

Dustbowl Xia

Episode 1: Yo, Jimbo!

Written by Daniel Bayn

Texas Panhandle - 1935

INT. SALOON -- NIGHT

A JAZZ BAND plays on a rickety stage while DANTE, a young black man in wing tip shoes, and ESTHER, a bottle blonde in a flapper dress, dance at their feet. A small crowd cheers them on, CLAPPING in time to the music, but their smiles don't quite touch their eyes.

JIMBO, a grotesque and corpulent man, sits in a booth with a bevy of YOUNG WOMEN. He has busy hands. A YOUNG BOY enters, eyes wide. He points outside and says something to Jimbo, who pushes his way out of the booth and trips over himself to get upstairs.

No sooner does he disappear into his room than a group of MAFIOSO file in. They fan out into the crowd, intimidating the townsfolk. TRUMAN, a middle-aged thug in a business suit, is the last to enter. He takes a moment to fiddle with his GOLD RINGS, then makes a bee-line for the dance floor.

The MUSIC stutters, then stops, as Truman takes center stage.

TRUMAN

"I love the heartland. It's full of God's people, meek and mild."

(to Esther) "How you doin'?"

"We're lookin' for a man named Jimbo. Can't miss him: fat, ugly, smells of the sewer. Anybody seen him?"

DANTE

"No, sir. Last folk to come into town were me and the band. Everyone else is local."

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TRUMAN

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

DANTE

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

TRUMAN

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

Truman throws a punch. Dante dodges out of the way. They have a brief fight that ends with Truman face down and about an inch through the floor.

The townsfolk run for the exit as mafioso move in from every side, SMASHING BEER BOTTLES and brandishing BAR STOOLS.

Dante takes Esther's hand and nods to the band. They start PLAYING right where they left off.

Dante mixes swing with martial arts as he takes the mafioso down one by one. He uses Esther as a weapon, spinning her out so her knuckles collide with a thug's face.

ESTHER

"Ow!"

Dante coils her back up into his arms and kisses her hand with a wink. Then, he twirls her off her feet and into a flying triple kick.

Truman regains his feet just as Esther regains hers. He draws a GUN and FIRES wildly.

CLOSE ON:

A bullet cruises past Esther's head. Another punctures the bass drum. A third RICOCHETS off a CYMBAL.

BACK TO:

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Dante whirls Esther out of harm's way, then knocks Truman out with a tornado kick.

The GUNSHOTS fade to silence.

EXT. A DUSTY HIGHWAY -- DAY

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.

AHOTE

"Did you see that bird's nest?"

Ahote 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.

LOTUS 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.

LOTUS

(mumbles)
"Yeah, it was great."

AHOTE

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

LOTUS

"Things are tough all over."

AHOTE

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

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

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Gish Cha
Population: 100

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAY

MAIN STREET is a tiny bundle of buildings surrounded by a few blocks of homes. Many are clearly abandoned. Signs of life are weak. Signs of prosperity are nonexistent.

AHOTE

"Wake up dear, we're at grandma's."

Ahote gives Lotus a gentle slap, then hops out of the car.

Lotus rolls out the other side and sorts out her limbs.

LOTUS

(spreading her arms wide)
"So, *this* is my destiny?"

AHOTE

"Could be."

LOTUS

"We shoulda stayed in California."

(dropping her arms)
"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."

AHOTE

"At least the room will be cheap."

LOTUS

"You'd better hope so..."

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(rattles a few coins around in her palm)
"... 'cuz this is the last of our rations."

AHOTE

"As long we we're following the path, Destiny shall provide..."

(swipes a dime)
"... but Sweetness needs gas."

LOTUS

"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, Lotus turns toward the SALOON. Its sign hangs drunkenly from an awning. The floorboards CRUNCH beneath her boots.

INT. SALOON -- DAY

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.

DANTE

(staring)
"Sorry, but we're close..."

LOTUS

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

DANTE

(looking away, embarrassed)
"Closed. I mean, we're closed... for renovations."

He waves toward the stage.

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LOTUS

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

DANTE

"Um... yeah. Things have been kinda... tense."

He watches her eyes dissect the crime scene, then turns the conversation sharply to the left.

DANTE

"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."

LOTUS

(smiling)

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

DANTE

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

He pirouettes, as if to demonstrate.

LOTUS

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

DANTE

(bowing)

"I'm Dante,"

He grabs her hand and brings it to his lips. She ripostes with a firm handshake.

LOTUS

"Lotus."

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A voice rings out from upstairs. It's one of the band members, wearing a black suit and a blacker expression.

MAN IN BLACK

"We're closed. Did you tell her we're closed?"

DANTE / MAN IN BLACK

(in unison)
"For renovations."

DANTE

"Yeah, I told her. Cool, Iya."

LOTUS

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

DANTE

"You're traveling with a friend?"

MAN IN BLACK

"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?"

LOTUS

(to Dante)
"Yeah, but it's not like that."

(to Man In Black)
"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'."

MAN IN BLACK

(laughing)
"Try the general store across the street! I'm sure they'd love to have you!"

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAY

LOTUS

(under her breath)

"Whatever. I'm givin' this place the ankle."

She steps outside just in time to see the Bentley squeal around the corner.

LOTUS

"Or not."

Shrugging to herself, she heads across the street to the GENERAL STORE. It's in better condition than the saloon, but that's not saying much. At least the windows aren't shuttered and there's a nice SEDAN outside.

INT. GENERAL STORE -- DAY

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.

GOON #1 calls into the back room. He has a thick Chicago accent.

GOON #1

"Hey. We got a customer."

He's immediately joined by a trio of injured men. GOON #2 is nursing his shoulder. Goon #3 has a nasty bruise on his throat. Truman's face is a jigsaw puzzle of welts and lacerations.

Truman slaps the not-cashier across the shoulder.

TRUMAN

"Who the hell is this? You made me think the Boss was here."

LOTUS

"My name's Lotus. The jackass across the street said you could give me a room for the night."

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They all snicker in unison, like they rehearse.

TRUMAN

"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.

TRUMAN

"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."

The goons laugh.

Truman slides between Lotus and the doorway, then reaches out and strokes her hair.

LOTUS

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

Lotus unleashes some wire-fu on Truman and his goons. An open-palm strike almost knocks Truman out the front door. She spin kicks Goons 2-3, then flies up onto the counter and starts kicking canned goons at them.

LOTUS

"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?!"

Goon #1 tries to sneak up behind her. She steps off the counter and lays out Goons 2-3 with a few flying kicks.

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Truman closes in and throws some haymakers while Goon #1 comes around the counter. Lotus reverse kicks him, knocking him into the back room, then somersaults backwards. On the way, she kicks Truman twice in the chest and once in the jaw. She lands in a crouch, one hand holding her hat, as he crashes to the floor.

A group of men eclipse the doorway. RAY is first in line, a pretty boy with an aviator's scarf draped around his shoulders.

RAY

"I didn't expect to catch a show this early."

(stepping over Truman)

"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.

RAY

"Please, sit."

He takes a chair kitty corner to her and leans in with practiced sincerity.

RAY

"My name is Raymond. You can call me Ray."

LOTUS

"Lotus."

RAY

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

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LOTUS

"Passin' through."

RAY

"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.

"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.

RAY

"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. CHUCK, an asian man in a kung-fu shirt, pushes him back down with a heavy heel.

RAY

"Thanks, Chuck."

(to Lotus)
"Wadaya say?"

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Lotus pushes away from the table and gets to her feet.

LOTUS

"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.

RAY

"Chuck, let the lady pass."

His 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.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Lotus finds Ahote waiting by the car.

LOTUS

"Where the hell have you been?"

FLASH

Ahote watches Lotus walk into the saloon, then backs his car up to the pumping station. The ATTENDANT, an old man in cracked spectacles, pokes his head through the door.

ATTENDANT

"Stay right there! Just take what you want and go!"

AHOTE

"Okay, old timer."

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Ahote starts the pump with practiced ease, never taking his eyes off the door.

AHOTE

"I just need a little. Must be my lucky day. Not too many places giving away gas."

ESTHER

"He's not generous. He's afraid."

Ahote turns to find a bottle blonde draped over the hood of his car.

ESTHER

"Some folks blew into town the other day; they're not too keen on payin' for things."

AHOTE

"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.

AHOTE

"See this, mister? I don't take what's not given."

ESTHER

"I didn't think you were one of them. 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?"

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AHOTE

"Yes. Yes I do."

(glancing towards the saloon)
"As long as it's quick."

INT. BENTLEY -- DAY

CLOSE ON:

Lotus appears in the car's rear view mirror as she steps out of the saloon. Ahoote doesn't notice. She disappears as the car rounds a corner.

BACK TO:

ESTHER

"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?"

AHOTE

"Things are tough all over."

ESTHER

"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."

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ESTHER

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

(uneasy)

"Let's not resort to prostitution *right* away. Isn't there anything else you can do? Sewing, cooking, killer for hire?"

ESTHER

"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."

She 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."

AHOTE

"Sure. I'm sure Lotus won't mind sharing the seat for a few miles..."

ESTHER

(sits back down)

"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.

ESTHER

"So... what kinda car *is* this?"

(continued)

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AHOTE

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

ESTHER

"I feel the same way about my hair."

AHOTE

"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.

AHOTE

"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.

ESTHER

"But, um... it's a *real* car, right? I mean, you filled it up at the gas station."

AHOTE

"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.

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AHOTE

"Sure beats the hell outta transubstantiation, right?"

ESTHER

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

FLASH

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAY

AHOTE

"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."

LOTUS

(getting in the car)
"Cute."

Ahote pokes his head through the driver's side window, leaving most of his body pointedly not in the car.

AHOTE

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

LOTUS

"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.

AHOTE

"What happened?"

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continued:

LOTUS

"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."

AHOTE

"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.

LOTUS

"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."

AHOTE

"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."

Lotus lets her arms drop and finally turns to look at him.

LOTUS

"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.

(continued)

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LOTUS

"Breakin' up bar fights is *never* a good idea."

AHOTE

"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."

LOTUS

"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!"

AHOTE

"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."

LOTUS

"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.

INT. GENERAL STORE -- DAY

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

LOTUS

"Wow. That was quick."

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Ray looks up from his work at the card table, where he appears to have been slapping Truman awake.

RAY

"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.

LOTUS

"Hey, is that money still on the table?"

RAY

"Sure is, sweetheart."

LOTUS

"Yeah, you can keep the 'sweethearts' to yourself, but I'll take the money."

He tosses her the whole wad, clip and all.

LOTUS

"Great. Wait right here."

Lotus turns and marches right across the street, adjusts the under-arm holsters beneath her jacket.

INT. SALOON -- DAY

LOTUS 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.

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continued:

DANTE

"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."

LOTUS

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

DANTE

"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."

LOTUS

"Thanks."

DANTE

"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?"

LOTUS

"Hmm, let me think it over?"

She 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.

DANTE

"Hey, now. Make the smart play, lady."

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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 leap skyward! 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 launches a flurry of attacks, but Dante flows around them like water. Defensively, she backs off and takes a breath. She watches him shift from foot to foot as if trying to classify a new species.

LOTUS

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

DANTE'S BACK-UP MAN

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

She attacks, he dodges, and they dance some more. When Dante finally counter-attacks, it's with a wide, arching kick. Lotus stops him cold with one arm. She grabs his 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.

Lotus 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 dance partners, 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.

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Lotus makes a few more passes with increasingly gravity-defying kung-fu. Dante tries to push her back with a slow kick to the stomach, but her whirlpool hands wrap around his ankle, then unwind in a motion that spins him like a rolling pin. He HITS the floor hard.

Now it's Dante's turn to go on the offensive. He moves around the floor on hands and feet, striking at her from odd angles. Lotus blocks them all, but not by much. He tries to finish her off with a whirling windmill kick. Lotus lurches back, stumbles, and ends up falling 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.

MAN IN BLACK

"I'd tell you to get a room, but... you know. Dante, maybe you should take the lady outside."

DANTE

(massaging his skull)
"Wadaya say, tomcat? Give up?"

LOTUS

"Not yet, 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.

MAN IN BLACK

"This is all I need."

DANTE'S BACK-UP MAN

"I wouldn't date her. I hate it when girls wear pants."

EXT. SALOON -- DAY

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.

CLOSE ON:

Ahote lifts his hands and mouths "What?"

BACK TO:

Lotus flips him the bird.

DANTE

"How do you do that?"

Lotus' finger hurries back to its sisters.

LOTUS

"Sorry, that was rude."

DANTE

"What?"

He finally looks up, confused.

LOTUS

"What?"

DANTE

"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."

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continued:

LOTUS

"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."

DANTE

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

LOTUS

"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?"

DANTE

"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."

LOTUS

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

DANTE

(laughing)
"You have no idea."

CLOSE ON:

Ahote's head is in his hands.

BACK TO:

(continued)

continued:

LOTUS

"I should get going."

She hops to her feet.

DANTE

"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."

LOTUS

"It's not up to me, but I'll see what *Destiny* thinks."

INT. BENTLEY -- DAY

AHOTE

"What was that?!"

LOTUS

"He's good."

AHOTE

"You're good!"

LOTUS

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

AHOTE

"Fine, fine, whatever."

He looks out the window, then drops his head on the steering wheel.

"Great. Here they come."

(continued)

continued:

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 infirmiry squad cut off their retreat. Ray knocks on Lotus' window.

RAY

"What was that?!"

LOTUS

"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

(to Ahote)

"Hey. 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?"

LOTUS

"Would that help?"

She tosses him the roll of bills.

RAY

"I don't take refunds."

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."

(continued)

continued:

AHOTE

"Ahote."

RAY

"What?!"

AHOTE

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

RAY

"Yeah, charmed."

AHOTE

"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

(to goons)

"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.

RAY

"You've got until tomorrow morning, wheelman. Then, we're drafting your little lady."

AHOTE

"Fine..."

He waves off Lotus' unspoken protest.

"... but I'll need to borrow the blonde Truman's got stashed in back."

(continued)

INT. SALOON -- NIGHT

A sickle moon shines little light through the saloon window. Dante is slouched on top of the bar, nursing a bottle and tapping out a mad rhythm 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.

MAN IN BLACK

"This is ludicrous! I'm starting to think he *wants* to die!"

Dante just raises his bottle in a toast-like gesture.

MAN IN BLACK

"Thanks for the sympathy, part-timer."

He 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. Esther and Ahote stand on the porch.

DANTE

(drunkenly)
"Who goes there?"

ESTHER

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

DANTE

(smirking)
"I thought you were 'sleeping' with the fishes."

The girl looks hurt, then pissed, so Ahote cuts in.

(continued)

continued:

AHOTE

"My name's Ahote. You met a friend of mine, this afternoon. I'm sure she made an impression."

DANTE

"Yeah, on my head!"

AHOTE

"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."

DANTE

"Riiight."

He taps the side of his nose.

"Come on in, 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.

DANTE

"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.

AHOTE

"You work here?"

(continued)

continued:

DANTE

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

AHOTE

"What?"

DANTE

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

AHOTE

"You could say I'm her navigator... or her spiritual advisor."

DANTE

"So, you're not..."

Dante puts his hands behind his head and rotates his hips.

AHOTE

"No! That would be... no! We're not doing anything of the sort. Nicely put, though. Very succinct."

Now, Ahote does down his booze.

DANTE

(to Esther)

"I guess that's where you come in."

Dante pours her 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.

DANTE

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

(continued)

continued:

ESTHER

"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..."

MAN IN BLACK

"Dante! 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.

EXT. ALLEY -- NIGHT

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.

INT. GUEST ROOM, SALOON -- NIGHT

Lotus swings her legs around and slips into the room like Peter Pan in pin-stripes. She creeps up to the mound of flesh and pajamas and levels her gun.

LOTUS

"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.

(continued)

continued:

JIMBO

"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.

JIMBO

(incredulous)

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

LOTUS

"You did it, then? You killed your wife with a beer bottle?"

JIMBO

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

LOTUS

"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?"

Jimbo starts rubbing his temple, as if the conversation failed to capture his full attention.

JIMBO

"Look, 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'."

(continued)

continued:

LOTUS

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

JIMBO

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

LOTUS

"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?"

Jimbo snaps back to attention, an epiphany smile on his face.

JIMBO

"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 stands on the threshold.

DANTE

"I *knew* it!"

IN. SALOON -- NIGHT

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.

(continued)

continued:

MAN IN BLACK

"We got here about six weeks ago. 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.

DANTE

"Mixing the lady a drink."

He winks at Lotus. Esther sticks out her lip.

MAN IN BLACK

"Is this the best time?"

DANTE

"Carpe diem, my friend."

MAN IN BLACK

"It's a tad distracting."

DANTE

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

The Man in Black sighs, taps his shot glass.

MAN IN BLACK

"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."

(continued)

continued:

DANTE'S BACK-UP MAN

"... until Dante laid 'em all out!"

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.

MAN IN BLACK

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

Jimbo comes lumbering down the stairs, newly dressed.

JIMBO

"Damn right, I wouldn't. 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.

LOTUS

"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!"

MAN IN BLACK

"That's the problem with organized crime. 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.

(continued)

continued:

MAN IN BLACK

"We've bought ourselves a little time by letting the Outfit believe we're mercenaries. 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.

LOTUS

"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."

JIMBO

"These fuckin' townies were plenty happy with me when they were pocketing my cash. Isn't that right, dollface?"

He gives Esther a stomach-churning wink.

LOTUS

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

AHOTE

"So... 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."

ESTHER

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

(continued)

continued:

AHOTE

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

ESTHER

"Truman's an asshole. Screw him!"

She smiles beneath her running mascara.

The Marshals confer via a series of shrugs and raised eyebrows.

MAN IN BLACK

"If you've got a driver in mind, we're willing to give it a go."

AHOTE

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

INT. GENERAL STORE -- DAY

Esther sits in a chair by the door, nursing a hangover. 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.

TRUMAN

"How was your date, doll?"

ESTHER

"Dull. Ain't nowhere to go, is there?"

TRUMAN

"Not what I meant. Did you find Jimbo?"

(continued)

continued:

ESTHER

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

TRUMAN

"'Ahote.' Awfully familiar, for a dull date."

He sinks his fingers into her hair and jerks her head back.

"Exactly how familiar did you get?"

ESTHER

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

He drags her off her seat and across the floor.

TRUMAN

"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. Lotus enters through the front door, dusting off her hands.

LOTUS

"Where's your boss. I know which hole his rat crawled down."

INT. CHEVY -- DAY

Ahote sits behind the wheel. Dante sits beneath a man-shaped haystack dressed in some of Jimbo's gargantuan clothes. The Chevy sits inside a tiny barn made of Swiss cheese. Countless shafts of light slip through its tattered thatch and pepper the car's exterior.

(continued)

continued:

DANTE

"This is a stupid, stupid plan. This ain't gonna fool nobody."

AHOTE

"Don't worry. They won't get close enough for it to matter."

Dante shifts in his seat, flaps his arms like a penguin throwing a fit.

DANTE

"I can't even scratch my chin in this thing."

AHOTE

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

DANTE

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

AHOTE

"Shhh! I hear cars... three of them."

He slips a black bag over Dante's head.

(smirking)

"Sounds like they brought a truck."

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 a nearby 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.

Ahote 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.

(continued)

continued:

DANTE

"What the hell was that?!"

AHOTE

"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.

AHOTE

"Damn, he's fast."

DANTE

"Who's fast?"

AHOTE

"Don't worry about it."

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

DANTE

"Holy Saint Peter in heaven!"

Dante starts to pull the bag off his head, but Ahote stops him.

AHOTE

"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 CRASH like Sumo wrestlers, if Sumo wrestling happened at 40 mph.

EXT. TRUCK -- DAY

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 SHOT down and to the right... where it POPS Ray's rear tire. The Alfa Romero jack-knives off the road and SKIDS to a stop in a magnificent wave of dust.

Lotus SLAPS the rifleman upside the head.

LOTUS

"Nice one, dumbass."

Up ahead, the Chevy veers off into the desert. Lotus pounds on the roof of the truck.

LOTUS

"Go, go, go!"

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.

LOTUS

(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 HITS 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.

LOTUS

(to the driver)

"Screw 'em! Get back up that hill!"

INT. CHEVY -- DAY

Back inside the Chevy, Dante succeeds in un-bagging his head.

DANTE

"Go, daddy-o!! I can't believe we're still alive!!"

AHOTE

"Don't get too excited."

He eyeballs 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?"

DANTE

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

Sure enough, the truck CLAMBERS up a gentler slope further from the road and moves to intercept them.

AHOTE

"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.

DANTE

"Shit. Good thing we have a lead on 'em. 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.

DANTE

(clutching the arm rest)
"Hey, hey, hotshot! We are NOT doing this!"

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continued:

AHOTE

"It's perfect."

He pets the dashboard and gives the steering wheel a kiss.

Once Ahote is 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.

EXT. TRUCK -- DAY

On the other side, Lotus watches the Chevy escape between the passing train cars.

LOTUS

"Well, boys. Looks like you blew it. Who else wants a drink?"

EXT. ROADSIDE -- DAY

A toolbox HITS the dust. The Alfa Romero's spare tire is propped up next to it. Ray's shoes walk away as Truman's step into view.

RAY

"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.

INT. GENERAL STORE -- DAY

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.

RAY

"What now?"

Chuck takes one step towards Esther and the truth darts out of her mouth like a rabbit from its hole.

ESTHER

"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."

RAY

"Well, hell!"

He 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.

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAY

RAY

"Yo, Jimbo! 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.

RAY

"I hope you guys are watching..."

Ray holds out his hand and one of the thugs puts a gun in it.

Ray SHOTS Esther in the head.

RAY

"Keep 'em comin', boys!"

Chuck KICKS Lotus onto Esther's body. Her fingers SINK into a mass of bloody hair. Ray sticks his gun between Lotus' eyes.

RAY

"I salute a worthy adversary."

Lotus 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.

EXT. GAS STATION, REAR -- DAY

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.

FLASH

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO -- DAWN

A young girl plays jacks in front of a modest, Chinese house. She drops the ball and sings...

CHINESE GIRL

"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.

CHINESE MAN

"I think you're the only flower that blooms before sunrise."

He 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.

CUT TO:

Through a circular window, a Chinese woman works in the kitchen.

CHINESE WOMAN

"Breakfast is almost ready, you two!"

BACK TO:

(continued)

continued:

CHINESE MAN

"I'm sure there's time for another round.
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.

CHINESE GIRL

"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.

FLASH

EXT. GAS STATION, REAR -- DAY

AHOTE

"What happened?"

Lotus opens her eyes to Ahote and Dante's furrowed brows.

LOTUS

"We shouldn't have left Esther here. 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."

(continued)

continued:

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 looks.

AHOTE

"What are you going to do?"

LOTUS

"I'm gonna kill 'em all."

AHOTE

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

LOTUS

"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.

DANTE

"Hey, wait up!"

EXT. GENERAL STORE, REAR -- DAY

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.

INT. STOCK ROOM, GENERAL STORE -- DAY

Sunset casts her long shadow across the store room floor. There are two men inside. THUG #1 is on her left and THUG #2 blocking the far door. She's already swinging when Thug #2 pulls his trigger.

A GUNSHOT rings out, then a RICOCHET as stone intercepts lead. The bullet careens left and catches Thug #1 in his throat.

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continued:

She flies across the room as the Thug #2 UNLOADS the rest of his clip into empty air. She KICKS him in the face and 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.

DANTE

"I'm kinda pinned down out here!"

LOTUS

"Then find another way in! Christ!"

FOOTSTEPS roll across the floor above her. Lotus peeks around the door and sees THUGS 3-7 on the stairs. Lotus side arms her stone; it SLAMS into THUG #3's face.

INT. STAIRS, GENERAL STORE -- DAY

Before he's done SLIDING down the wall, she's over the railing and disarming THUG #4 with a SNAP kick to the wrist. He throws a punch, which she catches and pulls into a hip throw. He TUMBLES down the steps.

She windmills around, evading a flurry of GUNSHOTS from the landing above. Rushing up the intervening steps, she SWEEPS THUG #5'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 THUG #6 in the face.

As the dead man drops, Lotus does the same and pulls THUG #5 over her head. He SLAMS into the wall behind her with a CRUNCH of wood and bone. THUG #7's eyes don't quite tear themselves away before Lotus retrieves THUG #6's 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.

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continued:

LOTUS

"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.

INT. BEDROOM, GENERAL STORE -- DAY

THUGS 9-10 are crouched behind an up-ended mattress and an over-turned dresser. THUG #11 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 start SHOOTING. 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. THUG #11 CRASHES through the window and CRUMBLES like a tin can when he hits the street.

Lotus re-enters the room, looking for someone to question, and Dante thanks her from down below.

LOTUS

"Just hurry up!"

DANTE

"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.

LOTUS

"Where is he?! And where are my goddamned guns?!"

He flashes her a crimson smile and passes out.

(continued)

continued:

LOTUS

"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.

DANTE

"Hey, Dollface! I think he's on the roof!"

LOTUS

(under her breath)
"He says, many deaths later."

Lotus slides one bullet into each borrowed gun, then steps out onto the awning and leaps up to the roof.

EXT. ROOF, GENERAL STORE -- DAY

Chuck is waiting, her shoulder holsters lying at his feet. He TWIRLS his rope dart like a popinjay with a pocket watch.

LOTUS

"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. Lotus chases him around the roof, collecting cuts on her knuckles, throat, and face. Chuck dances just out of her reach, always keeping her at the edge of his satellite's striking distance.

LOTUS

"Nuts to this."

(continued)

continued:

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.

CUT TO:

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.

BACK TO:

Chuck smiles to himself as he shakes Lotus loose, then WHIPS his blade up to intercept Dante. It SLASHES a crimson line along his throat. Dante 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 BLASTS 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.

Chuck and Lotus whirl around the roof like twin dervishes, neither able to land a hit. 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. Dante 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.

DANTE

(grins)
"Looks like you owe me your life."

(continued)

continued:

LOTUS

(grins back)
"Looks like."

DANTE

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

LOTUS

"Swanky."

She 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.

CUT TO:

Lotus fills the sky as she drops down on Chuck; her knee pounds into his chest like a meteor strike.

BACK TO:

Chuck spits up blood.

LOTUS

"Dick!"

She punches him in the face.

(continued)

continued:

DANTE

(nodding)

"That was entirely necessary."

Lotus picks up her guns and returns her holsters to their rightful home.

DANTE

"Wait, all that was just to get your guns? What about the Marshals?!"

LOTUS

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

Dante's objections are overruled by the ROAR of an angry engine.

EXT. MAIN STREET -- DAY

Sweetness careens towards the saloon. The mafioso OPEN FIRE, but Ahote skis the car up onto the side of a building. Somehow, the wheels find purchase and, slapping gravity in the face, Ahote drives up the side of the wall. Broken glass and battered wood spray in his wake as he jumps Sweetness across the alley and CRASHES 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.

AHOTE

"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.

(continued)

continued:

Sweetness SQUEALS around, scattering furniture and debris, then ROCKETS out through the front wall. The car hangs in the air for a second, rotating slowly through a hurricane of debris. Mafioso stare up at the undercarriage in disbelief. Sweetness HITS the ground after a quarter turn, already ACCELERATING down main street.

Another SEDAN with Illinois plates pulls into town, cutting them off. The GUNMEN piled inside OPEN FIRE. 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.

Lotus floats between two rooftops, FIRING her pistols to defend Sweetness. 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.

INT. APARTMENT -- DAY

Dante crashes through a window and rolls into an old woman's bedroom.

DANTE

"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.

DANTE

"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.

INT. BENTLEY-- DAY

Jimbo almost pops him in the kisser, but Dante dodges back and returns the favor with a backfist.

DANTE

"Suck on a lemon, 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.

LOTUS

"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.

EXT. HIGHWAY -- DAY

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.

LOTUS

"Can't you outrun these palookas?"

Still holding her guns, she grabs new clips with her fingertips and bangs the guns together, reloading each from the opposite hand.

AHOTE

"Not with you perched on the hood."

(continued)

continued:

LOTUS

"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.

LOTUS

"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. GUNMAN #1 manages to reload in time to SHOOT 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 from GUNMEN 2-3. She PISTOL WHIPS GUNMAN #2 (the rear passenger window). Reversing direction, she CRACKS Gunman #1 in the temple, then BACKHANDS GUNMAN #3 (front passenger).

The driver swerves madly, trying to shake her loose. Ray ZIPS past in the truck. 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.

INT. BENTLEY -- DAY

When Ray pulls up alongside Sweetness, GUNMAN #4 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.

GUNMAN #5 sticks a Tommy gun in the back seat. Dante grabs the barrel and directs the first few GUNSHOTS 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. Fighting ensues.

(continued)

continued:

One of the goons lashes Sweetness to the truck with a length of chain. He slides a crowbar through the links to secure it. Ray hits the BRAKES, dragging Sweetness into a spin.

EXT. HIGHWAY -- DAY

A few yards back, Lotus rides atop a now-empty sedan. She reaches inside and twists the steering wheel. As the car ROLLS over, she leaps off and flies up to the spinning 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 the crowbar and SWING Dante 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 Alfa Romeo is cruising straight into them, a confused Truman behind the wheel. When Ray SWERVES to avoid his precious car, Lotus SHOTS the truck's tires. Truman darts between them as Ray CRASHES into a telephone pole.

Truman does a bootleg turn through the debris and rushes to the crash site. Ray kicks the driver's side door open and spits out a bloody tooth.

RAY

"Get out."

Truman vaults over the door and tries to help his boss up, but Ray PUNCHES him out with a haymaker. He staggers over to the Alfa Romeo and opens up the gas.

INT. BENTLEY -- DAY

Down the road, Lotus and Dante finish climbing into the back seat.

LOTUS

"Looks like we're even."

(continued)

continued:

DANTE

"How's that, now?"

LOTUS

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

DANTE

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

LOTUS

"Really!?"

DANTE

"Smooth sailing."

LOTUS

(stops smiling)

"You know I caught that bullet, right?"

DANTE

"Which what?"

LOTUS

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

DANTE

"Really?!"

LOTUS

"Hand to God."

JIMBO

"Christ! Will you two fuck already?!"

(continued)

continued:

Ahote laughs/coughs in the rear view mirror, then his eyes widen.

AHOTE

"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.

LOTUS

"I'm shooting him."

AHOTE

"No. Stay in the car. I can loose 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 herd of RABBITS run out on the road ahead.

AHOTE

"Fuck."

JIMBO

"Fuck 'em!"

LOTUS / DANTE

"What?!"

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!"

EXT. FARMHOUSE -- DAY

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 his hood. Ahote swings the wheel just before Ray rams them, side stepping the Alfa, then 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 rolls his eyes.

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.

EXT. FARMHOUSE -- DAY

Ahote CAREENS up the porch steps, BOUNCING Lotus and Dante 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 Alfa Romeo. 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 raises a pistol. He SPINS his car around as she SHOTS. The bullet PIERCES 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 lovers. 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.

LOTUS (o.s.)

"Was this how you thought it would end?"

INT. ESTHER'S FARMHOUSE -- DAY

CLOSE ON:

A picture of Esther lies on a shelf half-buried in sand. Ahote picks it up and places it gently in a box full of keepsakes.

BACK TO:

AHOTE

"Of course not. 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."

LOTUS

"Hardly. 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 shelf behind and walk through the kitchen.

LOTUS

"Besides, it seems to me Destiny killed Ray."

EXT. FARMHOUSE -- DAY

Ahote puts the box down and picks up a wooden board. He places it across the door and Lotus POUNDS in each nail with a palm strike.

LOTUS

"Is this what it's gonna be like, walking the path with you?"

AHOTE

"Foreclosing homes, you mean?"

He picks up another board and the process repeats.

LOTUS

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

(continued)

continued:

AHOTE

"All I know 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.

AHOTE

"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."

LOTUS

(smirks)

"I know. 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.

LOTUS

"He's always on stage, though, ya know? He's always performing. I gotta wonder what he's like after the show."

INT. BENTLEY -- DAY

Sweetness wraps her steel arms around them. Ahote STARTS her engine.

LOTUS

"I do have one regret: Jimbo got away with it. A self-confessed wife-murderer is gonna walk. It doesn't sit right."

She mimes an upset stomach.

AHOTE

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

(continued)

continued:

LOTUS

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

AHOTE

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

LOTUS

"A girl can dream."

She pulls her fedora down over her eyes as they speed down the highway.

EXT. FARMHOUSE -- DAY

LOTUS (v.o)

"You know you forgot Dante, right?"

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

CUT TO BLACK

CREDITS

INT. PENTHOUSE -- DAY

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.

JIMBO

"Good riddance, huh?"

He snorts around his cigar.

The G-man guarding his door gives no response.

(continued)

continued:

Jimbo 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.

GUNSHOT

The muzzle flash fades to white.

END