

Dustbowl Xia

Episode 3 – Gabriel's Trumpet

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A giant's head rolls down Bourbon Street. Atop its plaster crown, fan dancers tease the Mardi Gras crowd to the tunes of a trailer-mounted jazz band. Revelers swarm the rue, already drunk by mid-afternoon, but no one's seen sobriety in days.

The balconies, too, are awash in Mardi Gras spirit. Their occupants lean drunkenly over the railings, yelling and waving at the mob, their faces hidden behind garish or glittering masks. A boy leaps from railing to railing, evading an angry mob. His face is hidden behind a painted skull, but his expression is unmistakable. This young man is running for his life.

He charges across tables and vaults over merrymakers, suddenly much less merry. By the time they turn to grab him, he's hurtling onto the next balcony and making new enemies. At the end of the block, where the cross street yawns wide, he picks up a bottle of scotch and smashes it over a stone bust, then jabs the jagged edge through a rope anchoring a streamer to the edge of the building. He swings around the corner in a wide arc, legs dangling over the parade.

More balconies, more obstacles, but then he finds the end of the road. The next block features less elaborate facades and the balconies are too far between. The Mississippi River shines in the distance. The young man twists as he goes over the last railing, clings for a moment to the outside of the balcony, then drops down to street level.

Three men with painted faces are waiting for him. He ducks their clutches and takes off down an alley. More hounds bray at the opposite end. He lets them close in on both sides, then runs up one wall, kicks off the other, and falls upon their back ranks like a tiger on gazelle. Rather than tear out their throats, he rolls off them and runs around the corner. More pursuers pour down the street.

The skull-faced boy heads for a burned-out warehouse on the bank of the river. When he crosses the threshold, his fingers curl over the door frame and he swings up onto the inside wall. As his enemies enter, two tiny fists pop back into

view and clock them both in the brain box. Their feet abandon them and both men meet the floor.

In turn, the mob tramples its way inside. The boy weaves between exposed 2x4's, letting a few pursuers get within arm's reach, then he grabs their greedy hands and drags the their arms around the timbers, tying his hunters in knots.

A fog horn sounds in the distance and the boy perks up his ears. He runs up a woman's backside and leaps into the rafters, then swings himself to the top of a fallen staircase. Bricks and bottles smash against the lumber, but he's home free. A few steps and a little elbow grease get him onto the roof.

"So... that it, Dante?" An older man stands at the edge of the building, his back to the river. There's a black cane in his hands, white sigils all over his face and chest. "You just gonna catch a steam ship an' never look back?"

"Those people gonna lynch me!" Dante pleads. "You gotta lemme go!"

"They ain't nothin' I can't handle, boy. You know that. Just tell 'em what they need to hear and..."

"It's all bullshit! I can't spend my life lying to their faces!"

"Why not, Dante?! Why the hell not?! It's what they want you to do! It's all they ever asked you to do! You rather break your back in a sugar cane field?!"

The *Willow Whisp's* exhaust pipe drifts into view behind the houngan. Young Dante watches the angles, judges the distance. The door kicks like a kangaroo; they've climbed the stairs. "You gotta lemme go."

"I'd rather let you hang."

Dante charges the old man as the door frame splinters. The black cane swings for his head, but Dante limbos beneath it before vaulting onto the old man's shoulders and leaping off the ledge. He flies toward his future, knees tucked to his chest and arms spread out behind him like wings.

Dante hits the ground running. His feet tear fistfuls out of the church yard as he sprints along the back wall of the rectory. He cuts between the two buildings at the last second, runs up the side of the church, and bounces backward toward the rectory, already spinning around to grab the awning. The night sky is waiting for him on the roof.

He gives his wing-tips a running start and they carry him back across to the church's second story, but lefty takes a bite out of the stained glass. God must be home, because Dante hears a startled cry from somewhere inside.

No time for apologies, now. He scales the steeple like a spider monkey, arms and legs akimbo. When he reaches the belfry, Dante vaults over the railing and kicks the bell with both feet. He immediately laments the bone-jarring flourish, but shakes it off and locates the chord.

A few, scattered windows alight across the hamlet as the bell cries out. Rows of simple, wooden homes line either side of what was once a river, now little more than a creek. Tents and shanties huddle inside the once-and-future riverbed... directly in the path of the tsunami that rises behind the church like one of Noah's nightmares.

Ahote bursts from a large tent with a child under each arm. He spares the flood a wide-eyed glance as he passes the kids to Sweetness. They join five more already in the back seat, the nurse up front, and the two toddlers in her lap. The shaman slides over the roof and slips through the driver's side window feet-first.

Sweetness takes off like a cannon ball, blasting apart two rows of lean-tos before tearing through the kitchen tent. Canvas engulfs Ahote's windshield. A tent stake attacks him through the open window. He reaches around and pulls the tent free, only to be greeted by the center post of a large, vestigial bridge.

The children roll over one another like grains of sand in a prospector's pan as Sweetness veers left, then back right, and drifts around the obstruction. She slides in the loose soil and they end up spinning 180 degrees, but Ahote keeps up the pace. He watches the flood engulf the church, swallow the shantytown, and smash the bridge to bits.

Again, they spin around, but this time Ahote leans into the turn and heads up the embankment. They crest the rise only to get smacked back down by a stampeding cow. Ahote takes one look in his rear view mirror before opening the throttle and launching them over the heifer sideways.

They land in the middle of the herd. Sweetness bounces back and forth like a pinball as cattle crash into her sides. "Come on, come on!" Ahote leans on the horn. "Get off the road!" He puts both hands on the wheel, locks the back tires, and fishtails to one side. The bumper scoops up one cow and pushes it forward, opening a tiny door in the wall of beef. Ahote swings the car around and races through the gap

The flood has spent its fury. When it finally crashes over them, Sweetness only floats a few yards downstream. The back doors open simultaneously, disgorging

equal parts water and children. Ahote turns to check on the nurse and she kisses him full on the mouth.

Upstream, Lotus skips over fallen and floating trees to the base of the broken dam. She charges straight up the ragged edge, knocking new rubble loose with every step. The crest sails past her as she takes flight and finds herself looking down on the worst jazz band in the world:

- A woman with a face like cracked earth carries a drum made of human skin; a sailor's tattoo is stretched taught across its surface.
- An old man made of leather and wrapped in overalls cradles a saxophone with crude, misshapen lumps of iron for keys.
- A stock broker strokes the strings of a double bass like he's comforting his girl.
- A black man with two faces lifts a weather-beaten trumpet to his lips and blows.

The rest of the band joins in with neither rhythm nor harmony, like a pack of cacodemons braying at heaven. Their discordant chi rampages over Lotus' equilibrium and knocks her from the sky. She plunges into the flood waters below.

30 minutes earlier...

The sun has set on middle America and night has smothered a town in its sleep. Ahote and crew coast through like a gurney down a hospital hall. The nurse breaks the silence.

"I can't thank you enough." Her gesture takes in everyone, but her eyes are only for Ahote. "It's been a ghost town for days. I don't know who I would've called. Even the refugee families are off in the hills."

"What for?" Dante asks, Lotus curled under his arm. "Are the redcoats a' comin'?"

The nurse shakes her head. "No. Just some stupid, local legend. Might as well be the British, for all the actual invading. They'll give it up by the end of the week, then I can order some medicine for my kids."

Sweetness descends the husk of a riverbank and rolls through a shantytown. The nurse directs them to a big tent bearing a red cross. Two boys are running around it, kicking a can. It's the only sound for miles.

"What are you two doing up?" the nurse scolds them from the window. "You'll catch cold and then what will your little sister do?" That one gets them. They give the can one, last kick in the teeth, then scurry inside. Sweetness pulls up on their heels.

"There's an old saloon back up the hill. You can probably just let yourselves in. Will you stay long?" she asks, eyelashes batting.

Ahote locks up like he missed an oil change. "Um, yeah. Maybe. I don't..."

Dante kicks the driver's seat. "We'll stick around for a few days," he interjects, "until your neighbors get back." He flashes Ahote a wide-eyed look in the rear view mirror.

"Great!" She just about bounces out of the car. "I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep tight." She skips into her tent like a schoolgirl.

"What's wrong with you, medicine man?!" Dante makes to slap him, but he can't reach without waking Lotus. "You gotta *make* time for the ladies, Iya."

"I get nervous around white women, ok? Don't you?"

"Dante Harrison Holloway doesn't get nervous around any kinda woman. Know that. When we get to the saloon, I'll give you an education in the ways of seduction."

"Wonderful."

~

The saloon's almost as dark as the rest of the town. A pool of wan light festers at the foot of the door. Ahote parks at its edge. Dante tries to kiss Lotus awake, but she's not having it. Ahote punches her in the shoulder.

"Hey!"

Dante gives kissing one more try, then: "Sorry, Tomcat. We're home."

Ahote's already waiting for them outside. "Get a load of these." He gestures over his shoulder. The wall is plastered with playbills. The art is crude, beyond amateur, and no two are exactly the same. Some are dominated by scenes of

devastation: avalanches, earthquakes, cities set ablaze. Others are crowded by the faces of four ugly, ugly people. They all say the same thing...

Gabriel's Trumpet

One Night Only

The shaman holds the door for his lovebirds. "Think we missed the show?"

"No sir, no sir. I'd say you're just in time for the show, and what a show! It's safe to say, Gabriel's Trumpet *always* brings the house down!"

The diatribe's source is a tiny man in a top hat. The rest of his ensemble is somewhat less formal. A ratty, tweed jacket encrusts a shriveled dress shirt and a tattered bow tie. His pants have patches on their patches and his shoes, well... he'd be better off with bread bags.

An almost-empty bottle of bourbon and fanned-out deck of playing cards accompany him at a table near the door. He hoovers up the latter with one hand and heads straight for the newcomers. Ahote intercepts while Dante vaults the bar. "You don't say!"

"Yes I do, yes I do. Hey," his eyes light up beneath the brim of his hat. "Wanna see a trick?"

"I'm sure I'm going to."

The cards dance among his diminutive fingers. He fans out a royal flush, in reddest hearts, then turns the cards around to reveal their counterparts in spades. The deck collapses again, then arcs from one hand to the other. He cuts the deck and flips both halves over: Aces of clubs and diamonds. He cuts each half with one hand and finds their brothers.

Ahote claps politely. Behind him, Lotus watches Dante do similar juggling with bottles of hooch as he mixes them a round of god-knows-what. You'd think they had the place all to themselves.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you kindly." Magician bows to shaman. Ahote puts a hand on his shoulder and steers them both back to his table. "But these are merely tricks of the hand, legerdemain. When the show starts, you'll see some *real* magic!"

"Pft!!" Dante spares the stranger a glance as he lifts his glass.

"Scoff all you want, young man! Scoff while you can, because your doubts are about to be put to rest. Gabriel's Trumpet is the real deal and they're gonna give the Tailor what for!"

Now, Lotus is interested. "*The Tailor? Wadaya know about *The Tailor*?*"

"Not much, my dear, but more than most. I know how he's done every member of the band wrong and I know how they're gonna make it right..."

The Shepherd's Tale

The Church, like its current occupants, has seen better days. Haggard men beg on the front steps while their wives sit in makeshift tents in the yard. Some boys climb on the roof; they dare each other to leap over ragged holes. A group of girls washes their clothes in the holy water.

A rust red pickup with an old strip of leather behind the wheel pulls around the corner. He makes eye contact with one of the girls. She sticks out her tongue and continues scrubbing.

The driver pulls up, dismounts, and approaches the church with a tool box in hand. The men don't beg him for a dime; they can smell their own. Instead, they part before him like the Red Sea. He removes a hammer and a nail from his toolbox, a folded piece of paper from his pocket, and uses the former to hang the latter from the church's door.

It's a hand-drawn map leading from the church to a ranch far outside of town. A string of bold letters emblazon the top and bottom:

"Homeless Welcome"

"God Helps Those Who Help Each Other"

~

A sky blue pickup travels a lonely, country road. Its back is piled high with apple crates, which is to say crates piled high with apples. A rust red pickup slices through its dusty wake, then pulls into the oncoming lane, but it does not pass. Instead, the driver slows to match speed and calls out across the negligible distance.

"Hey, buddy! Which way to Albuquerque?!"

Johnny Appletruck guffaws. "Mister, you are nowhere near..." He trails off as something in the side mirror catches his eye. Children are streaming into the back of his truck like ants on a jelly donut. He reaches behind his seat, retrieves a sawed-off double-barrel, and lets it finish his sentence.

The highwayman hammers the brake and zips out of harm's way. Buckshot streaks past his windshield. Children cling to the sides of both vehicles as they slide apart, their shoeless feet dangling just above the gravel.

The red truck regains steam while the kids help each other up. It runs right up the apple cart's tail pipe, crunching the fender against its grill. Crate-laden children run across the hood and over the cab. Their brothers and sisters greet them with open arms.

Johnny's tail lights flash as he taps his breaks, then really grinds them in. The blue truck pushes hard against its nemesis, causing the vehicles to fold in opposite directions. Johnny fishtails left and skids to a stop in middle of the road. The highwayman dives over the shoulder and takes off across the scrub.

Tiny fists pound the red truck's cab like hail. "Shepherd! Shepherd!" the children wail. "Matthew's still back there!"

"Shit." The old man lets the truck slow and guides it back towards the road. "You kids ever been shot at?" They all nod their heads in the affirmative. "Good. Stack up those apple crates and take cover."

Shepherd lets the blue bastard catch up and, sure enough, he takes a couple of pot shots. One sends the side mirror to hardware heaven. The other wastes a perfectly good crate of apples. The children take it personally. They pop up from behind their barricade like veterans of the Great War and launch a volley of produce at the enemy.

Enough artillery splatters on impact to seriously obstruct the driver's view, which allows Shepherd to swing in beside him. The kids wave their comrade over, but the blue truck lurches forward as Johnny throttles the engine. He pulls even with the highwayman and, guffawing once more, he levels his shotgun at Shepherd.

A tiny hand reaches through the driver's window, seizes Johnny's ear, and twists it like a stubborn candy machine. The driver screams. His gun does an about-face. The kid lets go of the ear and grabs the gun by its barrel, smashes it into Johnny's nose. He takes the gun with him when he scampers over the roof and leaps onto the red pickup.

The kid leaves Johnny a round of buckshot to remember him by. The blue truck's tire explodes and Johnny spins out. They leave him there, in the desert, to think about what he's done.

~

The rust red pickup and its red ripe apples trundle towards a bustling encampment. The meek have inherited a barren stretch of earth along a drought-starved riverbed. Their tents cling to the clay like barnacles on a sunken ship. Still, the fact that any life has taken root in such soil is a miracle.

A crowd (what one imagines to be the entire population of the camp, in fact) has gathered on the road. As Shepherd's truck draws closer, he spies a rich man's car at the throng's epicenter; it's a Duesenberg that's seen better days. The grill looks like a boxer's smile.

With the truck's wheels still rolling, the children jump out and dive into the mob. A man in a pin-stripped suit wades through them. He is spared their pocket picking only because a cowboy follows behind him, passing out candy.

Shepherd rolls around the mob and pulls up to a pavilion around the corner. Some of the women separate from the pack and begin unburdening his steed. They steal a few apples for themselves, biting into them every bit as greedily as their children do the candy.

"Looks like someone's come into some money," says the rich man. He's not talking about himself. "That looks like a helluva haul."

"It fell off a truck," Shepherd responds.

"Then perhaps I didn't make the godforsaken trip out here for nothing. I'm willing to make you one more offer." He hands over a folded bit of embossed paper. Judging by the elaborate script, one might think it a wedding invitation. The old man's reaction says otherwise. "Not a fair price, I know, but it's the best you're going to get. I recommend you accept this one-time, non-negotiable offer immediately, else I'll be forced to seize your land through eminent domain."

Torn bits of paper float towards the Tailor's feet. The old man chuckles. "Not in this county."

~

The judge wields his gavel like a sword, pointing its business end between the Tailor's eyes. "Eminent domain is a right of the government, not of rail barons or... whatever the hell you are. The court has asked you *repeatedly* to

demonstrate the government's interest in turning this property over to you and all you've given us," he brandishes a fistful of loose papers, "is a collection of arcane scribblings so inscrutable... they resemble nothing moreso than an alchemist's cookbook!"

The Tailor clutches the side of the plaintiff's table. His fingers strain against the molding. It cracks under the pressure. He opens his mouth, but the Judge cuts him off like a Gordian knot.

"The simple fact of the matter is that this land is already being put to good by its generous owner, as a home for many wayward souls. The public has absolutely no interest in displacing them at this time. Try again when the rain comes." His honor throws the Tailor's exhibits on the floor, re-sheathes his gavel, and departs. The peanut gallery erupts in cheers.

The Tailor's eyes smolder.

~

The encampment burns.

Shepherd flies over the river bank, sloshing the tub of water in the back of his truck. A bonfire fills his windshield. He skids to a stop behind the dozen or so men and women who managed to evacuate. They assemble immediately into a bucket line, but everyone knows it's useless. The flames tower over them like an angry god.

Then, the fire's roar is laced with the faint hint of children's screams. The women wail in response. Shepherd and a few of the men charge the pyre. They separate almost immediately, scouring the camp as best they can with eyes and lungs searing. The pavilion tent collapses, exhaling dragon's breath. Charcoal apples bounce off the Shepherd's boots.

He sees two of the children weeping over their father's body. Shepherd has enough time to notice the pool of blood glimmering beneath the corpse before a man in a duster descends between him and the children. "No seppuku for you." He chides. "Last thing we need is more red tape tied 'round this property. You best tend to the ladies."

The cowboy punctuates his directive with a pair of pistols, but the Shepherd doesn't budge. "Ya know what," the cowboy smiles, "you're absolutely right. It'd be a rotten shame to waste a backdrop like this." He spins the guns on his fingers, then grips them around the barrels. "Better hurry, though. Yer kids are dyin'."

The old man dusts off his right hook. The cowboy examines it with one raised eyebrow as it sails past him, then knocks the old man on the back of the head with a pistol butt. "Come on, pops! Make it worth my while!" Shepherd unloads two jabs, a left cross, and a haymaker. The cowboy dodges three and ducks under one, then delivers metal-capped hammer strikes to a left rib and right knee. On his way back up, he puts a boot in the old man's stomach and pushes him into a pile of ash.

One of the other men stumbles into the conflagration. Shepherd tries to wave him towards the children, but all he can force from his lungs is a soot-stained cough, so the poor fool charges the cowboy. The duster flares out like a matador's cape as he spins out of the way, then sweeps the man's legs out from under him and drives him into the ground with a pistol blow to the small of his back. The fool grinds face-first into the dirt. Before he can even roll himself over, a bullet penetrates his skull.

Shepherd snaps a burning tent pole off the pyre and wields it like a baseball bat. "Now we're talkin'!" the cowboy approves. Two swings trace glowing arcs through the air. The third stops cold as the cowboy catches it in the crook of his pistol and swings it down, then locks the makeshift weapon under his arm. The pistol in his other hand savages the Shepherd's face, whipping him forehand, then backhand, then forehand again.

Through a veil of blood, Shepherd watches one of the refugees gather up the children. They cry out for their father despite the smoke in their lungs, which draws the cowboy's attention. He lets go of the old man, knocks the club from his limp fingers, and turns both pistols on his prey.

Shepherd lurches forward, concussed, as a dozen gunshots tear through the blaze. Then, a circle of molten gunmetal brands him between the eyes. "Count yer blessin's, old timer." The gun departs, but only in advance of a boot heel that shatters his sternum and launches him through the fire. He hits his truck like roadkill, smashing the windshield.

Dimly, against a pillar of flame, he watches the yellow duster fly into the night.

"The next day, a man with two faces helped him salvage the deceased's only remains: the iron from their fillings. He told the Shepherd to melt them down and make 23 keys for a saxophone. Now, the souls of the vengeful dead scream through his instrument. They cry out for justice!"

The little man stands up on his seat and raises his arms toward heaven. Ahote and Lotus look on with bemused interest while Dante lounges on top of the bar, seemingly asleep.

"The next member of the band was a stock broker who lost a lot more than his shirt in the Crash of '29..."

Mr. Mountebank's Tale

A nurse throws open the drapes, shedding light on a little girl's bedroom. A legion of porcelain dolls stands watch over a four-post bed. A tiny pile of bones and blonde locks quivers beneath its sheets. The bedside is littered with bowls of soup, plates of pancakes, glasses of milk and juice, sides of bacon, beans, and summer greens... all untouched.

A portly man in a business suit escorts a doctor to her side. The doctor checks her pulse, depresses her tongue, shines a light into her eyes, jabs his fingers into her abdomen. She groans pitifully at the rough handling.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mountebank, but your daughter is not responding to treatment. Even when we can get her to eat, her body doesn't absorb the nutrients like it should. I give her another month, at the most."

More doctors flash through the room as the sun lurches, in time-lapsed fits and starts, toward the horizon.

Last is the Tailor, whose pin-stripped lapels are lined with needles. He circles the bed slowly, then begins inserting needles all over the little girl's body. She shivers and they jingle against each other like wind chimes. Then, he strikes her in the chest.

"What the *hell* are you doing?!" Mr. Mountebank is around the bed in a heartbeat, but the Tailor halts his client with one finger.

"Never second-guess your physician, Mr. Mountebank." The girl's eyes are wide open, her body still for the first time. She starts to reach for the food at her beside, but the Tailor puts one hand on her forehead and forces her back down. "One more minute, child, then you may eat." He removes his needles carefully, stows them back in his lapels, then releases her. Mountebank places a dinner tray in her lap and the girl devours it like a marine.

"Thank you," the fat man weeps. "Thank you, so much. You've worked a miracle!"

"Please." The Tailor rolls his eyes as he pulls the thankful father toward the door. "I cannot cure your daughter. This is just a treatment: a very expensive treatment that I will need to administer once a week. Her symptoms may pass in a month or a year... or never. Luckily for her, she comes from money."

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Men in blue collars stream in and out of an office building like hyenas stripping a carcass. The sign reads "Mountebank Brokerage," but not for much longer. Two men on ladders are pulling it down presently. In their shadow, the eponymous Mountebank goes toe-to-toe with a slightly taller gentleman's scowl.

"We all lost our shirts, Mountebank!" the scowl yells down at him. "We've all got creditors to pay. The only difference between you and I is that you didn't secure any collateral."

"No, *sir*, the only difference between you and I is the I don't kick a man while he's down!" With that, Mountebank kicks his creditor in the shin and makes a run for the door. Six repo men drop a bureau when they see him coming and tackle him to the ground.

Mr. Mountebank struggles to look up as the taller man steps in front of the sun. "Don't make me call the police," warns the scowl. "That's the last thing your daughter needs."

The repo men let Mountebank up and escort him to his car. He drives around the block and pulls into the alley behind the office, muttering angrily to himself. He waits for a small group of workmen to finish their cigarettes, then flags down the last before he steps through the door.

"Hey, pal! Wanna make a quick buck?"

The repo man looks around, then props the door open with his foot and leans into the alley. "Wadaya got?"

Mountebank offers up his pocket watch. "It retails for \$20. I'm sure you could get at least \$10 at a pawn shop."

"And what I gotta do?"

"I just need you to let me in for a few minutes to collect some personal effects."

"Done deal, daddy-o." The younger man snatches up the watch and pushes the door open. Mountebank scampers through. He's not two steps down the hall

before the repo man pops the watch open and finds its face cracked, its arms still.

"Hey! The fat man's lootin' his office!!"

Mr. Mountebank approximates a run as he hustles into his office and barricades the door. Silhouettes pile up against the frosted glass; fists pound on the frame. He rips a drawer out of his desk and tears free a stack of bills taped to its back, then scrambles out the window. His barricade crashes down behind him. Repo men start pouring into the alley.

The fat man dives into his car and slams the lock down. The angry mob breaks against his window like a wave. He crawls across the seat and fumbles for his keys. The repo men spread out and begin to rock the car back and forth. It's up on two wheels when he finally gets the engine running.

The car pulls itself loose and slams down amidst the mob, scattering them down the alley. A couple get caught between the bumper and a brick wall. Mountebank starts towards the street, then thinks better of it and points the car down the alley instead. Repo men bounce off his hood like bocce balls.

~

The Tailor arrives at Mountebank's home as a truck is towing his car away. He knocks, but doesn't wait for an invitation. The moment Mountebank opens the door, he marches inside with practiced familiarity. "I hope you have my money, this time. I doubt your daughter can skip another treatment."

"I had your money," Mr. Montebank confesses from the doorway, "but then I gave it to these guys." Two serious triggermen emerge from side rooms and flank the Tailor with guns drawn. "You're going to teach me how to treat my daughter, then these two gentleman are going to show you out. Politely. Screw with me... well, I might give you one more chance to cooperate after they break every one of those talented fingers."

The Tailor puts his hands up and lets the thugs escort him upstairs. Mountebank throws open the drapes and sheds light on a little girl's room devoid of dolls or furniture. Only the four-post bed and its pallid occupant remain.

"Would you believe me if I told you there's a cure?" the Tailor asks with feigned disinterest. "I was going to sell it to you, really clean you out one last time, but that moment has passed in so many ways." His right hand folds into a pistol shape, pointing to one goon's forehead, then he whirls on the other. A streak of red mist shoots from the first goon's head as the Tailor takes control of the second goon's gun. The hapless thug finds his pistol buried in his own stomach as

the Tailor twists him around and pushes him in front of the window. Another bullet punches through the glass and perforates his skull.

The Tailor tips his hat to the setting sun. A quarter of a mile away, his accomplice in the cowboy hat looks up from his rifle and returns the gesture.

The fat man remembers himself too late. He gets a hot iron half way out of his pocket before the Tailor brings the dead goon's piece to bear. "You wasted your money, Mr. Mountebank, but you still have to pay something." He throws both their guns aside and begins working the poor man over with precise strikes to the spine, kidneys, and chest. Mr. Mountebank doubles over and vomits violently.

The Tailor places a vile of brackish liquid on the floor in front of him. "I'm going to leave this with you. Call it a gift, but know this: There's enough for you or the girl, not both."

"Did you know, they used to make instrument strings out of cat gut? It's true! The two-faced man showed Mr. Mountebank how to do the same with his daughter's bewitched entrails and now he plays the band's double bass."

Lotus, now seated at the magician's table, kicks Ahote's chair. "That sounds a lot like the story Jack told me in Dodge City."

Dante snorts derisively, abandoning his sleepy facade. "That's a very old trick. Medicine men and snake oil salesmen do it all the time. They poison a well or do some fake diagnosis to create an illness only they care 'cure.' Seen it a hundred times."

"Maybe so, young man, maybe so, but the Tailor is no mere flim fam man. He's a master of strange and terrible arts, born of the wizards who tamed the West..."

Valentine's Tale

A dark-haired beauty sits in a Latin lap, sipping a beer and smiling like the sun. She and her man-cushion are crammed into a booth with two other dusty males.

"Next month," her paramour grins.

One of his friends almost loses a mouthful of booze. The other asks, incredulous, "That soon?"

"I've always wanted a spring wedding," she replies mechanically.

"Well," the recovered spitter interjects, raising his bottle. "To passionate hearts."

Four bottles clink, four bottles empty. Female fingers pluck them from calloused hands. "Please," she cuts off their protests. "You boys spend all day on your feet. I'll get the next round."

She slinks her way out of the booth, walks up front, and deposits the spent bottles on the bar. She signals to the bartender, but he's busy hitting on some tail.

"Nectar," someone whispers in her ear. She jumps like a rabbit, but the wolf behind her has already backed off. He's a young man in a finely-tailored suit. "Hummingbirds drink it for its high sugar content. The word was originally used to describe the drink of the gods. It means 'overcoming death.'"

She recovers quickly, looks him over, and decides to display her plumage. "Let me guess: You want to know what beautiful creatures drink."

He smiles, pleased if nonplussed. "You've heard that one before?"

"Not quite those words, but I know the tune." The bartender finally wanders over. She orders four more. He staggers away with the fallen soldiers.

"You here with friends?"

"My fiance and his friends," she replies. "And, yes, he's the jealous type."

He takes her hand, turns it over. "No engagement ring, so he's also either the impulsive type or the impoverished type. Either way, you could do so much better."

Her fermented quartet finally appears on the bar. She doesn't pick them up, not yet. "Can't you see?" she steps towards him and whispers coyly. "I'm in love."

"Hmm..." he replies, looking her up and down. "Yes, I do see. The color in your cheeks, the sheen of your hair." He grabs her abdomen like he's robbing the till. "I see exactly what you are."

She wrestles his hand away and retreats from the bar, leaving the drinks behind. Moments later, three angry drunks have come to claim them. Scratch that, they've come to claim him.

"What's your problem, zoot suit?" the fiance pushes him, playground style.

"Please, this suit is tailored. And I don't even like jazz." He pulls a slim, wooden case from an inside pocket and flips open the clasp, but the fiance knocks it out of his hand and over the bar. Needles scatter like dandelion seeds.

"I think you'd better leave, before something bad happens."

"Too late," the Tailor whispers. He kicks a barstool between himself and his assailant, grabs it, and jabs the seat towards the fiance's face. The larger man tries to take it away, but the Tailor manages to catch his arm between its legs. Then, he spins the stool around and pulls, dislocating the fiance's arm at the shoulder and elbow.

The big man screams even bigger, stumbles back. His friends step up, but both strike out. The bar stool crunches the bridge of a foot, breaks a fist in mid-punch, and cracks a skull at the temple. Both men fall.

Then, the fiance is back at bat. He slashes twice with a switchblade, high and outside. He lunges and the Tailor takes it in the palm, letting the blade slide between two metacarpal bones. With the knife neutralized, his other hand balls into a fist and goes on the offensive.

With one knuckle slightly extended, he strikes his attacker twice in the chest and once in the shoulder, rapid and precise. A spasm ripples through the poor man's body. His eyes roll back in his head and blood bubbles up onto his lips. He tips backwards, his weapon forgotten, and hits the floorboards like falling timber.

His woman rushes to him. She cradles his shivering head in her lap and looks up at the Tailor with anguished eyes. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

Slowly, he draws the steel from his hand. "I should say so." He binds the wound quickly, then vaults over the bar and begins gathering his needles. "Your lover's not going to die," he assures her. "Not today, anyway. Just give him some water when he wakes up and make sure he doesn't do anything taxing for a while."

One of the other men fights his way back to consciousness and picks up the bloody knife, but the Tailor kicks him in the face on his way back over the bar. "God," he bemoans when he sees the tears pouring down her face, "if it'll make you feel better..." He pops the quaking man's joints back into place, then plants a palm strike on his sternum. The shivering stops.

"See? Your big, strapping paycheck will be just fine." He takes one of their beers with him as he struts out the door. "See you around."

~

The dearly beloved are gathered in a church. Flowers bloom everywhere. The bride looks beautiful, dressed all in black. The padre stands beside her as she weeps over a coffin. She gathers herself up, now clearly pregnant, and they move off to the side. Family and friends line up to pay their respects.

When a young man in a pin-stripped suit appears before her, she almost screams. Then, harshly, she whispers, "What are you doing?"

"I heard about your misfortune and wanted to help. Please allow me to cover your expenses. I've already spoken to the padre. I know a woman in your position has few options. If you need anything..." He slips a business card into her hand.

~

A broken woman stands at a stranger's door. It opens to admit her. A butler brings in her bags.

The building is a lost fragment from another age, a museum of old west relics. The worn furniture belongs in a saloon. The bleached steer's skull belongs on a ranch. The owner... he doesn't belong anywhere.

"I'm glad you came." The Tailor approaches and kisses her on both cheeks. She responds like her creepy uncle just caught her under the mistletoe. "I know we got off on the wrong foot, to say the least, but I think there was something between us, a force drawing us inexorably closer, like gravity." He takes her hand and leads her down the hall.

"Is this all yours?" she asks.

"It was my father's. He was an engineer. I used to help him build railroads when I was a boy."

"I take it you don't mean models."

He chuckles distractedly. "No, actual railroads. There are still a few to be built, you know. This great continent isn't tamed yet." They enter what is either a large study or a small library. The walls are stuffed with books, floor to ceiling for two stories on all sides. Only a lone window on the far wall competes with them for space. Strange devices litter tables and shelves, but the desk is immaculate, bare except for a few sheets of paper. "I hope you don't mind, but I've had all the necessary documents prepared."

"Documents?" she stutters. "Necessary for what?"

"Come, now. We can't have you living here in sin."

She looks down at the marriage certificate and recoils.

"You knew what this way when you knocked on the door." His whisper tastes like steel, cold and unyielding. "A woman in your position..."

~

"Nooooooo!!!" She screams with the lungs of a lioness. Her dark mane is matted against her face, slick with sweat. She twists the bed sheets beneath her. "It's too soon!! What did you do?! What did you do?!"

The Tailor stands at the foot of the bed, between her legs. "I had nothing to do with this, remember? Blame either yourself or your first husband. Now push." She screams again, strains like a heathen on the rack.

When she finally relaxes, no child cries for its mother.

~

A valkyrie strikes the Tailor across the face. "You killed by husband and my son!" Her bags are by the door, again, larger and more numerous than when she arrived. He has her pinned against the nearby wall.

"Please. You never loved either of them. There's only room in your heart for one."

"That's right," she admits with a maniac's grin. "Which means I'll never love you, so you can choke on that marriage certificate. I'll never be your wife!"

"I think the sheriff would disagree." He releases her, steps back, and straightens his clothes. "You can either stay here and meet your contractual obligations, love be damned, or you can spend the rest of your life as a fugitive."

Her eyes blaze. She heads for the door. He grabs her by the hair and smashes her head into a mirror, grinds her face into the shards. His lips brush her ear.

"Not even I want you now."

"That very night, Valentine and the two-faced man went to the cemetery, dug up her fiance's grave, and harvested his skin. They stretched it across a wooden drum and trapped his soul inside. It always beats a steady rhythm, even when no one's playing."

"What about her stillborn child?" The road shaman asks.

"Well," the magician rubs his hands together, reveling in the audience participation, "the Tailor had already cremated his remains, but Valentine had kept some of the ashes. The two-faced man used them to make a mojo bag. She wears it over her womb."

Suddenly, Dante's ears perk up. "Wait, wait, wait. Is this guy a man with two faces or an actual two-faced man, in the hoodoo sense?"

The little man's eyes gleam. "Both..."

Two Tony's Tale

The trumpet player's soulful notes caress the crowd, such as it is. The dirt floor records the footprints of no more than a dozen men and women. They sit in creaky, wooden chairs and tap their, often bare, feet to the languid rhythms of the blues. A two-faced man sits with a couple near the stage. The male leans in and tells him, "Your brother's got a gift. Why ain't he playin' the District?"

The conjurer rolls his head slowly around, then lets his gaze slip up past the rim of his fedora and lock onto the woman. "You need someone driven away, n'est pas?" She gulps, fumbles in her purse, and produces a newspaper clipping. He sees a white man's face in the swarm of dots.

"He used to come see me at this club I worked at and now he won't leave us alone even after I quit and threatened to tell his wife everything." The words rush out like her mouth is a speakeasy and this is a raid. She mines a wad of rumpled bills from her handbag and offers them up like a pagan prayer. "Is this enough? We just want him to leave us be."

The hoodoo man counts his cash, weighs it on some invisible scale, then hefts a salesman's sample case into his lap. He digs in, muttering to himself, and pulls out a pickle jar. "Here's what I'm gonna do." He tosses in a handful of grey dirt, nine rusty nails, one rotten egg, and the newspaper clipping. He tightens the lid and gives the jar a single, violent shake. "Bury this where he'll walk over it, under his front step or outside where he works. Wait three days. If he's still sniffin' around after that, well, murder'd be worth considerin'.

"In the meantime, take this." He plucks a red flannel pouch from his case and hands it across the table to the woman. "Wear it under your clothes, against your skin, and don't let nobody touch it." The boyfriend starts to open his mouth. "No, not even your man, here. It'll protect you from..." "Bullshit!" A mug hits the

driftwood bar like a gavel handing down a sentence. The judge is a young man dressed too nicely for this place, tucked neatly into pin stripes and patent leather shoes. "Can you believe this bullshit?" he appeals to the unwitting jury. They stare at him as the trumpet's notes fade away. "He's selling you dirt in a goddamned jar!" "Wadaya you know about it, ofay?!" The blues musician's on his feet, his finger stabbing the air between himself and the Tailor.

"About bullshit?!" he replies. "Plenty! I had to wade through a sea of it to find *real* power."

"Time to go, big-talker." The bartender steps in before it can come to blows, but the Tailor's not in a diplomatic mood. He reaches up and grabs the bartender's jaw in one hand, then yanks it a fraction of an inch. The bone pops loose from its sockets.

"Shhhh." The Tailor turns back towards the stage just as the hoodoo man bolts out of his chair. He brings one hand to his lips and blows a puff of yellow powder in the Tailor's face. Using his hat as both shield and fan, the Tailor waves the cloud back where it came from. The conjurer lurches back, pawing frantically at his eyes.

"I stand corrected!" the Tailor exclaims to the fleeing crowd. "Looks like this shit does something after all!"

The trumpeter checks on his brother, then approaches the assailant with balled fists. "Did you come all the way out here just to pick on the colored folk?"

"I have nothing against negroes, but stupidity..." he tsk's. "I cannot abide stupidity." With blood pulsing through his eyes, the hoodoo man rejoins the fray. "Let's go out to the crossroads and I'll show you my mojo."

"How about you show me right here?" The Tailor draws a wooden case from his jacket, opens it, and removes several needles. He throws one at the trumpeter, pinning him in the forehead. His whole body goes rigid. The conjurer tries to intervene, but shoe leather knocks him through a table. More needles find their way into the musician's head. His lips grow foamy, his eyes roll back, and he falls to the floor.

"Fix that," the Tailor snaps his wooden case closed, "and I'll be impressed."

The two-faced man crouches over his brother. He examines his eyes and lips, turns his head over in his hands, listens to his chest. He produces a silver dime on a string and dangles it over the trumpeter, watching its every swing and spin with feverish concentration. Then, hands shaking, he yanks out every needle and flings them around the room.

"Sorry, but no." The Tailor walks around the bar, sees its tender cowering on the floor. "You're still here?" The bartender scampers past his feet and makes a hasty retreat. "Once the process is initiated, it's self-sustaining. You'll have to counteract it," he pours himself a drink, "... like a professional." A parade of oddities proceeds from the sample case: shiny stones, vials of blood, severed crow's feet, a salt crystal, cayenne pepper. Some are rubbed into the patient's skin, some placed under his tongue, others forced down his throat. Nothing works.

"I'm getting bored," warns the Tailor. "You're boring me. Bring out the ace material or, I swear, I might die before he does."

The conjurer rolls his brother over and pours of circle of salt on the floor, then crosses it with an "X." Once his brother is lying back on top of it, he rolls up a psalm, cuts the flesh of his palm, and lets his blood mingle with the ink. Incanting beneath his breath, he places his other hand his brother's chest, fingers spread wide, and immolates the psalm in a flash of green fire.

Nothing.

The Tailor applauds. "Close! So close. I think you almost had something, there. I appreciate the showmanship, though. You're a real entertainer."

Growling like a bear, the hoodoo man rises and turns toward the bar, but his brother's killer is already out the door. It swings closed, muffling the Tailor's laughter.

"Tony?" The musician's eyes are back where they belong, barely, and he's struggling to sit. The two-faced man props him up against the stage. "Where's my trumpet?" Tony fetches the instrument and wraps his brother's fingers around the keys. "Thank you."

He plays... weakly, but he plays. The notes float up to the ceiling and mingle by the fan, dance around it like a maypole. Tony watches as, one by one, they slip out the window and drift away to where ever music goes when it dies.

"Now he lives for himself and his brother. No longer one man, he calls himself Two Tony and he has walked in the Tailor's footsteps ever since. With his band assembled, they've finally begun demolishing his great works, putting the land right again. They're justice shall bring back the rain and end all this misery!"

The magician seems to be waiting for an Hallelujah.

Lotus is the first to find her tongue. "His 'great works?' So, they're not just trying to kill him? They're, what... knocking down bridges?"

"No. Well, one." The little man looks even more deflated. "The Tailor has built all kinds of things in the dustbowl. He built the damn that robbed this town of its water supply. He's got bridges and tunnels and railroads all over the place, tying the West up in knots."

"And untying those knots means what, exactly?" Ahote's voice takes an edge.

"When they're all together, the band is powerful enough to destroy a city!"

Dante hops down off the bar. "And they're playing here. Tonight."

"Oh, yes!" The magician vibrates with excitement. "I'm finally gonna see the show!"

10 minutes later...

Three people, all very wet and very angry, drag the magician out of the saloon's sodden wreckage. Lotus lifts him by his bow tie. Dante pours the water out of the little man's top hat and crushes it back on his head.

"Wasn't that amazing!" he exclaims. "Even my dreams were an unfit opening act!"

Ahote leans in close and asks the little man one question.

"Where are they playing next?"

On the Road

"I've seen bigger." Dante and Lotus peek through the Bentley's rear window at a cowbell the size of a barn. It's suspended over the prairie on a wooden frame that would make a team of suicidal acrobats think twice about heights. How the nurse's parents trust it with that much brass is beyond imagining.

"Oh, you have not," Lotus rebuffs him. "It's the world's largest. Says so right on the sign."

"Maybe not, but I did know a guy who built a triangle big enough to fit in Christ the Redeemer's right hand."

"What the hell for?"

"Brazilians love Carnivale! They wouldn't let him get it up the mountain, though. Apparently, important people thought it was sacrilege."

"Or maybe they thought it was stupid," she chides.

"Or maybe that."

Sickly children stare straight up into the cowbell's depths. They're escorted by a middle-aged couple, a goat, and two chickens. They all scatter when one of the children hurls a stone at the musical monolith. Lotus and Dante duck to avoid the reverberations.

In front of the car, the nurse is taking her time bidding Ahote adieu. She doesn't even seem to notice the cowbell's tolling. Ahote covers his ears. She finds it endearing, apparently, because she plants one on him before he can recover.

"Will ya look at that?!" Lotus gives the shaman a slow clap. "Ahote's gettin' some despite himself."

"That's about the only way he's gonna. You know he's afraid of white women?"

"No way." Dante confirms with his serious face. "Really?"

"As I live and breath. I offered to tutor him, but he ain't interested."

"You can tutor me." She slides a hand up his arm, grabs him by the lapels. "Tell me about this hoodoo stuff."

Dante's lights go out. "How should I know about that crap?"

Her body language shifts from *come hither* to *or else*. "You sure sounded like you knew a thing or three back in the saloon, when the little barker was calling Two Tony a 'two-faced man.' If you don't know somethin' about somethin', then what was all that about?"

"I don't wanna talk about it. It's all garbage, anyway. Nothin' but tricks and bullshit."

She looks as if she might shake him down, but the door opens and Ahote returns to his rightful place behind the wheel. "We'd better get going. The band already has enough of a head start."

"And we don't know where they're going," Dante adds, eager for a change of subject.

"I don't think we have to know," Ahote grins as he opens up the throttle. "I think they're following the Tailor's karmic current. If I just keep doing what I always do, let destiny pick our destination, I think we'll run right smack into them."

"Sure, but aren't you leaving out one, crucial detail?" Lotus leans into the front seat with a look of belabored sincerity. "You're afraid of white women?!"

He blushes and the lovebirds roll with laughter as the nurse disappears in the rear view mirror. "I'm not afraid of white women," the shaman corrects once the din has subsided. "As a red man, I'm just a little leery of accepting their affections. It's a good way to get lynched. Don't you ever worry about that, lover boy?"

"They ain't never made a noose that can catch this neck!" Dante boasts.

"Besides," Lotus interjects over her own giggles. "There ain't no good ol' boys here and that nurse still had you trippin' over your own feet."

"Hey, I did alright around Esther, didn't I?"

Lotus flinches. The laughter dies.

~

Dante teaches an old woman the Charleston while his friends fix her flat tire. Ahote lines up the ratchet and Lotus knocks loose each bolt with a flick of her wrist. "I'm sorry for bringing up Esther that way," he tells her. "I wasn't trying to shut your trap."

"I know." She holds up the car while he rolls away the flat. "I don't normally leave it open like that."

"It's a good thing," he grunts. The spare must be heavier than it looks. "Hess et tu tease."

"What?"

Ahote wrestles the spare into place and ushers in a breath. "He sets you at ease."

"Dante," she nods. "Yeah, he does. He's being real evasive about this hoodoo stuff, though. Didn't you get a whiff of somethin' back at the saloon?"

"Hmm," the shaman pauses either to think or to concentrate on working the nuts back into place. "He did perk up quick when the magician started talking about hoodoo. Tighten these, will ya? I need a break."

Lotus cranks through the task like a machine. "John Henry was a sissy," she gloats.

"I bet he didn't look half as good in a suit, neither." Dante has exhausted the old lady. She's perched on the trunk, swigging something out of hip flask. "You guys weren't talking about me, were you. My ears be burnin'."

"Sounds like a medical problem," Lotus retorts.

"Good, 'cuz a man's got a right to his secrets."

Ahote shakes his head and smiles. "Some day, my boy, you'll dearly regret saying that."

~

"All I'm saying is we're on the same side." Lotus slumps back in her seat and drags her fedora over her eyes. "And let's not worry about those caught in the middle? They're destroying innocent people's homes and lives in the name of revenge!" The sun has long set, but Ahote's still driving. He's turned completely around in his seat to pursue this conversation. No need to keep his eyes on the road when there's nothing to see. "Yeah, yeah. Revenge bad. I get it." She peaks under the rim of her hat, but the shaman clearly remains skeptical. "Seriously, I get that. I just don't wanna have this turn into Dodge City all over again."

Dante's forehead is pressed against the front seat. He lifts it an inch and lets it fall into the upholstery. "Yes, please no encores of *that* performance."

"Judas," the shaman mutters. "I admit, I snapped to a judgement on that one, but this situation is far less ambiguous. We watched them drown an entire town!"

"It was mostly deserted."

"I didn't see them evacuating the children, did you? Nor did they pause to talk before blasting you off a cliff. I'm not seeing a lot of concern for their fellow man."

"They're bad, reckless people. Fine!" The gunslinger rises for another round. "No one's saying we should let them keep on doin' what they're doin', but maybe you could uncork some of that mystical wisdom you're always luggin' around. Put 'em back on the path, road shaman!"

"If anything that little band promoter said was true," Dante cuts in, "these people have already done some grisly things, just to build their fetishes." He juggles two blank expressions before adding, "their instruments." His companions nod sagely. "They've dug up corpses and made strings out of intestines. They're doubled down on this bet. Nobody just walks away from shit like that, not on a stranger's say-so."

"We're gonna have to hit 'em separately, anyway," Lotus observes. "Whatshisface said they're only powerful when they're together. As long as they don't got their mojo workin', I don't see the harm in a little diplomacy."

"You do what you'll do, baby doll, but, I'm not givin' mine a chance to blow or pluck or beat a single goddamned note." Dante slumps back in his chair, arms crossed.

Lotus turns a wordless stare toward Ahote, but her eyes grow wide when a cow looms into view behind his head. The shaman turns the wheel without looking and swings them gracefully around the obstacle. "Fine," he sighs. "If we're splitting up the band, I guess words are all I'll have, regardless." She gives him a sunrise smile. "I do, however, reserve the right to hit them with my car."

~

The hill juts up from Oklahoma's tabula rasa as if the Devil were poking his finger through from Hell. Dozens of giant, iron spikes ring its base, each easily the size of a train car. Jackrabbits infest the scene like flies on spoiled fruit.

The trio stands next to Sweetness, parked near one of the iron spikes, as they struggle to take in the scene.

"He did this, the Tailor. I know it." Lotus' voice carries conviction. "The Chinese do this kind of thing to lands they conquer: find holy sites and disrupt their chi. It demoralizes the locals, but this is something else. This is..."

"Industrial," Ahote finishes for her.

"I was going to say, 'impressive,' but yeah."

Dante approaches the spike and crouches down, inspecting the mound of displaced soil that boils up around its base. "Back alley witch doctors are one thing, but this is monstrous. He's putting the whole Earth in leg irons."

Lotus looks to her shaman, but he's already looking to her. They debate via sideways nods and raised eyebrows. Lotus loses. She asks the back of Dante's head, "What happened to 'It's all just tricks and bullshit?'"

"I never said tricksters aren't dangerous," he replies. "All the Devil has are tricks, and look how much trouble _he starts." Slowly, resolutely, he stands and turns back toward them. "I'll tell ya where we'll find Two Tony. Look for a crossroads; they're places of power."

They find Two Tony at a crossroads, sitting on a bench by a fountain in the dead center of a town the Tailor built. Sweetness rolls down one of four cobblestone boulevards that converge on this plaza, her headlights casting stark shadows on the arcane symbols carved into its masonry. She pulls up right in front of Tony's bench and Ahote lowers his window.

"Your show's been cancelled," he informs the trumpet player.

Tony looks up with both faces, then casts his eyes around the rest of the plaza. Street lights shine on a phone booth and a newspaper stand, long since closed for the night. Rain falls gently. "Do you work for him?" Tony spits the words like bad sangria.

"No," Ahote replies as he steps out onto the street. Dante emerges from the passenger door and vaults effortlessly over the hood. "We're on your side, more or less, but we can't let you destroy these people's homes."

Tony gets up, starts backing around the fountain, opening up an escape route. Lotus floats down behind him, arms crossed.

He stands his ground and demands to know, "What the hell happened to my band?"

They tell him, and they don't spare the details.

~

A fat man and a double bass walk into a bar. More like a diner. They take a booth near a window and the bass sits beside him. There's nothing funny about it.

Before the waitress can take his order, a man with braided hair and bright suspenders enters. He slides into the seat opposite the bass and asks, in all seriousness, "Have you ever had your leg humped by a dog?"

"What?" the fat man fumbles for words and gropes for his gun.

"I mean really humped? Humped so hard that no amount of shaking or kicking could forestall the embarrassing-but-inevitable conclusion? Could I get a soda? Thank you."

The waitress hurries over with a chilled bottle and the fat man eases off his sidearm. Can she get him anything? Just a glass of water. No, nothing else. She returns to her sanctuary behind the counter.

"I have," Ahote continues. "I don't think I did anything to lead the dog on. Our relationship was always friendly, but professional. We played a lot of fetch. At some point, he just got so worked up that his brain lost its bearings. The elevated heart rate, the heavy breathing, all that perfectly platonic pleasure coursing through his cortex... if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be sexual arousal."

The fat man draws his weapon under the table, but Ahote puts his foot up on the seat, trapping the gun beneath his heel. "You're a lot like that dog, Mr. Mountebank. You've got all this rage and regret, all this emotion, but you're humping the wrong leg."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the good cop, Mr. Mountebank. My friends are meeting your friends at this very moment, and they're not stopping to chat. Let me assure you that I am indulging a life-long love of understatement when I tell you that they are, hands down, the two heaviest hitters this side of Perdition. By now, they've taken your band apart like stage lights after a show."

~

The Shepherd sleeps fitfully on a motel bed. A damp towel and dry bottle recount the evening's entertainment; they extend their thanks to the brass knuckles and three empty wallets on the night stand. A saxophone with iron keys leans causally against the lamp, waiting for a trick to turn.

A light breeze blows Dante in through an open window. He flutters to the bedside and perches over the old man, then gently pulls back the sheets. Not until he's bared the Shepherd's knees does he notice the bulge in the musician's boxers.

Dante crosses himself and looks away while his fingers plumb the old man's depths. They inch up one leathery leg until they're either an inch from his gris-gris bag or well into a misdemeanor, but a gnarled hand seizes his wrist.

"Son, a man always knows when someone's ticklin' his ivories."

~

It's already late when the last bus pulls into the station. The place is freshly minted, all gleaming chrome and steady, neon lights. The buses line up beneath its awning like cattle at the trough. A few cars are parked on the street nearby, where Lotus lies in wait.

She's not lying low enough. Inside the bus, dark eyes alight with recognition and a scowl spreads across a scarred face. Valentine pushes a young mother out of the way and drags her drum from the overhead compartment. The first beat blows out every window in the station.

Lotus hits the bricks as broken glass sprays from a dozen automobiles. A newspaper van veers over the median and rolls onto the hood of a car, flipping it into the air. Lotus ducks again as the auto crashes to the ground behind her.

The rest of the bus passengers give Valentine the ankle; a few even jump through the jagged window frames in panic. Lotus hops up onto a hood to get a clear shot, but Valentine rocks a drum solo that sends every bullet spiraling into the pavement. Glittering shards of glass dance in the concentric rings of sound waves coursing out from the bus.

Valentine launches into a frenzied drum roll and the bus' frame begins to buckle. The roof peels open like an onion. The car beneath Lotus starts to shake, then tip. She leaps off as it rolls into the street, joining the rest of the wreckage, but she can't sail through such tempestuous seas. The vibrating chi spins her off balance and drops her out of the sky.

She bounces off the awning and lands between two Greyhounds just as they succumb to tidal forces. She kisses the pavement and lets the titans clash above her. Metal groans as they slide backward, shoving each other down the line and into the street. Lotus clutches her hat. The air ripples across her body, rattles her skull.

"They're only powerful when they're together," Lotus mocks the magician. "I'm gonna fucking kill that guy."

~

The Shepherd kisses his girl and her alto scream shatters the motel mirror, but Dante's already diving out the window. He hits the fire escape and zigs left. The next blast punches a hole clean through the wall, but he isn't there either. Wing-tipped shoes dangle into view as Dante drops down from the fire escape above and rolls back into the room. Blast the third caresses his backside.

He's on his feet and running up the side of the far wall when next the sax wails. The dresser disintegrates under the onslaught. Its bits are blown into the next room when the wall gives way. Dante rebounds off the bathroom door and leaps through the newly-made hole, but the Shepherd catches him in mid-air. A pillar of sound drives him across the next room and slams him into the far wall upside-down.

He falls head-first into bed between two terrified lovers. Dante kicks the male out, then rolls off the other side with his woman. The bed turns to tinder behind them. He leaves her with a wink and apologies to her beau on his way out the door. The Shepherd unleashes a low note that stampedes after him, demolishing the support beams between rooms. A plaintive creak passes down the length of the motel, then the ceiling...

~

... collapses in on itself. Dust billows out from what was recently a bus station, then flies away on the ceaseless waves of sound. Plumbing tumbles out of the ruin and the waves scatter whenever the pipes chime against each other. Lotus rolls through the debris and picks up two pipes, then gets to her feet. She cracks her new weapons against each drumbeat with a sonorous *bong* and the waves break before her.

Again, Valentine sees her coming. Her music becomes manic; the sound waves froth and boil. Lotus takes to the air, but this time her chimes cut a path through the pulsating churn. She lands in front of the drummer and thrusts one pipe through the drum's tattooed skin. Instantly, the world goes silent, save for a high-toned ringing. Lotus' other pipe crosses the woman's ravaged face with resolute *crack!*

~

Dante's wing-tips knock the Shepherd's door off its hinges and send it sailing into the room. The sax reduces it to toothpicks, but that gives Dante just enough time to run up the rubble and escape onto the roof. Surprisingly spry, the old man follows suit.

He mounts the summit just in time to see Dante leap off the side. The Shepherd charges after, sucks in some ammunition, and blows one last volley... *squeak*. He puckers up and blows again... *squeak, sputter*.

The King of Swing smiles as he shimmies up a drain pipe on the neighboring building. Once he has about a story on the Shepherd, he kicks off the wall flies back across. Below him, and all around the Shepherd, a crossroads symbol has been poured out in salt.

The musician tries to run, but Dante plants his heels in the bastard's back and knocks him to the ground. The saxophone skitters across the gravel roof and smudges the five-spot. "Oh, too late," Dante chides while he rummages through the Shepherd's sundries. He yanks the gris-gris bag free. "And now I've got your mojo."

He hops off his quarry, smashes the sax against a stovepipe, and scatters the gris-gris' contents on the night wind. "This house is clean."

~

The waitress drops off the fat man's water like it's a hand grenade. The contents aren't done spilling before she's back in the kitchen, probably calling the police.

"I'm giving you a chance to make good, Mr. Mountebank. I think you deserve it. Your friends are after revenge, and I know how hard that is to give up, but the Tailor isn't the one responsible for your daughter's death, is he?" The fat man tries to yank his gun free, but Ahote's heel is a vice. The water cup tips over completely and crashes to the floor.

"You would've added a few more daughters to your death toll, back at the dam, if not for my friends and I. You're not too far gone, Mr. Mountebank, but you need to let go of the Tailor's leg. Tell me where you're supposed to meet your hoodoo trumpeter. Tell me where to find Two Tony."

Two Tony conjures a length of barbed wire from inside his raggedy suit and holds it up for their inspection. "You should'na faced me on a crossroads, 'specially not this crossroads. It was made for magic." Dante locks eyes with the two-faced man while Ahote offers Lotus a confused shrug. She takes a step towards him and Tony whirls, throwing the bit of trash at her like he's hurling a dagger. Lotus swings her gun to block, but connects with nothing. The barbed wire has vanished.

She doubles over and gasps voiceless agony as blood sprays from her mouth. Her men rush to help, but Tony's trumpet is all warmed up. He unleashes a trebly blast that pulses through the rain and pounds Ahote into his automobile.

Dante slides to the side, skating along the wet cobblestones and skirting the fountain to reach his girl. "Are you alright?" Her expression says he's an idiot for asking. She raises one gun over his shoulder and unloads the clip, but Tony's ready for her. Staccato beats intercept each bullet and blast them to smithereens. The air ripples with rainbow light.

He only stops to take a breath when the clip clicks empty. Dante finally turns to face him, but not fast enough. Tony's next note plucks him from the earth and throws him across the plaza. The shockwave pulverizes a brownstone, but Dante manages to find a nice, soft window to break his fall. The brick gives way all around, cratering under the impact.

Lotus stares blankly at her gun, lying there on the cobblestones as blood and water pour down in equal measure. Above her, Two Tony inhales for his killshot. He pulls the proverbial trigger, but a deep bass tone knocks it wide. Lotus loses her hat, but not her head.

Two Tony turns to face Mr. Mountebank, who's instrument now stands near the phone booth at the edge of the plaza. "Do you betray *everybody* you know?!" Tony screams. "You deserve revenge as much as anyone, Mountebank! Don't tell me you gone an' grown a conscience!"

"No, Tony," the fat man bellows. "It was my fault. I let her die." He plucks a resolute chord and the ground reverberates. The cobblestones quiver, then loosen. Crackes spread out around the bass like bolts of lightning.

The conjure man counters with a sharp burst of sound that thrusts like a spear point through the rain. Mr. Mountebank abandons his demolition to pluck a few defensive notes, deflecting the skewer through the phone booth. Tony fires a few more, as fast as his lungs can pump them out. The air quakes as the discordant sounds duel one another. Finally, a note scythes through the bass' stand. It drops out of Mr. Mountebank's hands for just a moment, but it's long enough for Tony to perforate the instrument with a furious solo.

To his right, Dante emerges from the brownstone with a six-foot pole in his two hands. He charges, screaming, and plants the pole in a cobblestone as soon as Tony turns. A fist of sound punches through the wood as Dante vaults over Lotus. He hangs in the air for a second, then drops to the ground and rolls beneath Tony's guard. He leaps back up with a mercy stick of jagged lumber in one fist. He brings it down on the conjure man's clavicle, grinding wood into bone.

His other hand grapples for the haunted trumpet. Two Tony lets it go and sinks his fingers into Dante's chest. They sear right through his clothes and bore holes between his ribs. The dancer screams and lets go of the stake, starts patting Tony down with both hands.

"You best stick with that stick," Tony admonishes him. "I sew the important gris-gris into my flesh." His smile is double wide.

Behind him, Sweetness squeals on the wet road and speeds off down the street. Tony lets out a laugh that resonates across the plaza. Then, the Bentley spins a

180 and stares back at him with predatory eyes. Ahote revs the engine and begins his charge. Tony tries to pull his hands free and reach for his trumpet, but Dante grabs his wrists and holds the conjure man fast.

The car hits the edge of the fountain and takes to the sky. Momentum carries the rear wheels forward as Sweetness back flips overhead; her bumper only clears Dante's scalp by inches. Ahote glares down at Two Tony as the car finishes its rotation, then slams into the street right atop the remains of Mr. Mountebank's double bass. The stonework buckles, the cracks widen, and the sewer swallows Sweetness whole.

Tony shrieks and pulls back from Dante. He holds up his hands; each finger ends in a bloody, pulsing stump. Dante looks down at his chest, through the holes in his shirt, and finds no wounds. Lotus pulls a twisted length of barbed wire from her throat, throws it on the ground, and picks up her guns.

Dante massages his chest with one hand and retrieves Tony's trumpet with the other. "God, I hope your fingers aren't still in there."

Now, the plaza is filled with sunbeams and people. At an outdoor cafe near the pulverized brownstone, Dante is spinning plates for Lotus' amusement while a waiter and a busboy jockey nervously between the dinnerware and the ground.

Mr. Mountebank watches them from inside a hotel lobby across the way. In between, a team of hammers and hand saws is already repairing the Tailor's work. They'll have the structure restored inside a week and the chi will flow once more.

Ahote takes a seat beside Mountebank and the recently retired musician grimaces. The shaman pats him on the shoulder. "That's what this is all about, you know." He nods towards cafe. "People finding each other, doing their best to make each other happy. Justice becomes vengeance the moment it *stops* being about that."

Mr. Mountebank just stares expectantly, letting the moments accrue.

Ahote's expression turns from paternal to perturbed. "What?"

"Oh, that's it? I was expecting some bizarre anecdote about a constipated turtle."

"I don't get blue this early in the morning," Ahote retorts. They both turn back to the window. Lotus has commandeered her own set of sticks and plates, and now the two of them are juggling china in a cruel game of keep-away.

"You can still help us stop the Tailor, mojo or no."

Mr. Mountebank shakes his head and pats the case on the seat next to him. "I have to go home and finish burying my daughter, then I'm done with all of this. Besides, I think you've got it well in hand."

The waiter and busboy collide with each other and tumble into the table, flipping it over. Hot coffee fills the air and both jugglers jump out of harm's way.

Fade to black on the sound of crashing china.

Firelight flickers inside a lonely, dilapidated cabin. The cupboards are bare, but liquor bottles crowd the kitchen table. Mr. Mountebank clutches a glass of brandy and stares blankly into the fireplace. A double barreled shotgun sits beside him like a faithful pet.

The man's eyes are gaunt, but a full beard obscures the rest of his face. Grey hairs creep in at his temples and the corners of his mouth. He wears a heavy coat, despite the fire, and lets his drink rest on his protruding belly. Something kicks the back of his chair and he almost dives headfirst into the blaze. The brandy flies ahead of him, creating a burst of heat and light that sears his corneas. Then someone is wrestling him to his feet, holding his arms behind his back. A woman's voice screams curses into his ear.

Two faces swim in his gradually-returning vision. It takes Mountebank a moment to realize he's not seeing double. Two Tony punches him hard across the face.

"Been a long time, fat man. How are the wife and kids? Oh, that's right."

Mountebank spits out a tooth and looks around the room while Tony relieves the shotgun of its ammunition. "Where's the old man?" her asks he captors. "Did he finally give you and bitchcakes the ankle?" Valentine knees him in the crotch.

"The Shepherd is with us in spirit." Tony holds up an empty beer bottle for inspection. Something bloody dangles from a string inside and it seems to pull toward Mountbank like a magnet. "He hates you even in death."

The bottle vanishes back into Tony's voluminous rags and is replaced by a butcher's knife. Valentine chuckles behind Mountebank and leans in to bite his ear. "Get ready for a long night, fat man," she jeers.

Two Tony grabs him by the jaw and shows him the rusty blade, then pauses. "Have you lost weight?" He pats Mountebank down with increasing alarm, then tears open his coat. Buttons ping off the fireplace like stray bullets.

"Funny you should ask," Mountebank smiles as the wire running across the inside of his coat snaps, triggering the firing pins on twenty-four sticks of dynamite strapped to his decidedly lean stomach.

The blast fades to white.