

# Dustbowl Xia

## Episode 1: Yo, Jimbo!

Written by Daniel Bayn

Texas Panhandle - 1935

Bass strings pulse through the walls of a decaying saloon as a jazz band belts out the frenzied rhythms of a bygone age. At their feet, a couple tears up the dance floor. The bottle blond screams as her partner twirls and tosses her like a juggling pin. They glide across the uneven floorboards on his wing tip shoes. The crowd cheers them on, clapping in time to the music, but their smiles don't quite touch their eyes.

A grotesque man swills beer in a corner booth, surrounded by young women. Neither their dust-caked clothes nor sun-cracked skin can deter his meaty fingers from their pawing. What *does* deter him is a whisper from a boy with wide eyes, who blows through the saloon door. Shoving the women aside, the man flees the booth and trips over himself to get upstairs.

No sooner is he out of sight than the saloon doors swing inward and a small group of gangsters make their entrance. They fan out and infiltrate the crowd, instantly silencing anyone who sees them. The last one to enter takes a moment to fiddle with the gold rings on his fingers, then makes a bee-line for the dance floor. The music stutters, then stops, as the capo takes center stage.

"I love the heartland," he says to no one in particular. "It's full of God's people, meek and mild. How you doin'?" he asks the bottle blonde, very much in particular. "We're lookin' for a man named Jimbo. Can't miss him: fat, ugly, smells of the sewer. Anybody seen him?"

"No, sir" replies the man in the wing tip shoes. The mobster whirls on him. "Last folk to come into town were me and the band. Everyone else is local."

"That so? Maybe we just all look alike to you, negro."

"Why don't you let me buy you and your boys a beer?"

"We're not lookin' for hospitality, boy. We're lookin' for Jimbo. If you're not gonna talk..."

The capo throws a right hook, but the dancer just leans back and lets the swing pull his opponent off balance. Then, he kicks the creep's legs out from under him. As the thug falls, the dancer's elbow drops on the back of his head, accelerating his face's journey to the floor.

The locals run for the exit as mafioso move in from every side, smashing beer bottles and brandishing bar stools. Paying them no mind, the dancer takes his partner's hand and nods to the boys on stage. The music starts up right where it left off.

They're doing the Lindy Hop when the first goon tries to cut in. The dancer swings his partner out of harm's way, then drops to the floor. Glass teeth take a bite out of the air above his head. Wing tips pop up on either side of the shiv as the dancer flips into a headstand, locks the goon's arm between his legs, and drags him to the floor. He's back on his feet in time to rejoin his partner and segue into a St. Louis Shag.

The next attacker hurls a chair, easily dodged with a deep dip, then comes in close for fisticuffs. The dancer turns, keeping the girl behind him, and blocks a flurry of jabs in time to the music. Then, he steps inside his attacker's knee and bends it out, throwing him off balance. A quick knife hand strike to the throat sends him crashing backwards through a table.

He pulls his partner close, then unfurls her like a flag. Her arm snaps out and cracks another thug across the face. "Ow!" she shouts as the dancer coils her back up into his arms. He kisses her hand with a wink. Then, he twirls her around such that she flies off her feet. Her pumps plow through several mafia jaws as they twirl through the air.

The capo and the blonde regain their feet at the same moment. He draws a gun and fires wildly, still concussed. She screams as bullets cruise past her head, puncture the bass drum, and ricochet off a cymbal. They twirl away from each other and the dancer's motion builds to a tornado kick that connects with the capo's ear before his eyes can warn his brain.

The gunshots fade to silence.

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Tumbleweed blows past a sun-bleached telephone pole. In its boughs rests a bird's nest made entirely out of barbed wire. A curtain of dust shoots up around it as a Bentley coupe tears down the highway below.

"Did you see that bird's nest?" The driver adjusts his bright red suspenders as he speaks, trusting the wheel to mind its own business. His hair is pulled back in a long, smooth braid and adorned with wooden talismans.

His passenger glares out the window, her chin perched in her hand. A gun peaks out from her pin-stripped suit, while her long hair spills out from beneath a brand new fedora. "Yeah, it was great," she mumbles.

"I think it was made out of barbed wire."

"Things are tough all over," she says, looking out on a blasted hellscape of withered farms and empty fields.

"Sure, but just think about the chicks that get raised in that nest. Those are gonna be some *badass* birds!"

She leans back and pulls her hat over her eyes as the Bentley breezes past a town marker. In peeled paint, it reads...

Gish Cha  
Population: 100

The dry and empty earth rolls past until they approach a tiny bundle of buildings. An emaciated main street clings to life, surrounded by just a few blocks of homes. Many are clearly abandoned. Signs of life are weak. Signs of prosperity are nonexistent.

"Wake up dear, we're at grandma's." Ahote gives her a slap, then hops out of the car.

Lotus rolls out the other side and sorts out her limbs. "So," she spreads her arms wide, embracing it all, "*this* is my destiny?"

"Could be."

"We shoulda stayed in California." Her arms drop back down to her sides, defeated. "Ya know, we passed dozens of families on their way *out* of here. Furniture, tools, pots and pans, their entire lives were tied to their cars, driving resolutely towards California. We were already *in* California. Seems like the smart thing is going *to* rather than *from*. Aren't we smart people, Ahote? I wanna be one of the smart people."

"At least the room will be cheap."

"You'd better hope so," she rattles a few coins around in her palm, "cuz this is the last of our rations."

"As long we we're following the path, Destiny shall provide," he says as he swipes a dime, "but Sweetness needs gas."

"For once, we agree. I'd rather invest in a way to leave than a place to stay."

Pulling her fedora down against the sun and dust, she turns toward the only apparent lodgings: a two-story shanty with a "saloon" sign hanging drunkenly from its awning. The floorboards don't so much creak as crunch beneath her boots. The place looks even worse on the inside. Empty tables stare at a stage whose only dressing is broken furniture and a drum with a bullet hole through it.

"Sorry, but we're close..." The dark-skinned man behind the bar looks acutely out of place. Maybe it's his too-hip, silk vest or his wing tip shoes. Or maybe it's just the way he's staring at her, like he's just seen his first ocean sunset. He's fit, though, and reasonably attractive. Color rushes to her cheeks.

"Don't be sorry," she says. "We ain't that close, having just met an' all."

Embarrassed, he breaks eye contact and walks around the bar. "Closed. I mean, we're closed... for renovations," he adds with an expository wave towards the stage.

"Looks like a wrecking crew came in here. Is that a bullet hole?"

"Um... yeah. Things have been kinda... tense." He watches her eyes dissect the crime scene, then turns the conversation sharply to the left. "I'd ask what a girl like you is doing in a place like this, but I'm sure a girl like you goes wherever she pleases."

"It's the pants, right," she says with a smile. "Men like skirts, 'cuz they make it harder for their women to run away."

"Hey, now! Don't paint us all with the same brush. Me, I like the way they flare out when you're dancin'." He demonstrates with a pantomime pirouette.

"Well, you could always wear one. Something with sequins would really bring out your eyes."

"I'm Dante," he introduces himself with a theatrical bow, then grabs her hand and brings it to his lips. She ripostes with a firm handshake.

"Lotus."

"We're closed," a voice rings out from upstairs. It's one of the band members, wearing a black suit and a blacker expression. "Did you tell her we're closed?"

"For renovations," they say in unison. "Yeah, I told her. Cool, Iya."

"My friend and I just need a place to sleep for a night or two. We don't mind the mess..."

"You're traveling with a friend?" Dante asks.

The man in black barks over them both. "Closed means CLOSED, as in No Vacancy, as in No Room At The Fucking Inn and the manger's by reservation only. Closed. Got it?"

In a sidebar to Dante, Lotus whispers, "Yeah, but it's not like that."

To the jackass upstairs: "First of all, you tactless shit house rat, that's no way to run a business. Second, I wouldn't stay in this bloated carcass of a gin mill if Jesus himself was the maitre d'."

The man upstairs bursts into laughter as she turns to leave. "Try the general store across the street!" he calls after her. "I'm sure they'd *love* to have you!"

"Whatever," she says under her breath. "I'm givin' this place the ankle." She steps outside just in time to see the Bentley squeal around the corner. "Or not." Shrugging to herself, she decides to take the jackass' advice. The general store is in better condition than the saloon, but that's not saying much. Like everything else, it's caked in dust, but at least the windows aren't shuttered and there's a nice car outside.

Inside... not so good. Crates and barrels have been pressed into service as makeshift card tables, while a stack of cans appears to have been used for target practice. Something red stains the wall behind the cash register, either blood or tomato sauce. "Hey," a young man with a Chicago accent calls into the back room. "We got a customer."

He's immediately joined by a trio of injured men. One is nursing his shoulder, another has a nasty bruise on his throat, but their leader puts them both to shame. His face is a jigsaw puzzle of welts and lacerations. He slaps the not-cashier across the shoulder. "Who the hell is this? You made me think the Boss was here."

"My name's Lotus," she cuts in, already losing patience. "The jackass across the street said you could give me a room for the night."

They all snicker in unison, like they rehearse. "You bet I could, sweetheart. You can have mine. I hate sleepin' alone."

Lotus pinches the bridge of her nose. "Ya know what, forget it." She spins on her heel, but they swarm around her like coyotes on fresh meat.

"No chance of that, my eastern flower. Once my brain gets hold of a pretty face, it never lets go... not until the next morning, anyway." Their laughs are dead things. The capo slides between her and the doorway, then reaches out and strokes her hair.

"Not too long from now," Lotus tells him, "you're gonna *really* regret doin' that."

She crushes his rejoinder with four knuckles to the trachea. Her other hand delivers a palm strike to his chest and he staggers backwards, just barely catching himself on the door frame. His goons grab her by the arms and yank her back, but she's light on her feet. She twists around, breaks their hold with a sweep of her arm, and leaps up into a spin kick that wipes the surprised looks right off their faces.

The capo tries to catch her in a bear hug, but she flies onto the cashier's counter and starts kicking canned goods at him. "I didn't even wanna stop in this armpit of a town! No restaurant, no hotel, and now it's infested with palookas from Chicago! Aren't you children a little far from home?!"

The two thugs are back on their feet and the not-cashier is sneaking up behind her. Lotus steps off the counter and plants one foot in the first thug's face. Kicking off him, she twists into a sideways barrel roll and brings her other foot down on the second thug's sore shoulder. He screams like a girl.

The capo closes in, starts throwing hooks and haymakers. Lotus blocks one after another until the not-cashier creeps into range, then she ducks and drives a reverse kick hard into his mid-section. The kid folds in half as he sails through the back room door. Her foot snaps forward and launches her into a backwards somersault that puts two kicks in the capo's chest and one right under his jaw. She lands in a crouch, one hand holding her hat.

A group of men eclipses the doorway. First among them is a pretty boy with an aviator's scarf draped around his shoulders. "I didn't expect to catch a show this early," he remarks as he steps over the capo like offal in the street. "I'm sure my boys had it coming. Truman, here, has never been my favorite. Since we were boys, he's thought that picking a fight was the best solution to every problem. Once, he spent half an hour insulting a pickle jar's ancestry, because he couldn't remove the lid.

"Let me make it up to you." A money clip appears in his hand, practically gagging on bills. He counts off a couple and presses them into Lotus' hand. Without letting go, he guides her over to the makeshift card table and pulls out a chair. "Please, sit." He takes a chair kitty corner to her and leans in with practiced sincerity. "My name is Raymond. You can call me Ray."

"Lotus."

"Lovely, just lovely. Tell me, Lotus, what brings you to... whatever town this is?"

"Passin' through."

"I see. Well, let me tell you what brings me to this, as you put it, armpit of a town. In point of fact, it's an armpit of a man. He was my brother-in-law, up until last month. That was when he murdered my sister. The drunk beat her to death with an empty bottle, beat her so hard her head split open like a grape. Truman, over there, tells me the rat bastard is hiding out in this town. Says he's hired a team of mercenaries to protect him and paid the locals to keep their mouths shut. He answers to 'Jimbo.' Ain't that the living end? My sister was murdered by a man with a punch line for a name." Ray doesn't laugh.

"Lotus, I know you don't have any reason to care about me or my sister. Hell, after the way my boys treated you, I'm sure you'd rather just keep on passing through. Thing is, those guys that Jimbo hired are, apparently, very rough customers. I can use all the help I can get." The money clip reappears, makes itself at home on the table between them. "What would it take to convince you to help me bring a murderer to justice? Someone with your obvious talents would surely tip the scales."

Truman groans back to partial consciousness and tries to sit up, but an asian man in a kung-fu shirt pushes him back down with a heavy heel. "Thanks, Chuck." Then, back to Lotus, "Wadaya say?"

Lotus pushes away from the table and gets to her feet. "I say: Sorry. First, I'm sorry for what happened to your sister. Second, I'm sorry, but I can't help you. I ain't no cop or mercenary." She heads for the door, again, but Chuck blocks her path. He twirls something sharp and shiny on the end of a chain, like he means to measure her with it.

"Chuck, let the lady pass." Ray's voice is laced with poison, just enough to taste. "I'm sure she's had her fill for one day." The man in the kung-fu shirt steps aside, but his gaze clings to her like a jealous lover.

Finally back outside, Lotus finds Ahote waiting by the car. "Where the hell have you been?"

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A little while back...

Pulling her fedora down against the sun and dust, Lotus turns toward the only apparent lodgings: a two-story shanty with a "saloon" sign hanging drunkenly from its awning. Ahote watches her saunter inside, then backs Sweetness up to the pumping station. There's no attendant in sight, but someone cries "Stay right there!" as soon as Ahote touches the pump. An old man in cracked spectacles pokes his head through the door. "Just take what you want and go!"

"Okay, old timer." Ahote starts the pump with practiced ease, never taking his eyes off the door. "I just need a little. Must be my lucky day. Not too many places giving away gas."

"He's not generous. He's afraid." Ahote turns to find a bottle blonde draped over the hood of his car. "Some folks blew into town the other day; they're not too keen on payin' for things."

"I see," Ahote takes a closer look at main street while he hangs up the pump. Most of the windows are shuttered tight and there's only one other car on the curb, a black sedan with Illinois plates. He places his dime on top of the pump. "See this, mister? I don't take what's not given."

"I didn't think you were one of them," the blonde purrs. "You've got good taste, for one thing." She runs her hand along the chrome siding. "I've never been in a car like this. All we got here is trucks and tractors." She meets Ahote at the driver's side door and runs her hands up his suspenders. "My name's Esther. Care to take me for a ride?"

"Yes. Yes I do," he gulps. Then, with a glance towards the saloon, "As long as it's quick."

Lotus steps out of the saloon and into Sweetness' rear view mirror just before they round the corner. Ahote doesn't seem to notice.

"She drives like a dream, like we're floating on a cloud and the whole world is miles and miles below us." Esther squirms in her seat, enjoying the leather. "If I had a car like this, I'd just drive and drive in any direction, as far as it would take me. Anywhere's gotta be better than here, right?"

"Things are tough all over."

"I guess. That's my place out there." She points to a pile of sand and wood on the horizon. "Pa left me the farm when he passed away, sorta. I was the only one left, at any rate. The soil's no good for raising anything but jackrabbits."

She bites her lip and starts wringing the hem of her dress. It climbs slowly up her thigh. "There's men in town who take care of me, but that's no life, cozying up to anybody who'll buy you a meal. At least whores get paid in cash."

Ahote eases each word out, as if suspicious of his own tongue. "Let's not resort to prostitution *right* away. Isn't there anything else you can do? Sewing, cooking, killer for hire?"

"Don't do no good to sell anything if nobody's buying. Besides, I told you: the guys in town aren't the paying type." Esther touches his arm and leans towards

him, dangling her cleavage like a lure on a hook. "Do you think I could hitch a ride with you? Just let me off at the first place with a nightclub or a restaurant or... anything."

"Sure" he says with only moderate hesitation. "I'm sure Lotus won't mind sharing the seat for a few miles..."

Her ass is immediately back in said seat, her wiles revoked. "Don't worry about it. I wouldn't want to impose. Truman's gonna let me go with him to Chicago, once they're done here." She inhales sharply, as if trying to suck those last words back into her mouth. They pass over the rusted remains of a railroad in silence. "So... what kinda car *is* this?"

"She used to be a Bentley, but I've made a lot of modifications." Ahote's chest swells. "This car is my soul."

"I feel the same way about my hair."

"No, I mean this car is *literally* my soul, the physical embodiment of everything about me that is good and enduring." The girl's spine straightens. Her hand starts searching for the door handle, tries not to draw attention to itself. "The holy men of Tibet and Siberia call it a 'windhorse.' They say every person has one. It grows stronger when you do good deeds. The windhorse is your luck, your destiny, and your soul. Mine is this fine automobile."

Finding no success with the door, the girl's hand slinks back into her lap. "But, um... it's a *real* car, right? I mean, you filled it up at the gas station."

"I only put in half a gallon. This car will run on a thimble of gas, if needs be. It will never fail me unless I fail myself. Plus, it can do this." Ahote pops the car up on two wheels and skis down the highway. The girl gropes frantically for a hand hold, then screams as the car twists into a spin. All four tires rejoin the road in a plume of dust.

Now driving blind, Ahote puts it in reverse and flies back toward town. As they approach the railroad, he sends Sweetness into a spin. The car jumps skyward when it hits the tracks, rotates twice in mid-air, then touches down as gracefully as a cat. "Sure beats the hell outta transubstantiation, right?"

"I think I'd like you to take me back to town, now."

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"So I did, and she ran off, then you came out of the General Store and said 'Where the hell have you been?' At which point, I told you this story and that pretty much brings us up to now."

"Cute," Lotus summarizes as she gets in the car. Ahote pokes his head through the driver's side window, leaving most of his body pointedly not in the car.

"What's up, buttercup? No room at the inn?"

"God! Not you, too. Look, this place is locked up tight and fully stocked with assholes. I say we keep movin' to the next town." She straightens her hat and fixes her eyes on the horizon, as if intending to drive by will alone.

"What happened?" Ahote asks in a tone of boundless patience.

"Leseee... The saloon is closed for renovations, which sucks 'cuz the bartender's a looker, and the general store's been taken over by the Chicago mob. It just ain't a hospitable place. I say we move along."

"You can't keep rolling forever, tumbleweed. Don't you think it's a little conspicuous that we happen to wander into a town that's smack in the middle of a criminal invasion? Where you smell trouble, I see providence. We're walking the path, Lotus, and that means resolving the conflicts that we find along the way."

Lotus starts making steering wheel motions with her hands. "I kinda had to rough 'em up a little. Not the bartender, the mobsters. They were gettin' fresh, so I laid 'em out. Then their boss showed up, tried to hire me, I said 'No.' You want me to manhunt for the Outfit? If that's my destiny, I coulda found it in a town with a goddamned movie theater."

"No, I don't think we're here to solve the mafia's problems. I think we're here to help these people. You said it yourself: this whole town is locked up tight. Maybe we're here to kick the Outfit outta Dodge."

She lets her arms drop and finally turns to look at him. "I'm good, *so damn good*, but I'm in no hurry to take on this many jerks all by my lonesome. The mob's looking for some wife killer who's hiding out here with a bunch of mercenary bodyguards. I think they're the ones who are renovating the saloon, by the way. Breakin' up bar fights is *never* a good idea."

Ahote mulls that over for a minute, works his jaw as if chewing on it. "Sounds to me like they're all bad men. Why not go to work for the mob, just this once? If we can ferret out their wife killer, the Outfit will go back to Chicago and the mercenaries will go back to the bread line."

"Ya know, I'm getting mixed signals from you. First, it's 'Killing is wrong' and 'Find your destiny.' Now it's 'Hey, why not work for the mafia?' It would really grease the wheels if you could just make up your damn mind!"

"I said *murder* is wrong. Killing for profit or kicks or because it's the easiest solution to a problem is wrong. Unnecessary killing is wrong. All I'm proposing is that you drag a viper into the light of day and let a pack of hyenas do what comes natural."

"Christ! Fine!" She's back out of the car in a blink, back inside the general store in two. Ahote gets in the car and warms up the engine, just in case.

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"Wow. That was quick." Truman's three lackeys are hanging up-side down from the rafters when Lotus pokes her head back through the general door.

Ray looks up from his work at the card table, where he appears to have been slapping Truman awake. "Chuck's handiwork. Take a bow, Chuck." The man in the kung-fu shirt does no such thing. Instead, he slides his feet into a fighting position and lets the chain slip from up his sleeve.

Lotus does her best to ignore him. "Hey, is that money still on the table?"

"Sure is, sweetheart."

"Yeah, you can keep the 'sweethearts' to yourself, but I'll take the money." He tosses her the whole wad, clip and all. "Great. Wait right here."

She turns and marches right across the street, adjusts the under-arm holsters beneath her jacket. She throws the saloon doors wide and strides into the main room, takes a deep breath... and stares into the barrels of the half dozen firearms leveled at her along the banister and down the stairs. The men behind those barrels stare back at her with merchants' eyes, carefully calculating a transaction.

Dante steps around the bar and approaches her, hands above his head. "Ya know, the man upstairs was just jokin' when he said you should try the general store. Nobody wants to see you hangin' with the wrong crowd."

"Well, I had some time to kill. Besides, their boss is a lot more polite than yours."

"Ain't it the truth?" Dante casts the man in black a look that says he lost a bet. "I caught a little of the action over there, by the by. Swanky moves."

"Thanks."

"My pleasure. Point is, we ain't pickin' any fights. Obviously, we're ready to finish one, but it would be a damn shame to put a bullet in a kitten like you. How about you gimme your guns and I'll pour you a drink?"

"Hmm, let me think it over?" Lotus crosses her arms in contemplation, which happens to put each hand within flirting distance of a gun. The musicians tense up like a string being tuned. Dante slides in close to Lotus, shielding her with his body and holding her arms with his hands. "Hey, now. Make the smart play, lady."

Slowly, her hands pull back from her pistols, but then she snaps her arms free of Dante's grasp and slams her palms into his chest. Almost. He starts falling backwards before she even touches him. Her palms connect with empty air as he folds himself in half and flips heels over head.

He rights himself just in time to see Lotus fly over his head! He nabs her ankle as it floats past and brings her crashing back to earth. She pops back up like a rubber ball, fedora lost in the wreckage, fury plain upon her face. Dante laughs out loud, then starts dancing back and forth. The gunmen finally relax.

Lotus does not. She closes in and lets loose a volley of punches. Dante flows around them like water. She switches to hooks and knife hand strikes; he bobs up and down, ducking each one in turn. Then, he plants his hands on the floor and rolls to the side, coming up on her flank. She backs off defensively, takes a breath, and watches him dance from foot to foot.

"You got fancy feet, Fred Astaire, but when are we gonna fight?"

"Are you kiddin', lady?" one of the musicians exclaims. "Dante's the *king* of swing!"

She lunges at Dante with a forward kick. He turns away from it, leaning just out of reach with his hand up to protect his face. She whirls into a spin kick. He bends one knee and ducks under her foot, his whole body parallel to the floor. She continues rotating into a leg sweep, but he cartwheels safely over.

When Dante finally counter-attacks, it's with a wide, arching kick. Lotus blocks with one arm, but it stops him as cold as if he'd kicked the side of a barn. She grabs that leg with both hands and throws him across the saloon. His back crunches into one of the balcony's support beams and he hits the ground in a shower of splinters.

She smirks, but there's little time to waste. Once again, she flies up towards the balcony, but Dante's wing-tip shoes are already moving. He runs up the support beam beneath her and executes a backflip that hooks his foot around her ankle. Again, she crashes back to earth.

He works out the kinks in his spine while she gets up and brushes some dust off her shoulder. They circle each other like dancers, answering each others unspoken challenges with a shifted stance or a quickened pace. He beams at her

like a birthday candle. Her smirk returns, teases a smile, then she flies towards him! She hangs in the air, unleashing three kicks before hitting her apogee.

Dante pitches backwards and drops down on one hand, lets her sail right overhead. He rolls over onto all fours and almost stands back up, but Lotus is already bouncing off the far wall. She twists into a tornado kick in mid-air. Dante contorts himself into a C-shaped handstand that narrowly avoids her sledge-hammer heel.

She lands on his other side and, when he regains verticality, Dante tries to push Lotus back with a slow kick to the stomach. Her whirlpool hands wrap around his ankle, then unwind in a motion that spins him like a rolling pin. He hits the floor hard, but doesn't stay there for long.

Dante's feet shoot up in front of Lotus's face, then snap towards her at an obtuse angle. She tries to grab him, but those toes are long gone. Dante moves about the floor like a mad monkey, kicking from unexpected directions. Lotus blocks them all, but barely. Then, he launches into a windmill kick that leaves his body hanging sideways in the air while his feet chase each other towards her. Lotus lurches back, stumbles, falls... into his arms.

He dips her deep, neither of them sure if it's a flourish or a takedown. Confusion, then relief, then panic flash across Lotus' face. Her foot whips up and cracks Dante on the back of the head. Together, they collapse.

"I'd tell you to get a room," says the man upstairs, "but you know. Dante, maybe you should take the lady outside." It's not a question.

"Wadaya say, tomcat?" Dante asks, massaging the his skull. "Give up?"

"Not yet," she replies while untangling her limbs, "but outside sounds good. And gimme my hat." Dante tosses her the fedora and they shamble out the door.

A half dozen guns track their every step. "This is all I need," the man in black lowers his weapon so he can rub his temples.

"I wouldn't date her," Dante's back-up man declares. "I hate it when girls wear pants."

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Lotus and Dante take a seat outside the saloon, on a bench bleached white by the relentless sun. At first, they refuse to look at each other. Lotus casts her gaze down the street to where Ahote sits in the car, engine purring contentedly. He lifts his hands and mouths "What?" She flips him the bird.

"How do you do that?" Dante asks, still examining his shoes.

Her finger hurries back to its sisters. "Sorry, that was rude."

"What?" Dante finally looks up, confused.

"What?"

"How do you do that?" He makes a bird puppet with his hands and flaps his fingers a little. "Fly through the air like that? It's amazing."

"Oh, my father taught me that. You just have to control your chi. Most people's energy is scattered all over the place. They fight themselves more than they fight gravity. Sorry about your head, by the way. I mean, you had it coming, but... sorry."

"Hey, no harm done," he lies. "I've got a soft skull."

"How do you do your thing? You know," she weaves her head around like a drunk on the high seas, "move around like that, dodge everything?"

"That's all me, baby. Self-taught." He puffs up his brisket, then remembers his bruised spine. "Ow. It's a little swing, a little mambo, and a whole lotta capoeira. I picked it up while sailing in the Caribbean."

"Wow. You really get around, don't ya?"

"You have no idea," he laughs.

Ahote's head is in his hands. "I should get going." Lotus hops to her feet.

"Wait. You're not gonna try it again, are ya? I mean, I'm always down for a second round, but I could use some time to recover."

"It's not up to me," she says over her shoulder, "but I'll see what *Destiny* thinks."

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"What was that?!" The car can barely contain Ahote's exasperation.

"He's good," she shrugs.

"You're good!"

"I'm good at hitting things. He's good at not getting hit. You can see the problem."

"Fine, fine, whatever." He looks out the window, then drops his head on the steering wheel. "Great. Here they come."

Raymond's whole clan marches out of the general store and encircles the car. Chuck stands right in front and stares at Ahote like they're playing chicken. Truman and his infirmary squad cut off their retreat. The man himself knocks on Lotus' window.

"What was that?!" Main street can barely contain Ray's exasperation.

"You were right, they're tough customers. So tough, in fact, that I'll bet you dimes to donuts your pal is in there. Can't think of any other reason their trigger fingers would be so itchy."

Ray takes a look around the car while he thinks about that. "Hey," he nods to Ahote. "I'm Raymond. You can call me Ray." Before Ahote responds, his attention is back on Lotus. "You're right about me being right, which is to say these are things I already knew. Are you gonna help us shake the place down or do I deserve a refund?"

"Would that help?" Lotus tosses him the roll of bills.

"I don't take refunds," Ray replies as he unclips the cash and scatters it around the cab. "When I pay a gal for a service, I expect to be fully satisfied, so you better be hot to trot tomorrow when the rest of my boys arrive. We're goin' in guns blazin' and ladies first."

"Ahote," says Ahote.

"What?!"

"Ahote. That's my name, Ray. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, charmed."

"Look, we don't wanna see anybody get shot, least of all ourselves. It'd be a damn shame if you boys busted up the wrong gin joint and spilled a lotta blood for no good reason. Lotus agreed to find your mark and that's what we'll do, just not by walking in the front door."

Ray stands to address his men. "Are you gettin' a load of this? I've never seen the chauffeur do all the thinkin'." They laugh, right on cue. Ray pops his head back in the car. "You've got until tomorrow morning, wheelman. Then, we're drafting your little lady."

"Fine," Ahote agrees, waving off Lotus' unspoken protest, "but I'll need to borrow the blonde Truman's got stashed in back."

---

A sickle moon rises over main street, shedding little light. Inside the saloon, Dante's been drinking. He's slouched on top of the bar, nursing a bottle of Jack and tapping out some manic tempo with his feet. He looks longingly at the punctured drums.

An upstairs door bursts open. The man in black stomps onto the balcony and slams the door behind him. "This is ludicrous! I'm starting to think he *wants* to die!" Dante just raises his bottle in a toast-like gesture. "Thanks for the sympathy, part-timer." With that, his boss blows into a room down the hall and all is silent once again.

Silent, except for the staccato beats of wing-tipped shoes on old wood. Then, another beat comes in, pounding thrice in time to Dante's taps. He looks at his shoes with a mix of surprise and admiration. When it happens again, with his feet still, he realizes someone's knocking at the door.

A familiar blonde and a man in bright suspenders stand on the porch. "Who goes there?" Dante demands, with just a hint of a hiccup.

"It's me, Dante," Esther replies. "Can we come in for a night cap?"

"I thought you were sleepin' with the fishes."

The girl looks hurt, then pissed, so Ahote cuts in. "My name's Ahote. You met a friend of mine, this afternoon. I'm sure she made an impression."

"Yeah, on my head!" Dante is far too pleased with that zinger.

"Well, you didn't exactly make friends, did you? I'm looking to stay a while," he nods towards the blonde, "but Lotus is ready to hit the bricks. Maybe we could help each other out... ya know, if I wasn't so damn thirsty."

"Riiight," Dante taps the side of his nose. "Come on it, just keep it on the q. t."

Dante slides across the floor, spins around the end of the bar, and plucks a couple of bottles off the shelf. "I hope you like booze." He pours three glasses and leaves the bottles on the table. "Cheers." Ahote sniffs his and recoils. Esther throws hers back and asks for another.

"You work here?" the road shaman asks.

"You her sugar daddy, 'cuz you don't look like her brother."

Ahote tries to follow Dante's lead, but "What?" is the only move in his repertoire.

"She said she was traveling with someone, but 'It's not like that.' So, what's it like?"

"You could say I'm her navigator." Ahote finally finds his feet. "Or her spiritual advisor."

"So, you're not..." Dante puts his hands behind his head and rotates his hips.

"No! That would be... no! We're not doing anything of the sort. Nicely put, though. Very succinct." Now, Ahote does down his booze.

"I guess that's where you come in," Dante says as he pours Esther another round. "Anything with a set of wheels, huh Toots?"

She pops up off her stool like a Jack-in-the-Box and slaps him across the face.

"That didn't sound like a 'No,' Sweetcheeks."

"Stuff it, Dante! What you don't know could fill a... well, something big! You're the same as them, ya know: Blow into town, make yourselves right at home, then you'll leave without a backwards glance! Don't you pretend you're any..."

"Dante!" the boss bellows from his doorway. "What the hell is *she* doing in here?! Is there a 'Spies Drink Free' sign in the window?!" Other doors swing open; other armed men appear. Everyone starts talking at once. Everyone but Esther, who wails like a banshee.

---

The girl's hysterics are clearly audible in the alley behind the saloon, where Lotus lies in wait. Quiet as a breeze, she takes a few steps and then flies up onto the roof. She moves to the first window, sits with her back to the edge, then tips over and curls her spine up until she can peak through the curtains. She repeats this process three times before finding someone she doesn't know: a portly man who's slumped in his reading chair, snoring.

Lotus swings her legs around and slips into the room like Peter Pan in a pin-stripe suit. She creeps up to the mound of flesh and pajamas, levels her gun, and intones, "Jimbo, I presume."

The snoring continues. She slaps him across the face, careful not to make too much noise, but gets the same lack of result. "Christ." Lotus draws her other gun and pistol whips him.

"Ow! God!" He almost tips his chair over, but Lotus steadies it with her foot. Finally, his pinprick eyes focus on the gun. Slowly, they march along the barrel, up Lotus' arm, and reach her face.

"They sent a dame?!" he snorts. "Is that supposed to be poetic justice or something?"

"You did it, then? You killed your wife with a beer bottle?" Her voice is gunmetal.

"Yeah, I did it. Bitch was gonna rat me out to her brother. She saw me packing my bags, put two and two together."

"Great strategy, Sun Tzu. Here you are, holed up in the cheapest inn this side of the Rockies, and the Outfit's nipping at your heels, anyway. If you were already leaving, why not just gag her and leave her in the closet? Keep her quiet for a day or two, instead of sticking her in the ground forever?"

"Look," he starts rubbing his temple, as if the conversation failed to capture his full attention. "Bitch had it comin'. I busted ass for that woman, got in up to my balls with the mob, but could she be bothered to spit out a single word of thanks? Even *once*? Hell, no. She needed killin'."

"Fair enough, but sounds like the same could be said about you."

"What's stoppin' you, then?!"

"I'm not your executioner, Jimbo. I'm just the scout. Way I hear it, your presence is making life miserable for the people who actually *live* in this dried-up husk of a town. Look around: Aren't their lives miserable enough without the Outfit in the general store and a band of mercenaries in the saloon?"

He snaps back to attention, an epiphany smile on his face. "Look, Lady. I don't know if this'll make a difference to you, but I'm not hiding out with hired goons. I'm turning state's evidence. These are U.S. *Marshals*, you're fuckin' with!"

Lotus barely has time to lower her gun before the door blows open. Dante takes in the scene and declares, "I *knew* it!"

---

A liquor bottle rolls down Dante's arm and into his waiting hand. His fingers snap it into the air; it flies over his head as he spins around, then lands in his other hand. He pops the cork with ease, then pours a line of shot glasses without spilling a drop.

The jazz band / US Marshals toss theirs back almost in unison. Almost, but not quite. The one who sets his shot down last mutters something under his breath and walks over to the door. After a quick look across the street, he nods back to the others.

"We got here about six weeks ago," starts the man in the black suit. "Mr. Barker, Jimbo, has about one more week before he's scheduled to testify in Chicago. Information supplied by Mr. Barker to the F.B.I. was crucial in making dozens of arrests, but the Outfit doesn't know about that, yet. They want Mr. Barker's tongue cut out on account of the murder. Our job is to make damn sure his tongue stays inside his fat head long enough to provide testimony in court, which will put a lot of very bad men in prison for a very long time. What the hell are you doing?"

Behind the bar, Dante juggles a trio of rainbow-colored bottles. "Mixing the lady a drink," he replies. He winks at Lotus; Esther sticks out her lip.

"Is this the best time?"

"Carpe diem, my friend."

"It's a tad distracting."

"If it wasn't, I'd be doing it wrong."

The Marshal sighs, taps his shot glass. "Fine, but *carpe* us another round, while you're at it. Anyway, the thugs across the street showed up night before last, made a helluva scene."

"... until Dante laid 'em all out," pipes in another Marshal. Dante tosses one bottle into the air so he can acknowledge the compliment with a point of his finger while pouring the other two into Lotus' glass with one hand.

The man in black continues, "And we should've evacuated the place at that point, but Jimbo wouldn't hear it."

"Damn right, I wouldn't." Jimbo comes lumbering down the stairs, newly dressed. "Runnin' didn't do me any good, before. Court date's right around the corner. Best to hole up here and wait it out."

Lotus takes a sip of her beverage and flashes Dante an appreciative smile, then whirls on Jimbo. "Are you even here, right now, or are having a different conversation with the voices in your head, 'cuz that didn't make any kind of sense! All you did was let the bastards call for reinforcements!"

The Marshal cuts off Jimbo's retort with a gesture. "That's the problem with organized crime," he says. "They can't afford to trust anyone they haven't known their whole lives, which means they're always getting stuck with somebody's relatives. Gene pool's a bit shallow." Muttering, Jimbo pushes his way past Dante and nabs himself a bottle of scotch.

"We've bought ourselves a little time by letting the Outfit believe we're mercenaries," he continues. "If they knew the truth, that we're lawmen, he'd most likely force our hand by threatening civilians."

Lotus bores a hole through Jimbo's head with her eyes. "I don't care how many thugs you've got on the hook, no testimony can be worth putting up with all your bullshit. I've already been in two fights on account of you, and this town is about one overheard conversation away from a massacre. Way I see it, I'd be doing everybody a favor by gettin' you gone."

"These fuckin' townies were plenty happy with me when they were pocketing my cash. Isn't that right, dollface?" Jimbo gives Esther a stomach-churning wink.

Lotus groans. "Was that a come-on or are you having a stroke in slow-motion?"

"So," Ahote breaks in, "it sounds like you boys need a third option. If we *fake* a getaway, the mob won't have any interest in this town. They'll spend a few days chasing after a ghost, during which you can stay here without endangering the locals. All you'd need is a good driver and a fake hideout, preferably one safely outside of town."

"You can use my farm," Esther offers. "It's right near the highway and nobody's been there in weeks, not even me."

"Are you sure?" Ahote asks. "We'd be telling Truman that Jimbo has been hiding at your place the whole time. He might think you were in on it."

"Truman's an asshole," she smiles beneath her running mascara. "Screw him!"

The Marshals confer via a series of shrugs and raised eyebrows. "If you've got a driver in mind, we're willing to give it a go."

"Oh, I'll drive," Ahote replies, "but I'll need to borrow the Chevy you've got parked out back."

---

The next morning, Esther's nursing a hangover in the general store. Truman stomps his way down the stairs like a rhino, still shrugging on his shirt. He steals a bear bottle off the card table, swishes its contents around his mouth, then spits it out the door. "How was your date, doll?"

Esther offers him her shoulder. "Dull," she says. "Ain't nowhere to go, is there?"

"Not what I meant." He gathers behind her like a storm. "Did you find Jimbo?"

"Sorry. Not my department. I'm sure Ahote and Lotus will be by shortly, whether they found him or not."

"Ahote," Truman parrots back. "Awfully familiar, for a dull date." He sinks his fingers into her hair and jerks her head back. "Exactly how familiar did you get?"

"Go chase yourself, ya hoary-eyed hood!"

He drags her off her seat and across the floor. "Is that what you like?! Half-breeds who can't hold their liquor?!"

A stone strikes Truman's head and he falls through the card table. "Where's your boss," Lotus asks from the door. "I know which hole his rat crawled down."

---

"This is a stupid, stupid plan," Dante laments from deep within a man-shaped haystack. He's been wrapped in some of Jimbo's gargantuan clothes, then stuffed with hay to complete the illusion. "This ain't gonna fool nobody."

"Don't worry. They won't get close enough for it to matter." Ahote sits serenely behind the wheel of the Marshals' Chevrolet, which sits inside a tiny barn made of Swiss cheese. Countless shafts of light slip through its tattered thatch and pepper the car's exterior.

Dante shifts in his seat, flaps his arms like a penguin throwing a fit. "I can't even scratch my chin in this thing."

"You wanted to be involved. You're involved."

"It's still a stupid plan. Do you even know where you're..."

"Shhh! I hear cars... three of them." Ahote slips a black bag over Dante's head. "Sounds like they brought a truck," he smirks.

Ahote turns the ignition and the Chevy roars to life, then it bursts through the barn door like a lion from a thicket. Bits of wood spray across the yard and bounce off the two cars that have just pulled up to the farmhouse, Ray's Alfa Romero and the sedan from Chicago. Ahote flies past them and out towards the road, but a truck full of goons bears down on them. Lotus rides in the back with a pair of riflemen, holding her hat with one hand and a pistol with the other.

The truck driver thinks he can win a game of chicken. Ahote agrees. The road shaman locks his rear wheels and puts the car into a skid, then a spin. The Chevy pirouettes past the truck in a flaring skirt of dust. "What the hell was that?!" The bag does little to muffle Dante's cry.

"Spectacular, that's what! Too bad you missed it. I'll do another one for you, later."

The gangsters climb back onto the road and give chase, Ray's Alfa Romero easily overtaking the Chevy. "Damn, he's fast."

"Who's fast?"

"Don't worry about it."

Ahote weaves back and forth across both lanes, keeping the sports car behind him. He taps his brakes, gives Ray's headlight a black eye. As the other cars catch up, the sound of gunfire starts to penetrate the windows. Then a bullet does the same.

"Holy Saint Peter in heaven!" Dante starts to pull the bag off his head, but Ahote stops him.

"Not a good time, blasphemer." The Alfa has just managed to slip its nose past the Chevy's bumper. Ray opens up the throttle and pulls alongside. Truman rides shotgun with a shotgun, eager for a clear shot at Jimbo. Ahote veers right, pressing both cars into the shoulder, but Ray's not giving up easily. The two cars wage war like Sumo wrestlers, if Sumo wrestling happened at 40 mph.

Back in the truck, Lotus takes pot shots at her comrades. The riflemen have draped themselves over the cab for support. Amateurs. She nudges one of the them just as he pulls the trigger, sending his bullet down and to the right... where it tears a mean hole through Raymond's rear tire. The Alfa Romero jack-knifes off the road and skids to a stop in a magnificent wave of dust.

She slaps the rifleman upside the head. "Nice one, dumbass."

Up ahead, the Chevy veers off into the desert. "Go, go, go!" Lotus pounds on the roof of the truck. The sedan follows them off the road, groaning as it lurches over the sun-baked earth. Slowly, they start to close in on their quarry. One of the riflemen points, yells, and starts banging on the driver's window. Up ahead, Lotus sees the edge of a steep hill and a dry riverbed not too far below. She kicks out the rifleman's knee and yanks him back into the bed of the truck. Then, to the driver, "No, no! You can make it! Keep going!"

The Chevy fishtails as it goes off the cliff, rotating 90 degrees before it disappears. The truck follows and, as they hang in mid-air, Lotus can see Ahote accelerating back up the hill. He passes beneath them and delivers an automotive uppercut to the sedan behind, flipping it on its side. The Chevy pops over the hill and takes off across the desert before they've even hit the ground.

The sedan rolls past them, further into the riverbed. "Screw 'em!" Lotus tells the driver. "Get back up that hill!"

Back inside the Chevy, Dante succeeds in un-bagging his head. "Go, daddy-o!! I can't believe we're still alive!!"

"Don't get too excited." Ahote is eyeballing the rear view mirror like it's hitting on his girl. "That's not gonna stop the truck and, besides, they need to see us leaving town, right?"

"Fine, but the damn bag stays off. You'll just have to keep ahead of them, this time."

Sure enough, the truck clammers up a gentler slope further from the road and moves to intercept them. "No problem." Ahote puts his foot down and they blast past. The flats give way to a series of low hills. On the other side, a train spans the full width of the horizon.

"Shit. Good thing we have a lead on 'em." Dante says. "Better turn around before we get pinched." Ahote slows down, but he doesn't turn. He just waits for the truck to come around the last hill. "Hey, hey, hotshot! We are NOT doing this!" Dante clutches the arm rest. He knows they're doing this.

The road shaman grins. "It's perfect." He pets the dashboard and gives the steering wheel a kiss. Once he's sure the gangsters have a good view, the accelerator hits the floor. The Chevy rockets across the flats, skipping over ruts and rocks like a stone over a pond. Dante prays to a long list of saints as the train looms larger and larger. The track is on an embankment and, when they hit the edge, the car leaps like a dolphin. Dante watches the sky come into view through the open doors of a boxcar... then pass right back out of view.

Car crashes through car with devastating effect. They emerge from the other side like a bullet escaping the barrel, wood and iron spraying out around them. The Chevy hits the ground with enough force to shove Dante's knees up his nose, but it keeps rolling. Driver and passenger celebrate their continued breathing by hollering at the top of their lungs.

On the other side, Lotus watches the Chevy escape between the passing train cars. "Well, boys. Looks like you blew it. Who else wants a drink?"

---

A toolbox hits the dust. The Alfa Romero's spare tire is propped up next to it. Raymond's shoes walk away as Truman's step into view. "You can join your fellow failures after you fix my car." The truck pulls up, Ray takes the wheel, and they leave Truman on the roadside.

When they get back to the general store, nothing's right. Esther sits alone in the middle of the room; her face is a quilt of cuts. Chuck's chain swoops out from behind the door and wraps around Lotus' legs. He yanks her off her feet, then he's on top of her, tearing off her jacket and her holsters. She scorpion kicks him in the small of the back, which knocks him forward just enough for her to get free, but now she's surrounded by gunmetal. The goons know who's side they're on.

"What now?" is all Ray has to say. Chuck takes one step towards Esther and the truth darts out of her mouth like a rabbit from its hole.

"The getaway was a fake. Jimbo's in the saloon, but those guys aren't his bodyguards." Her one good eye makes contact with Lotus, pleading. "They're Feds."

"Well, hell!" Ray turns to his soldiers and spreads his arms wide. "That changes the landscape! No need to wait for reinforcements, boys. We have all the leverage we need, right here." He snaps his fingers, points to the women, and walks out the door. His thugs grab Esther, while Chuck manhandles Lotus onto the street.

"Yo, Jimbo!" Ray calls out to the ether. "You fucking coward, hiding behind the government's skirts! Are they gonna have your back if it means watching this whole town burn?! You know the kinds of things we do for fun!" The mafioso cheer and fire their guns into the air.

Rifle barrels cast their shadows against the saloon's curtains as the Marshals get ready to hold down the fort. "I hope you guys are watching..." Ray holds out his hand and one of the thugs puts a gun in it.

He shoots Esther in the head.

"Keep 'em comin', boys!" Chuck kicks Lotus onto Esther's body. Her fingers sink into a mass of bloody hair. While the rest start kicking down doors, Ray sticks his gun between Lotus' eyes and says, "I salute a worthy adversary." She spits in his face and ducks to the side as a bullet blasts through her hair. Then she's airborne, narrowly escaping the kiss of Chuck's rope dart as she rolls over the saloon's roof. Bullets streak over her head and ricochet off the masonry.

Lotus scrambles over the other side of the building and slinks down the block. Sweetness is parked behind the gas station. She paces back and forth as terrified screams flood the street, stares at the gore on her hands. Her scream joins the deluge, then she hits the wall hard enough to shatter every window. She sinks down with the falling glass, pulls her knees to her chest, and sobs.

---

Morning is just about to peak over the San Francisco skyline. A young girl plays jacks in front of a modest, Chinese house. She drops the ball and sings, "Onesies!" Her hand darts out and snatches one of the jacks. "Queens before kings!" She grabs two more, then slips her hand beneath the ball just before it hits the ground.

"I think you're the only flower that blooms before sunrise." Her father kneels down beside her. "My turn?" She smiles and hands him the ball. He bounces it once, grabs every jack, then balances the ball on the tip of his finger. The girl frowns and reclaims her toys.

"Breakfast is almost ready, you two!" her mother calls from inside.

"I'm sure there's time for another round," her father insists. "Focus on the jacks, not the ball." He stands and walks back towards the house. "Drills after breakfast."

She throws down her jacks, but they start jumping on their own. She stares at them for a moment, then turns to call her father back. "Da! Look at..."

The house collapses like cigarette ash. She tries to run inside, find her parents, but the attic is where the kitchen should be. A fireball erupts from the somewhere below, knocks her back into the yard. She pulls her knees to her chest and sobs.

Behind her, the skyline crumbles.

---

"What happened?" Lotus opens her eyes to Ahote and Dante's furrowed brows.

"We should'nt have left Esther here," she reports. "Chuck's a dog; he can smell fear. He beat it outta her and then he got the drop on me." She punches the ground, leaves a crater. "Ray shot her dead. He's gonna kill everybody, then torch the place."

Lotus turns and pries a large, flat stone out of the foundation, then gets up and wipes her tears away with a blood-spattered sleeve. Ahote and Dante trade troubled looks. "What are you going to do?" the shaman asks.

"I'm gonna kill 'em all."

"No, you're not!" he retorts. "We're going to save them!"

"Whatever."

Dante glances from one to the other, then shrugs at Ahote and gives him an awkward pat on the back. He runs after the girl. "Hey, wait up!"

---

Lotus circles around behind the general store. The rolled-over sedan is there, minus its windows and plus a sizable dent where Ahote clocked it. She blows the back door down with one kick. Sunset casts her long shadow across the store room floor. There are two men inside: one on her left and one blocking the far door. She's already swinging when the latter pulls his trigger. Stone intercepts bullet with a flash and the ricochet catches the goon on the left in his throat.

She flies across the room as the first thug unloads the rest of his clip into empty air, landing her heel squarely in his face. He drops like a rummy in a gutter. She takes his gun and rifles through his pockets for ammo. No luck.

Gunfire erupts out back. "I'm kinda pinned down out here!" Dante shouts over the rat-a-tat-tat.

"Then find another way in! Christ!"

Footsteps roll across the floor above her. Lotus peeks around the door and sees a knot of goons on the stairs. She side arms her stone into the first one's face. Before he's done sliding down the wall, she's over the railing and disarming the second goon with a snap kick to the wrist. He throws a punch, which she catches and pulls into a hip throw that sends him tumbling down the steps.

She windmills around, evading a flurry of shots from the landing above. Rushing up the intervening steps, she sweeps the first thug's gun across his body and pins it against the wall while she snaps his head back with an open palm strike to the jaw. Then, taking cover behind his bulk, she twists his gun arm up and back, squeezing the trigger to make him shoot one of his friends in the face.

As the dead man drops, Lotus does the same and pulls the first goon over her head. He slams into the wall behind her with a crunch of wood and bone. The last thug's eyes don't quite tear themselves away before Lotus retrieves Faceless' gun and ventilates him. Bullets tear through his chest and keep going, obliterating the ceiling fan upstairs.

Again, she checks the corpses for ammo and comes up empty. "Don't any of you bastards carry spares?! How do you kill *anybody*?!" She can hear them flipping over furniture, barricading themselves in the shopkeep's bedroom. A tiny smile tugs at her lips.

Inside, three men are crouched behind an up-ended mattress and an over-turned dresser. A fourth points his rifle out the window, taking pot shots at Dante down on the street. When Lotus walks into the doorway with a pair of empty pistols in her hands, all four open fire. No one seems to notice the lit stick of TNT clenched between her teeth. While her hands are busy parrying bullets, her mouth lets the dynamite drop and her foot kicks it over the barricade.

She dives back into the hall with a cheshire grin. The whole building trembles with the force of the explosion. The rifleman plows through the window and crumples like a tin can when he hits the street. She re-enters, looking for someone to question, and Dante thanks her from down below. "Just hurry up!" she retorts.

"Sorry, Dollface. Some of us still have a little respect for gravity."

Lotus finds one who's still conscious enough to be spitting up blood. She puts a boot on his chest. "Where is he?! And where are my goddamned guns?!" He flashes her a crimson smile and passes out.

She looks around, "And what happened to *your* goddamned guns?" The only one she can find in the wreckage has a broken grip. At least she can salvage the bullets. Both of them.

"Hey, Dollface," Dante yells. "I think he's on the roof."

"He says, many deaths later," Lotus complains under her breath. She slides one bullet into each borrowed gun, then steps out onto the awning and leaps up to the roof. Chuck is waiting, her shoulder holsters lying at his feet. He twirls his rope dart like a popinjay with a pocket watch.

"What is this *thing* you think we have between us, Chuck? There is no us! There's just you: a petty thief who's spoiling for a fight!" She shoots him in the face. Almost. He leans back just enough to let the bullet fly harmlessly by. His rope dart zips out from behind his back and strikes at Lotus like a viper. Gunmetal parries steel.

The rope dart returns to its master in a blink. It circles him in tight orbits that flash in the setting sun. She rushes in with a stepping side kick, but Chuck has already danced away. She throws a roundhouse kick after him, but hits only air. His blade flies in and bites her on the ankle. A flurry of punches flirt with his face and chest, but he leaps and spins just beyond her reach, keeping her always at the edge of his satellite's striking distance.

She chases him around the roof, collecting cuts on her knuckles, throat, and face. "Nuts to this," she says as she doubles back to where her guns are still waiting. She dives for the holster, but Chuck sends his chain after her in a wide arc. It loops around her guard and ensnares her neck. He pulls it tight and yanks her back, off her feet and across the roof. He shakes his head in disappointment as Lotus hurtles past him, then holds fast as she drops over the edge, strangling her against the back wall.

On the other side of the building, Dante emerges from the broken bedroom window. He runs along the awning, leaps onto the neighboring wall, then kicks

back off and vaults to the roof. He sees Chuck leaning against his chain like a fisherman with a catch, fills in the details, then takes off like a sprinter to save his girl.

Chuck smiles to himself as he shakes Lotus loose, then whips his blade up to intercept Dante. The King of Swing tries to twist out of the way, but a crimson gash slides across his jugular. He clutches the wound with one hand and cartwheels away on the other.

Lotus rises like the phoenix behind Chuck, an angry welt on her throat and Hell in her eyes. She levels a six-shooter at the back of Chuck's head and pulls the trigger. Her last bullet erupts from the barrel and seems to hang in the air for one perfect moment, before Chuck's steel guardian flicks it away like a spent cigarette.

He shuffles back as she comes down, kicking viciously at his face and chest. He tries to ensnare her legs, but Lotus is already back in the air, unleashing a pair of flying spin kicks. Chuck whirls away. They chase each other like twin dervishes, neither able to land a hit.

Meanwhile, Dante tears a strip off his vest and ties it around his neck to staunch the bleeding. Something across the street catches his eye: a gunman on the saloon porch is lining up a shot at Lotus. He shouts a warning before flinging himself into her. The gunshot rings out as they tumble together. Chuck hits the deck, too, giving them a moment.

"Looks like you owe me your life," Dante grins from beneath her.

"Looks like," she smirks.

"You go high and I'll go low?"

"Swanky." Lotus gets up and discreetly examines her revolver. The rifleman's bullet is lodged in the side of the chamber. She flicks it away and turns back to Dante. "Shall we?"

Chuck is at the edge of the roof, waving off the thugs across the street. He gets his rope dart moving when he sees his opponents are back on their feet. They rush him, Lotus in front with Dante a half step behind. Chuck shoots his dart at them like a harpoon. Lotus flies up while Dante leans back and slides forward on his knees. The dagger skewers the air between them.

Dante watches it snap back above him as he continues forward. He rolls onto his side and straightens his knees, catching Chuck's legs in a scissor lock.

The mercenary topples like the Tower of Babel. Lotus fills the sky as she drops down on him; her knee pounds into his chest like a meteor strike. He spits up blood.

"Dick," Lotus barks before punching him in the face.

"That was entirely necessary," Dante says as he extricates himself.

Lotus picks up her guns and returns her holsters to their rightful home. "Wait," Dante exclaims. "All that was just to get your guns? What about the Marshals?!"

"Now that I have my guns," she replies, "I go across the street and shoot everybody who looks at me cockeyed."

Dante's objections are overruled by the roar of a very angry automobile as it careens down main street. The mafioso open fire, but Ahote veers off and skis the car up onto the side of the post office. Somehow, the wheels find purchase and, slapping gravity in the face, Ahote drives diagonally up the wall. Broken glass and battered wood spray in his wake as he jumps Sweetness across the alley and punches straight through the saloon's second story!

He skids into a box slide and plows through an inner wall. The two Marshals on the other side bounce off his front and back bumpers, respectively. He throws it into reverse and backs into the doorway, cutting off Jimbo's escape, then pops open the passenger side door.

"There's a woman across the street who wants to kill you. 'Take a number,' I know, but this woman is *very* cross and, when she wants a body dead, that body gets dead. You're either leaving here in this car *right now* or you're leaving in a pine box later."

Jimbo gets in the car.

The shaman squeals the car around, scattering furniture and debris like a chrome twister, then rockets out through the front wall. The car hangs in the air for a second, rotating slowly through a hurricane of debris. Goons stare up at the undercarriage in disbelief. Sweetness hits the ground after a quarter turn, already accelerating down main street.

Unfortunately, another sedan with Illinois plates is just pulling into town, cutting them off. It bristles with firearms as the hooligans piled inside get wise. Ahote hits the skids and the car starts to tip over, but not before a wall of lead presses against his window. He stares agape as bullets fly in from overhead, knocking enemy ammo out of the air just a foot from his face. Lotus unloads her pistols as she floats between rooftops, playing defense. The car finally tips over and balances on two wheels, putting its roof between its passengers and their would-

be assassins. Sweetness slides sidewise down a narrow alley as the oncoming car barrels past.

Meanwhile, Dante crashes through a window and rolls into an old woman's bedroom. "Pardon, ma'am." She pulls a shotgun down from the wall as he weaves around the furniture and out the door. A large chunk of wall explodes behind him. Her son bursts into the hall, firing wildly. Dante runs up the wall and pushes past him. "You have a lovely home, sir!"

Then he's out the window at the end of the hall and flying over the alley as Sweetness skis through. He bounces off the far wall and slides in through the rear passenger window. Jimbo almost pops him in the kisser, but Dante dodges back and returns the favor with a backfist. "Pucker up, fat boy. No one's leavin' without me."

Ahote nods in the rear view mirror as he clears the alley and puts the car back on all fours. Lotus' boots hit the hood. As they accelerate, she crouches down to peer through the windshield, easy as you please. "Pass me some clips!" Ahote points to the glove box and Jimbo obeys, passing a handful of ammo out the window. She and Dante share a smile while she reloads.

As they race down the side street, Lotus catches a glimpse of Ray running back to the rusty truck, a handful of thugs at his heel. The sedan crosses over a few blocks down and follows them onto the highway. Ray's truck isn't far behind. Lotus tries to line up a shot at the sedan's tires, but the angle's all wrong and then the thugs start shooting. Lotus flattens every bullet that comes close. She ejects her clips and crouches down to reload while the goons do the same.

"Can't you outrun these palookas?" she complains. Still holding her guns, she grabs new clips with her fingertips and bangs the guns together, reloading each from the opposite hand.

"Not with you perched on the hood," Ahote replies.

"I'm not gettin' in unless you wanna get shot." She stands back up and immediately opens fire. Ricochet sparks dance off the pavement on both sides of the car. Two more empty clips bounce off the hood. She crouches back down. "This'll just take a minute. Don't go nowhere."

She takes one step onto the roof, then leaps skyward. She hovers in place while the sedan covers the distance. One of the goons manages to reload in time to fire a few rounds. Lotus waves her pistols in front of her like wings, parrying each bullet, then lands on the roof and kicks the gun right out of his hand. She spins, blocking two more shots as the others open fire, then pistol whips the goon in the rear passenger window. Reversing direction, she cracks the first thug in the temple, then backhands the front passenger.

The driver swerves madly, trying to shake her loose. Ray zips past as they brush the shoulder. His goons take pot shots, but Lotus intercepts them. Bullets squish against each other like puddy. Ray leaves her to her beatdown, eyes on his prize.

When he pulls up alongside Sweetness, his passenger sticks a double barrel through the window and tries to blow Jimbo's head off. Ahote pushes the gun up against the roof, Dante pushes Jimbo's head down, and buckshot explodes through the cab.

Then a second shooter sticks a Tommy gun in the back seat. Dante grabs the barrel and directs the first few rounds over his head, then ejects the drum and throws it at the shooter. He reels back with a broken nose. Dante yanks the gun from his grip and tosses it out the window behind him, then dives headfirst into the back of the truck. Momentum carries him into a handstand. Shoe leather pummels flesh and bone.

Ahote veers right, almost dragging Ray's passenger out of the truck. When the cars come back together, one of the goons in back slips a chain through the driver's side windows and lashes the vehicles together. He jams a crowbar through the links to hold them fast, then gives Ray a thumb's up... right before Dante kicks him in the teeth. Ray hits the brakes, dragging Sweetness into a spin.

A few yards back, Lotus rides atop an empty sedan. She reaches inside and twists the steering wheel. Hard. As the car rolls over, she leaps off and flies up to the rotating cars. Both Ray and Ahote gape at the wreck as it careens toward them.

Dante draws the crowbar free like a sword and nails the last goon standing on the side of the knee. He topples as Ray hits the gas. Dante topples, too, but Lotus plants her feet just in time to grab the end of his crowbar and swing him onto Sweetness' hood. The sedan disintegrates behind them, spitting metal and glass in impotent rage.

A horn wails over the cacophony, rising rapidly in pitch. Ray's hotrod is cruising straight into them, a confused Truman behind the wheel. When Ray swerves to avoid his precious car, Lotus fills the truck's tires with lead. Truman darts between them as Ray plunges off the road, then side swipes a telephone pole.

Truman does a bootleg turn through debris and rushes to the crash site. He finds a mess of bent steel and broken glass. Three men are in the back of the truck, treading the waters of unconsciousness. A fourth is passed out in the dirt, apparently ejected from the passenger window.

Ray kicks the driver's side door open and spits out a bloody tooth. "Get out," he growls. Truman vaults over the door and tries to help his boss up, but Ray lays

him out with a haymaker. He staggers over to the Alfa Romeo and opens up the gas.

Down the road, Lotus and Dante finish climbing into the back seat. She straightens her hair and gives him a smile. "Looks like we're even."

"How's that, now?"

"I saved your life back there. You woulda fallen right under the tires."

"Dante Harrison Halloway does *not* fall! I was just about to kick off the side and dive right back into Sweetness, here."

"Really!?"

"Smooth sailing."

Her smile fades to black. "You know I caught that bullet, right?"

"Which what?"

"That bullet you 'saved' me from on the roof. I blocked it before you tackled me."

"Really?!"

"Hand to God."

"Christ! Will you two fuck already?!" Jimbo whirls on them, his head like a ripe turnip. Ahote laughs/coughs in the rear view mirror, then his eyes widen.

"Oh, shit. Is that Ray driving up our ass?"

Everyone turns in unison. Sure enough, the Alfa Romeo is pulling up pavement in their wake.

Lotus pokes her head into the front. "Can I shoot him?" she asks.

"No," the road shaman says with a sigh. "Stay in the car. I can lose him." Sweetness leaps like a thoroughbred, putting Lotus back in her seat. She and Dante watch out the window as the Alfa stops growing larger, then slowly begins to shrink in the distance.

Relief is almost on their lips when a tidal wave of rabbits washes over the road ahead.

"Fuck," Ahote laments beneath his breath.

"Fuck 'em!" Jimbo urges the shaman forward.

"What?!" Lotus and Dante cry.

Ahote lets go of the gas, releases the clutch, and swerves off the road. Sweetness skips over the caked earth, then plows through a sand dune and sails... into the broad side of a barn. Wooden planks and peeled paint crash against the windshield like a wave against the shore.

Jimbo slaps Ahote upside the head. "At least we didn't hit any of the precious bunnies!"

Ahote puts the car in reverse. Sweetness sloughs off the wreckage with ease, but Ray has had plenty of time to intercept. The Alfa Romeo bears down on them, tendrils of dust streaming off its hood. Ahote swings the wheel just before Ray rams them, side stepping the Alfa, then cranks it the other way and spins a 270 degree turn right around Ray's back bumper.

The centripetal force crushes Lotus and Dante against the door. He wraps his arms around her. Jimbo almost loses his eyes in the back of his head.

Ray skids through the whole in the barn, turns parallel to Ahote, and blasts his way out through the open doors, emerging right alongside. He tries to shoulder check Sweetness, but Ahote hits the breaks and slips behind him toward the farm house. Ray leans further into the turn, whips a donut, and gives chase.

Ahote drives up the porch steps, bouncing the lovebirds in the back seat like pinballs, while Ray swoops around the front. When he pulls even with them, Ahote punches through the railing and tries to land Sweetness right on top of the hotrod. Ray accelerates out of it, just barely, and Sweetness slides off his trunk. Ray pulls his parking break and smashes Sweetness right in the grill.

The cars scissor into each other, head to tail. Lotus is face down in the back seat; Dante's crammed onto the floor. She pushes herself up and makes eye contact with Ray, then one of her pistols follows her gaze. He spins his car around as the bullet punctures his windshield from the inside out.

The cars' hoods smash together like a hammer and anvil, pushing Ahote towards a steel shed. They arm wrestle as the structure looms, then Ahote gives it one big push and spins the wheel the other way.

The vehicles separate like dancers. The side of the shed cuts between them, Ahote on the outside. Ray pounds through the doors, then through the back wall, then into the business end of the thresher parked behind.

They find him impaled upside-down on its jagged teeth.

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"Was this how you thought it would end?"

Ahote plucks a picture of Esther from a shelf half-buried in sand. He places it gently in a box, next to a one-eyed doll and an ivory comb. "Of course not," he sighs. "I didn't want Ray to die. I didn't want anyone to die. You're the one with a dozen dead men on her conscience."

"Hardly," she scoffs. "Any of those bastards would've done the same to me, or worse, if I gave them the chance. Some folk just need killin'." They leave the barren shelf behind and walk through the kitchen. The window's broken and the stove's missing, either sold or stolen. "Besides, it seems to me Destiny killed Ray."

Out on the front porch, Ahote puts the box down and picks up a wooden board. He places it across the door and Lotus drives in each nail with a single palm strike. "Is this what it's gonna be like, walking the path with you?"

"Foreclosing homes, you mean?" He picks up another board and the process repeats.

"Getting into other people's trouble. Solving their problems with bullets and bodies. I expected a little less moral ambiguity."

"All I know," he answers, "is that our lives are shaped by forces much larger than ourselves. You can either swim with the current or struggle against it." They take the box back to Sweetness and pop the trunk. "Consider, though, that fate didn't just bring you to this town. It also brought you to Dante. He asked me if he could travel with us, you know."

"I know," she smirks. "I like him. I've never met a guy who could keep up with me before, no offense." Ahote waves her off as he lays Esther's box in the trunk. "He's always on stage, though, ya know? He's always performing. I gotta wonder what he's like after the show."

Sweetness wraps her steel arms around them. Ahote starts her engine. "I do have one regret," Lotus adds as they pull away from the farm. "Jimbo got away with it. A self-confessed wife-murderer is gonna walk. It doesn't sit right." She mimes an upset stomach.

"It was the best compromise available. A lot of other bad men are going away for good, because of him."

"Walking the path shouldn't be about accepting the lesser evil. It should be about justice, makin' the big boys pay."

"He'll get his. You can't act like he does and not get your teeth kicked in, sooner or later."

"A girl can dream." She pulls her fedora down over her eyes as they speed down the highway. "You know you forgot Dante, right?"

Sweetness backs up past the farmhouse, slides through a 180 turn, and heads toward town.

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Jimbo lights himself a cigar and unfolds the morning paper. The Chicago skyline curls up at his feet. The headline congratulates him: Twelve Convictions. Zero Appeals. "Good riddance, huh?" he snorts around his cigar. No response from the G-man guarding his door.

He looks up while turning the page and sees a pair of boots drop past his window. A nice pair of leather-clad gams follow on their heels. The last moment of Jimbo's life reaches out towards infinity as the rest of Lotus descends into view. Her hair streams upwards and her arms stretch out before her, a gun gripped in both hands. As the barrel lines up with Jimbo's forehead, she winks.

The muzzle flash fades to white.