodge itself, the trails were broken into rows of three that had from from years and years of people skiing and snowboarding down the massive slopes and a natural rock formation led up to the top of the slope like nature made steps. The only man-made structures surrounding the slope was the ski lift built around it. Overall it was as much of a winter wonderland as you could get. Jigen let out a long whistle as he lifted his hat to get a better look at the resort and slopes.

"Man, this must be where angels go to hit the slopes. That's one big mound of snow." Jigen commented.

"It's like a kid's snow castle on a grand scale, and just as whimsy." Lupin said with a wide smile.

"The building is a real piece of artwork, too. How old is it?" Fujiko asked.

"Just about as old as the mountains themselves. A noble family from the 18th century used this place for a summer home. Then after the last family member died it was left here. No one was really interested or even knew what to do with it. Then Lupin showed me it's potential. And I snatched it up for twenties on a hundred." Ambrose explained, smiling with pride.

"Lupin told us about that. I'm sure this building has many interesting stories to it." Goemon replied.

"It certainly does, Goemon. And who knows? You four may add another story to the book." The resort owner said with a wink.

Eventually the snow coach came to a slow stop as Percival parked in front of the entrance. Ambrose got out of his seat first and went to get the luggage, followed by Lupin and Fujiko, then Jigen and Goemon. Percival then got out of the driver's seat and went to help Ambrose with the luggage. The small group made their way up the grand stairs that led to the elaborate, large double doors. Ambrose pushed them open and the Lupin Gang was greeted to a large, amazing lobby. To the left were floor to ceiling windows that showed a spectacular view of the famous Andes Mountains and in that space was a den-like area with a carved stone fireplace and several comfortable looking couches and chairs around it for guests to relax on. There was also a panoramic elevator tucked in a blind spot just behind the fireplace. To the right was a large bar area with the reception desk just a few yards apart from it and the hallway that led the resort's dining area. And at the center was a grand staircase that led to the upper floors and a crystal chandelier hanging overhead of the entire space. The décor was a mix of modern styles and traditional Andean craftsmanship.

"Wow, this place is even more beautiful inside." Fujiko said with a smile as she stepped in with everyone else.

"Glad you think so! Believe it or not the decorating took the longest part. The building itself was standing strong and just needed some spit and polish to make it look good as new and a touch of modernization to accommodate guests. But adding the visuals? Heavens! I sometimes wonder if I got in the wrong racket with real estate and should have been in interior decorating. Those women are simply cutthroat!" Ambrose stated.

Just as Percival brought in the last of the luggage his cellphone rang. He sat the bags down and turned away to take the phone call. After speaking back and forth, nodding along to the other side of the conversation, he ended the call and turned to Ambrose.

"That was the agency the specialized officer is from, Ambrose. He just got on the ski gondola and is headed up to the port." The pale man said.

"Ah wonderful! Soon we'll have a full house. You can go and pick him up, Percy. Our seasonal worker will get the luggage." Ambrose said.

"Very good, sir. I'll see you all later." Percival said, and with a bow left out of the doors.

"And you four can come and get your keys at the reception desk." Ambrose said and led the group to the desk.

As they all walked over Lupin did some quick observation of the main floor. Indeed the décor was breathtaking as Fujiko said. But he was mainly looking out for any of the other guests here. Looking over at the bar he saw a well dressed man who looked to be in his early thirties drinking to himself and noticed the steel caduceus cuff links he wore. Better than even chance that was the celebrity doctor Ambrose mentioned. Then he turned to where the den area is and saw a young couple sitting close to the fireplace and looking at a magazine about home décor. Clearly those were the newlyweds. He also saw an older looking Japanese man dressed in Western two-piece suit reading a newspaper. That must have been the businessman. Well that was four people, Lupin mentally counted. He wondered who the other eleven who are already here are like? And who could this specialized officer be? Hopefully no one who looked through the international criminal database very often...

"Alright guys! This is where we get into our characters. Goemon, you and Jigen first." Fujiko whispered to the group, which snapped Lupin out of his moment of observation.

"Wait, right now!? But Fujiko, I'll have to do that God awful accent!" Goemon whispered back in protest.

"It's for practice! Come on!" The cat burglar urged. The samurai groaned but gave a sharp nod none the less. After taking a deep breath, exhaling, the stoic and cool personality flipped and in its place was a bubbly, extroverted personality that was obvious just from the wide smile Goemon made as he leaned against Jigen and wrapped his arms around his.

"Jericho-*kun*! This is trip gonna be so much fun! This resort is, like, the best place for inspiration for my next cosplay. I'm so glad we're here." Goemon said in a voice so immensely unlike him that it was comical as he nuzzled into Jigen's arm. But he sure didn't feel like laughing on the inside – wishing he could commit seppuku right now. Grinning slightly Jigen chuckled as he wrapped his arm around Goemon's waist and pulled him close.

"Of course, lil' darlin'. Visiting the Andes was on my bucket list anyhow. So it was only natural that I brought along some pretty company to enjoy the view." Jigen said, giving his voice a slight country accent as he winked to Goemon. The samurai forced himself to giggle even though he wanted to gag at how vapid he sounded.

"Aww Jericho-*kun*, you're such a charmer!" Goemon exclaimed happily.

Fujiko and Ambrose smiled widely, seemingly happy for the couple to an outside observer. But really the wide smile was the best way to relax the urge to burst out laughing at the complete 180 Goemon did from a cool and collected samurai to a Gyaruo persona. Lupin wasn't even trying to hide that he wanted to laugh – his shoulders quaking so badly that you would think he was chilly. He had to cover his mouth just to hide his smile that wanted to burst out with cackles. To anyone else it would appear as if the master thief was holding back a sneeze instead of a hyena-like laughing fit. Looking at the few guests in the space he saw the newlywed couple look at Goemon and Jigen with fond smiles, clearly relating to the lovey dovey pair themselves. At the bar he saw the doctor raise an interested eyebrow, and he was directly looking at Goemon as he scanned him up and down. Well that'll make for some vacation entertainment, Lupin thought, once Jigen found out that some Hollywood doctor was eyeballing his boyfriend. And looking over to the businessman he saw the guy had an annoyed sneer on his face due to cheery voice cutting into the calm quiet he once enjoyed, then turn back to his newspaper with an equally annoyed shake of his head. While he was sure that the samurai himself didn't care a great deal for his performance – it did the trick in fooling everyone around them. Clearing his throat Ambrose addressed the two men with a smile.

“Mr. Moore and Mr. Hagihara! So good to have you join us in paradise at Utopia Lodge. I've set you both up on the fifth floor in Room 348. Enjoy your stay.” Ambrose said as he took two keys off the rack and handed them to the men.

“Thank you kindly, Mr. Gatsby. And please – it's just Jericho.” Jigen replied as he took his key.

“Thanks so much! And you can just call me Tsubasa. Or Tsusu! That's what everyone calls me.” Goemon said cheerily as he took his key, giving a friendly smile that belied the feeling of complete disgust and self-hatred he had.

“You're quite welcome, gentlemen. Enjoy your stay! Dinner will be at 8PM tonight. You can either eat in the dining hall or have room service bring it to your room.” Ambrose replied. Jigen and Goemon nodded in understanding before walking away, the samurai making a show of cuddling up close to the gunman as they moved off to the side. Fujiko and Lupin then stood before the receptionist desk – both thankfully already calmed down from their great urge to laugh. “Hello! I take it you're Aiko Kawasaki and Paul Sernine?”

“We are indeed. Thank you for having us, Mr. Gatsby. This place is the perfect rest stop after all of the pictures I've been taking. And you can expect this resort to be featured for next month's issue of Tokyo Life's international section.” Fujiko said with a smile.

“And I've been loving the different wines that I tasted between Argentina and Bolivia. I might just see about collaborating with

some of the vineyards to make a new flavor." Lupin said, using his more posh accent and emphasizing his French tone as he spoke.

"Marvelous! I'll be looking forward to that new wine and next month's issue. Here is your room. You're both on the fifth floor in Room 352. Enjoy your stay." The resort owner said as he took off another pair of keys from the rack and handed it to the couple.

"Thank you, Mr. Gatsby. And I'm sure we will." Fujiko said as she took her room key along with Lupin. The pair then walked over to where Jigen and Goemon stood off to the side and saw the gunman comforting the samurai as he lamented about his performance.

"I cannot believe that I acted in such a gaudy manner in public...! I never wanted the floor to swallow me whole more than that moment." Goemon said as he buried his face in his hands, shaking his head in disbelief at his own alternate persona.

"Hey, don't be so hard on yourself Goemon. You were amazing back there." Fujiko said with a smile as she patted her friend on the shoulder.

"And the country bit was a nice touch for Jericho, Jigen old pal." Lupin said to the gunman.

"Thanks. I like to make sure I don't get too rusty on my country accents." Jigen replied.

"Well that's good, because I suspect you'll be working on your protective cowboy husband country accent in a minute. 'Tsusu' here caught someone's attention." Lupin added with a wide grin.

"I what?" Goemon asked with a shocked expression.

"He what?" Jigen asked with a displeased expression.

As if on cue, a new voice cleared their throat from behind the group. Everyone around to see that same well dressed man from the bar approach them.

"Hello there. I'm sorry to intrude on your conversation, folks, but I just had to introduce myself." The man said, turning squarely

to Goemon as he gave a charming smile with teeth lined with porcelain veneers as he held out a hand. "Afternoon. I'm Howell Conway. Surgeon to the stars, both rising and fallen alike, for those who need an extra sparkle. That's a little jingle I made myself.

The man, Howell, laughed in a baritone voice that had a tittering cadence. It was like hearing a walrus trying to giggle in a high-pitched tone but couldn't quite pull it off. The four thieves all felt a shock wave go from their shoulders to the spines like someone running their fingers across piano keys. They all had similar expressions of disgust after hearing the laugh. Lupin especially looked unsettled as the ugly laugh reminded him of a certain knock-off cretin named after a throat lozenges. And turning around to look at Ambrose and the other guests they likewise found Howell's laugh to be horrible. The woman of the newlywed pair physically recoiled while the man immediately shot his hands up to cover his ears. The Japanese man looked more confused and shocked than anything to hear a sound like that from a human being. And Ambrose made a quick dry gag before he regained his composure. Goemon eventually recovered and gave an awkward laugh as he reached up to shake Howell's hand.

"C-Coolio. It's nice to meet you, Conway-san. Tsubasa Hagihara is the name, and cosplaying is my game. You can just call me Tsusu." Goemon replied as he gave a wink.

"I see. Well I'm *quite charmed* to make your acquaintance, *Tsusu*. I've always said how cosplayers are the abstract paintings of beauty. The longer you admire the work, the more you understand it. And thus...the more beautiful it becomes in the eye of the beholder." Howell said, then raised Goemon's hand to his lips to kiss his knuckles.

At this, Fujiko gave a disgusted and sympathetic look to the samurai while Lupin was disgusted with a hint of protectiveness that made him want to reach over Goemon's shoulder and kick the surgeon in the teeth. And Jigen? 'Angry' would be too inadequate of a word to describe the rage that was simmering off of him. For his part Goemon was at a cross between taking the surgeon in a jujitsu hold and throwing him across the lobby floor and throwing up on his loafers he was incredibly disgusted. But he somehow managed to metaphorically swallow down the need to attack along with swallowing the literal bile that was building in his throat to give a tight smile.

"Thanks, Conway-san! Always happy to meet a fan. But hey! Let me introduce you to my mega hottie boyfriend Jericho Moore! He's a retired Marine and is, like, a big deal with stocks. And he won it with the lottery." Goemon explained, pulling away from Howell and moving to lean against Jigen's chest as he gave a wide smile as he gushed over his boyfriend.

Howell looked surprised by this information, turning to look at Jigen as if registering him for the first time. He blinked twice and then he gave a smirk. Lupin mentally winced and murmured a knowing 'uh oh'. He knew that smirk anywhere. The lustful, self-aggrandizing smirk of a man who didn't care that someone else had already hitched their wagon to the pretty star he saw. He was more than willing to cut the chain from that wagon and snatch the star from the sky for himself. Basically a classic, distasteful, "the ring is just a challenge" kind of playboy. Howell gave a nod to Jigen and held out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Moore. I have nothing but the deepest respect for our veterans. Thank you for your service and sacrifice." Howell said. Jigen shook the man's hand, not breaking eye contact as he gave him an unimpressed expression.

"Thanks. So you're a doctor, huh?" Jigen asked.

"A *surgeon*, yes. Plastic surgeon mostly – but I also dabble in a bit of Botox. My philosophy is that everyone comes into the world pretty, but there's always room for improvement. Nothing wrong with a little touch up here and there." Howell said, smiling like a fox trying to charm a rabbit out of its warren.

"Oh, sure. I'll bet his 'little touch ups' are so hugely exaggerated they make a healthy fifty-year old look like a dead twenty-year old." Fujiko whispered to Lupin who barely held back a laugh.

"Uh huh. Well that's all well and good for those who actually want it, I guess. But as far as I'm concerned, not *everyone* needs a 'little touch up'. Exhibit A..." Jigen trailed off as he wrapped his arms around Goemon and pulled him close to give him a peck on the cheek. The samurai genuinely giggled as he leaned into the kiss. Fujiko and Lupin grinned, looking at each other and giving agreeing nods while silently mouthing 'checkmate'. The surgeon stood up straighter at the display of affection, but didn't look deterred despite it.

"Yes, of course. Plastic surgery isn't a mandatory procedure. And for a select few it's the same as pour sand on the beach. As you said, Exhibit A." Howell said as he gave Goemon a flirty grin with a smirk to match. "Well! I won't keep you all. I'm sure that you need to start unpacking and begin your vacation. I do hope you'll be in the dining hall for dinner. I've always found that good food is better with the...*appropriate atmosphere*."

The way Howell said it and the way he eyed Goemon's chest and hips made it clear what sort of 'atmosphere' he had in mind. Lupin could barely hold back the grunt of disgust. Even when he's that blatant about expressing his interest – he's a lot classier

about it. This Howell guy is just a pig standing upright. He saw Jigen's fist ball and it looked like he was going to clean the creep's clock. But then Goemon spoke up.

"Oh, totally! I'm all about aesthetics. But like you said, we got mondo unpacking to do before we can get ready for dinner. Later alligator!" Goemon said and grabbed Jigen's arm before pulling him towards the elevator. Fujiko and Lupin gave Howell quick, polite nods before following the pair. Once they were out of earshot Lupin spoke.

"Smooth move, Goemon. You really shut that creep down like a professional." The master thief complimented.

"Thank you, but really that was more pure instinct than conscious actions. All I could think to do was saying anything to keep that cretin at arm's length and survive the conversation and that God awful laugh of his." Goemon replied.

"Good thing you did, because Jigen was going to act on the pure instinct of knocking Conway out with the conscious action of throwing his fist." Lupin said, turning to give a sympathetic smile to the gunman who was still seething at the encounter.

"I still might if I catch him anywhere near Goemon. Tch! Good food is better with the appropriate atmosphere. I'll see if he feels the same way still when he has his last meal by the hole I make 'em dig." Jigen stated.

"Now, now, Jigen. You're pretending to be a retired Marine. Think of how poorly using your superior combat skills on a civilian would look on you." Fujiko playfully chastised to which the gunman rolled his eyes.

"And besides, we don't want you to get blood all over your suitcase. Speaking of which, where's that seasonal worker with our bags?" Lupin asked.

As if on cue a voice spoke up the right of the group. A voice that sounded vaguely familiar to the master thief.

"Good afternoon, everyone! I apologize for keeping you waiting. I'm still getting used to the lay of the land here at Utopia Lodge. Easy to get lost and stuff." Said the voice of a young man with a Yankee, European mixed accent.

"Oh no, we understand! I'll bet you could tell stories about how you need a trail of breadcrumbs just to make your way through..." Lupin paused in his words as he turned to face the young man, blinked when he saw him and then did a double take.

"Ricky!?"

The other thieves looked up at the young man their friend and leader had addressed, and quickly became just as shocked as he was. Sure enough standing there in a pressed uniform of the lodge with a baggage cart in front of him was none other than Ricky – the young punk from the high school that Lupin went undercover at to steal back the Cleopatra's Soul diamond that accidentally got knocked into his bag. And then he and Jigen saved his chickenhearted teacher Mario from getting shot up by a gangster he and his colleagues had crossed. The young man looked a lot different from the scrappy punk with a chip on his shoulder. He grew out his hair a bit and actually combed it. And in place of the usual solo earring he wore a pair of simple studs that matched the buttons on his uniform. Ricky blinked in surprise at hearing his name spoken by these seemingly new guests. But when he looked at Lupin he gasped in surprise.

"Mr. Pierre!? I can't believe it's you! You're the last person I thought I'd see in the Andes. You look good, man." Ricky said with a surprised, friendly smile.

"E-Err...I mean yeah, it's good to see you too kid! Almost didn't recognize you for a moment there. You're looking just as good yourself. Seems like you really changed for the better, Ricky." Lupin said.

"Heh, yeah. I did. Something crazy happened between me and Mr. Mario. But let's just say he really stepped up when I needed help. I didn't become a boy scout overnight, but I guess you could say I'm at least a halfway good Samaritan. And it actually put me in the running for this abroad volunteer program that the school offers to get special credits for college. I actually won, and now I'm working here as a seasonal guy while studying the culture." Ricky explained.

"Wow, Ricky! That's really impressive. Mario must be very proud, too." Lupin said.

"He sure is, but he's still lame about it. The chicken wouldn't stop crying when I told him. And he's actually here with me as my chaperon since I'm still too young to be on my own. Anyway, that's enough from me. Let me get your bags in this elevator." Ricky said and loaded the thieves' luggage onto the baggage cart before going into the elevator with the loaded cart along with the thieves.

As the elevator doors slowly came to a close the grand doors opened, but instead of Percival and the sixteenth guest like they expected an older man with a cane walked in, followed by a young man and a young woman who each had arms full of

shopping bags and were chattering away with each other as they went to the direction of the grand staircase. Obviously that was father and his two adult children Ambrose mentioned. And as the elevator closed and slowly rose up the group saw the older man stop and wave to the couple sitting by the fireplace. The young woman went rigid and practically threw the magazine onto the couch as she stood up, grabbed the man's wrist and the walked away, going in the direction of the dining hall. The older man seemed to try to call out to the newlyweds, but apparently it didn't work as his shoulders slumped in defeat and he followed after his adult children. Lupin, Jigen, Fujiko and Goemon all blinked at seeing this and turned to look at one another. And they all thought the same thing.

Whatever that scene was about, they had a strong feeling that it would continue at some point or another. They just didn't know how it would conclude. But they would, soon enough...

The day passed with the Lupin Gang settling into their respective rooms, enjoying the view and having video calls like modern strings on soup cans even though their rooms were just across the hall from each other. Before long it was time for dinner, and the group decided that they would eat in the dining hall after Ambrose confirmed that all of the other guests would be eating there as well. Best way to get a load of the other crazies, Lupin said. So currently Lupin and Fujiko were trying to decide what to wear for dinner. Which, as a pair of fashion forward people who have a combined closet that could fill up a football stadium three times not counting disguises, was rather hard to do. Fortunately the couple knew each other's tastes well enough to coordinate what and what not to wear without even seeing each other.

"Hey, Fuji-Uji! What about the...?" Lupin started to ask from where he was in the bathroom but was cut off.

"No!" Fujiko called from the master bedroom.

"Well how about my...?" Lupin started again but was cut off yet again.

"No!" Fujiko called out once more.

"Then should I wear the...?" Lupin asked until he was cut off.

"Yes!" Fujiko called back in agreement. "Alright! Now how about I wear the...?"

"No!" Lupin called out.

"What about this...?" Fujiko started again and got cut off.

"No!" Lupin called back again.

"What if I put on the...?" Fujiko started before she got cut off.

"Yes!" Lupin said in agreement. Finally the pair stepped out and looked at their outfits. Fujiko in a silk dark blue off-shoulder knee-length dress with ivory white accents along the hemline and neckline and matching ivory white pumps. And Lupin was in coral colored suit with a tailcoat jacket, a black dress shirt to match his black Blucher shoes and a dark blue tie that matched with Fujiko's dress. "Chalk up another winning power couple outfit for Lupin the 3rd and Fujiko Mine! This will be our best look yet."

"It's a strong second. I still like that silver dress I had and your dark purple suit that we wore during that heist we did with that charity those organ traffickers we exposed were using as a front." Fujiko said as she went to the mirror by the window to adjust her earrings.

"I wonder what's taking Jigen and Goemon so long? They usually show up to check to see if we're ready by this time." Lupin said, looking over at the clock on the wall.

"Well Goemon is probably coming to terms with his outfit for dinner." Fujiko replied, not looking away from the mirror.

"What do you mean?" Lupin asked in confusion and a touch of curiosity.

"When I decided on what Goemon's persona was going to be like, I figured he may as well practice dressing the part, too. So before we left for the airport I gave his wardrobe a bit of an...upgrade." Fujiko said, a grin slowly etching onto her face as she said 'upgrade'.

"I get the feeling that this 'upgrade' wasn't one that you ran by Goemon." Lupin replied with a wary grin of his own.

"Well...." Fujiko trailed off. And just then they heard a door not too far from where their own room was slamming open. Following the door slamming was the sound of footsteps thundering down the hallway to their room. And finally came a series of sharp knocking that demanded an immediate response.

"Ooooh Aiko-*chan*! I wanna talk to you, *girlfriend*, and get your opinion on my ensemble...!" Goemon called from behind the door, his voice sickly sweet with an underlining tone that promised retribution as he used his airheaded accent.

Lupin stifled a laugh and looked to Fujiko as he mouthed 'what did you do', but Fujiko just giggled and gestured for him to open the door. The master thief opened the door but before he could even get a look at Goemon the door was immediately slammed open and he barely had time to move out of the way before a blur of red and tan swiftly marched inside. Jigen slowly came inside, wearing a Marine evening dress suit and grinning widely.

"What did Fujiko slip into Goemon's suitcase, man? I tried to get a look but he just blew right past me." Lupin said. Jigen just shook his head, still grinning.

"Come and take a load for yourself." The gunman replied as he closed the door and walked ahead with Lupin following behind.

"You may as well transfer Tokyo Life to Maria to run it full time, Mine, because you will NOT live to edit another article for this...this...utter betrayal you committed against me!!" Goemon's voice stated angrily.

"Why Goemon, I'm hurt. You always talk about how a warrior is prepared for everything. I simply took your advice to heart and prepared you for your role as Tsubasa. You need to look the part, after all." Fujiko countered in a coy voice.

"You call THIS besmirching statement against fashion looking the part!?" Goemon asked in an affronted tone.

When Jigen and Lupin joined in on the scene, the latter finally got a load of what exactly the samurai was talking about. The apparent 'besmirching statement against fashion' turned out to be a formal ruby red romper with glittery tiger stripe accent along the sides and a hollow out chest portion that showed off some of his bare chest. He wore tan/warm grey ombre colored leggings and brown Balmoral boots. He also wore satin tan long sleeve fingerless gloves with glittery ruby red accents along the holes for the fingers and Koi fish scale designs on the back of the gloves. And around his waist was a warm grey sash with similar Koi fish scale designs. This time, Lupin couldn't help it. He just laughed.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!! Oh my God, you look like a Japanese version of a background character for a Carol Burnett dance special!" Lupin exclaimed as he pointed at the samurai, falling to his knees as he laughed.

"Shut up, Lupin! Fujiko, I can't believe you would do this to me! I look like I escaped from a J-Pop music video!" Goemon stated.

"Ah, good. I was worried that the sash took away from the look." Fujiko said.

"You can't seriously expect me to wear something so ridiculous." Goemon said.

"Of course not. I don't expect *you*, as Goemon Ishikawa the 13th, to wear something like this even if I promised you a month of eating at your favorite sushi restaurant. But I expect Tsubasa "Tsusu" Hagihara to not only wear this, but flaunt it with pride." Fujiko said as she gave a wink.

Goemon looked like he was about to argue, but then sighed as he slumped down in a show of defeat.

"I can't I'm going to go out like this..." Goemon trailed off miserably.

"Not yet, you're not! Your hair still needs to be done. And I have some nude lip tint that'll be perfect. You two go ahead and get us seats. I'm going to finish prettying up little Tsusu." Fujiko said as she grabbed Goemon by the wrist and dragged him to the bathroom.

Goemon groaned in protest but still let himself be dragged off. Jigen and Lupin chuckled at the scene before leaving the room themselves.

"Well if that was a sign of things to come, I can only imagine what the other guests are like." Jigen said.

"You're telling me! All we need now is a chance encounter with a tall, eccentric stranger....Ooff!!" Lupin exclaimed as he bumped into someone who was coming out the their room.

"Ah, excuse me sir." Said the voice.

"Oh no, it's perfectly fine Mr...Mr..." Lupin started to apologize, saw who he had bumped into, paused and trailed off like a broken record as the shock of who he was looking at. Then he gulped and whispered "M-M-M-Mr...Zenigata!?"

Jigen did a double take and felt his jaw drop. Indeed, standing right there before them was none other than Inspector Koichi Zenigata – dressed in a black suit that was different from his usual brown trench coat and brown suit. Zenigata blinked at looked at the gunman and master thief. For a good while, no one moved. No one said anything. It was like their bodies were physically paused.

Finally Zenigata spoke...but it wasn't with words that either man expected.

"Well now! This sure is a surprise. Hey there, Lupin, Jigen. Good to see you both." Zenigata greeted with a polite smile.

.....

.....

.....

.....

Wait, say what?

"....Huh?" Was the only intelligent thing Lupin could say.

"I said, it's good to see you both. Didn't expect to see you guys here. Of all the folks to meet on my vacation." Zenigata repeated.

"Wait, vacation? You're actually taking a vacation?" Jigen asked in surprise.

"Ha, ha! Don't be so shocked, Jigen. Even I like to let my hair down and relax once in a blue moon. And it seems like you two are doing the same, what with these get-ups. So what's say we call a truce? For the duration of our stay to when we get off the airport back home?" Zenigata asked, holding out his hand.

Lupin and Jigen shared a look, blinking in surprise. Then they turned back and Lupin reached out to shake the older man's hand. He fully expected a cuff around his wrist or those damn mini-cuffs around his thumbs. But neither happened. Zenigata just smiled and shook his hand normally. Lupin blinked again before a tentative smile graced his face.

"S-Sure. I guess we have a truce then. But are you really serious? The whole time we're here you're not gonna try and arrest me?" Lupin asked in surprise.

"That's right. For as long as we're on vacation and until we exit from the terminal at the airport in Japan, you're a free man." Zenigata answered.

"Whoa. That's...really generous of you there, Pops." Lupin said slowly in shock.

"Real generous. I mean this just isn't something we would expect from you of all folks, Pops. Not only taking a vacation, but actually giving us a pass on top of it. Did you hit your head or somethin'?" Jigen asked.

At this, Zenigata merely gave a wide, knowing smile before chuckling.

"Let's just say, Jigen, that I have my reasons." The inspector added cryptically.

Before Lupin could ask what Zenigata meant, Fujiko's voice spoke up from behind them.

"Sorry for the wait, guys! I couldn't decide whether to give Goemon a ribbon or a normal hair tie. So I finally decided on...these...cute...hairpins." Fujiko's words came out one by one when she got a look at who her on and off boyfriend and the gunman were talking to. Goemon, who was following along, didn't even say anything as he got a load of the inspector. His expression just changed into one of shock as his eyes widened with disbelief. But Zenigata just gave a friendly wave.

"Evening, Fujiko. You're looking lovely as usual. And...Is that you, Goemon? That's a really different look you're trying out. And...are you wearing lip tint?" Zenigata asked, looking both confused and amazed.

Goemon's eyes widened for a second, remembering what he had on. Then his eyes darkened as he pulled out the hairpins, rose gold and very sharp, from the bun Fujiko styled his dark locks into and held said hairpins like daggers. His fallen hair now

making him look like a flamboyant wraith.

"I am truly sorry, Zenigata...but no one can ever know about what you've just seen." Goemon said as he slowly began to advance on the inspector.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, Goemon! We have a truce! A truce!" Lupin pleaded as he rushed to hold Goemon back.

An explanation from Zenigata and assurances from Lupin later, the four thieves and Interpol inspector finally headed downstairs to eat. As it turns out it was Zenigata who was hired on as the special security detail for the guests that are staying. Now the Lupin Gang understood what Ambrose meant when he said how the officer mentioned a 'long and drawn out case'. It was Zenigata referring to his case with Lupin. The thieves also informed Zenigata of their fake names to refer to them by, Goemon reluctantly explaining his cover with an embarrassed scowl on his face. And if anyone asks how they know each other Zenigata met Aiko during an interview she did with the Tokyo Chief of Police, met Paul at a charity gala held by Interpol in Paris that he provided the wine for, he and Jericho are friends who came to know each other through volunteer work for veterans and he knows Tsubasa because he was hired to be his bodyguard when a crazy stalker was threatening his life. Goemon didn't care for the 'damsel in distress' cover-up he got but Fujiko reminded him that he's pretending to be delicate airhead and can't defend himself. The samurai grumbled but let it slide.

As they all got closer to the dining hall Zenigata turned to Lupin.

"Oh yeah, I should probably give you all a head's up. Some of the guests are people that you're already familiar with." Zenigata said.

"What, seriously!? Who are they? They're not other thieves we're in competition with, are they?" Lupin asked.

"Honestly, Lupin, I'd be more worried if they were your ex-girlfriends." Jigen said with a grin making Fujiko and Goemon chuckle while Lupin glared at him.

"Tch! That's rich comin' from the guy who's *ex-boyfriends* always wind up being henchmen of the bad guys that try to kill us. The worst my exes ever did was maxing out my credit cards." Lupin shot back, making Jigen glare at him.

"Low blow. Accurate but still low." Jigen stated.

"Relax, you two. There's no need for you to be super concerned about the other guests. While you've dealt with them in the past – they have plenty of reason to act like they don't know you." Zenigata said.

"How can you be so sure?" Fujiko asked.

Rather than answer, Zenigata just walked to the dining hall threshold and gestured into the dining hall. A silent 'see for yourself'. The Lupin Gang all looked at each other before stepping to the threshold of the dining hall's entrance and looking inside. Once more, they were all left shocked at who they saw sitting at various tables. At one of the window seats sat Elena Gotti the widowed millionairess turned political activist, near the band stand was the young prodigy magician Luca, Mario sat closer to the kitchen which wasn't a surprise as Ricky said he came as his chaperon and in a spot between the center and band stand was none other than Kosuke Holmes Akechi and his assistants Yoshio Watson Obayashi and Mayu Hanasaki. The gang also saw the other guests they saw earlier plus a new face. The newlyweds sitting by another window seat, Howell Conway sitting two tables apart from the center, that Japanese businessman was sitting was sitting a few yards away from the entrance and sitting in the center was that old man, his two adult children and a man the four thieves hadn't seen before sitting with them. That was probably the lawyer of the older man. And Ricky was working the floor with Percival and other staff.

"Well, well, well. This sure looks like a fun bunch." Jigen said with a raised eyebrow.

"If by 'fun' you mean 'completely unsettling' then yes, I do agree." Goemon replied with a wary expression.

"Sheesh, Pops. You weren't kidding when you said that some of the guests are folks we're familiar with. At least three of them we pissed off majorly." Lupin said, looking over at Akechi's table as he watched the cross-dressing detective make over-exaggerated hand gestures while telling some sort of story to his assistants who laughed and nodded along.

"Yep. Your buddy Ambrose had given me the guest list. So I knew who was going to be here." Zenigata said.

"Well I don't think we'll have to worry about Luca too much. He's a good kid and plus we helped him out with that creep phony magician." Fujiko said as she observed the young magician, noting how he looked more mature than when she last saw him.

"Yeah, same with that Mario guy. The only ones I see being a problem are that Gotti chick and Akechi and his groupies." Jigen said.

"True, but we know things about them that they wouldn't want revealed to others. So we should be good. Well then, gang, shall we take our seats?" Lupin said as he offered his arm to Fujiko who gracefully accepted it.

"You bet. Hope you brought your appetite, Tsusu." Jigen said teasingly to Goemon as he wrapped an arm around his waist.

"Tsusu...?" Zenigata repeated in surprised confusion.

"Nothing that you need to bother remembering OR repeating to anyone, Inspector." Goemon stated sharply.

With an amused shake of his head Zenigata followed along with the Lupin Gang to sit between the window area and the entrance of the dining hall, putting them in a perfect position to see everyone else in the room. As the group of five made their way to their table Lupin saw several eyes following them. Elena, that Japanese businessman and the adult children sitting with their father and his lawyer. Lupin figured that Elena recognized Zenigata and was mainly looking at him instead of the whole group. But why were the businessman and those other two looking their way? The master thief would get part of his answer, as the Japanese man got up from his table and walked their way as soon as they sat down.

"Hello, please pardon me. I don't mean to interrupt you all before you can even have your dinner. But I had to confirm something. Madame, are you really Aiko Kawasaki? The chief and editor of Tokyo Life?" The man asked.

"Why yes, I am. And for whom am I confirming this information?" Fujiko asked as she turned to better face the man, who was dressed in a traditional Montsuki Hakama and had his hair slicked back. Goemon couldn't help but feel a pang of irritated envy. That's something he *would* be wearing if he wasn't made to look like a pop idol doll.

"Nobutoshi Iwamoto. I'm an avid reader of your publication, Kawasaki-*san*." The man, Nobutoshi, said as he held out his hand.

"Oh yes! I've heard of you. You're the owner of Kiji Imports. The company in Japan that distributes luxury furniture and artwork from other countries. I've covered your company before in an article two years ago." Fujiko said with a smile, taking the man's hand and shaking it.

"That's me, indeed. I wanted to not only thank you for that exceptional article you made about my company – but to see if it would be possible to arrange another interview. A follow-up, you might say." Nobutoshi said.

"Oh? A follow-up for what, exactly?" Fujiko asked.

"Well I can't say it openly at this time. Certain things have to go through the proper channels and all that. Tedious red tape. But what I can say is this. I will very soon acquire a very special item that will make Kiji Imports the envy of all." Nobutoshi replied with a proud smile.

"That so? I guess then instead of the goose, the green pheasant laid the golden egg." Goemon replied, somewhat slipping out of his airhead mode. At this Nobutoshi looked at him with an annoyed yet somewhat surprised expression, looking up and down in a judgmental manner than gave a small scoff.

"Yes. I suppose it is. That's a surprisingly on point analogy coming from someone...so *young*." Nobutoshi said evenly, but the samurai knew exactly what he was trying to imply. The businessman then turned to Fujiko with a smile and bowed. "Thank you for your time, Kawasaki-san. I won't keep you further. Will it be alright for my secretary to reach out to you when the time comes and make the arrangements for that follow-up?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Iwamoto. That's perfectly fine. It was nice speaking to you." Fujiko said with a smile and waved the man off. Nobutoshi bowed to the rest of the table, though he cast Goemon specifically a slight sneer, before he turned and went back to his table.

"'*Someone so young*', he says. '*Surprisingly on point*', he says. Just wait until he sees how on point this young man is with a sword...." Goemon growled as he gripped his salad fork hard enough to make it bend.

"Believe me, Goemon, a guy like him is no one to waste your energy getting mad about. And certainly not someone to waste your skills on. I'm actually surprised you did an interview with Nobutoshi, Fujiko. Especially knowing what he did." Zenigata said, looking from the Goemon to the cat burglar.

"What he did? I don't understand." Fujiko said in surprise, making Zenigata blink in shock.

"Wait, you *really didn't* know? Huh. I guess his PR team managed to scrub the stories from the papers in time before anyone could read about it." Zenigata said.

"Scrub what from the papers?" Jigen asked.

"Yeah, Pops. Now you got us all curious. Don't just talk in riddles. Tell us what the guy did." Lupin said as he leaned forward.

"Well, it's not exactly a secret. Anyone with a computer who knows where to look and what firewalls to get past could find this out. But two years ago Iwamoto got involved with a foreign business partner and..." Before Zenigata could continue Elena Gotti came over next; looking every bit the enchanting woman in her emerald green evening dress.

"Koichi. I can't believe it's you. For a minute I thought the champagne was actually doing it's job and making me see things. But what a surprise this. You look really good." Elena said, a fond yet sad smile on her face.

"Hello, Elena. You're looking well yourself. I'm here as special security detail. I'm keeping an eye on you and the rest of the guests staying here." Zenigata replied, his face and tone professional but also carrying a certain warmth that he only showed to those he knew.

"Ha, ha. Of course you are. Only you would come up to a resort in the Andes for work." Elena paused, then turned to look at the Lupin Gang. She raised an elegantly groomed eyebrow at them before speaking. "And I see that you're dining with a rather interesting group. It's very nice to meet you all."

In that instant Lupin could tell that Elena knew who they really were. But she didn't say anything. Probably because knew she couldn't risk exposure about knowing of her late husband's hidden fortune if she tried to expose them as well. Plus, with the so close yet so far expression she was giving old Pops, it was clear that Elena's attention wasn't on the four thieves.

"Yeah. Some old acquaintances I've met during my line of work. And not to be rude, but I'd like to catch up with them." Zenigata said.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry to interrupt." Elena said with a sad smile then started to turn around.

"Tomorrow, though." Zenigata said. This made the blonde woman stop and slowly turn back.

"What?" Elena asked.

"Tomorrow. As in tomorrow we can talk. I'll be doing my morning jog so I can't meet then. But after my afternoon rounds I'll be taking a break. If you're free then, we can talk tomorrow." The inspector replied with a small smile. Elena blinked in surprise, then gave a soft smile.

"I think I'll be available, then. Sure. Enjoy your dinner, Koichi. Good evening gentlemen. Miss." Elena said, giving a parting nod to the group before going back to her seat.

"Aha. Seems like something happened with the Gotti widow after that fateful full moon night. Were you the one who got away, Pops, instead of the other way around?" Lupin asked teasingly.

"I plead the fifth. Just pick a good wine while I check the food." Zenigata said as he picked up his menu and looked. But even Goemon could spot the distinct rosy tint that Zenigata fought to keep down.

As Elena made her way to her seat, Lupin saw Akechi trying to wave to her to get her attention. The blonde woman blew him off completely, and the cross-dressing detective visibly deflate at the silent rejection. More than likely the guy wanted to try and get her to become a client to guard her. After his embarrassing failure with Fujiko's daring rescue of Lupin – Akechi hasn't exactly had a line out the door for his services. Akechi's eyes then wandered across the room. Then eventually they landed on Lupin's eyes. The master thief saw Akechi squint, as if trying to register who he was looking at. And it seemed like he finally realized it because his eyes bulged to the size of the very dinner plates that he and his companions were eating off of. Lupin watched as Akechi stood up abruptly, saying 'excuse me' with just about his entire face, then briskly walk towards the their table.

"At attention, friends. Our number one fan boy is coming in hot." Lupin whispered in amusement to the others, making them pause mid conversation and look up.

"Damn. Coming in hot is right. I could light my cigarette with his face." Jigen said, chuckling as he took in Akechi's young expression flushed with burning fury.

"Hmph. I still owe this little bastard a heel to the face for what he did in Japan..." Fujiko muttered, flexing her sharp manicure.

"Forget it, Fujiko. If I can't slice that snob Iwamoto in half then you can't give Akechi the dominatrix special." Goemon replied with a grin.

"Just leave him to me. You all get in character." Zenigata whispered just as Akechi had reached their table, then put on his best casual smile. "Why hello, Akechi! This sure is a surprise. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"The feeling is mutual, Inspector! Seeing you here was definitely a surprise for me. Although..." Akechi paused dramatically as his eyes scanned over the four thieves. "I'm *more* surprised by the familiar looking company you're dining with."

"Familiar looking? Oh yeah! You may recognize them from the past assignments I mentioned when we were working back in Japan. Tokyo Life chief and editor Aiko Kawasaki, French socialite and heir Paul Sernine, retired Marine veteran Jericho Moore and Japan's rising cosplay star Tsubasa Hagihara. They're also pretty popular figures in their own circles. So you've probably seen them in the news, too." Zenigata replied, lying in such a smooth manner that the Lupin Gang mentally tipped their hats to the inspector.

"Uh huh. Well, 'popular' is definitely an apt word to describe this bunch. So popular, in fact, that I feel as though I've met them before." Akechi said with a tight smile, then turned to look at Fujiko. "Especially *you*, madame. Kawasaki, was it is? Is that *really* your name?"

"But of course. It's the name I was given when I was born. And it's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Akechi. I must say though I can't say I know even though you say you know me. If I did, I doubt very much I'd forget such a...*stylish* looking fellow." Fujiko replied, not able to hold back a touch of cattiness as she gave a mean smile.

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't Kawasaki. But I do believe we have met before. And I'm sure if you thought about it, you'd remember too." The cross-dressing detective spoke in a pressing tone as he leaned forward, as if challenging the disguised woman.

Zenigata, Lupin, Jigen and Goemon all looked at the situation with tense expression. This was not looking good. Akechi would definitely spill the beans. And looking out the corner of his eye he saw Yoshio and Mayu approaching. Likely wondering what was taking their boss so long and coming over to see what was going on. But just before Lupin could try and make up an excuse

for them to leave, suddenly a figure sitting near the band stand approached their table – walking straight towards Akechi.

“Excuse me, sir! Take a look at the meat of this crab!” The voice exclaimed, and Lupin saw that it was Luca coming over while holding a large crab claw.

“What? Excuse me?” Akechi asked, leaning back to look at Luca with a surprised expression.

“This crab! It has so much meat and is incredibly well seasoned and juicy. Plus the claw itself is easy to crack open. Like so!” Luca exclaimed cheerily as he cracked open the claw.

But instead of crab meat two paper mache crabs popped out of the broken halves of the claws in a flurry of small ribbons and string confetti. Akechi gave a shrill scream and leaped back in fright, just in time for Yoshio and Mayu to catch him.

“Mr. Akechi!” Yoshio exclaimed in shock as he took up the sudden weight in his arms.

“Are you alright, sir?” Mayu asked in concern.

“Oh my! I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were allergic to shellfish. Perhaps you'll enjoy some poultry instead.” Luca said as he tossed the paper mache crabs and lifted his top hat, which unleashed a flurry of doves that flew into the faces of the trio of detectives.

“AAHHHHH!!” Akechi shrieked once again as the doves flew into his face and overhead, almost snatching off his signature trilby hat along with his brunette wig which he immediately grabbed a hold of.

“Get away from Mr. Akechi, you stupid birds!” Yoshio ordered as he swatted at the surrounding doves.

“Wow, seems like I have a tough crowd. Perhaps a floral touch is what we need.” Luca said and, with a snap of his fingers, the doves turned into white carnations that rained down on the entire room.

Everyone from the guests to the staff looked up in awe at the scene and soon clapped their hands in amazement. Although Lupin couldn't help but notice that Howell was sneezing between claps. Seems like the guy has a problem with allergies. Just then Ambrose came into the dining hall, likely to check on the guests, and smiled widely at the spectacle.

"My, my! And here I was going to announce Mr. Luca as our entertainment for the evening. But it seems like he announced himself." Ambrose said as he clapped along.

Of all the turned carnations, though, one dove remained. A pink one that flew down into Luca's left hand. He then walked over to Fujiko and covered the pink dove with his right hand, blew into his closed palms, uncovered his left hand and revealed a pink carnation. Luca bowed before the cat burglar and held out the flower.

"And here. The prettiest flower to the prettiest lady. I hope that you'll speak of my performance in the next issue of Tokyo Life, Ms. Kawasaki." Luca said, giving a knowing wink. Fujiko smiled widely and accepted the pink carnation.

"You can count on it, Mr. Luca. I think this is a front page worth show, even." Fujiko replied, giving a wink of her own. Luca smiled widely before he stood up and waved to the crowd with his hat.

"Thank you all for your kind applause! I hope you enjoyed the show." Luca said, relishing in the applause and cheers.

"No! Stop applauding! This is an act of obstructing justice! He was...!" Akechi tried to protest but Lupin came over and threw an arm around his shoulder.

"Now, now, *Monsieur* Akechi! It was all part of the act! No need to flip your wig over a little fun!" Lupin exclaimed in a cherry and posh French accented tone as he laughed. Then he leaned down and whispered to Akechi in his natural voice. "And unless you want me to flip the wig you're wearing and show everyone that you're secret cleaning supplies spokes model, I suggest you quiet down and play along with our disguises."

"You wouldn't dare!*Would* you?" Akechi asked nervously as he gripped his hat and hair in a protective hold.

"Do I look like I haven't done dares for less?" Lupin asked with an evil grin. Then he gave a happy smile and patted Akechi on the back. "I knew you'd be a good spot about it, *Monsieur* Akechi! You detectives are always so gracious!"

Deciding to pick and choose his battles for once, Akechi laughed along with the master thief. Though Zenigata, Fujiko, Jigen and Goemon could tell that it was a laughter from duress and not genuine joy.

After all of the excitement died down and the carnations cleaned up, everyone resumed their dinner. Fujiko and Lupin actually went over to catch up with Luca while Zenigata conversed with Ambrose to give him a status report. That just left Jigen and Goemon at the table. They were enjoying their wine before the samurai felt one of his hairpins coming loose.

"Damn! My hairpin is loosening. Please pardon me, Jigen. I'm going to go and fix this." Goemon said as he stood up.

"Sure thing. Just keep an eye over your shoulder. That Conway creep was eyeballing you during dinner. Probably fantasizing about your lips on him instead of the tempura you were eating." Jigen said, glaring at the memory of how he saw the celebrity surgeon licking his lips as he watched his boyfriend eat his food.

"As disgusting as that is to know, I don't think I'll have to worry about him. Lupin said that he saw the esteemed doctor leave a little while ago and heard him ask Ricky to bring something for hay fever to his room. Seems like he had a reaction to the carnations from Luca's show." Goemon explained.

"Yeah. Well it serves him right. Maybe he'll get something that'll make him drowsy so he'll stop sniffing around for you." Jigen stated making Goemon chuckle.

"We can only hope. But I'll be back. Don't you have dessert without me now, *Jericho-kun*." Goemon said, using his Gyaruo accent in a teasing manner.

"Wouldn't dream of it, lil' darlin'." Jigen replied in his fake country tone as he grinned back. They shared a quick kiss and the samurai left the dining hall to go to the men's room to fix his hair.

As Goemon made his way to the restrooms, he heard voices trying but failing to stay low arguing. They sounded further ahead, just around the corner that led to the elevators. The samurai narrowed his eyes in curiosity before he headed in the direction of the arguing, walking past the restrooms. Peeking around the corner he saw the young woman of the newlywed paid arguing with that same old man from earlier. And it looked like his adult daughter was with him arguing as well.

"For the last time, Desmond, I don't want anything to do with you or your damn family!" The redheaded woman stated angrily, though she tried not to sound too loud.

"Talula, please. Just let me finally make this right to you." The older man, named Desmond apparently, said desperately. Goemon noted that he also had an Irish accent like the young woman, Talula, did.

"Come off it, daddy! There's no use talking to this guttersnipe. I don't get why you waste your money trying to sway her opinion, anyway. Nevermind that she's too simple-minded to see the big picture." The brunette young woman, clearly Desmond's daughter, said in a rather cruel tone while casting a sneer to Talula. But Talula herself stood her ground.

"Spare me the mean girl routine, Stephanie. It didn't work when we were kids and it doesn't work now. And frankly speaking – someone who spends her father's money like it'll never end and has no practical skills to make her own money wouldn't know the first thing about what a big picture really is anyway." Talula said.

"You bitch...!" Stephanie started but Desmond raised his hand to cut his daughter off.

"Stay out of this, Stephanie!" The older man ordered. His daughter huffed but backed down, crossing her arms tightly as she turned away. Desmond then turned back to Talula, his face filled with what Goemon identified as remorse and desperation.

"Lulu, please. I know I don't deserve to be forgiven but...!" Desmond started to say until Talula cut him off.

"That's the one thing you got right, old codger. You *don't* deserve to be forgiven. Not after what you did! And don't you **ever** call me Lulu again! Only my friends get to call me that. Only my husband can call me that! Only....only...*she* could." Talula said, her voice tapering off into a small whisper as she looked away with a sorrowful expression. Then she shook her head and turned back to Desmond with a glare. "And she wouldn't want me to accept so much as a bag of crisps from the likes of you because of what you did! So get the Hell out of my face and quit trying to be in my life!"

Goemon's brows furrowed in concern as he watched the scene unfold. He had to step in and help. Steeling his resolve and getting into character, the samurai pranced around the corner and called out to Talula.

"Lulu, hi~! I never thought I'd see you here!" Goemon called out. The three people turned to the samurai just as he moved past Desmond and Stephanie to hug the surprised young woman. "Come on, girlfriend! Gimme a hug! It's been ages!"

Though shocked, Talula did slowly hug Goemon back and whispered to him.

"What's all this? Who are you?" Talula asked in a low voice.

"The name's Tsubasa. Just play along and follow my lead. We'll talk in the dining hall." Goemon whispered back. He felt Talula nod against his shoulder before he pulled back with a wide smile. "And just look at you! Already radiating that married life glow! I can't believe my old pen pal is at Utopia Lodge same as me!"

"Me neither! I always wanted to make plans to visit you, Tsubasa, but it looks like fate made the arrangements for us." Talula said with a smile that she tried her best to look natural.

"Totally! And speaking of fate, I was recently blessed with a mega hottie that I'm here. You just have to meet him!" Goemon exclaimed giddily. Then he turned around to face Stephanie and Desmond, as if noticing them for the first time, and acted surprised. "Oh, my bad! I didn't know you were talking to other people. Did I interrupt anything?"

"Actually lad..." Desmond started to say before Talula cut him off.

"No, Tsubasa. You didn't interrupt anything important with Mr. MacBride here. Let's go. I want you to meet Rory anyway." Talula said, giving a tight smile to appear friendly but showing that she was firm in her decision.

"Nectar! Let's get going. Pleasure meeting you both. Oh, and that's a cute dress sweetie. Very bold, too. Wearing something last season and all. But you make it work!" Goemon said, grinning wickedly and relishing in Stephanie's affronted gasp as he took Talula's hand and pulled her out of the fray to head back to the dining hall.

But before they left, Desmond called out.

"Talula! I'm going to make this right, no matter how much you push me away! And I'm going to do it with the one thing that not even you will turn away! The one thing that *she* wanted more than anything in the world!" Desmond yelled in the hallway. Then he heard the man walk away with his daughter in tow, and soon after he heard a ding sound off. Clearly the pair took the elevator to their room floor.

Goemon felt Talula's hand stiffen in his, but she didn't break stride and kept following him. As they walked the restrooms the samurai saw Howell exit from the men's room out the corner of his eye and go around the corner down the hall that Goemon

and Talula just left from. He was probably tending to his allergies in the bathroom, and was only just now taking the elevator to go to his room. But that wasn't a focus for now. Right now he had to get Talula away and keep up the act.

As they returned back to the dining hall, Goemon saw that not much had changed. Zenigata and Ambrose were still talking. As were Fujiko, Luca and Lupin. Elena sat at her table as she gracefully ate at her raspberry cheesecake. Akechi was at his table not so gracefully stuffing his face with crème puffs, likely eating his feelings of aggravation that the Lupin Gang had him over a barrel and mad that he couldn't expose them without his own secret being literally laid bare, while Mayu and Yoshio tried in vain to stop him. Ricky and Percival were still working the floor with a few other staff. Nobutoshi was reading a book as he drank his coffee. He saw Talula's husband by the window, drumming his fingers as he was clearly waiting for his wife to return. And Jigen was at their table talking with some twenty-something young man and....

.....

.....

.....Wait a second. *What!?*

The samurai did a double take and rapidly blinked, as if he would see something completely different than what he was beholding. But that didn't happen. So, Goemon thought, my eyes *are* correct. Sitting at the table with Jigen, in his own seat no less, was some twenty-something blonde young man in a light green suede suit that was too tight to be formal with his dress shirt and blazer unbuttoned to reveal part of his chest. And he was leaning instantly towards Jigen, giving him a smile that was far too wide to be casual. Added with how visibly uncomfortable Jigen looked – it was clear that the punk was flirting with his boyfriend. He also noticed that another man, Middle Eastern and slightly younger than Zenigata was with graying dark brown hair tied in a simple short ponytail and sporting a thin yet immaculately styled mustache, standing beside the younger man as if trying to gently herd him away from Jigen. That must be Desmond's lawyer. Meaning that young man must be his son.

"His *late* son, that is." Goemon muttered aloud, eyes narrowed into dangerous slits.

"Come again, sir?" Talula asked in confusion. Realizing that he let his real lethal personality loose Goemon immediately switched back to his airhead persona and turned around to smile.

"Oh, nothing Miss Talula! I was just saying how there seems to be two people at the table with my boyfriend. But I don't know who they are." Goemon replied, pointing at the two over at the table. Talula looked where he pointed, saw the men and instantly rolled her eyes with a groan.

"Ugh. Of course they'd be here. The older fella is MacBride's lawyer Butrus. Don't let the kindly teacher expression and the Tweeds fool you. He can be awful temperamental on a good day. The blonde is his man-eater of a son Liam. You might say men in uniform are his favorite meal. More than likely he spotted your leannán from the moment he walked in and saw those medals sparkle." Talula explained.

"Aha...*coolio*. Guess I'll do the social butterfly thing and introduce myself." Goemon said with a tight smile, mentally adding on 'and put that little tramp in his place'.

As Goemon got closer to the table, he heard Liam spoke to Jigen. His voice was high-pitched in a way that only certain animals could hear and it dripped with false sincerity.

"And I could go on and on about the history of warriors from Ireland, Colonel Moore! All those buff, striking men with rippling pectorals. I'll bet you have your own share of muscles, though, underneath that uniform." Liam said, batting his eyelashes at Jigen in what he probably thought was a seductive manner but just looked like he was trying to blink dirt out.

"Well I've managed to stay in shape, yeah. But really, son, I think you should be on your way. My party will be coming back soon enough. And I'm waiting to have dessert with them." Jigen said, trying to smile politely while holding back the annoyance he surely felt from showing on his face. The fact that it was evident in his voice notwithstanding.

"Oh come now! The more the merrier. My sister and father always retire early. And I'd just love to hear more about, Colonel Moore." Liam said, attempting a seductive purr but it came out gargled more than anything.

"Come now, Liam, don't behave so shamefully. We should leave the Colonel alone." Butrus said, tapping the blonde on the shoulder in an attempt to get him to turn his attention away from the disguised gumman and get him to leave. But Liam just brushed him off.

At that point Goemon had enough, and closed the gap with a few purposeful strides before bringing his hands down on the

table. Making the tableware clatter from the sudden motion. This made Jigen, Liam and Butrus look up at them while also getting the attention of the other folks in the room. Goemon didn't care though. His eyes were squarely on Liam as he leveled him with a friendly smile. And contrasting that friendly smile were eyes burning with righteous, protective fury.

"Hi there~! I see that you've met my boyfriend Jericho-kun. I'm Tsubasa Hagihara. Thanks for keeping my seat warm, **buddy**, but I'd like it back since I'm here now." Goemon said. While he spoke in a bubbly tone the look in his eyes left no room for argument. This wasn't a request. It was an order. And one that he expected to be followed immediately.

Liam caught on quickly and shot up from the seat, quaking with fear as he gave a scared smile.

"R-R-R-Right! Of course! S-Sorry about that, pal. I didn't realize Colonel Moore's party was comin' back so soon. Heh, heh, heh...." Liam replied, laughing nervously. Then he saw Talula standing behind Goemon and his nervous fear changed to barely hidden disdain. "Talula. I understand that congratulations are in order. Papa says that you're a married woman now. Found someone easy to condition into Stockholm Syndrome?"

"Liam, behave yourself!" Butrus scolded sharply.

"Forget it, Al-Alami. It's understandable that Liam would mistake commitment for captivity. After all, he could only ever keep a man himself by twisting something against the lad to make him stay." Talula said, smirking at the glare Liam casted.

"Listen here, you little shrew, I'm not about to stand for...!" Liam started to protest until he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and saw a very displeased looking Irishman who's muscles were prominent even through his finely tailored suit.

"You won't have to stand here, Liam. Because you're gonna turn your smarmy arse around and leave. *Now*." The man stated with a sharp look. And given the fond expression Talula had – Goemon surmised that this was her husband.

Liam looked like he wanted to argue, but between the husband's no-nonsense glare, Butrus's insistent tugging at his arm and Lupin, Fujiko, Ambrose and Zenigata walking over it was obvious that he was outnumbered. So a haughty huff and a dramatic flip of his shoulder-length hair he backed away to stand by Butrus.

"Fine. I need my beauty sleep, anyway, so that I can hit the slopes in the afternoon. No need to stare at unseemly sights that'll

stir up nightmares." Liam said, casting a sneer to Talula who just glared at him. Then Liam gave a flirty grin to Jigen and blew a kiss. "Evening, Colonel. It's been a real pleasure."

And with that Liam sashayed out of the dining hall, Butrus following close behind.

"A pleasure, he says. Seems like the kid got the definitions of 'pleasure' and 'misery' mixed up." Zenigata said with a displeased expression.

"I'm truly sorry about, Mr. Moore. I assure that our guests here are typically well behaved. If you wish I can have a stern conversation with the MacBride party about Liam's improper behavior." Ambrose said.

"Eh, don't worry about it. Trashy folk like that aren't worth the sweat you build up." Jigen said, then turned around to face the Irishman behind him. "Besides, this fine fellow here got rid of him. And I'd rather focus on expressing my gratitude, Mister...?"

"Rory, sir. Rory Ogden. Carpenter by day, aspiring accountant by night. But my true claim to fame is that I'm the husband of this gorgeous woman here." The Irishman, Rory, replied as he shook Jigen's hand, then looked over to smile at Talula who smiled back.

"And my own claim to fame is being lucky enough to land a man like Rory. Seems like we've come full circle, too, *A Chroí*. Mr. Tsubasa here saved me from having to deal with Desmond and that eejit daughter of his." Talula said, gesturing to Goemon.

"What!? Desmond and Stephanie approached you? I knew you were taking a while to powder your nose, but I didn't think that was why! I ought to hunt down that codger and...!" Rory stated to say, face angry and fists clenched to match before Talula went over to her husband and laid comforting hands on his arm.

"Rory, please, calm down! They approached me but it was just their usual nonsense. Nothing I couldn't handle. And like I said, Tsubasa here saved me and got me away from them." Talula assured.

The Lupin Gang couldn't help but note how terribly angry Rory became at the apparent mention of the other two MacBride's. A real zero to one hundred reaction, Fujiko thought to herself. But just as quickly as he became furious he soon calmed down after hearing his wife's assurances. After taking a deep breath Rory turned to Goemon.

"Right then. Well, seems like I owe you my thanks Mr. Tsubasa. Like Talula said – we came full circle. Glad to meet you." Rory said with a smile as he held out his hand which the disguised samurai accepted.

"Likewise, dude! And it was my pleasure. I couldn't let a nice lady like Talula deal with such a creep and a witchy woman like that on her own." Goemon replied with a smile.

"Well then. If you'll all permit me, I want to remedy the sourness of that situation with a sweet treat. The cooks have some Suspiro de Limeña prepared. And in addition to the traditional caramel flavor they've also prepared passion fruit and chocolate blended flavors." Ambrose said.

"For real!? Can we try out the different flavors, Mr. Gatsby? Pretty, pretty please?" Goemon asked, his sweet tooth exceeding his embarrassment with his airhead persona's dialect.

"Ha, ha! Of course, Mr. Hagihara. You can have as many rounds of each flavor as you desire." The resort owner replied.

"Thank you kindly, Ambrose! Would you care to join us, Mr. and Mrs. Ogden? Nothing beats dessert with good company." Lupin said with a smile.

"Oh sure, why not? We couldn't decide what to eat for dessert anyway." Talula said as she took a seat at the table.

"Right! Plus it's the perfect way to end off the night." Rory said with an agreeing smile as he likewise took a seat.

And so, the evening ended with the four thieves and inspector toasting to new friends. Finally they decided the time had come to call it a day. Zenigata immediately went to bed in his room on the fourth floor along with Percival, Ricky and Mario who's rooms were also on that floor, the Lupin Gang and Luca retired to their respective rooms on the fifth floor, Rory and Talula went to their room on the sixth floor, Elena and Nobutoshi went to the seventh floor and Ambrose went to his private quarters on the top floor. It was quite the first day at Utopia Lodge, and the four thieves definitely enjoyed themselves even in spite of the hiccups they were faced with. But they met all sorts of interesting that are worth talking about. Hence their little meet up in Jigen and Goemon's room.

"Man, I'll never forget Akechi's face when Luca cracked that crab claw and the paper mache crabs came out. I would've paid full

price for our rooms just to see that again!" Lupin exclaimed, laughing and kicking his feet up from the chair he sat in.

"It definitely brought a smile to my face, seeing that little creep get his just desserts." Fujiko replied with a smile.

"Speaking of dessert, I'm surprised that I was able to steal eat mine after that floozy with balls kept trying to flirt with me. I was this close to losing my appetite." Jigen said, shuddering with disgust as he recalled Liam's over-the-top and failed attempt at seduction.

"Hmph! If that boy attempts to flirt with you again, he'll become a floozy with *no balls*." Goemon stated angrily as he took off his boots.

"Why Goemon. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous of the little MacBride son." Fujiko teased.

"Oh please, Fujiko. Being jealous would imply that I view that boy as a threat – and I don't. I simply find him irritating because he's like vermin. Comes in where he doesn't belong and trying to settle in where he isn't welcome." Goemon replied in a matter-of-act-tone.

"Ha, ha! Of course, my mistake Goemon." Fujiko said with a giggle, then turned serious. "And while we're on the topic of MacBride's, what were Papa and Sister MacBride like? Talula said you saved her from having to deal with them. And I didn't want to ask her about it and make her upset."

"Make her upset? I wouldn't want to make her husband Rory upset bringing them up. That guy didn't even see either of them and just the mention of their names set him off. And I doubt those muscles he has are for show. I hope no impatient soccer mom with a chip on her shoulder ever cuts him off in traffic." Lupin said.

"Ah yes. The daughter's name is Stephanie. And really doesn't have much of a personality to her. To sum it up she's a 14-year-old mean girl in a bitchy 30-year-old woman's body who still acts like the princess she isn't. But the father, Desmond MacBride, he was different." Goemon said, his tone sounding reflective.

"Different how?" Jigen asked as he removed his uniform's dress jacket and hung it up.

"The way he talked to Talula sounded like they had a past history. And whatever it was clearly wasn't good, going by what Talula had said. He called her by her nickname Lulu, and that made Talula even angrier. Said that only her friends, her husbands and someone she just referred to as '*she*' could ever call her that. And that this same '*she*' wouldn't want Talula to have anything to do with Desmond. This '*she*' was also spoken of in past tense, so I can only assume the person is no longer alive. But she's clearly part of if not the entire reason why Talula hold such contempt towards the MacBride's. Especially Desmond." Goemon explained.

"Interesting. What happened after you got Talula out of there?" Lupin asked as he leaned forward.

"Well before we left for the dining hall, Desmond called out and said that '*he was going to make this right no matter how much Talula pushed him away*'. And he said that he'd do it with '*the one thing that not even she would turn away*'. And apparently this was something that the mysterious '*she*' also wanted '*more than anything in the world*'. Then he left for the elevator with his daughter." Goemon replied in conclusion.

"Wow. This is starting to sound like a live stage drama. And so many questions! Who's this she that Talula and MacBride were talking about?" Fujiko asked.

"And why's MacBride so hellbent on making things up with Talula even though she wants nothing to do with him?" Jigen asked as well.

"I couldn't begin to either of those questions, my lady fair and dear friend. But one thing is for sure. You called this a live stage drama, Fujiko. Well we've only just finished the first act. I have a feeling that act two is going to be even more intense." Lupin said in a serious tone. Then he let out a long yawn as he stretched. "So before that, I say we stars get our beauty sleep!"

"Good call. As much as I love pumps these are *not* shoes to wear past the three hour mark. I'm ready to trade these in for some slippers." Fujiko said as she stood up from her seat.

"I hear ya. I feel the same with this uniform. Even though I'm pretending to be a Marine to enjoy a vacation and not for personal gain, you can only ignore that you're committing stolen valor for so long." Jigen said with a wary smirk.

"And I'm going to relish in wearing a genuine yukata after having that abhorrent outfit on for dinner." Goemon said, smiling widely as he held out his sleeping yukata.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me Goemon! I think you'll really like the winter outfit that I picked out for *Tsubasa* to wear." Fujiko said, grinning mischievously as she said the samurai's fake name with a teasing cadence.

"Fujiko, do you strive to ruin a man's day for your own personal fun or do you have a general quota you try to hit every week?" Goemon asked, already looking displeased at the idea of whatever Fujiko shoved into his suitcases making the cat burglar giggle.

"Depends on my mood, usually. But I can confidently say that, if it were a job that came with a quota, I'd be promoted for always beating mine. Goodnight, gentlemen!" Fujiko said cheerily as she left out first.

"See you fellas in the morning." Lupin said with a smile as he left as well.

"Night, boss. Fujiko." Jigen said with a wave.

"Pleasant dreams." Goemon added.

As the other couple exited from their friend's room, they almost bumped into Percival who was briskly walking down the hallway.

"Whoa! Sorry about that, Percival." Fujiko said apologetically.

"Oh no, Ms. Mine. I almost ran into you. I was just in a hurry to get to Mr. MacBride." Percival said in assurance.

"Desmond? What did he want?" Lupin asked.

"Apparently he lost his room key in the excitement during Luca's show earlier. So he called the staff line and expressed with great urgency and rudeness that he needed a new one. So I had to use our key copying machine to cut a fresh one for him." Percival said, holding up the key in question.

"You had to make a fresh one? I thought hotels and resorts always have duplicate keys at the ready." Fujiko said.

"Some do, yes. But last year we had a problem with guests lying about losing their original key just to get the duplicate and give

it to a friend or whatever so they could sneak in and stay in that guest's room. So Mr. Gatsby made it a rule that duplicate keys are made to order only. That way we don't have to worry about already made duplicates improperly circulating among outsiders." Percival explained.

"Aha. That's a pretty smart way of handling. Well we won't keep. Goodnight, Percival." Lupin said with a wave.

"Goodnight to you both!" Percival called over his shoulder as he continued down the hallway to his destination while Fujiko and Lupin went to their room.

At long last, all fell silent within Utopia Lodge. Not a stir came from anyone or anything. The billowing snow from outside worked its magic as a natural white noise that lulled everyone to sleep. All was quiet and at peace.

Well...all was quiet, yes. At peace? Only tentatively so. And come the morning that tentative peace would be irrevocably shattered.

The next morning...

As soon as the dawn came Percival, Ricky and the arriving staff worked to get the resort up and running for the guests. Ricky's duty for that morning was to sweep off the snow from last night's downpour off the andesite stone steps so that no would-be skiers would slip and take a rougher, unpleasant ride down the staircase-like rock formation. And so the former punk walked up the path with his push broom while he whistled a nameless song. Once he got the bottom of the steps he began to sweep. But as he pushed the excess snow to the sidelines he noticed something odd. Something that stood out from the white snow and the grey andesite. Cocking his head to the side in confusion Ricky sat his broom against the stony steps and went over to the pile of snow that the oddity was poking out of. With his hands he dug through the snow to see what it was. And soon he found that what he saw wasn't a *something*.

It was a *someone*. And that someone was Desmond MacBride, lifeless eyes rolled back and his skin ashen with death.

"WHAT THE HELL!?! " Ricky exclaimed in horror as he leaped back, which caused him to stumble and land on his rear end. He scrambled back and breathed heavy from shock. Eventually, with now shaky hands, he reached for his radio and called Percival. By the first ring the man picked up.

"Good morning, Ricky. How are you fairing so far with the sweeping? I hope that the snow didn't freeze over too much to give you issues." Percival said over the radio.

"....help." The former punk softly replied after a beat of silence.

"Beg pardon, son? I didn't catch that." Percival said.

"I said I need **HELP!!** It's Desmond MacBride! He's...He's dead!" Ricky exclaimed, the word coming out in an urgent rush.

"What!? How did he die? No, nevermind. I'll get Mr. Gatsby right now and we'll come to you. Don't touch anything, Ricky! Where are you now?" Percival asked.

"I-I'm at the steps by the slope outside! I was sweeping off the snow from the steps and I..." Ricky paused, noticing something out the corner of his eyes that made him pause. It was something poking from behind a large mound of snow that served as a blind spot. It looked like the elbow of a winter jacket.

"And you what, Ricky? What is it? Are you alright?" Percival asked in concern.

Instead of replying right away, Ricky went over to the snow mound to and looked around it to better identify what he saw. Indeed, it was the elbow of a winter jacket. A winter jacket was still being worn by none other than Inspector Koichi Zenigata, laying face down in the snow and sporting two nasty gashes on the left side and back of his head. Despite the fear that gripped him Ricky bent down to touch the inspector's neck and feel for a pulse. To his relief there was one. But it was faint. Exhaling an anxious breath Ricky finally responded to Percival.

"Hey, Percival. I think I'm gonna need more help than just you and Mr. Gatsby." Ricky said.

"Why? Is there something else wrong?" Percival asked.

Looking at Zenigata's unconscious body the former punk shook his head, even though he knew that Percival couldn't see him.

"Dude. I don't think wrong is the right word to describe how bad this is." Ricky said.

And just like that, what began as a peaceful morning was upended and turned into chaos. Instead of making omelets and flipping fluffy flapjacks the staff were hurrying to convert one of the rooms on the lower floor into a makeshift morgue for the deceased body of Desmond MacBride. Staff also worked to change another room into a private medical ward of sorts for the unconscious Zenigata. By the afternoon everyone was told of the tragedy that befall Desmond and how Zenigata was also hurt. Stephanie and Liam were inconsolable as they cried in each other's arms while Butrus did his best to comfort them. Elena was completely heartbroken and worried for Zenigata. Akechi, Yoshio and Mayu were amped up to investigate the who, how and why. And Talula, Rory, Luca, Mario, Nobutoshi and Howell were just simply on edge.

But all of those clashing emotions paled in comparison to the indescribable rage that the Lupin Gang felt. When Ambrose first told them of what happened to Zenigata and the state he was found in, none of the four thieves spoke. At least verbally. In their eyes, however, he saw a fire that was light and burning bright. A fire that promised great retribution to whoever hurt the inspector who, in spite of being a constant foil to their heists, was someone they all dearly cared for. Naturally Ambrose took them to the makeshift medical ward so they could see Zenigata for themselves. As they all walked inside Percival had just finished wrapping the bandages around Zenigata's head, the sudden entrance making him look up.

"Ah, I see you brought them. Lupin, everyone. I'm truly sorry for what happened to..." Percival started to express his sympathies before Lupin cut him off.

"Where the hits fatal?" Lupin asked, his face completely blank and his voice devoid of his usually mischievous mirth. Recognizing the intensity of the situation Percival just rolled with it and replied.

"No, thankfully they weren't. Both hits are closed head injuries. Hard enough to break skin and cause external bleeding from the scalp. But not hard enough to injure the brain or break the skull. If I had to guess, it seems like someone struck Zenigata the first time at the left side to possibly knock him out. Then they decided that wasn't sufficient enough and struck him again in the back of the head." Percival explained.

Lupin said nothing at first. Neither did Jigen, Goemon or Fujiko. Then finally the master thief let out a sigh and nodded. Like he was finally done processing what was said and accepted it.

"Good. That's...that's really good. Heh. I guess you really *do* have a hard head. Eh, Pops?" Lupin asked to the unconscious man with a humorless half smile.

"And you say Ricky found him like this? And MacBride, too?" Fujiko asked.

"Yes, that's right. He was sweeping the excess snow off the steps leading up the slope. He found Mr. MacBride first. Then he saw Zenigata behind a mound of snow. It's a sizable blind spot, too. I hate to think of what would have happened to the inspector if Ricky didn't see his arm poking out." Percival said.

"That makes five of us." Jigen said, his tone neutral but the obvious anger and concern he felt starting to show on his face.

"This act **will not** go unpunished." Goemon stated, not even trying to hide the vengeful edge in his voice as he clenched his fists.

"Damn straight it won't, Goemon. We're going to find out who did this to Zenigata. And I have a strong feeling that it has to do with the reason why Desmond MacBride is dead. Ambrose, do we have your support to look into this situation?" Lupin asked as he turned to his contact.

"You had it the moment I came to you and told you what happened, my friend. Although I fear that you may have to contend with some...competition to investigate." Ambrose said with a wary expression.

"Competition? What do you mean by...?" Fujiko's question was cut off by the sudden sound of raised voices on the other side of the door.

"Sir, please! Mr. Gatsby said that no one is to come into this room!" Stated the frazzled sounding voice of a maid.

"And I'm telling you, the authority of an ace detective trumps the word of a resort owner! A fellow investigator was struck down and I am duty bound to investigate how this came about! Now let me past so that I can properly speak with Gatsby!" Ordered the unfortunately familiar voice of one Kosuke Holmes Akechi. The four thieves groaned in annoyance while Ambrose nodded, as if confirming what they just heard.

"As you heard, Fujiko, that's what I meant by 'competition'. Once news of this horrible business broke out Akechi wanted alibis, names and murder weapons. He even heckled Ricky with a bunch of questions and very nearly got his clocked cleaned before his chaperon Mario stepped in." Ambrose explained.

"Well there's no way we're letting him investigate. But let him in. Better to deal with this now than later. And he knows who we really are. So there's no need to keep up the act." Lupin said. Ambrose nodded to Percival who nodded back and went to the door.

"It's alright, dear. Mr. Ambrose will see the...!" Percival could barely finish his sentence as Akechi shoved his way inside the room. The head employee growled in annoyance as he slowly closed the door. And Lupin was more than sure that, if no one else was in here, that the cross-dressing detective would be lying in a second bed.

"Mr. Gatsby! I find it very unprofessional that you would shut out a world-class detective like myself when a murder of a guest and an assault on my fellow officer of the law has occurred. But now that I'm here, I expect the full cooperation of the staff, access to every room in the resort and...!" Akechi started to ramble as he listed off his expectations before the resort owner cut him off.

"And nothing, Holmes. Lupin and his friends in charge of this investigation." Ambrose said simply. This made Akechi pause and do a double-take, blinking in shock at the words.

"Wait, what!? No. Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. You're clearly under a lot of stress, Mr. Gatsby, and aren't thinking clearly. That's the only logical explanation there is for you to say that you're putting this thieving band of wombats in charge of this case." Akechi said, casting a sneer at the thieves. Although it was more directed at Fujiko who just glared back at him.

"I assure you, Holmes, my mental faculties are all clear despite the stress of the situation. And if we're talking logic, it's only logical that I let Lupin and the others be in charge of this case." Ambrose said.

"Seriously!? But why?! Give me one good reason!" Akechi demanded in an angry, whiny tone. At this point Fujiko stepped up and got right in the detective's face as she grabbed his cheeks and made him face her. Manicured nails digging into his skin just enough to pinch but not enough to make cuts.

"I'll give you *three* good reasons, Detective Negligee. Reason number one, to the other guests here it would be considered biased for you as someone who knew Zenigata personally to investigate his assault while not being questioned yourself. Reason number two, since we've interacted with the other guests in some way ourselves we have a foot in the door to interrogate them without making them suspicious. Or, in your case, pissing them off to where they wouldn't talk at all. And reason number three,

although it's only in the most technical definition of the word, you *are* a detective. So we need you and your fan club to hold down the line and keep the other guests from getting antsy and trying to leave." Fujiko explained.

"Wh-What!? But I'm the one and only Kosuke Holmes Akechi! I shouldn't be delegated to grunt work while a pack of thieves take all of the glory!" Akechi stated, flailing in the cat burglar's grip.

But he immediately stopped his struggled when Fujiko pressed the nails of her free hand into Akechi's forehead. A warning gesture. And going by the evil smile on her face, it was clear that she was ready to turn that warning into an action.

"Akechi, Akechi, Akechi. You sweet summer gumshoe. Clearly, you're misunderstanding what's been said. So let me clarify things. Ambrose put us in charge of this case because it's been decided that we're the most logical choice. You're going to do crowd control because it's decided that your skills are best suited for this role. Do you see the pattern here? These are decisions already made. These are not suggestions open for debate. In short...you don't have a choice." Fujiko explained, her tone friendly sounding but it was clear that she wasn't playing nice.

"Ngh! No...no way! I won't accept this! I refuse to be ordered around by a common thief like you!!" Akechi stated.

"...*Common*?" Fujiko repeatedly slowly, like she was testing the word to make sure she heard the younger man correctly.

Lupin, Jigen, Goemon, Ambrose and Percival all looked at each other with horrified expressions. If there was one thing you never, ever, **ever** called Fujiko Mine under any circumstances – it was "common". Being the extraordinary woman that she is Fujiko doesn't do or deal in anything "common". So for Akechi to refer to Fujiko as a common thief? Well, let's just say a bull would be more merciful if you waved a red flag in front of it than Fujiko was about to be to Akechi. And it seemed like the cross-dressing detective realized this much too late.

"N-No, no, wait! I didn't say *common*! I said *shaman*! Shaman! This is a case that requires a practical approach! And while I mean no offense at all to you, Ms. Mine, your...holistic ways wouldn't be...conducive to the investigation. That's what I meant! Heh, heh, heh..." Akechi explained weakly, laughing nervously as he finished his lame excuse.

But Fujiko still stared at him with that unblinking, scary expression. Then she gave a smile and nodded.

"I see. Now I understand." Fujiko replied.

"Wonderful! So what say we start over and bury the hatchet..." Akechi started to say, but stopped when he felt the nails press deeper into his forehead. "Eek!"

"Oh no. You misunderstand. When I said 'I understand', what I meant is that I understand something about you. You're a tactile learner." The cat burglar said.

"A...a tactile...learner?" Akechi asked in a fearful tone.

"Right! You learn things through hands-on experiences. And today, you're going to learn hands-on why it's very unwise to run your mouth with me." Fujiko said, grinning evilly before she turned to the other men. "Guys. Would you mind stepping outside for a little while?"

Neither man hesitated and left as the cat burglar requested. And for the duration of that 'little while' Akechi's wails of pain were dismissed as distinctly shrill blows of winter winds to any curious staff that passed by. Suffice to say, the detective was a lot more agreeable after Fujiko's "stern convincing". When asked by Mayu if he trusts the thieves to investigate on their own he told her that while he doesn't trust them personally, he trusts that they care enough about Zenigata to find out who hurt him. And when Yoshio asked why his boss had a bunch of band-aids on his face Akechi brushed it off as a result of scrubbing too hard with his beauty blender. Back on topic, Lupin and Fujiko chose to speak with Ricky and Mario first. So they chose to talk behind the fireplace in the blind spot where the elevator was tucked in.

"I'm real sorry that you had to start your shift like this, Ricky. You must be real shaken up." Lupin said.

"Shaken up? Hell. I'm so freaked out I think I could vibrate through the couch I'm shaking so bad." Ricky said, running a stressed hand through his hair.

"It's alright, Ricky. You handled the situation well, given the circumstances. And you managed to save the inspector too. God only knows what would have happened if you didn't look around that mound of snow." Mario said in a reassuring tone, patting his student on the shoulder.

"We get that this is sudden to ask you questions, Ricky, but we have to." Fujiko said with a sympathetic look.

"It's cool. I understand. Ask away." Ricky said, straightening up as he looked at the two.

"Alright, first question. Did you notice anything strange around the bottom of the slope? Any signs of a struggle or things like that?" Lupin asked.

"No, not that I saw. Even when I calmed down and helped Percival and Mr. Gatsby, nothing about area looked strange." Ricky replied. Then he blinked, as he recalled something, then looked away as he stroked his chin. "Well, now that I think about it..."

"Think about what? What is it?" Fujiko asked.

"Well it's just that, I remembered looking at Mr. MacBride while I waited for Percival and Mr. Ambrose. And I remembered thinking that his clothes were...weird." Ricky said.

"Weird in what way?" Lupin asked.

"Weird because he was wearing his pajamas. I mean folks go outside in their pj's all the time to get a real feel of the cold wind. But Mr. MacBride wasn't even wearing any boots." The former punk explained.

"No shoes and in his pajamas, huh...? Then that means the murder didn't happen at the slopes." Lupin said, muttering the last part to himself.

"Yeah. And I also noticed something about one of his pants pockets when I was helping bring his body back to the resort. It had a hole in it. Like something had ripped through. I remember thinking how a guy who's clearly well off had nice looking pajamas with a hole in one of the pockets." Ricky explained further.

"Really? We'll check out that out when we look at the body. Now this next question is really important, Ricky. Did you notice anything about Mr. Zenigata besides those gashes?" Fujiko asked.

Ricky looked down, thinking hard for a moment. Then his eyes widened as he looked up and nodded his head.

"His fist! His right fist was balled up tight. I remember because when I was picking up his body with Percival to put on the gurney I was arranging his arms to be at his sides and I realized his right fist was balled up tight. It was like that thing we talked about in biology with that criminologist. Remember, Mario?" Ricky asked to his teacher.

"Ah yes! I know what you're talking about. Ricky's referring to the phenomenon called the death grip; where an unconscious person's hand will make an excessively tight, involuntarily clench. Usually out of fear, panic or a surge of adrenaline. That's what the criminologist covered during his special seminar in the biology class." Mario explained.

Lupin and Fujiko blinked at this, then turned to each other. A death grip? What could have happened for Zenigata to clench his fist so tightly even in his unconscious state? Was it a lump of snow he grabbed as he was brought down from whoever struck him? Or was it a potential clue?

Before the pair could ponder on this further a sudden loud crackle followed by a surprised noise made everyone move from behind the fireplace to see what was going on. Standing in front of the burning hearth was Howell Conway, leaning away from the fire that was burning a bit too brightly.

"Whoa! Careful, Howell. We don't want you in the kindling!" Lupin exclaimed as he stood up and hurried over to take the poker from the celebrity surgeon's hand and using it to move the logs away from each other and tame the fire.

"Whew! Much appreciated, Mr. Sernine. I'm a West Coast boy, you see. So I was stoking the flames to get a bit of heat. But it looked like I played with the fire too much and almost got burned." Howell said.

"Well it's a good thing that didn't happen." Fujiko said with a smile.

"You're telling me. After all, I want to look as good as possible when I see that cutie Tsubasa again." Howell said, giving a confident grin which made Lupin roll his eyes.

"Right...Well I guess that about covers it for now, Ricky and Mario. Mr. Conway, we'll talk to you later on." Fujiko said, looking from the teenager and teacher to the other man by the fireplace.

"Fine with me. Not like I have plans to go anywhere else." Howell said with a shrug.

"We should go and see how Tsubasa and Jericho are doing now. Ready to go, Paul?" Fujiko asked to the master thief. When he didn't answer she turned to him and saw that he was looking into the fire while still holding onto poker, as if examining the flames. "Paul? Are you okay?"

"Hm!? Oh yeah, I'm fine. I was just making sure that the fire finally calmed down. There you go, Howell. I know this is nothing like California heat, but rather you make the most of what you got then die trying to make a copy." Lupin said as he placed the poker back in its holder.

"Ha, ha! Don't worry, Paul. I just need to learn my lesson from one example." Howell assured.

"Glad to hear it. Anyway, let's get going Aiko." Lupin said and the pair left for the dining hall.

There, Jigen and Goemon were talking with Liam, Stephanie and Butrus. Or rather Jigen was talking with the two MacBride's and lawyer while Goemon ran interference to keep Liam from flirting with his boyfriend.

"And you have no idea why your father would be outside by the slopes?" Jigen asked to Stephanie.

"No, we don't. Daddy hated skiing and snowboarding. He hated the cold, really. He'd have no reason to be outside unless it was to get on the snow coach back to the gondola to leave for the airport." Stephanie explained, dabbing her tissue at her already red and swollen eyes that had cried out earlier.

"So if that's the case, then why'd your dad come with you for this trip? Was it for, like, shock therapy?" Goemon asked, trying his hardest sound intelligent enough to make a decent question while still sounding ditzy about it.

"Hardly anything like that, Mr. Hagihara. He was here because he had some business to tend to. Legal matters. Which is why I accompanied the MacBride's." Butrus explained.

"That right? Did your father tell you or your sister what these legal matters were about?" Jigen asked, reluctantly turning to Liam.

"No he hadn't. But now that he's dead, I can't help but wonder if he was murdered because of the business he had here. And as his children, we could be next!" Liam exclaimed dramatically.

"Wait! What do you mean by...?" Jigen tried to ask but the blonde continued to carry on.

"It's simply dreadful! Oh Colonel, I'm so frightened!" Liam exclaimed dramatically as he leaped forward to try and land in Jigen's arms.

But instead of Jigen's strong, comforting hold Liam was instead taken in by Goemon's strong, very displeased hold.

"There, there, Liam-*kun*! You have, like, my deepest condolences. I can't imagine how awful this is for you. Just let it all out! I'll hug away the pain." Goemon said, feigning a sympathetic expression as he 'hugged' Liam with the kind of tightness that a snake would when constricting prey.

"Hurk...! Uh, th-thank you, Mr. Hagihara! Urgh, y-y-you can...let go now! I feel...better!" Liam struggled to say between what little breaths he could get in.

"Easy there, lil' darlin'. I know you're a sentimental soul, but you have to be careful with how much love you give out." Jigen said, barely hiding his grin as he watched Goemon slowly release Liam and watched the MacBride son gasp for breath. Then the disguised gunman turned serious as he continued to interrogate. "But like I was asking, what did you mean by you wonder if your father was murdered because of the business he had to do? And that you think you could be next?"

"Oh, Liam was just carrying on, Mr. Moore. Grief will do that to a person. Don't let the thought linger in your mind." Butrus quickly said, not letting Liam speak.

"Actually, Mr. Moore, there is a kernel of truth in what Liam says." Stephanie interjected.

"Stephanie, please! There's no need to bring this up!" Butrus scolded but the brunette young woman whipped around to glare at the lawyer.

"Please nothing, Al-Alami! I told you and I told daddy that chasing Ogden here trying to win her over was a waste of time! And now look where it's gotten him for not listening here!" Stephanie stated angrily.

"Ogden? You mean Talula Ogden? What does she have to do with any of this?" Jigen asked, at which point Stephanie turned

back to him and gave a hollow, angry chuckle.

"Ha! She has plenty to do with this, Mr. Moore. In fact little Lulu is the reason why daddy braved the cold here." Stephanie replied.

"Really...? So, like, did your father want to form a partnership with Talula or something?" Goemon asked curiously. Liam, finally composing himself, merely scoffed.

"Tch! Why don't you ask the lady herself? She knows why. In fact – why don't you ask her what her name used to be before she got married?" Liam asked.

Before Jigen or Goemon could ask why they would do that, a new voice spoke up from the entrance of the dining hall.

"That won't be necessary, Liam." Said a familiar voice making everyone turn to the entrance to see Talula standing there, her expression stern yet also looking resigned. "I'm perfectly willing to tell them myself."

"Of course you are, Mrs. Ogden. You always were the responsible, type. Even back then." Stephanie said, glaring at the other woman.

Once again, before Jigen or Goemon could inquire further on what the meaning of this talk was another new figure came to the entrance. This time it was Rory, panting like he was rushing to get here.

"Talula! You didn't say anything, did you? You don't owe these people anything!" Rory stated.

"Rory, please. It's not about owing anyone anything. They were going to find out sooner or later. At least this way I have the choice of telling them myself. And it's better to get it all out anyway." Talula said.

And just then Lupin and Fujiko came to the entrance, looking at the group of people with observing eyes.

"I couldn't agree more, Ms. Ogden. What's say we take this to yours and your husband's room?" Lupin suggested.

A short while later, the four thieves sat on the chairs in the couple's room as they watched Talula pace around. Clearly building

up the courage to say what she was going to say. Rory sat on the bed watching his wife with a reassuring expression. Finally, after taking in a long breath and sighing, Talula spoke.

"Desmond...He's my father." Talula said.

"What!?" The gang exclaimed in shock, to which the young woman nodded.

"Aye. He's my biological father, that is. You know how it goes. Rich boy meets poor girl. The poor girl wants a commitment. And the rich boy wants the novelty of acting like he's in it for commitment. Then the poor girl gets pregnant, and the rich boy skips town." Talula explained, making a waving motion with her hand and shrugging like it was old news.

"So then, like, does that mean the 'she' that you both were talking about was...?" Goemon trailed off to which Talula nodded.

"My mum, yes. She tried to be strong for both of us but I could tell how she was still heartbroken over that bastard. Even though she left her. Left *us*. And when he remarried and had kids, making a big show about being a father and all, it broke her even more. Mum had days, weeks when she could hardly get out of bed. And then one day...she didn't get up anymore ever again. Had almost a dozen empty pill bottles on her nightstand." Talula said, putting her face in her hands as she started to cry softly. At this Rory quickly stood up to hug his wife and comfort her.

"It's alright, Mo Cuishle. It's alright. Your mum would be proud of the woman you've become." Rory said.

"I think I understand where this is going. After your mother committed suicide, at some point Desmond felt a pang of guilt for the woman and daughter he left. So he's been trying anything and everything to get back in touch with you and to make amends. But you wouldn't let him." Lupin surmised.

"No she wouldn't. And I sure as Hell wouldn't let him either. But MacBride was nothing if not persistent. As you can see he's gone as far as following us while we're on our honeymoon." Rory said.

"Yes, we saw how protective you were about your wife just from hearing the mention of MacBride. Fiercely protective, in fact. Some could even call that a lethal temper." Jigen pointed out.

"What? Are you saying I killed MacBride? And struck down that inspector just because?" Rory asked defensively.

"No, we're not saying that at all. But we are pointing out that a harassing biological father is more reason than what most husbands need to commit a crime in the defense of their wife." Fujiko said.

"Please, Rory didn't kill him! And neither did I! I didn't want anything to do with Desmond in life. I certainly wouldn't give him the satisfaction that my life is tied to his because I went to prison for killing him. You have to believe us!" Talula stated desperately.

"We do believe you, Talula. Really. But the issue now becomes who else would have reason to kill Desmond. After all, apart from you two no one else seems to know him personally." Lupin said.

"And while we're on that subject, what's this about business he had to do here that involved you?" Jigen asked.

"Oh, that. Well like you already guessed – Desmond has been trying anything and everything to become involved in my life. Sending me money. Trying to buy us a house. Basically throwing money at the situation until he can buy it. But recently he's been trying something different. Something big." Talula explained.

"Would this big thing happen to be what Desmond said about something your mom wanted more than anything in the world? The one thing he said even you couldn't turn down?" Goemon asked.

"It is. See my mum was into artwork. That's how her and Desmond met. At an art show in her neighborhood. She had an eye for fine art but, naturally, couldn't afford to buy any. Then one time while they were dating Desmond gave her the money to bid for the rare portrait of Francis Bacon by his friend Lucian Freud that had recently resurfaced. And she won it. But after they broke up when he found out she was pregnant with me, the pig had the gull to take it back. Even though she legally owned it she didn't have the fight in her to keep it." Talula explained.

"And he thought that if he gave it to you, then you'd call him every Christmas? What a stand-up character." Jigen said with a shake of his head.

"Yes, that's pretty much the gist of it, yes. But I wouldn't have accepted it anyway, no matter what Stephanie and Liam think. That

painting has more bad memories than good ones. And I want nothing to do with it." The young woman explained.

"Fair enough. Well I guess this does give reasonable doubt that you couldn't have done it. But still, unless we find a smoking gun as to who actually did it, we can't totally rule you both out." Fujiko said.

"Smoking gun...? Hmm...smoking...." Lupin muttered to himself, looking away in thought.

"What is it, Mr. Sernine?" Rory asked.

"Hm? Oh nothing. I just remembered something is all. Something that I think will give us the very smoking gun that we need." Lupin said as he headed for the door.

"Hey, wait Paul! Don't you, like, want to share it with the rest of us?" Goemon asked as he hurriedly followed after the master thief along with Jigen and Fujiko.

"I'll explain on the way! Just follow my lead!" Lupin said as they exited from the room. Then the master thief poked his head back in to address the couple. "Oh by the way! Ambrose is a really great real estate agent. You guys should talk to him if you're looking for a nice little house to buy. Just thought I'd let you know. Toodles!"

As the man left and closed the door, the couple could only blink in confusion.

"They're a strange bunch, that lot." Rory said with a shake of his head.

"That they are. But they seem fun otherwise." Talula said.

An hour later....

In the time that passed, things had settled down as much as they could. While guests were still on edge about the situation the atmosphere wasn't as chaotic as before. Everyone was free to move around inside the resort – but they couldn't leave the grounds. And after spending so much time doing their own thing most of the guests had all migrated to some part of the main lobby. Nobutoshi was sitting by the window in the den area looking out at the scenery, Elena sat on the couch adjacent to him

reading a book with Butrus sitting next to her drinking coffee, Talula, Rory and Howell stood at the mini bar, Luca was showing a series of card tricks to Mario and Ricky and the MacBride siblings were sitting at the stairs scrolling through their phones. Just then Percival came down the stairs and made his way to the bar, going straight to Howell.

"Excuse me, Dr. Conway? Are you busy?" Percival asked as he approached the man.

"Not at all, Mr. Percival. I'm totally free. What can I do for you?" Howell asked.

"Mr. Gatsby wants you to check over Inspector Zenigata. He's starting to wake up. And since you're the only doctor here we need your help." Percival said.

Howell's eyes widened in shock. And everyone else in the main lobby who heard this announcement looked up with interest. There was a moment of silence before the celebrity surgeon cleared his throat and replied.

"I uh...I see. Well, that's good about the inspector. It's a relief to hear that he didn't meet a bad end, too." Howell said with a small smile.

"Oh yes! It's very fortunate. But you need to be careful with him as he's still weak from those head injuries. Here, this is a copy of the key to the room Zenigata is resting in. Don't give it to anyone else, now. And once you're done examining the inspector return it to me." Percival instructed as he handed the brass key to Howell.

"Of course. I'll see to him right away." Howell said as he accepted the key.

"Thank you, doctor. We're very lucky to have you hear." Percival said, giving a bow and turning to leave back up the stairs. Once he got to the top of the stairs he looked over the railing to see the guests down below. No one moved from where they sat. But even from up above the tension was clear. Grinning widely Percival took out his personal cellphone and called Ambrose. "Phase one complete, Ambrose. Now we just wait for the rat to get the cheese in phase two."

Some more time had passed, and it was now the early evening. Zenigata laid unconscious in his temporary bed. He breathed evenly as he rested, letting out low breaths. Suddenly the door creaked open and a shadowy figure walked in. The figure then went over to the curtains, cut the draw cord from it and coiled both ends around their hands before pulling it tightly. The figure

walked over to Zenigata's bed side, staring down at him. Then they slowly brought the draw cord to his neck....

CLICK!! Suddenly the entire room was enveloped in brightness as the lights flicked on. And standing at the threshold of the room with his finger still on the switch was Lupin, flanked by Jigen, Fujiko and Goemon.

"Howdy there. I'd say I'm surprised to see you, but that'd be a lie. Looks like your partner tipped you off about our dear inspector waking up. And from the looks of it you're planning to use the same cut draw cord routine like you used to kill Desmond MacBride. Aren't you...Mr. Iwamoto?" Lupin asked.

Sure enough, the figure turned around to reveal the stunned, manic expression of Nobutoshi Iwamoto. Holding a draw cord from a curtain in his hands.

"....How? How did you know?" Nobutoshi asked.

"Well truthfully, we didn't know it was you exactly. But we knew that whoever killed Desmond MacBride did so for a reason. And there were a bunch of little things that, on their own, made no sense or were inconsequential. But when you put them all together they led straight to you." Lupin replied.

"The first indicator was when you told me that you wanted to do a follow-up interview about Kiji Imports. You said that you were in the process of acquiring an item that would make your company the envy of all other import companies. But you couldn't say what it was. But then I had to ask myself. Why would you need to go out the way to acquire some shiny new antique to make Kiji Imports stand out? It's not like you're unknown or anything." Fujiko said.

"So we decided to do a bit of internet sleuthing. And guess what we found out? Turns out you were up to your shoulders in black market dealings two years back. Using your imports company to help ship artwork and antiques without all of that, as you called it, tedious red tape." Jigen said.

"You cut a deal back then to turn on major black market players for a slap on the wrist. But even though you were never convicted of anything and any mention of you was buried in the news, your company still suffered from the scandal. Kiji Imports became a hot potato that nobody would hold even with oven mitts on." Lupin said.

"Then, like the spider to Little Miss Muffet, along came Desmond MacBride. An art collector big kahuna in high society. And he used you to be, like, the buffer for his art deals. It kept your lights on but you could barely break even. But you couldn't land any new clients, so you were stuck selling big bucks artwork for nickels on the dime in return." Goemon added.

"Then one day he promised to sell a very special painting through your import company. Francis Bacon by Lucian Freud. Just having a rarity like that in your possession would help you regain your prestige." Jigen said.

"And *that* was what you wanted a follow-up on. Your acquisition of the Francis Bacon portrait." Fujiko supplied.

"But then, something went wrong. Didn't it, Nobutoshi?" Lupin asked. The businessman was silent for a moment, then he slowly nodded.

"Desmond...he reneged on the deal. He wanted to give the Lucian Freud painting...to someone else." Nobutoshi confessed slowly.

"Right. He wanted to give it to Talula. But Desmond didn't even have the guts to tell you that himself, did he? You found that out thanks to someone who happened to hear Desmond announce his plan to give Talula the painting. The same someone who gave you the duplicate key to this room so you could take out Inspector Zenigata before he woke up and...." Before Lupin could finish, Nobutoshi yelled and as he looked at the group with an ugly, desperate expression.

"Shut up! If you know so much, then you know I won't allow any further exposure! Not from you motley bunch, or the inspector. So either you let me leave here, or I'll kill this man right now!" Nobutoshi stated, holding out the stretched out draw cord in a threatening manner.

But instead of the four thieves in front of the businessman replying to his threat, a voice from behind him spoke.

"Well that's a confession if ever I heard one." Said the voice.

"What...!?" Nobutoshi asked as he whipped around to see who spoke behind him.

And upon turning around, he was immediately met with a right hook that knocked him sideways and made him fall to the

ground with a hard thud. With a groan of pain the businessman passed from the strike. The Lupin Gang grinned and turned to look at the hitter. A fully conscious Inspector Zenigata.

"Nice right hook, Pops. I was wondering when you'd announce yourself." Lupin said.

"I wanted to make sure I got just enough on the recording before I knocked him out. You had plenty of rope, but Nobutoshi had to tie around his own neck by himself." Zenigata said as he pulled out the recording device hidden underneath his blanket and pressed the button to stop the recording.

"Fair enough. Plus it's not like we really needed to go into more details anyway since you're up. After all, you're not only a witness but you have the final clue." Fujiko said.

"Right. I had gone out for my morning jog, and I made it to the slopes. That's where I saw Nobutoshi burying Desmond MacBride. And before I could even try to call out for someone I got slugged at the left side of my head and blacked out." Zenigata explained, now clearly recalling the previous events that brought them here.

"We figured as much. No one but Elena and us knew that you jog in the morning when you made plans to meet her in the afternoon. So I'll bet Nobutoshi and his accomplice had an awful surprise when they saw you." Jigen said.

"They sure did. But I managed to come to for a second, and I grappled with Nobutoshi's accomplice when they tried to drag me off. Unfortunately, I was still pretty dazed from the first hit. Which gave Nobutoshi the chance to strike me again in the back of the head. And that time I went down for good." The inspector replied.

"But you didn't go down without something to show for it, Zenigata. You grabbed something off the accomplice, and through the rush of adrenaline kept it in your fist in a death grip." Fujiko said, clenching her fist to emphasize her point.

"That's right. It came off their sleeve. I remember hearing a rip and then felt something solid in my palm. And before I blacked out again all I could think about was not letting go." Zenigata said, holding up his still balled right fist.

"Well let's get a load at what's behind Door #1." Lupin said as he and the others walked over.

Zenigata held out his right arm and slowly opened up his fist, fingers somewhat stiff from being clenched so tightly for so long. Finally though his right hand opened completely and revealed a singular steel caduceus cuff link. Lupin nodded at the cuff link, not surprised by the sight of it.

"Mm-hmm, just like I figured. That proves that Howell Conway is Nobutoshi's accomplice. Of course, other little things helped prove it. Right, Goemon?" Lupin asked to the samurai who nodded.

"Right. When I was taking Talula away from the confrontation with Desmond and Stephanie, Howell came out of the men's room as we were leaving. He was in there and heard Desmond say that he was going to give Talula the one thing that said even she wouldn't turn away. Howell was in there and clearly heard what MacBride said, knowing what he was referring to. So he went and told Nobutoshi." Goemon explained.

"Why would Howell tell him anything? Did they know each other prior?" Zenigata asked.

"They sure did. That was part of what we found out when we looked into Iwamoto. Like you said, Zenigata. Anyone with a computer who knows where to look and what firewalls to get past could find out. And it turns out that Howell helped bring in most of Iwamoto's clients before the scandal broke. Even though he wasn't directly involved with the black market deals he still lost a lot of prestige with the celebrities who used Kiji Imports based on his suggestion. Business got bad for him, too. Not even the has been fallen stars would come to him for touch-ups." Jigen said.

"And when Howell met Desmond and found out he had that Francis Bacon portrait, he introduced him to Nobutoshi. He was relying on kickbacks from Nobutoshi getting that painting. So he had plenty of reason to keep Desmond from giving it to Talula." Fujiko said.

"But how did you get the idea Conway was involved at all?" Zenigata asked.

"You can thank Fujicakes and her choice of words for setting us on that path. When we talked with Talula and Rory, she said that we needed to find a smoking gun. And then I remembered Howell was stoking the flames at the fireplace a lot. It made me think that he was trying to burn something, and not just trying to warm himself up. And when Ricky told us that your fist was in a death grip – it gave me the idea that you tore off one of his cuff links." Lupin said.

"And that idea was right on the money, Lupin." Said a voice from behind the group and they turned to see Percival walking in, holding out something. "After we got phase two underway and the guests all left the main lobby, I put out that fire to see if anything was salvageable. I saw burnt remnants of fabric that looked to be from a blazer. But this one little piece managed to survive."

The head employee held out his hand to reveal the slightly charred mate of the cuff link Zenigata had.

"There's your smoking gun, Fujiko. Conway probably realized Pops tore off his other cuff link and burned his blazer in the fire place. But the great thing about steel is that it's non-combustible. And it takes a lot more than some stoked flames in an open fire to melt it down." Lupin said as he took the other cuff link from Percival.

"Well wait a minute. Where's Howell Conway now?" The inspector asked.

"If I had to guess, since Percival gave him the duplicate key for this room and Nobutoshi had it to get inside to try and kill you, he's probably hanging back in the lobby waiting to see if his partner in crime pulled it off. And he also has the last clue that wraps this all up." Lupin said.

"In that case, let me approach him." Goemon said.

"You sure about that, Goemon?" Jigen asked with a concerned expression.

"I am, Jigen. I'm the only one who can get close enough without suspicion. But I can handle myself." Goemon assured.

"Alright then, folks. Let's wrap up the final act. But first, we need Akechi and his crew to check something in Desmond's room just to make sure." Lupin said with a grin.

Goemon took the elevator down to the lobby and exited out, walking around the fireplace and getting into the den area. There he saw Howell sitting on the couch, anxiously tapping his foot and looking to the stairs every few moments. Likely waiting to see if Nobutoshi would come down the stairs after dispatching Zenigata. Taking in a deep breath and exhaling, the samurai walked over to Howell and spoke up.

"Hi, Conway-san! Is this seat taken?" Goemon asked. Howell's anxious foot tapping stopped as he turned to look at Goemon and smiled widely.

"Not at all, Tsubasa! Sit right down." Howell said as he gestured to the seat next to him. "I was getting bored anyway. Waiting on a friend of mine, but it seems like I've been stood up."

"Really? Who's the friend you were waiting for? I can go get them." Goemon said.

"Oh no, it's fine. They'll come around eventually. Probably just got hung up on something...important." Howell trailed off, trying to smile in a charming fashion but the anxiety and tension of the reality of things made it look awkward.

"Ah, I see. That's totally reasonable. Speaking of important, didn't Mr. Percival ask you to check out that poor inspector? He said he was starting to wake up." Goemon said in a cheery voice.

"Y-Yes, he did. But I figured I'd let Inspector Zenigata acclimate as he wo-woke up. I'll get to him in due time, cutie! Don't you worry about a thing." Howell said, waving the situation off as he laughed nervously and spoke with a slight stutter.

At this, Goemon slowly dropped the act and smiled in a more knowing, calculating manner.

"That so? Then tell me, Howell-san, were you going to get to Zenigata-sensei before or after Iwamoto-san killed him?" Goemon asked pointedly. This made Howell's body go rigid as he looked at him with wide eyes.

"Wh...What did you say?" Howell asked.

"I mean, what was your plan of action to try and cover your tracks? Personally I would have checked on Zenigata-sensei first to make an alibi and then kill him. Like how you made yourself an alibi by asking Ricky for that allergy medicine to be sent to your room. Or maybe you were planning to let Nobutoshi take the fall and bail on him in the snow coach." Goemon replied, holding out his hands in a weighing gesture. Then he looked to the stunned surgeon and smirked. "But it doesn't matter either way what your plan was. There's a new plan now."

At this Goemon gestured to the stairs. Howell turned to see Zenigata walking down and flanked by Lupin, Jigen, Fujiko, Ambrose

and Percival. The man gasped in shock at seeing the inspector alive. Seeing this reaction Zenigata scoffed as he walked over.

"Well now! Seems like you're surprised I pulled through, Howell. I'll admit, you and Iwamoto did strike me pretty good this morning. But in my line of work being hardheaded goes a long way. We already have Nobutoshi in custody. And we retrieved the other cuff link you tried to burn. So just make this easier and come along quietly." Zenigata said, taking out his signature handcuffs.

But Howell didn't go along quietly. Instead, he grabbed Goemon and held him in front of him like a human shield and pulled out a brass key that he held to the samurai's throat.

"Back off! Come any closer and Tsusu here will be cosplaying as a ghost!" Howell ordered before the group could come closer.

"Easy there, Howell. No need to make this worse than it already is." Jigen said.

"And that key. It isn't your room key, is it? It's the copy that MacBride asked Percival for last night, saying that he lost his original key. But he didn't. He wanted to give Nobutoshi a duplicate for him to use so he could come into MacBride's room so they could talk about the Francis Bacon portrait. Unfortunately communications broke down. And Nobutoshi killed him. Then he had you help him dispose of the body." Lupin said.

"You put the duplicate key in Desmond's pocket to make it look like he just left his room and wandered outside taking a stroll. But Nobutoshi knew that wouldn't work because the original key was still in Desmond's room. And finding another key on him would look suspicious. So he took the duplicate out of his pocket, tearing the lining in his rush because the key was new and very sharp, and gave it to you so that you could go into MacBride's room later and take the original key to dispose of it so that no one would now that you two had it." Fujiko supplied.

"Ha, ha, ha! Well aren't you a pair of bright bulbs. But not bright enough to stop me! Like I said, back off and Tsusu here doesn't get hurt. We'll be going for a little ride to the gondola and off to the airport." Howell said as he slowly backed away to the door.

"Conway-san, this is a really uncool way in which you're handling things. The best thing you can do now is stop. Otherwise you're gonna get hurt real bad." Goemon warned in a cutesy voice.

"Oh yeah? And who's going to hurt me exactly, cutie?" Howell asked in mocking amusement.

At this, Goemon looked over his shoulder to stare up at the man and gave a wicked smile.

"You asked that at just the right time!" The samurai exclaimed.

Then, before Howell could even register what was happening, he was struck by a flurry of hits. First Goemon stomped on his foot which made him lean away and move the key from his neck. Then he was struck in the stomach by a sharp elbow from the samurai which made him fully back off so he could wrap his arms around his now pained stomach. Finally he was met by a roundhouse kick to the face that sent him flying into a potted plant. By the end of it all Howell saw were dancing keys in his vision before he passed out.

"Nice work, lil' darlin'." Jigen said with a proud smile as he went over to his boyfriend and kissed him.

"Like I said, I can handle myself." Goemon said with a smile as he leaned into the kiss.

A short time later, police from the town arrived to cart Nobutoshi and Howell away into custody as well as take Desmond MacBride's body for proper storage and examination. As expected, Akechi and his assistants did in fact find the original key of Desmond's room inside the suite. Which proved that the duplicate was requested under false pretenses. Pretenses that would up being used against the art collector and cost him his life. Butrus, Stephanie and Liam left the lodge that same night with the police – unable to stay another night after everything that happened and wanting to make arrangements for Desmond's funeral. Liam tried to give Jigen a kiss farewell, but a very fed up Goemon gave him a warning smile to see him off that sent the blonde scurrying. Once everything was said and the four thieves, inspector, Ambrose and Percival all reconvened in the dining hall.

"Man, what a mess this vacation turned out to be. Sorry for all of this, Agent Percival." Zenigata said to Percival.

"Agent Percival!?" Lupin repeated in shock.

"Don't worry about it, Inspector. I'll call Interpol later on and explain what happened." Percival assured with a wave of his hand.

"Interpol!? Wait, what's going on?" Fujiko asked in confusion.

"Oh right. I guess you wouldn't know. Percival here is a freelance agent from Interpol. That's how I wound up working security here. It was through his recommendation to Ambrose." Zenigata explained.

"But I thought Ambrose said you were an expat!?" Lupin asked to the pale man, still shocked.

"I am. An expat from the Washington division of Interpol. I take up laborer jobs through temp agencies to gather intel for various cases. Like I said, places away from the public eye makes people more honest about themselves. And between Nobutoshi Iwamoto and Howell Conway, I knew that something was going to happen. Which is why I recommended Zenigata being here to Ambrose." Percival explained with a smile.

"So is that what you meant when you said you had your reasons to give us a pass? You were focusing on keeping an eye on Howell and Nobutoshi?" Jigen asked.

"Yes and no. They were part of the reason. But another reason I had was much greater than that. Actually, I guess in a way you four are part of that reason." Zenigata said.

"You're talking in riddles, Pops. What the Hell are you talking about? And what's the reason why you haven't arrested us?" Lupin asked.

"Lupin, I wasn't surprised when I saw you all here. When you booked your rooms for the lodge Ambrose told me the updated guest list." Zenigata started.

"You what!?" The four thieves asked in shock.

"That's right. And knowing Zenigata's staunch dedication to your case, I suggested to him that I call in a different agent to act as security because I didn't think he could focus on Howell and Nobutoshi and resist the urge to arrest you four." Percival said.

"Naturally, I took that personally. So we made a bet! If I could go through this whole vacation not arresting any of you and didn't try to slap the cuffs on you until we returned to Japan and let the airport terminal there, he'd have to personally supplement my expense account for three whole months! That means I could dine at my favorite high-end noodle shops around the world!" Zenigata exclaimed cheerily.

"Wait. *That's it!?* You gave us a pass was so that you could get three months worth of expensive noodles?!" Lupin asked, looking both surprised and offended that his worth came down to restaurant quality ramen.

"Frankly speaking, Lupin, I don't totally blame Zenigata for this. I would have made a similar bet with the same stakes." Goemon said with an agreeing nod.

"Well, I guess that wraps up this whole mystery then. So now what?" Fujiko asked.

"Now I treat you all to a celebratory dinner! Think of this as a restart to your vacation that ruined over the past forty-eight hours." Ambrose said, clapping his hands. At which Ricky came out of the kitchen pushing a food cart.

"That's really sweet of you, Ambrose, but most of the staff left for the night. It's just Percival and Ricky here. Won't it be too much to have them do all of the work?" Lupin asked as he lifted the silver lid from the platter, only to be bombarded by the flurry of doves that came out. "WHOA!!"

The group watched as the doves flew up high, then formed a circle that went on for a short loop before the birds dispersed into fifteen groups of three. The birds then all bundled together and, in a puff of feathers, turned into steaming plates of Pollo Saltado. The plates all had little parachutes on them which helped to gently lower them down to each table. And in that moment Luca came out of the kitchen with a wide smile.

"You don't have to worry about that, Lupin. I was able to work a little magic and help Ricky out." Luca said.

Just then Elena, Akechi, Yoshio, Mayu, Mario, Talula and Rory came into the dining hall – all looking cheerful and ready to eat themselves. Akechi walked over to the gang with his assistants, looking at the Lupin and his fellow thieves with a haughty expression.

"Don't think that this is the end between us. You're just lucky that a case with greater priority occurred. But you're still on my most wanted list, thief." Akechi stated, pointing at Lupin.

"Fair enough. Glad to know I'm still a top favorite." The master thief replied with a smile.

"Hmph! Top *least* favorite is more like it. Still...even I can admit that you did an adequate job with this investigation. For people on the opposite side of the law, anyway." Akechi said, flipping his hair.

"Aww Akechi. If I didn't know any better I'd say you were getting soft on us." Fujiko teased. The cross-dressing detective blushed and shook his head before turning to glare at her.

"Sh-Shut up! I'm just giving credit where it's due! Even for those undeserving as you four! That's the last time I ever give the likes of you a compliment! Hmph!" Akechi stated before turning on his heel and storming off, Yoshio and Mayu following right behind as they tried to calm him down. The four thieves just laughed while Zenigata shook his head in amusement. Then they were approached by Talula and Rory.

"Evening, folks. Seems like I have a lot to thank you for. Especially you for taking down that Conway lad, *Tsusu*. Or do you prefer Goemon? Percival told us everything." Talula said with a grin, saying the fake nickname in a teasing tone.

"Just Goemon, please. I spoke like that one more time, I'd be drawn to Silicon Valley and never leave." Goemon said with a chuckle.

"Well, Goemon, like I said I have a lot to thank you for. All of you. And I want to express my thanks with this." Talula said, holding out her hands to reveal what she was holding behind her back.

It was no bigger than a large postcard, but there was no denying it. In Talula's hands was the Francis Bacon portrait by Lucian Freud. Everyone gasped as they looked at it.

"Holy crap. The Francis Bacon portrait. It really is that small." Lupin said.

"Yeah. Turns out that Desmond actually wrote in his will that upon his death he wanted me to have this. Brought it with him to give to me and all." Talula said.

"Really? I'll bet Stephanie had a real fit about that." Fujiko said.

"Actually...Stephanie gave it to me herself. Said that she didn't want the reminder of the reason why her father was killed. She

may be a spoiled brat, but she did love Desmond. And he loved her. She even told me that he loved me too. Maybe not the right way, but he did love me. Seems like he really did want to make things right for abandoning me and mum." Talula explained.

"And what do you think about that?" Zenigata asked with a careful curiousness.

"I think that this doesn't make her, Liam and me friends. But who knows? Maybe I'll give them a ring every other holiday. But I meant it when I said it has too many bad memories. So I don't want it either." Talula said. Then she turned to Ambrose and held out the small portrait. "That's why I'm giving it to you, Mr. Gatsby."

"What? Really?" Ambrose asked in shock.

"You bet! Even though things got crazy with the murder and whatnot me and Rory are still enjoying ourselves. We got to meet all sorts of neat folks here. Plus I know you gave us a discount for the room. So consider this my way of paying it forward." Talula said, holding the portrait out further Ambrose. The resort owner blinked at the offered painting, then slowly accepted it with nervous but eager hands.

"Thank you, Mrs. Odgen. I'm truly touched by this. I promise that I'll cherish this for the rest of my days." Ambrose said, just as Elena came over to the group.

"I'm glad that you're alright, Koichi. I guess we'll have to take a rain check on catching up, huh?" Elena asked with a sad but understanding smile.

"Only until my head stops ringing like a belfry. But if you're interested in some authentic Japanese noodles, I could meet you half way to Japan." Zenigata replied with a smile of his own.

"It's a date. Also, Mr. Gatsby, I couldn't help but notice that gorgeous Francis Bacon portrait you have. I know we more or less worked out a price for the investment already, but I would be inclined to sweeten the pot if you included the portrait as well." Elena said.

Without missing a beat Ambrose rose from his seat and practically teleported to Elena's side.

"But of course, Ms. Gotti! Deals are made to be flexible, after all! And I think this will look just darling in that cute house you bought in Patras. Just out of curiosity, exactly how much *more* would you be sweetening the pot?" Ambrose asked as he led the woman away so they could talk business.

"Well so much for cherishing it for the rest of his days." Percival said with a grin.

"You can say a lot about Ambrose, but the one thing I can confidently say he'll never do is look a gift horse in the mouth." Lupin said, laughing at the scene along with everyone else.

So while the vacation started off rocky, it ultimately ended on a happy note for nearly everyone involved. And when it comes to a vacation, you can always be assured of this with the Lupin Gang and Inspector Zenigata. Nobody gets away with trying to steal their good time.