

Dustbowl Xia

Episode 4 - Big & Bad

Written by Daniel Bayn

A predator and its prey tumble down the Appalachian hillside, perpendicular to the slanted rays of the setting sun. The prey, a hearse, slides and spins around every tree and boulder. The predator, a Duesenberg, just crashes through like a juggernaut.

They regain the road a few rungs above the bottom of its serpentine path. Faro and Leviathan, the drivers, plead silently with each other across the distance. Jack Daniels stares down the Duesy's passengers: The Shootist and the Tailor. All six of their eyes drip with malice.

Faro squeals around and rockets toward Leviathan's broadside, but pitches forward just short of a collision, digging his front bumper into the gravel, and flips his hearse overhead. They land safely on the Duesy's far side and race away. The Shootist empties one of his revolvers, but the bullets ricochet harmlessly off the hearse's back.

Leviathan glares scornfully through his rearview mirror. "You can't shoot a man's soul, cowboy."

"You heard the chauffeur," the Tailor chimes in. "Get your ass over there."

The Shootist climbs out onto the roof as Leviathan blasts off in pursuit. He takes one step, then flies across the intervening space, landing crouched upon the hearse's roof. He draws a gun and reaches down to the passenger's side window, but Jack grabs his wrist and tries to yank him off

the car. The Shootist drops his gun, seizes Jack's arm, and drags him out onto the roof with him.

They fight while the Duesy finishes closing the gap. When it rams the hearse with its chisel-shaped grill, they fall backwards and crash down on the Duesy's hood. Leviathan tries to shake them both loose, without success, until Faro slams on his breaks and locks up the Duesy's ramrod in his car's already mangled bumper. Jack and The Shootist fight their way back onto the hearse.

With the cars locked together and the brawlers busy, the Tailor climbs out onto the Duesy's hood and smashes through the hearse's back window. Several bags of money lie inside. He starts cleaning the place out.

Faro gets Jack's attention through the windshield. "Hey! You're slacking off!" He jabs one thumb over his shoulder. The other hand grips the wheel, white-knuckled.

Jack flips himself over the cowboy's head, then plants both feet in his back, sending the Shootist sprawling across the hood. Jack lands on the roof in a forward roll and launches himself at the Tailor, who leans back like a limbo champ and delivers a precise strike to Jack's shoulder. Jack's right arm goes limp and he crashes into the Duesy's windshield.

The Shootist pounces on Jack with a hungry grin and they nearly roll off the Duesenberg's rear. The Tailor grabs the last money bag and retreats back into the car. As they round a turn, Faro shakes his hearse loose and drops back beside the Duesy, providing Jack with an escape route. Leviathan smirks and pulls a lever on his overgrown dashboard. Three metal spikes extend from the Duesy's undercarriage and impale the hearse's side. Leviathan compresses his shocks. Both vehicles kiss the gravel.

Up top, The Shootist has Jack's only working arm in a painful lock. When he tries to kick his way free, The Shootist stomps savagely on his other leg, snapping the bone in half.

Leviathan releases his shocks and the Duesy flips into a barrel roll. His spikes take the hearse along for the ride, but not gracefully. The vehicles rotate away from each other. Faro hits the ground upside-down and tumbles off the road.

Leviathan lands on all fours and skids to a stop, the cowboy and the drunken monkey both holding on for dear life. The former recovers first; he slams Jack's skull into the car, knocking him out, then jumps down on the driver's side. "What'd I goddamned tell you 'bout tryin' to kill me?!"

The Tailor doesn't give Leviathan a chance to respond. "You look fine, now go finish off the shaman."

"No," Leviathan cuts in. "Both of you: stay with the car. I'll tend to the shaman."

The Tailor shrugs his shoulders and The Shootist stands aside. Leviathan's leather boots take measured steps over to the wreck. Meanwhile, The Tailor gets out and gives Jack the once over.

"Interesting. He has tremendous Qi, but it's blocked in a most unusual manner. I wonder if we had anything to do with that." He plucks a few needles from his lapel and sets them in Jack's neck, back, and chest. "That should keep him under control. Throw him in with the luggage. I'll take a closer look when we get back."

"Gimme a fuckin' break, boss! I'll just kill him now and leave him with his dead friend." The Shootist pulls a shotgun out of the back seat.

"You'll put him in the trunk, like I told you." They stare each other down across the barrel of the gun. "Don't forget your place, triggerman, or I'll turn some other hothead's life around. You're my weapon, nothing more. I point, you shoot. Capiche?"

The Shootist drops his gaze and tosses his shotgun in the car, then drags Jack roughly around back. Behind the Tailor, the hearse collapses on itself in the dying light.

The city of Allentown is an oasis criss-crossed by a railroad, running east to west, and a canal that flows north to south. Vast swaths of industrial buildings and shanty towns fill most of its quadrants, but one is dominated by a single estate. Its mansion overlooks a cemetery and an elaborate bridge which carries the railroad over the canal in the exact center of town.

Kitty-corner from the mansion, Ahote sits alone at a cafe table, sipping his tea and listening to the world. The sun shines, the birds sing, and all is at peace.

Until Lotus slams a stack of maps down on the table.

"I think I know why we're here," she exclaims.

"We're here because it's our destiny, Lotus. The universe called us here to end the Tailor's reign of terror."

"No with a but, my friend. Look what I found in his fancy workshop."

~

The Tailor's fancy parlor is well appointed, full of old west furniture and decorations. One of the windows smashes in, leaving Lotus' open palm poised in its frame. She slips inside and takes a look around.

She saunters down the hall, peeking into room after room until she finds a locked door. It doesn't stay locked for long. One open-palm strike pounds the doorknob clean through its fixture. The door swings open to reveal a cluttered room with a massive, upright table. It was obviously built to restrain a human being. Long needles descend from the ceiling on insulated cables that connect to a diesel generator in the back and a wall full of levers off to one side.

In her mind's eye, the Shootist appears on the table, back arched like a wishbone as electricity courses through his body. Dozens of needles protrude from his flesh; lightning arcs between them. The Tailor observes from the sidelines, scratching his chin and throwing levers as he sees fit.

Lotus shakes the vision off and continues her spying.

The Tailor's fancy workshop is littered with mad science paraphernalia: beakers and burners, clamps and calipers, mason jars filled with specimens and sickly fluid. The doorknob jiggles, then explodes into the room, smashing an Erlenmeyer flask.

"Oops."

Lotus pushes the door open and scans the room, has to cover her mouth when she sees some of the specimen jars. She lingers on a geomantic compass the size of a coffee table, spinning its many concentric rings in vague recognition.

Nearby, she finds a stack of maps covered in arcane diagrams. She flips through them, then stops, looks closer. One of the maps clearly depicts portions of Dodge City. Another includes architectural notes on the dam she watched Gabriel's Trumpet demolish. A third resembles the crossroads where they confronted Two Tony.

She starts laying them out, edge to edge, until she's retraced Ahote's entire route through the dustbowl, all the way back to Gish Cha. A spiral pattern connects them all, running inexorably to Allentown and the Tailor's own estate.

~

The maps are now laid out on the table beneath both Ahote's eyes and his cup of tea. Behind him, Dante runs through the distance, chased down an alley by a mob of children brandishing makeshift clubs.

Oblivious, Lotus continues her exposition. "I think these lines here show how he's channeling the earth's energy into this town, right into the center, beneath the railroad bridge." She points down the street.

"So... he *is* causing the dustbowl, just like the magician said?"

"Yeah, I guess. And look at this." She pulls a set of blueprints from somewhere within the pile. They depict something that looks like a Russian nesting doll made out of gyroscopes. "I think it all feeds into this machine. It must be underground. See how the canal and the bridge form a crossroads?"

"He's harvesting the chi from five states and channeling it all into... what? The world's largest desk ornament? And what does this have to do with our destiny?"

"Look at the maps, Ahote. You haven't been following fate, you've been following the chi!"

Ahote considers that for a while, crestfallen, before Lotus starts slapping his shoulder excitedly. He looks up and finds Dante running down the middle of the road with a jackrabbit peering out from inside his vest. Dante charges straight at an oncoming delivery truck, runs up the grill to the roof, then leaps to the side of a building. The mob of children meet up with a similar mob of adults coming from the other direction. They shake their clubs and cudgels with furious anger.

"What's that about?" Lotus wonders.

"What is that *ever* about?" Ahote replies.

~

A crowd has gathered outside of town. Men, women, and children dressed in their Sunday best, carrying pots and pans and wooden clubs. They're lining up shoulder-to-shoulder when Dante arrives. He stands beside a little girl, as if he's been there all along.

"What's this, some kinda dance?" he asks her.

"It's a rabbit drive! Where are your noise-makers, mister?"

"Well, I just came from the library and they don't allow any noise in there, so I gave mine to a real quiet hobo."

She giggles. "You're funny. We don't got no library. Here, you can use my pot and I'll just bang my spoons together."

"You're quite kind, little miss. I'm in your debt." He starts pounding out a mambo rhythm.

"Not yet! Not yet!" she reprimands him. "Ya gotta wait for..."

One of the men fires his shotgun into the air and everyone starts banging away. Ahead of them, the earth flows as hundreds of jackrabbits flee their hidey holes and pour across the field. The line advances after them. The little girl dances to Dante's beat and clangs her spoons together with abandon.

As they approach the edge of town, the purpose of this ritual creeps into Dante's comprehension. The jackrabbits are being herded into a large pen that funnels them towards a group of men with cudgels. One by one, they catch the jackrabbits by their feet and bash their brains out.

Dante's drumming trails off and the line leaves him behind. The little girl looks back, perplexed. She's about to ask a question when one of the jackrabbits rushes between her legs and leaps up into Dante's pot. "That one's mine!" she screams. "It landed in my pot! Let me kill it, mister! Please, please, please!!!"

Dante looks down at the jackrabbit, up at the little girl, back down at the jackrabbit... and takes off running. "That guy's stealing! He's a stealer!!" She takes off after him and a bunch of the other children join in. Hearing only scattered shouts of "thief" and "get him," some of the adults do the same.

Dante vaults over fences and cuts through backyards, but the children enlist more help on every block and soon it seems the whole town is on his tail. He ditches the pot and stuffs the rabbit into his vest when he needs both hands to climb up the side of a building. He flies from one rooftop to the next, but there are angry townsfolk on every corner. It's like trying to outrun a maze, much less the minotaur.

Dante dashes down an alley behind a street-side cafe. He baseball-slides into an overturned garbage can, knocking it upright with his momentum, and pulls the lid on in the process. He and the rabbit share a few, tense moments as the alley fills with footfalls and angry shouts. Then, silence.

He lifts the lid to take a look and finds a gaggle of filthy children giving him the stink eye. He yelps and pulls the lid back down. They start beating on the can with their clubs, quickly tipping it over. They roll Dante down the alley and into the street. He busts out of the garbage can and takes off down the median, passing the cafe where Lotus and Ahote are reviewing the Tailor's maps.

"What's that about?" Lotus wonders.

"What is that *ever* about?" Ahote replies. "Look, Lotus. There's something I have to tell you, too."

"But look at this. I think we can bust into the machine here..."

"That can wait. This might be important, if I'm right. I hope I'm not, but just in case I am, you'd better hear it from me. I'm sure you won't sit down for this, so I'll just say it... I think your husband's in town."

Her face is a mask of terrified skepticism.

"I think I saw him when I went to check out that glass cathedral..."

~

Ahote meanders down the aisle between four rows of wooden pews. The sun shines down through a vaulted ceiling made entirely of glass. Metal supports arc across the interior at seemingly random angles, and stained glass windows pepper all four walls without any obvious pattern. It's like standing inside a poorly-made kaleidoscope.

In his mind's eye, the sun accelerates across the heavens. The moon and stars come out, then set. Day, night, day, night. The celestial objects begin to trace paths that match up with the cathedral's support beams. At key times, they line up with the stained glass windows.

"It's an observatory," he observes.

His curiosity sated, Ahote returns to his Bentley and drives down a residential street. He stops at an intersection and notices a strange group hanging out in front of a colonial with paint so fresh you could still watch it dry. They're all Chinese men dressed for a night out on the town, not visiting with the neighbors. More than a few of them openly carry guns.

The crowd parts for a moment and Ahote spies a man with only four fingers on his left hand. His ring finger is missing; the wound is angry. Ahote steps on the gas a little too hard and Sweetness squeals through the intersection.

The man with four fingers watches with interest.

~

Lotus' face is still a mask of terrified skepticism.

Ahote clears his throat and soldiers on. "Certainly, there's more than one four-fingered, Chinese man in the world. There might even be more than one four-fingered, Chinese man who travels with a dozen Triad goons, right? It's entirely possible that this is just a big coincidence and absolutely nothing will come of it, so let's get back to the Tailor and his infernal machine, huh? How's that sound?"

Just then, three black sedans screech to a stop in front of their table and disgorge a dozen Triad goons. Ahote sighs. "Or, more likely, this could happen."

Lotus flips the table on its edge and kicks it into the oncoming goons. She draws her guns and shoots bullets out of the air on either side, covering their flanks while Ahote runs for cover.

She drops her clips and flies into the air, reloads as she flips over the goons' heads. She lands in the back of the mob and proceeds to tear them apart. The sedans absorb a hurricane of bullets. The goons don't fare any better.

Lotus is wiping out the last few when she suddenly comes face-to-face with Four Fingers. He opens his arms wide and declares, "Lein. It's time to come home."

She freezes, guns still drawn, and stares at him with wide eyes. The last goon standing sneaks up behind her and puts his gun to her head. "Put them dow..."

Lotus backfists his piece, knocking it away. He fires reflexively, but in vain. Lotus extends her arm and, without looking, puts her gun squarely between his eyes. Blood sprays across Four Fingers' face. Her other gun rises up beneath his chin. He closes his eyes and waits for death... continues waiting. One eye peeks at her, then he smiles. "You still love me."

"No, I loathe you, but you never could tell the difference." She brings her other gun across his temple with a crack and he slumps to the ground. "Ahote! Meet me upstairs."

"And bring some rope."

With no small amount of relish, Lotus tightens the rope around Four Fingers' wrists. He's tied to a chair in the middle of a hotel room. There's a bloody gash on the right side of his face.

Ahote paces back and forth near the door. "So... how often do you do this, Lotus? Tie people to hotel chairs, I mean. It's becoming a motif."

"We need to know how he found us."

"Are you going to murder him?"

"If I wanted him dead, he'd be dead."

Ahote's expression repeats the question.

"I coulda killed him back in San Francisco, easy as breathin', but all I took was his ring finger."

"So, no murder, then? Just, what... torture?"

"We're going to have a polite conversation, Ahote. We're married, ya know."

"That's not evidence in your favor." Four Fingers stirs in his seat. Lotus punches him hard in the gut. "Quite polite," Ahote mutters to himself.

Four Fingers sucks in a breath, collects himself, and gives his wife a smile. "You can come home now, Lein. Father won't be a problem, anymore. I've seen to it."

She shakes her head. "Right move, wrong time. The right time would've been when he poisoned my scotch or when he sent that hitman after me on the balcony. Or, and here's the one I woulda really appreciated, maybe when he tried to have me executed *right in fucking front of you!!!*"

She punches him across the jaw.

"I know that was a set up, Lein. He admitted to it, near the end. I had Tino peel his flesh off one strip at a time. It was better than he deserved." He turns to Ahote. "Father never liked her. Too strong-willed for a proper, Chinese wife, you see. He got one of the household servants in some

trouble, then gave Lein an opportunity to help her out... by stealing from the Triad. She took the bait and he had a firing squad ready."

Ahote continues his pacing "I know all about it, Mr. Fang. Lotus told me everything."

Four Fingers turns back to Lotus with a congratulatory expression painted across his face. "Look at you, changing your stripes."

Her eyes peel that paint right off. "If I kept things to myself, before, it was because everyone around me was a liar and a cheat. You people can't be trusted with the truth."

"Please. You always had to be the big dog in the yard, that's why you couldn't stand to be anyone's bitch, not even mine."

Her fist gets a running start at his face, but she holds it back. Her fingers relax with reluctance. She looks down at his missing digit. "Do they call you 'Four Fingers' now?" He gives her a withering glare. "Holy shit, they do!" she guffaws.

"And yet, here I am, offering you forgiveness. I take ownership of my disgraces, Lein. I don't run away from them. Think about what I'm offering you. Do you really wanna go back to living like a monk? Poverty never looked good on you."

Lotus is still laughing. Ahote kicks her foot to get her back on task.

"Aren't you supposed to be watching the door?" She returns to her husband, all business. "Do you work for the Tailor? Did he bring you here to distract us?"

"You mean the guy with the acupuncture needles? He's a geomancer, not a tailor. Seriously, Lein, where's your mind?"

"I know, jackass, that's just what they call him. Capital 'T' Tailor. You know him, then?"

"Sure. He's renting me a house, but I work for nobody, not anymore."

"Then how did you know where to find us?"

"Your father brought me here."

For the second time today, she's stunned silent. A hot pinch hits. "Her father's dead."

"I know. She *is* my wife, medicine man. I visited a witch doctor in New Orleans, brought him a little piece of the old man's corpse."

Lotus pops him in the face. His head snaps back like a speed bag. He flashes her another smile, this one bloody. "I have your dear father's spirit trapped in a bottle, Lein, and coming home with me is the only way to set him free."

~

Dante hides behind a hospital sign on the second floor of Allentown Memorial. A few club-wielding townies still wander the streets in search of him. The jackrabbit pokes its head out of Dante's vest and surveys the scene.

"The coast ain't quite clear, yet, Jack. Keep cool. Thanks for not shitting on my shirt, by the way. You're much better than the last Jack I met."

The demon Duesenberg roars down the boulevard and through the hospital entrance. It parks beneath Dante and its passengers emerge to stretch their legs. Dante gives them as close a look as he dares. The Tailor's voice drifts up on the wind as he orders The Shootist to "Take him upstairs."

The trunk pops open of its own accord and The Shootist drags out a comatose Jack Daniels.

"Speak of the tap-dancing devil."

~

The sounds of breaking tile emanate from behind the bathroom door. Four Fingers, still tied to the chair, looks considerably more injured than before. Ahote dabs his wounds with a handkerchief while trying his hand at interrogation.

“What can you tell me about the Tailor?”

“You? What would I want to tell you about anything? She’s the one who can crush skulls with her bare feet.”

“I think it’s fair to say that, at this very moment, my influence is the only thing keeping you from exactly that fate. It might be in your best interest to do me a favor or three.”

“From where I’m sitting, it looks like I don’t have to buy your influence. I think you’ll defend me, no matter how much of an asshole I am. Soft hearts make soft heads, kemosabe.”

“No, Lotus makes soft heads. You said it yourself, *friend*. Look, my will isn’t the one you should be worried about. Keep taking her down this path and she *will* kill you. The only thing that will distract her from that, I imagine, is the thing we came here for in the first place, and that’s the Tailor. He’s spent years redrawing the dustbowl and every road leads to this town. Why? What is he trying to do?”

“Hell if I know! The feng shui here is fucked. One night, the rain starting falling upward. Night before that, about a thousand toads paraded north on Main Street. I just saw their tracks in the morning, but the croaking woke the whole town. Locals have to exterminate the jackrabbits twice a month.”

“There’s no greater pattern to it? No hint of his purpose?”

“I’ve only been here about a week, Little Big Man, but there’s always a light show in the center of town just before shit starts--” The bathroom door bangs open and Lotus storms out, a large piece of broken tile in her hand.

Ahote hops to his feet and tries to intercept, but Hurricane Lotus blows right past. "This cocksucker's gonna fess up or I'm gonna show him his intestines."

"That won't do any good, Lotus. You know it won't. This is about you and your anger."

"Somebody's gotta make the big boys pay."

Four Fingers flashes Ahote a knowing look. "There's the girl I married." She slashes the front of his shirt open with one swipe.

"Monsters beget monsters," Ahote cautions. "Plus, this sounds just really, really disgusting. Let's please not do it in the hotel, okay? Lotus?"

She's busy waving her shiv at the end of Four Fingers' nose. "Where is it, asshole? Where's the damned spirit bottle?"

He doesn't answer her, just keeps his eyes locked with Ahote's. "We may have over-estimated your influence, wise man."

The door opens and Dante enters. He sees Lotus bent low over a bloody, shirtless man. She looks up at him, blushes deep, then stares daggers at Ahote, who should have been watching the door.

Dante takes it all in like a wide angle lense. "So, so many questions, right now, but I think I'll start with... Who's this guy?"

"Her husb--" Lotus' fist interrupts Four Fingers' words, but not his meaning. Dante's face contorts from shock, through anger, and finally into pain.

Lotus finds his eyes, but her lips won't form anything useful. "Dante... Is that a rabbit in your shirt?"

"Yes, Lotus, it is a rabbit. He has many enemies. Maybe someday I'll find out he has another protector that he's been keeping secret from me, but for right now he's mine and I'm going to take care of him."

"Dante, listen..."

Dante turns his back on her and heads out the door. "I'm gonna go rescue your other old man. The Tailor's got him trussed up in the hospital somewhere."

Then, he's gone.

The road shaman shakes his head wearily. "Why is it that, every time you two argue, somebody gets beaten and tied to a chair?"

Leviathan and The Shootist slouch in a hospital waiting room and nurse cups of circus-grade coffee. The latter mutters bitterly into his beverage. "'I point, you shoot.' That man is grinding my last nerve. He's worse than my mother. If I'da wanted to spend my days gettin' nagged at, I'd've gotten married."

"Amen, brother." Behind him, Dante distractedly pushes a broom across the floor. The jackrabbit peaks out from the collar of a stolen janitor's uniform.

The Shootist turns in his chair and looks him over. "Mind yer mop, pork pie. Is that a rabbit in your shirt?" Dante pushes the jackrabbit's head back down beneath his collar and minds his mop.

Leviathan tugs his cap over his eyes. "You're the bitch, cowboy. All you ever do is whine. Take some goddamned action, if you're so bent outta shape."

"Maybe I will, cabbie. I don't need his damned treatments anymore. That's why his bonnet's been in a twist. He knows I'll be leavin' soon."

"Still thinking like a bitch. 'I'll just walk away. He'll miss me when I'm gone.' You're the one wearing the skirt."

The Shootist is an unwatched pot. "Fuck you right in the corn hole. You're the one who can't get it up in the revenge department, not me. I've got no score to settle."

"Sure, you don't. It's not like you've saved his life over and over again. He amped you up, but how is that equal compensation for his life? If you don't think you're owed any severance, you're an idiot as well as a bitch."

The Shootist's eyes pour anger into his coffee. "Maybe I'll steal your baby and leave with all that cash in the back seat."

"Maybe you will... if your testicles choose this night to descend, but I have doubts."

The cowboy leaps out of his chair, tosses his coffee on the floor, and puts one pistol to the road shaman's forehead. "Maybe I'll end you *and* him. What's holdin' me back, wise man?!"

Dante decides to duck out. He ushers his mop quickly down the hall and finds the Tailor tending to his patient. Jack is strapped to a gurney and covered in acupuncture needles. An I.V. drip is attached to one arm. The Tailor watches him twitch and scratches his chin.

Dante keeps shuffling down the hall, his mind clearly not on his business. "Married, for the love of... Obviously has no respect for the institution. Leaves her first husband, if that *is* her first, tries to turn me into a polygamist. It's shameful."

He remembers them dancing at the club in Dodge City.

"Just how many guys *has* she tied to a chair?"

The bank vault flashes through his mind. She's perched on his lap, her hair falling around him like a privacy curtain.

"Thinks she can do whatever the hell she wants just 'cuz she can shoot bullets outta the air."

He's in the back of Ahote's car and she's asleep under his arm.

"Self-righteous, self-centered skirt."

The Tailor nods to himself in apparent satisfaction, then gives his patient a quick slap across the face. Jack's eyes flutter open, but he only achieves semi-consciousness. "You'll be an interesting hobby, kung-fu hobo. We'll get you fixed up tonight, then it's off to the torture chamber in the morning! I'll be right outside. Sleep while you have the chance."

He turns and marches out of the room. Dante scuttles away from the door and manages to escape notice. He watches the Tailor enter the waiting room to fanfare only he can hear. "Alright, boys, you can knock off for the night..."

Dante doesn't wait for the rest. He leaves his mop next to the door and approaches the gurney. He yanks out the I.V. needle and starts working on the restraints. "Jack. Hey, old man! It's half-past rescue time. Wake the hell up!"

The older man stirs, but does not wake.

"I shoulda brought some booze," Dante laments. "Hey, old man. It's Dante. You tried to steal my girl and kick my ass, but you failed 'cuz you're old? Remember? Then you locked us both in a bank vault 'cuz you're a dick? God, why am I even doing this?"

Behind him, Lotus appears on a window sill. "There you are!" She lets herself in.

Dante grimaces. "Keep it down, Mrs. Whatshisface. The Tailor's outside."

She glances back out the window. "I didn't see him."

"Outside in the hall, not outside with the damn birds."

"I should've told you..."

"You have trouble finding the right time for things, don't you? Help now, talk later, or just go back to your domestic disturbance."

Jack groans and his eyes roll around the room, taking in everything at once. His eyes finally fix on Dante, then flick to Lotus as she approaches. "Hey, boss lady. Missed me, I see."

"Not really. You're just one of my chickens, come home to roost."

"Always thought I was the fox in the hen house."

"For the love of Saint Fucking John," Dante execrates. "Chit chat later, old people."

They yank needles free by the fistful, but they're not quite fast enough. The Tailor frames himself in the doorway. "You've got pals in every port, don't you, sailor?"

Lotus strikes a defensive stance while Dante pulls Jack out of bed. The old guy's hobbled as soon as his bandaged leg makes contact with the floor. Dante buckles under his weight. "You gotta quit drinkin', grandpa." Jack uses the bed to support himself, but he clearly won't be running away.

"That's right, Jack. Back to bed." The Tailor's bedside manner is impeccable. "Your friends will be going to the emergency room. It's six floors down and on your left."

Dante pushes the old man towards his girl. "Help your loverboy, Lotus. I'll be right behind you." She takes custody of Jack, easily hoisting him on one arm.

Dante comes at the Tailor sideways, moving along the floor on his hands and feet. He drives the geomancer away from the door with a flurry of off-balance kicks and spinning sweeps. Lotus and Jack bolt past them.

The Tailor blocks Dante's attacks mechanically, studying each move. When he begins to counter-attack, Dante just flows around every blow. "Do I detect a splash of swing in your capoeira? Interesting."

He gives up blocking and starts to dodge around Dante's attacks, mirroring the dancer's technique. It quickly becomes a battle no one can win. "Your Qi is quite fluid, highly responsive. I bet you're a natural talent, no discipline. If I wanted to lead you towards the window, all I'd have to do..."

He starts throwing telegraphed punches to Dante's sides. As the dancer dodges, he moves steadily closer to a closed window near the gurney. "And then, if we switched places and I left you an opening..."

The Tailor throws a slow kick towards Dante's mid-section. Without any room to retreat, Dante hits the floor and rolls past the geomancer into the room. The Tailor lowers his guard and Dante moves in to strike, but connects with nothing. His opponent steps inside the attack and shifts Dante's center of gravity, effortlessly flips him upside down, and throws him through the window.

As Dante watches the jagged window frame recede from view, his eyes grow wide. Slowly, he rotates and finds himself staring down six stories to an unforgiving curb. His eyes close. His breathing becomes slow and measured...

When he hits the pavement, it's in a perfectly controlled crouch. Cracks spray outward like lightning bolts. One intersects a parked car and its tire blows out. Broken glass falls around him like cherry blossoms in spring.

Dante opens one eye, then the other. "Ho. Ly. Shit!!!" He lets out a few celebratory whoops and does a victory dance in the street.

Six floors up, Lotus and Jack rush past the nurse's desk towards a door marked 'Stairs.' The nurse on duty is nonplussed, as if she sees fleeing prisoners every day. "Hey, stop," she commands with neither authority nor enthusiasm. She reaches for the phone without looking to see if they obey. "Runners on six, hon. Yep, the stairwell."

Jack and Lotus look down a half dozen flights of stairs, then at each other. "Catch me?" he asks.

"Sure thing." She lets him down and hops up onto the railing. Jack ducks behind the still-open door as a couple of armed orderlies come running down the hallway. They watch Lotus spin around and drop down the center of the stairwell. Right as they cross the threshold, Jack whacks them with the door.

Lotus draws her guns and shoots several more orderlies making similar entrances as she drops past the intervening floors.

Jack vaults over the railing and descends the stairwell by leaping back and forth between flights. He slips on the last one and falls, but Lotus catches him in one arm while she shoots a few more goons.

Outside, Sweetness rolls up behind Dante while he's still celebrating in the street. "Did you see that, daddy-o?! I was spec-fuckin-tacular!"

The road shaman leans across the passenger seat. "Who's in the what now?"

Jack and Lotus burst through the front doors. "I thought you were right behind us," she tells Dante.

He waves his arms toward the crater. "He threw me out the window! I fell all the way down here, then *bam!!!* I focused my whatever and landed and all the force just *whooshed* through me and into the ground!"

Lotus tosses Jack in the back while Dante's gushing. When he turns her attention back, there's murder in her eyes. "He threw you out the window?!"

"Yeah, but it's okay 'cuz I focused and I..." He hops back in the impact crater and poses in a crouch. "... and it was *amazing!*"

"I'll kill him. I will *kill* him."

"Look, dollface, you're missing the point."

Jack leans out the window. "Hey, kids! Can you bicker inside the car?"

Ahote revs the engine. "Yes. Yes they can."

The hospital's doors burst open as the Bentley's slam shut. The Tailor and a few limping orderlies hit the curb just in time to watch Sweetness vanish around a corner. The Tailor doesn't curse or shout his frustration. Instead, he whirls on his henchmen and takes them all down with a blur of calculated strikes.

Leviathan screams into the wind. An industrial neighborhood rushes past the Duesy's open windows, all sooty smokestacks and warehouses. He jerks open the glove box and dozens of sheets of paper fall out. The Tailor's face peers out from the angry, black sketch lines carved into each sheet.

A stream of them escape through the window, but one spreads out on the back of the passenger's seat like a wanted poster. Steel glints in Leviathan's hand as he swings his arm around and impales the upholstery, stabbing the Tailor's effigy through one arrogant eye. His arm pistons back and forth to stab again and again and again.

The Duesy escapes the warehouses and emerges onto a wide rail yard. It hops up onto a set of tracks and heads straight for an oncoming locomotive. Its brakes come on like banshees and spit fire in the train's wake. Leviathan compresses his shocks and leans off one side of the track, but his finger lingers over the release. He stares at his own, approaching end like a man savoring his last meal.

Then, his finger flicks the switch and the Duesy launches into a barrel roll, but just a moment too late. It clips the passing engine and twists into a gyroscopic spin. The cabbie's world flashes around him in broken bits of blue sky, gray gravel, and the gleaming sides of passing train cars.

When the Duesy hits the ground, it's with all four wheels. It whirls to a dusty stop at the edge of the railyard. Its driver hunches over the dash, grinding

his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut. Tears well up from deep within and march solemnly down his face.

~

Leviathan gazes up at the moon as it hangs high over the city. He's parked in the alley behind a long row of brownstones. The Tailor emerges from the window of the one nearest and drops two stories onto pavement. He lands in a forward roll that brings him to his feet with his hand on the Duesy's doorknob.

"Mr. Daniels decided to come home early," he tells his driver. "Our friend is keeping him and his wife company whilst we bring the car around."

Gunshots pop-pop-pop above them. "He's killing him!" Leviathan turns in his seat and slings the accusation at his passenger.

"Hardly. I'm sure he'll leave the drunkard more than well enough to sign a cheque."

Leviathan turns back around like a key in a rusty lock. "I can't be a part of this. I need to end it." He hits the gas and tears down the alley. The Tailor calmly restores his hat to head and stifles a yawn. The car clears the alley and crosses the street in a blink, headed straight for a telephone pole on the opposite side, but the brakes come on at the last second. Leviathan lurches to a sliding, sideways stop that puts the telephone pole just inches from the Tailor's face.

He spares it a disinterested glance through the window before saying, "Don't waste my time, cabbie. That's not a road you can travel. Just do your job, wait for your moment, and think real hard about whether you'll be able to live with yourself after it comes.

"In the meantime, please bring the car around front."

Leviathan puts four knuckles into the dashboard, but does as he's told. When they round the corner, Jack's already lying in his front yard,

surrounded by shards of glass. The Shootist flies through the broken window and lands on the hood as they pass.

While he's climbing inside, Leviathan tells them both, "I *will* be the end of you. When the time comes, I'll kill you both."

The cowboy laughs. "The way you drive, you'll kill us all. Now hold it steady while I leave that fella somethin' to remember me by." He fires one shot out the window. It crosses half a dozen doors before plunging into Jack's chest.

~

Jack clutches his bandaged chest and checks the rest of his wounds while Sweetness zips through an industrial area, all sooty smokestacks and warehouses. Lotus rants beside him. "Nobody throws *my* man out of a sixth story window and lives, I'll tell ya that for free."

Dante lets his jaw drop in mock amazement. "What a coincidence! Someone threw your husband out a window?! The same thing just happened to me!"

Jack's head spins like he's just been slapped. "Your husband?!" She's about to reply when Ahote steers them roughly onto a long, divided highway. Everyone shuts up and scrambles for a handhold.

The road shaman exploits their silence to break into the bickering. "Get off your soap box, casa nova. I seriously doubt Dante Harrison Holloway ever let a wedding ring come between him and woman." Dante opens his mouth to respond, then thinks better of it and fixes his gaze on the skyline. Lotus stares out the side window behind him.

Ahote turns around and addresses Jack as if no one else was present. "Where's Faro?"

Jack lowers his head. "Dead. Leviathan killed him, night before last." Ahote turns back around, but his eyes are clearly not on the road.

Lotus pats Jack on the knee. "He told me that he knew how and why he would die. Do you think that was true, Jack?"

"I don't know, boss. He never told me about that, exactly. I thought we were gonna take those bastards out, but we failed. They're just too... everything: fast, strong, smart. It was too much for Faro and me, but maybe now... maybe with the four of *shit!*"

A custom Duesenberg blows past them on the other side of the divider. Ahote stares it down in the rearview window. "That was Leviathan, wasn't it?"

Jack looks like Ahote stole his thunder. "How did you know?"

"Not sure. I just know."

"Do you suppose he knows?" Dante asks, peering into the side mirror.

Twin fins of vaporized rubber erupt from Leviathan's back tires and he whips into a 180 degree spin that sends him crashing sideways through the cement divider. The Duesy roars after them.

Lotus refills her ammo. "He sure as hell knows somethin'."

"You guys should probably hold on to something." Ahote veers off the highway and zig zags his way between industrial buildings. Each time they cross an intersection, Leviathan is one block closer.

"He's faster than you." Lotus notes.

"I can see that."

"He's a lot faster than you."

Dante raises a finger. "You know, they say the only car that can pass a Duesenberg is another Duesenberg, and then only with the driver's permission."

"Cute," Jack taunts.

"Idea!" Ahote exclaims.

He ducks into a huge warehouse with Leviathan nipping at his heels. Sweetness starts swerving and spinning around the support beams. The bigger car can't turn so tight and Leviathan begins to lose sight of his prey, so he starts pounding through whatever gets between them: wooden palettes, shipping crates, even the support beams.

A long, deep, groan of stressed metal fills the building as Sweetness heads for the door. Lotus fires a shot through the cable holding the door open and it slams shut behind them. Everyone, even Ahote, watches out the back window as the building collapses. The metal door stays closed, but Leviathan explodes through the brick wall beside it.

They all curse in unison.

Leviathan gains quickly and tries to ram them. Sweetness weaves around each lunge, dodging left and right, but all the stalling slows her down. The Duesy pulls alongside and slams into her, muscling the smaller car onto the sidewalk.

Ahote kicks Sweetness up onto two wheels and drives up the side of the building, then lets her crash on top of Leviathan upside-down, crunching his roof. She rolls off the other side and lands back in the street, none the worse for wear.

Leviathan punches the roof to make some headroom. He glowers at Ahote, then opens up the throttle and pushes a few feet ahead as they cross an intersection. The Duesy pops back onto the opposite curb and plows through a line of parked cars, knocking them into Ahote's path.

The road shaman goes right, clearing the first few, but Leviathan puts more mustard on each one until they're barreling into the opposite building. Ahote ducks left, passing beneath two more as they cartwheel over the road.

Now, he's riding in the Duesy's wake. Leviathan slams on his brakes and slides to a sideways stop directly ahead. Again, Ahote gives gravity the finger and drives up the side of the building, clearing both the Duesy and a wall at the end of the block. Leviathan blasts right through the wall and continues the chase.

Dozens of railroad tracks weave in and out of each other in a broad switching yard. Train cars litter the landscape in chains both long and short. Sweetness heads for a tight cluster of short ones, swerving madly between empty stretches of track. Leviathan follows suit. Ahote swings wide and puts a short chain of cars between them for a few seconds. He drops even with the Duesy and, when the coast is clear, veers back into his enemy.

The cars slam together, sparks fly, and Leviathan is forced onto a collision course with a long train of empty cars. The Duesy's shocks compress, then it leaps up into the train car, driving right through the back wall... then the front wall... then the back wall of the next car. Leviathan plows through several more, then leaps out of the last and lands right back beside Sweetness.

Lotus' gun is waiting. She fires almost point blank through his shattered side window, but Leviathan is already on the brakes. The Duesy falls back just enough to let her first shot pass harmlessly through the cab. The rest ricochet off the windshield, hood, and grill.

He falls in behind them and they race out of town on a lonely rail line.

The Duesy pulls off to the side of the track, slanted down a slight embankment. Ahote looks down and sees the spikes extend just as Leviathan rushes up the embankment and slams into them. They arm wrestle back and forth across the track. Sweetness groans as the spikes dig into her side.

The Duesy's shocks compress, primed to toss both vehicles, but Leviathan looks over at his prey and sees Faro behind the wheel. His hand pauses over the trigger. Ahote finds a loose plank and bounces off it, sending Sweetness

skyward. Both cars barrel roll away from each other, Leviathan less gracefully. The Duesenberg crashes on its side and tumbles across the plain before slamming into a telephone pole. It comes to rest upside-down on its already weakened roof.

Sweetness lands on all fours, then approaches the wreck as it would a wounded tiger. Lotus springs out of the car before it's in park, twin pistols in hand.

Ahote intercepts her. Surprise is plain on her face. "He might not be dead."

"Let's try to keep him that way. He's just as much the Tailor's victim as anyone."

Jack hobbles out of the car, supporting himself on the door. "Bullshit, he is! I don't care how he got there, but he's been standing by that murder's side for a long time. He's responsible for every death he failed to prevent, including my wife's!"

Ahote gestures toward the wreck. "Look at this. That's not just an automobile; it's his life and he's trapped inside it. They don't make metaphors like that anymore. If I can get him free, it won't be because I'm good with a lug wrench. If I can save him, he won't be the Tailor's stooge anymore and he won't be our enemy."

Jack's head rolls back and forth like a tetherball. "How many times does a guy gotta try to kill you before you get the hint?" He raises his gaze and addresses Lotus. "That dog needs to be put down. If you have doubts, gimme the gun."

She looks to Dante, but he just shrugs his shoulders. "I'm about outta compassion, today." He pulls the jackrabbit out of his shirt and releases it.

Ahote gives her his most sincere face. "If he's still here in the morning, you can murder him all you want."

"Deal. Are the keys in the car?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Jack needs a drink."

They leave Ahote and his toolbox alone with Leviathan.

Firelight seeps out of the Tailor's parlor like blood from an open wound. The Shootist is sipping his brandy by the fireplace, daring it to warm the bottoms of his boots, when the Tailor storms through the entryway, already ranting.

"That drunk had exactly one friend in this world and we killed him yesterday, so who the hell just swooped in and delivered him from my fucking hospital?! These are the questions I ask myself, cowboy. These are the questions you should be answering!"

He spots the broken window. "Let me guess. It was like that when you got here."

"You point, I shoot. Ain't nothin' in there 'bout runnin' yer damn errands."

The Tailor pinches the bridge of his nose, walks over to the fireplace, and kicks the cowboy's feet off the ottoman. As the Shootist lurches forward, the Tailor pulls a pair of needles from his suit and whips them at the cowboy's face. The Shootist parries one with his pistol, but the second slips through and embeds itself in his third eye. His whole body goes rigid.

"You are an investment," the Tailor tells him. "I keep you around only so long as the cost of replacing you exceeds the cost of putting up with your posturing. You're running a very narrow margin right now. It's not giving me confidence in your continued profitability."

He plucks the pistol out of the cowboy's hand and drops it on the floor. Then, he grabs his wrist with one hand, his elbow with the other, and wrenches every joint in the cowboy's arm out of its socket. Beads of sweat roll down the Shootist's paralyzed face.

Slowly, calmly, the Tailor puts the cowboy's pieces back in their proper places. "Every time you open your goddamned mouth, I want you to calculate my return on investment." Finally, he removes the needle from his servant's forehead. He turns his back and walks down the hallway. "Find out who stole my guinea pig. Now."

The Shootist scorches the hallway with his eyes.

~

The bars aren't open on Sunday, but that's no reason to give up on drinking. Jack drops head-first down a ventilation pipe in the kitchen, lands on the stove in a hand stand, then flips himself onto the floor. His leg is noticeably better. He skips his way to the front door and unlocks it for Lotus and Dante.

"Damn blue laws," Lotus complains. "I thought prohibition was over."

Jack's already half way to the bar. "I can't believe how fast I'm healing up. Fucking witch-doctor."

Dante closes the door behind them. "I had a ton of fun during prohibition. Never drank more before or since. Sad to see it go." He starts toward the bar, but Jack's already ransacking the place. "Pour some for the rest of us, whydoncha."

He and Lotus sidle up to a pair of bar stools and wait for the drunken monkey to remember his manners. "So," she asks, "are you the type to let a wedding ring get in your way, Dante Harrison Holloway?"

"Not in the past, I'll admit, but I kinda wanted you to respect me."

"I respect you plenty, young man, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

He smiles. "It ain't like I don't understand. I wouldn't a' told me, neither."

"What are you implying?!" She grabs his left hand and examines his ring finger for tan lines.

"They ain't made a ring that can catch this finger." He looks up at Jack, who's still swilling from the bottle, then back to Lotus. "Since drinks aren't on the menu, wanna dance?"

"I guess we have a few minutes. I mean, it still takes a few minutes to get drunk, right? Even if he drinks it all at once?"

Jack waves them off. He's not stopping to breath, let alone talk.

Dante sweeps her up and they sashay into the middle of the room. "Now, I know there's no music, but listen with your feet." He sets the tempo with a few steps, then leads her into a quick Lindy Hop.

Her spins her out, then twirls her back and wraps his arms around her. "You really don't mind that I'm married?" she asks.

He unwinds her arms with a set of dizzying spins that put them face-to-face. "I'd mind if you were in love, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

"I don't think it ever was. I used to run with a triad gang and his father was a higher-up. He offered me a life of leisure and I didn't see the strings until they were attached."

"Couldn't settle for a gilded cage, huh? I can sympathize."

"That and his father tried to have me killed."

"Ah."

He pulls her in beside him and they step together for a few. "Ahote ran over me not long after that."

"Ran *into* you?"

"No, he hit me with his car."

"Oh."

"It ain't like I'd never been run over before. No harm done."

He picks her up and swings her around his waist, first one side and then the other. "Speaking of which, remember when I survived a six-story fall by focusing my whatever? Wasn't that the bee's knees?"

"Don't think I forgot. I owe that bastard pain."

"Put a lid on it, sugarbritches. The point is that I learned something from you."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

Her smile is honey-sweet. "Huh. I haven't learned a thing from you."

~

In the hospital lobby, The Shootist interrogates a group of battered orderlies. They all point outside where...

Townies are hauling away the bodies of a dozen triad goons, already stripped of their valuables. The Shootist questions them and they point down the street to...

The hotel, where a quaking bellman points The Shootist upstairs.

Four Fingers, still tied to the chair, ducks as the door flies off its hinges and sails over his head. The Shootist sweeps through the adjoining rooms, barely sparing the hostage a second thought. The gangster waits patiently, then deadpans, "Thank god, you saved me."

Seemingly satisfied, the cowboy pulls up a chair. "Somehow, I don't think yer the one I'm lookin' fer."

"Asian girl in a men's suit? Meaner than a cornered cat?"

"Good with a gun, I hear tell."

"That would be my wife, Lein. If you could kill her for me, that'd be great."

Amused, The Shootist settles into his seat and holsters his weapons. "You got a lotta spirit for a... fairly badly beaten man tied to a chair."

"I've also got a lot of money. As for the chair, maybe you could..."

"First, I ain't fer sale. I'm my own man, not a thug. Second, I think you should stay in that chair fer a while, at least until you're done telling me every last, little thing about yer woman." He looks ready to continue threatening, but Four Fingers jumps right in.

"She was raised by Shaolin monks; her parents died in the big quake of '06. She ran with a gang before she married me, then she shot her way out of my father's penthouse. That was the last time I saw her..." He wiggles the remaining digits of his left hand. "... or my ring finger. Until today, that is, when she killed twelve of my men and tied me to a chair. Now, how about cutting these ropes?"

The Shootist chews on that for a second, making no move to untie his stoolie. "Shaolin monks, huh? How does she fight? Describe it."

"She's incredibly strong; if she'd kicked down that door, it'd be in splinters. She channels her chi through her guns and she can shoot bullets out of the air."

"Who can't?"

"I've seen her shoot a bullet while it was still in the chamber."

"Ain't that normally where a bullet is when you shoot it?"

"The other guy's chamber, obviously."

"Obviously."

Four Fingers squares his shoulders despite his restraints. "She can shoot a rich man through his monocle from the poor house down the block," he boasts.

"That sounds a bit like admiration. Why ya want yer wife dead?"

"I don't. I came here to bring her home, but she's stubborn beyond imagining. I gave her until right about the time I lost that second tooth..." He nods towards a bloody bit on the floor. "... to come to her senses. Now, I just need some closure."

"Sounds like one helluva lady. I just gotta meet her." He stands up, draws a Bowie knife from inside his duster, and cuts the gangster loose.

He straightens his back and cracks his nine knuckles. "That's oh so easily arranged."

~

Jack rolls drunkenly over the bar, lands on a stool, and spins around like a top. "I'm action for the ready, Sergeant! Reportin' for deadily doodily."

Lotus snatches the remains of a bottle from his non-saluting hand, takes a swig, then passes it to Dante. "Finally! Back to the hotel, then. I can finish up that beat down and we can get my father's soul back."

"Belay that order!" bellows the drunk. "We gots ta strike the Tailor while he's one man down! T'aint no time like the present, carpe that diem, et cetera, et cetera!"

"You just gotta kill somebody today, don't ya Jack?" Lotus leans in, then recoils from Jack's breath. "Are you so sure we'll be on your trolley, now that Ahote's not here? What about my father?"

"That's not really your father." Dante's contribution goes unnoticed against Jack's tirade.

"Damn straight, that's what I think, lady boss lady! When'd you go so soft? This is our chance, right now! If we're lucky, his gunbunny'll be out huntin' fer us, too."

"Please," Lotus objects. "Nobody out-guns this bunny. I can keep that hack busy from now 'til doomsday, if you two can handle the Tailor. We can take him any time, but ol' Four Fingers won't stay tied to that chair for long."

The drunken monkey's up and off his barstool, weaving his way into Lotus' face like a truck on an icy road. "Don't be an arrogant git! That witch-doctor's been pumping the cowboy's chakras open for years. He ain't human, no more, just a weapon with legs. He beat me without a bullet; he'll put you down like a two-dollar mule!"

Lotus throws a punch; the monkey takes it and lets the momentum twist him into a spin kick, which she easily swats away. Before she can counter-attack, Jack flies into a tornado kick that carries him almost to the ceiling. Dante steps beneath him, places one hand in the small of Jack's back, and redirects his descent into the bar. The drunken monkey bounces off and crashes into the liquor shelves, then tumbles to the floor.

The dancer steps between Lotus and the bar. "What your hubby's got in that bottle ain't your father, not in any way that counts. It's just an echo of him, not even a ghost, so there's nothing to set free. It'd be like rescuing the magnet from a compass. It's just another trick."

She mulls it over while Jack collects himself. "Well, you *are* the hoodoo man, but I still don't like it. Whatever he stole from my father's grave needs a proper burial."

"Duly noted, but I also think Jack's right about the Tailor." He takes another swig from the bottle. "God a'mighty, I'm never gonna get the taste of those words outta my mouth. Anyway, he's off balance. Maybe we should carpe this diem, if you're game."

Lotus reads his face for a moment, then finishes off the bottle. "I'm the gamiest. My old man's probably escaped by now, anyway."

The Tailor toils in his workshop, adjusting an array of switches, levers, nobs, and dials like he's conducting an orchestra. Four Fingers walks through the door and gazes around the room in awe; The Shootist is right behind him, one gun at the ready.

"This guy's got yer damn answers, doc." The cowboy forces Four Fingers into a chair.

The Tailor turns, takes in the man's swollen features, then gives him a quick physical exam. "You have a talent for taking punishment, Mr. Fang. Who did this to you?"

"Who else? My wife."

"Have you considered divorce?"

"It's frowned upon in my culture."

"I see. Murder must have been your first choice, then."

"Second, actually, but no more successful than the first. She's a spitfire."

Something starts humming through the walls and the Tailor turns back to his work. "I think I met her this afternoon. She shot her way out of my hospital."

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least."

"Tell me something, Mr. Fang: What brings your wife to my town?"

"Well, from what little I gathered while she was pummeling my face, I'd say she's looking for you."

"I see. And her friends?"

"Some redskin and some spook. I don't know either of them. Must be strays she picked up between here and San Francisco."

"And what brought you to Allentown, Mr. Fang?"

"A dead man's finger." The Tailor turns back around, obviously expecting more information. "Her father's finger, actually. I have it in a spirit bottle. It guided me here."

"Interesting. She must have loved him deeply." He strokes his chin, checks his pocket watch, glances at the geomantic compass on a table nearby, then addresses his minion. "Take Mr. Fang back to his accommodations. He'll show you were to find this spirit bottle. Bring it back here with considerable haste. I believe Mrs. Fang and her friends will be here shortly; we'll need that spirit bottle as collateral."

"Collateral fer what?! I'll handle her my own self. Been lookin' forward to it, actually."

"I have confidence in your skills, cowboy, but my confidence in you has been sorely shaken. I'll need some leverage on the little lady and there's no better leverage than a child's love for his father."

The Tailor steps into the cowboy's personal space, jabs one finger into his third eye, then delivers an elbow strike to his chest. The Shootist flies backwards and crashes into the wall. Wood and wallpaper pour onto his hat as he crumples to the floor.

"This is the *last* time I will suffer your remonstrations! You're not even a man!! You're a gun with a corpse attached!!!" He turns back to Four Fingers, as calm as can be.

"Mr. Fang, you will take my manservant back to your accommodations and show him where to find this spirit bottle. He will then bring it to me with considerable haste. If he does not, I will take the both of you apart and make one complete man from the pieces."

~

"Please, mister, gimme one more chance!"

A teenage boy clings to a steelworker's leg as the former tries to leave a pub. "One more chance, double or nuthin'! Come on, mister! I need this!"

"Goddamn, kid! Fine, but I swear to Jesus, you better be good for it."

"I ain't never welshed on a bet an' now's no time to start."

"Damn straight, it ain't, 'cuz I'll take it outta your ass, son."

The teenager releases the older man's leg and stands up, privately rolling his eyes. He tosses a dart over his shoulder like it's a pinch of salt. It flies all the way across the bar, past the Tailor, who sits at a table piled high with dusty tomes, and stabs a dart board right in its eye.

The boy's smile is full of smug. "Pay up, fucknugget."

Two minutes later, the teenager is pressing a handkerchief full of ice against his face. His whole face. The Tailor sits down next to him at the bar. "That was the single most amazing thing I've ever seen," he says.

"If you're from the circus, buzz off."

"Stupidity, son. I meant the display of stupidity. It was truly amazing."

"You like kickin' a guy when he's down, huh?"

"That *is* usually the best time, but I suspect your question was rhetorical."

The boy slams his cold pack down and fixes the Tailor with his one working eye. "Ya know, if yer lookin' to insult me, ya might wanna do it in English. Otherwise, shake a leg. My head hurts plenty already."

"Now, there's a problem I can solve." He plucks a needle from his lapel and inserts it at the base of the boy's skull.

"Hey!" he fliches. Then, relaxing visibly, "Oh... hey. How'd you do that?"

"Years of diligent study and a monumental degree of talent."

"Yeah, well, I ain't got no money, so don't bother peddlin' any cure-alls here."

"Quite the contrary. I was about to offer you a job."

"An' I ain't no hustler, neither."

"I'm not soliciting your penis, just your arm. Well, most of your body, but I have no use whatsoever for your manhood. Do you want a job or don't you?"

"I want money, so we're half way there. What I gotta do for it?"

"I'll turn you into the greatest gun fighter in the world and you'll be my bodyguard."

"Is that all?!" He almost pats the Tailor on the head, but returns the icepack to his face instead.

"Not by a long shot, but it's enough to get us started." The Tailor throws a stack of bills onto the bar. "There's your first month's pay."

The teenager stares at the money, then the Tailor, then the money again, then the Tailor again. "You're serious, ain't ya."

"We've just met, so I'll forgive you for asking that question." He extends a hand and the teenager shakes it with vigor. "Welcome to your life."

~

The Shootist kneels amidst the ruins of a crystal cathedral. Lotus has him in a headlock, one of her pistols pressed against his temple. Behind them, Four Fingers' body lies beside the altar. All around them, the floor is buried in broken glass.

Lotus tightens her grip around the cowboy's throat. "This is for my husband, who deserved worse than he got."

"Mercy!" her victim pleads. "I just got my life back from that madman."

She pauses, still tense as a violin chord. "You ever killed anybody who didn't need killin'?" she asks. "Anybody he didn't tell you to kill?"

His eyes drop. "You know I have."

"Then you die."

~

"Look what he did to your life."

Ahote kneels near the wrecked Duesenberg, slowly unpacking his tools. Leviathan is still trapped upside-down in the driver's seat. "A fairly wise man once said, 'The source of all suffering is desire.' Now, some are plainly positive, like the desire to love and be loved in return, or the desire to understand the world and your place in it. Where would we be without want?"

He selects a crowbar and applies it to the Duesy's door. "It's only when you want what you cannot have that desire leads to suffering. Take you, for example. You want to stop The Tailor. Seems pretty healthy, he's a bad man, but you just couldn't quite close the deal, could you? You were always a few seconds too late and he was always a few inches out of reach. You could've given up, walked away, let somebody else handle it... but you didn't. Instead, you let him use you."

Leviathan stirs in his tomb. His voice rattles out of the wreck between the clanging of Ahote's crowbar. "If I can't stop him, who the hell can?!"

"He can."

~

A candelabra occupies the middle of the Tailor's workshop. It's flames flicker sideways suddenly, as if whipped by a gale. The Tailor dives to the side, narrowly dodging a pair of bullets. He raises a massive flashbulb from his side, takes aim at Lotus, and sears her retinas.

"I stole these candles from the Forbidden City. They're disturbed by an assassin's ill-intent. Are you an assassin, Mrs. Fang? I thought you were a thug."

He bolts through a side door and out into the hallway, but Jack and a curtain rod are waiting for him. The Tailor ducks a drunken swing and rolls backwards, tries to rush past a blind Lotus, but Dante's got her back. He dances across the width of the hallway, cutting off the witch-doctor's escape. "Should we give him a chance to surrender?" the dancer asks the drunk.

"Surrender to who? Ain't no jail gonna hold him. He ends right here and we burn the place down around him."

The Tailor gestures to a door right next to him. "Wow. Confidence. You know I can just escape through here, right?"

Lotus' guns snap to attention. "Try it."

Dante puts a spring in his dance step. "We find you guilty of crimes against just about everybody, Mr. Pinstripe Suit. You've been draining the life away from half the continent, ruining thousands of lives, ending others outright. You deserve the harshest punishment, but we're just gonna give you an execution. We're humanitarians."

"Please," the geomancer retorts. "The steel plow caused the dustbowl. I merely took advantage of undervalued real estate. I'm a savvy investor."

"You're a dead man," Jack intones.

"We'll see, won't we, Lotus?" The Tailor bolts for the door. Lotus fires two shots, but they splinter wood, not bone. Dante gives her an astonished look.

"Shut it, Dante!"

Jack's on the witch-doctor's heels. They dive out an open, curtainless window one after the other. Dante puts his arms around his girl. "You alright, baby doll?"

"Sure, except all I can see is pain. I'll be okay in a minute. Don't let him get away."

"Jack's on it," he assures her.

"Jack's a drunk."

"Point taken."

He follows the drunk through the window.

Grave markers and mausoleums crowd a wooded area bordering the Tailor's estate. It's the kind of necropolis one expects to find in New Orleans, not the bible belt. The Tailor vanishes easily into this labyrinth, leaving Jack and Dante to play hide-and-seek.

"Do you like my monuments, Mr. Daniels?" the Tailor taunts them from points unknown. "I have a talented mason on retainer. He's preparing the following epitaph for you: 'No greater potential was ever squandered.' What do you think?"

"I'd prefer 'Husband, Criminal, Executioner.'"

The Tailor applauds. "I admire your optimism. You know, you'll be the first people buried here who were not on my payroll. These are all of the workers who died during the construction of this town. I built it from nothing, willed it into being from the dust of the Earth and the sweat of lesser men."

Dante catches up and cuts in. "That supposed to be noble? Remorse won't wash their blood off your hands."

"You misunderstand. The widows couldn't afford funerals and some of my experiments require ready access to cadavers. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement."

Jack waves Dante around the other side. "You're not leaving this cemetery!" he screams into space. "You're gonna pay for my wife and my friend and everyone else you've put in the ground!"

"What's it all for?!" Dante demands as he sniffs out the Tailor's trail. Lotus lands in the branches above him and gestures forward with her gun. "What do you do with all the lives you've stolen, all the energy you're pouring into this place?"

"Why, I do whatever I want with it!" the Tailor laughs. "I push back the veil of ignorance that keeps mankind shivering in the dark. I do things here that would leave your worldview weeping in a corner, mourning its lost innocence. I do the impossible three times before breakfast!"

Lightning flashes in the distance, but it's going in the wrong direction. Blue arcs of electricity shoot up from the railroad bridge in the center of town. The canal waters begin to glow.

A gunshot rings out from the treetops and Dante turns back just in time to see a pin-stripped suit vanish behind a cloud of broken masonry. "Still not seeing straight, Mrs. Fang?" The Tailor sounds honestly disappointed. "That's unfortunate, because you're going to need your eyes in a moment. You know what they say about seeing and believing?"

A wave of soil explodes across the cemetery. Corpses fly out of their graves and land everywhere: in the trees, perched atop gravestones, crouched on the ground like hyenas in tall grass. They start hopping towards living, their hands and feet still bound for burial.

The Tailor steps into view on top of a hill, his arms outstretched and his head held high. "I can raise the goddamned dead!!"

The zombies break through their bonds and set upon the living like a flood. Lotus empties her clips into the mob approaching Dante, but bullets have little effect. "Thanks anyway, dollface."

"Don't thank me, yet!" She jumps down beside him and begins knocking down the undead with her fists and feet. They break like marionettes. Dante does the same, but the mob quickly engulfs, then separates them.

Nearby, Jack's still trying to get his hands on the Tailor. He kicks his way up one corpse, then runs over their heads towards the hill, but they drag him down like a riptide. Jack twirls his curtain rod in a blur that knocks them back in waves.

Meanwhile, Dante leads his portion of the horde on a merry chase. He slides between their legs, vaults over their heads, runs along mausoleum walls, and makes his way up the hill. The Tailor gets ready to defend himself, but Dante sails over him. "No time to chat! Sorry!"

His pursuers take the hill like a calvary charge. The Tailor smiles. He controls the crowd with fast footwork and quick counter-attacks, taking them out one at a time. He hits them along their spines, in the head, and under the jaw. Lightning erupts from their bodies at each location, ending with a burst from the eyes and mouth. They fall lifeless to the ground, their strings cut.

Dante rejoins Lotus by flying into the melee and planting both knees in a zombie's chest. Bloody corpses lie all around her. She hits the dead hard enough to crush rib cages, sever limbs, and shatter skulls. Dante just tries to keep the surplus off her back until it's time for them to die. Again.

Jack whirls through his attackers like a tornado of wood and shoe leather. Corpses fly into trees, crash through headstones, and break into pieces under his onslaught. He finally gets free and leaps up to the Tailor, bats aside the last of the zombies, and tries to jab his enemy in the face. The goemancer catches his makeshift staff in one hand and twists it all the way down its length. Jack lets it go before the same thing happens to his arm.

The Tailor is about to press his attack when a gunshot pushes between them. Jack watches it sail past his pupils in slow motion. They both look up to find the Shootist standing at the far end of the cemetery, thunder still rolling from the barrel of his rifle.

"Punctual, as ever!" the Tailor spits. "I thought I was going to have to fight them all myself! Did you bring it?" The Shootist raises the spirit bottle for everyone to see. Dante and Lotus trade looks as they drop the last of their cadavers. "I hope you're prepared to negotiate terms, Mrs. Fang. There are so many things I could do with an enlightened master's soul."

"Actually, boss," The Shootist interrupts, "I quit. If the lady wants this, she can come get it." He turns and flies off toward the crystal cathedral. Lotus looks to Dante and he nods. She takes a pot shot at the Tailor on her way out, but he dodges without effort.

"You sure that's wise?" Jack asks Dante. "What if she needs help?"

"She doesn't need any help, Jack, but I'll be here when she gets back."

Ahote wails on the Duesenberg's door. It dents, but doesn't budge. The shaman has to stop and catch his breath. He crouches down by the broken window. Leviathan avoids his gaze.

"You know..." he huffs, "I thought that destiny... guided me here. I thought that... the universe had a plan. Do you know what I learned... just this morning?" Now, there are bitters mixed with Ahote's truth. "I've been circling the Tailor like water down a drain. I've been following his bad karma for weeks."

"He was manipulating you, just like he did me." Something sparks inside the cab. Oil begins to drip through the floor.

"I don't think that's true," Ahote replies. "We've never met him before; I doubt he even knew we existed until today. Honestly, we've been doing more to keep him in business than not. Did he ever mention me? Or a lady gunslinger and her lounge lizard boyfriend?"

"Not to me, but why would he?"

"Fair enough, but consider what it might mean if he didn't see us coming: He's not completely in control of his own machine. He's redirecting rivers, but he can't choose what flows down them. We met Jack and a hoodoo jazz band on the way here; they wanted the Tailor's head more than we do!"

The cabbie bursts into deep, gravely laughter. "A hoodoo jazz band?"

"Yeah," Ahote chuckles. "They were terrible." He lets the moment pass before getting back to his pitch. "Look around, the Tailor is his own worst enemy. Let him destroy himself."

~

The Shootist waits inside the crystal cathedral, in front of the altar and beneath a sky set aflame by the setting sun. Four Fingers kneels beside him, bound and gagged, only half conscious. The spirit bottle sits on the altar like an offering.

Lotus crashes through the ceiling and lands between the pews. Her opponent tips his hat. "I like your style, lil' lady. How do ya like this dramatic backdrop? I've been dying to shoot the hell outta it for months."

She brushes some glass off her shoulder before locking eyes with him. "What do you want from me, Guy I've Never Met?! You told the Tailor you quit, so why are we doing this?"

"Just because I quit my job don't mean I quit bein' me," he explains. "I never worked for the man's money, though he paid me pretty damn well. He made me strong, no tellin' how strong, not unless I test myself, which is where you come in."

"If that's all you want, how about you let the asshole go and gimme that bottle?! I'll test you for free and nobody's gotta die."

"What the hell kinda test is that? Gotta make sure you're motivated. Gotta make sure you're committed..." He gets down behind Four Fingers and puts his bowie knife to the gangster's throat. Lotus draws both her guns. She aims one at the knife and the other at The Shootist's head. "You're a complicated woman, ain't ya? This man here wants you dead. Not quite an hour ago, he offered me money to put a bullet in ya."

Lotus does not waver.

"Still want him alive, huh? What would you do in exchange for his life?"

Lotus does not plead.

"Well now, that just leaves the one motivation."

He starts to slice and Lotus fires. As the bullet streaks towards the bowie knife, The Shootist tilts his blade slightly up and pushes it just a little bit forward. Lead bounces off steel and the bullet ricochets up into Four Fingers' face. His head slumps forward over the knife.

The Shootist looks down at the dead man's scalp and lets out a low whistle. "I thought that was gonna penetrate his skull for a second. Then I'da been in some kinda trouble, huh?" Judging by Lotus' expression, he's still in trouble.

The Shootist pulls his knife free, cutting Four Fingers' throat for good measure. Lotus charges him. Both her guns bark like wild dogs. The cowboy steps back and parries each bullet with his blood-soaked main gauche. He draws his rifle and tries to bring it between them, but Lotus leaps up and kicks it to the side, then pounds him in the face with her other foot.

She flips backwards and spins as she flies over him, landing on the other side of the altar, and reaches for the spirit bottle. He keeps her at bay with a point-blank rifle blast. She blocks with her off hand, but the force of the bullet pushes her back a few feet. Her father's soul stays where it is.

They circle away from each other in opposite directions, each flying over the pews as they empty their clips. The glass walls shatter in their wakes. Debris fills the air like glittering snow.

Lotus drops her clips and reloads. The cowboy draws his six-shooters.

They close in on each other and meet in the center aisle. They fight hand-to-hand, saving their bullets until they can line up a sure shot. She gets a gun against his temple, but he headbutts out of the way as she pulls the trigger. He gets a gun under her chin, she shoots the barrel to the side and plants a heel in his stomach. They each get the other in an arm lock, then try to twist each other in front of their own weapons.

They part like ballet dancers. The Shootist gets his gun hand up first, pointed right between Lotus' eyes, but she crosses her guns in front of her and crimps the cowboy's barrel like a silly straw. She smiles wide and gives him both guns. He parries two bullets with his broken pistol and kicks a third away with the spur on his boot.

He continues flying backwards as Lotus drops her clips, but prevents her from reloading by fanning his good gun. That gives him just enough time to pull two sawed-off shotguns from beneath the altar.

“Cheater!” she accuses him.

“I don’t reckon we specified terms.”

Clouds of buckshot fill her vision. Lotus swats away what she can as she dives behind a pew. Another blast tears the pew to pieces around her. A third almost eats her hat. Lotus closes her eyes and take a deep breath, imagines dancing with Dante back at the bar.

Then, she bolts out from behind cover and slides around the end of the pews. She swings as if with a partner, dipping and twirling around each successive shot. They’re back in front of the altar when he finally runs out of ammo and she closes in for the kill. He swings his shotguns like cudgels, but she flows around every blow, still dancing.

She hops over a low sweep and traps one shotgun between her knees, then twists it out the Shootist’s grip. The rotation carries her into an elbow jab to his face and, while he’s reeling, she kicks his other gun across the cathedral. She reaps one leg out from under him, catches his neck in a headlock, and presses her pistol against his skull.

“This is for my husband, who deserved worse than he got.”

~

The Tailor and the drunken monkey wage war high atop a cemetery hill. Jack rolls into a handstand and almost catches his nemesis in the chin with both feet, then flips himself into a drunken fist stance. The Tailor beams as Jack weaves around in apparent stupor. “Ah ha! This is what I came to see!”

The Tailor dodges a spray of off-balance strikes, quickly adopting Jack’s techniques. Dante leaps into the fray, aiming to hit the Tailor with both knees, but the geomancer grabs Jack’s lapels and pulls him into Dante’s path. They go down in a tangle of limbs.

Mr. Pinstripe Suit takes off toward the center of town, zig-zagging his way between mausoleums and empty graves. Dante out-paces him by running along the rooftops and skipping across headstones. He cuts the Tailor off at one end of a walled courtyard. Jack enters through the opposite gate and locks it behind him.

The Tailor kicks Dante's gate into Dante's face. The King of Swing staggers backwards with a bloody nose. "Where ever did those fancy feet go?" the Tailor taunts.

He turns and deals with Jack while Dante shakes off a concussion, but still manages to return to the gate and kick the lock down before Dante can push his way inside. The King of Swing starts to climb over, but the Tailor reaches back and pulls the gate out from under him just as he reaches the top. Dante falls on his ass right outside and the Tailor latches the gate closed once more.

The Tailor now mirrors Jack's every move. They stagger and weave around each other like a wasted couple at closing time. Dante gives up on the gate and runs up the courtyard wall, but that's all the opening their quarry needs. The Tailor grapples Jack and throws him into Dante just before he lands, then opens the gate and makes his escape.

Jack pushes Dante off him in a huff. "Damn it, kid! You gotta watch were I'm goin'!"

"He already learned your moves, didn't he?"

"Yeah. I don't think I can beat him alone."

"I'm not sure we can beat him together."

"You a quitter, now? What would your lady say?" Jack helps him up and they rejoin the chase. Once again, Dante overtakes the witch-doctor from above, catching him in a narrow alley between two mausoleums. He tackles the Tailor to the ground, but they're both back on their feet in a blink. The geomancer rains elbow strikes down on Dante.

Jack squeezes down the alley and flanks the geomancer, but the narrow quarters don't play to his strengths. The Tailor easily counters Jack's cramped attacks, then hits Dante with a flurry of knuckle strikes. The King of Swing swoons. An elbow strike plants his face into one wall and he slides down, insensate, until he's wedged in-between. The Tailor pushes Jack back with a powerful kick, then does a backflip over Dante and flees the scene.

Jack slaps Dante across the face. He grins like an idiot. Also drools like an idiot. "This may be the liquor talkin'," Jack cautions, "but I think I see what he did." He punches Dante hard in the chest, then again in the gut. Poor Dante howls in pain, but returns to his senses.

"Damnation!!!" He shoves Jack away and massages his tender vittles. "You just can't wait for the witch-doctor to kill me, huh?!"

"He ain't the only quick study," Jack congratulates himself. "Come on. He's runnin' like a coward."

They chase the Tailor onto the railroad bridge. Lightning still lances skyward all along its length and the canal waters glow below. Up close, they can see the canal draining into some machine. Metal rings fly in and out of view as the water rushes over them. The Tailor steps gingerly from one plank to another, always managing to avoid the next thunderbolt.

Dante and Jack stop short at the curtain of electric fire. The latter looks for a way around, but Dante stares straight down the gauntlet. "I think I can get out there."

Jack's eyes snap back around. He shakes his head and pats Dante on the back. "Be my guest. I'll go 'round the other side."

"Don't try to talk me outta it or nothin'." Dante closes his eyes and puts one foot onto the tracks, only to have it nearly blown off by a white-hot bolt of electricity! He pulls back, tries again, and gets one step in before he loses his eyelashes to another *zap*. He backs up, takes a few quick breaths, then runs screaming onto the tracks.

The Tailor is just finishing some adjustments to his wardrobe: He's pulled loose a metal button and attached it to the chain on his pocket watch. He clutches the timepiece in one hand and waits for Dante, whose wing-tips are tapping madly. Bolt after bolt just misses the traceur as he careens his way down the tracks.

They dance from one lightning blast to the next, but the Tailor is just stalling. He waits for a bolt to lance up between them, then lunges forward with the pocket watch in his open palm. A river of energy hits the metal button and courses up the chain. Dante avoids the blow by inches, but that's not enough to stop the lightning. It arcs across the gap and hits Dante's shoulder, then runs down his arm and bursts from his fingertips.

Dante cries out, clutches his arm, and teeters on the edge of the bridge. Jack yells to him from the sidelines, then flies to the rescue. He clears the canal easily, but the Tailor is ready for him. He reaches up and, with the tiniest push, sends Jack hurtling into the churning waters below.

Dante forgets his injured arm and charges the Tailor like a beast. They wrestle back and forth across the tracks, narrowly avoiding electrocution. Then, the Tailor's watch catches Dante in the chest. Searing light bursts from his back and Dante staggers forward -- into a kick. His feet leave the tracks and Dante follows Jack into the maw of the Tailor's machine.

"What a mess."

The Duesenberg's mangled door lies on the ground a few feet from Ahote, who now applies his tools to the mass of dashboard and steering column that pins Leviathan to his chair. Even so, Ahote's comment was clearly not in reference to the car.

"The only person," Ahote continues, "responsible for the Tailor's crimes is the Tailor. The world is a great, big place and most of these things in it are well beyond our control. Just worry about the road in front of you, okay cabbie? Make it the shortest road out of town."

“What about the preacher?” Leviathan laments. “I didn’t just stand by and watch, that time. I killed him over money. I can’t forgive myself for murder.”

“He wasn’t really a preacher.”

“What?”

“He was one of us, a road shaman, and he went to that death willingly. He foresaw it, made peace with it. I think he wanted to save you.”

Something pops deep in the dash and it all falls to pieces. Leviathan weeps. Smoke begins to billow up from the back of the car. Slowly, haltingly, Leviathan drags himself out of the wreck. It disintegrates in his wake.

Ahote clasps him on the shoulder, helps him stand. “Faro, the not-a-preacher, he used to put the affairs of the wrongfully dead in order. If you’re really worried about absolution, maybe you could right some of the wrongs you witnessed.”

“Yeah, maybe... Thank you.”

“Please. This was Faro’s plan, not mine. I just roll with the punches.”

Leviathan turns toward the sun and starts limping down the shortest road out of town. He only gets a few steps before he stops to add: “Go easy on the cowboy, will ya? He’s as turned around as I was.”

~

The Shootist kneels in front of the altar, Lotus’ arm ringed his neck like a noose. Her gun presses against his temple. The hammer pulls back...

“Teach me,” he begs.

Lotus carries his pregnant pause to term.

"I just got my life back. Teach me how to live it like you do. Put me on another path."

The hammer strains to consummate its destiny. Then, slowly, Lotus eases off the trigger. "You'll have to do penance, prove to me that you're not a danger to innocent people. I want you locked up until I come for you. Capiche?"

He nods as well as he's able, given the headlock.

"Think on this two minutes from now, when you start pondering escape: I'd as soon ventilate your skull, but I'm also trying to learn a new path. I have a teacher who can find anybody, anywhere, just by closing his eyes and turning the wheel. If you're not shackled up with a felon named Lipstick Larry inside a week, we will come for you like the Grim Fucking Reaper."

He releases his shotguns and she releases him. He walks, then runs, for the doors. When he's gone, she turns her attention to the remains of her husband and her father. Through the shattered remnants of the cathedral wall, jagged fingers of electric light claw the skyline.

~

The canal drains through the center of a spherical chamber dripping with insulated cables and vacuum tubes. Four concentric rings spin counter-rotationally through the waterfall, chopping it into a miasmatic spray. Lightning courses over the gyroscopes like a Tesla coil turned inside-out.

Jack falls feet-first into this chaos. The outer ring slices toward his kneecaps, but he shatters it with a kick and slips through the gap. His other foot pushes off the top of the next ring; he backflips through the web of electricity and lands on a catwalk that runs the circumference of the chamber. As he casts his eyes slowly around the machine, a look of dawning comprehension spreads across his face.

His study is cut short when Dante plummets in after him. The outer ring nearly decapitates the poor boy; he watches it sever water droplets just

beyond the tip of his nose. The King of Swing composes himself enough to tap dance off the inner rings and ends up dangling by his feet over the edge of the catwalk. A black pit yawns below him, swallowing the canal waters like an oncoming whale.

Jack grabs his wing-tipped shoes and hauls the kid up. "Holy hell, old guy," Dante says by way of thanks, "I thought you bought the farm."

"Not in this economy, son. Hey, if we can't beat this bastard, wadaya say we break his stuff? Rich guys hate that." Dante looks around for the first time and his jaw goes slack. "I know, but I think I see how it works."

"We can't just smash it? Smashy, smashy?"

"Actually, that's just what I want you to do. Smash all those glass tubes and I'll--"

Dante is off like a shot, smashing vacuum tubes with one flying kick after another. Jack finds a valve control and wrestles it closed. The water begins to back up into the chamber. The lightning intensifies and starts to break out of the gyroscopes' confines. The shattered outer ring spits and sparks like a foundry forge.

On the wall opposite Jack, a wheel starts to spin. This wheel unlocks a door, which swings open to admit the Tailor, who carries a mob and bucket. When he see his enemies alive and with all their limbs attached, he snaps the mob off with his foot and hurls the jagged, wooden handle at Jack. It sails through the lightning storm unharmed and clears the still-spinning rings, but Jack's already moving when it closes on his back. He spins around with an outstretched hand and snatches the makeshift spear out of the air.

The Tailor frowns. "I expected a much bigger mess."

Dante screams up the side of the chamber and launches himself at the Tailor. A flying spin kick segues into a leg sweep, then another spin kick. He whirls like a juggling plate, but just cannot connect. The Tailor dances away from every attack.

Jack flies through the center of the chamber and joins the fray, stabbing savagely with the mop handle. The Tailor parries with his slop bucket, keeping the water inside with centripetal force, until he can dump it in Jack's face. The old man sputters and tries to clear the soap from his eyes.

The Tailor turns back to Dante and finds the capoeirista in an uncharacteristic pose: His feet and fists are lined up in a simple kung-fu stance. He catches the Tailor with a single kick to the chest. Mr. Pinstripe Suit flips backward and over the railing. He catches himself on the edge of the catwalk. His toes splash and spark in the rising, electrified water.

Jack gets a handful of the Tailor's dress shirt, pulls it a few inches past the railing, and impales it through the catwalk with his broken mop handle. He slaps the Tailor across his cheek and flashes a shit-eating grin. Bolts of lightning arc all around them, shattering what few vacuum tubes remain intact.

Jack takes Dante by the shoulder and ushers him out the door. Dante looks back at a man caught in a death trap of his own devising. "Wait, Jack. We can't just... Oh, fuck it. He deserves worse."

He slams the door shut and spins the wheel.

Jack and Dante emerge from a hatch near the edge of the canal. The railroad bridge has become a pyre, licking the night sky with tongues of amber flame. Lightning clutches the canal with a thousand gnarled fingers.

The sound of strained metal rattles up from underground and the canal begins to crack. A blast of light erupts from the machine and obliterates the bridge. Dante and Jack scurry back as the entire structure implodes.

Ahote spots them in the daylight flash and runs up from the roadside, toolbox in tow. He regards the both of them with puppy dog eyes. "You guys went without me?"

Lotus and Dante watch the sun rise in the Tailor's cemetery. Corpses lie in ordered rows all around them, interspersed among the empty graves. Lotus holds up the spirit bottle and lets the sunlight stream through its blood-smearred interior. It's sealed with wax and a string dangles down into the center. At its end swings a bundle containing her father's finger bones. It tilts toward Lotus in clear defiance of gravity.

"So, what do we do with it?" she asks her resident expert. "Is there a ritual or incantation or anything? I feel like we should have a funeral or an exorcism."

"Let me. It's a pretty delicate procedure." He takes the bottle by its stem and smashes it against a headstone. The bloody bundle rolls into an open grave. "Ashes to ashes, yadda yadda, amen."

She hugs him around the waist.

"Hey!" Ahote yells from a few yards away, where he toils over a grave. "Are either of you planning to give me a hand with these bodies?!"

"You said you wanted to finish Faro's work," Lotus responds straight-faced.

"Is that what we're gonna do, now?" Dante asks. "Avenge the dead?"

Ahote parks his shovel in the loose earth. "I don't know, Dante, but somebody's gotta put these corpses back in the ground and one of us is a fair sight stronger than the other two. To each according to ability, says I."

Lotus picks up a corpse and brings it home, then takes up the shovel. She refills the grave like she's spooning sugar into her morning coffee.

Jack approaches from the Tailor's mansion. He's got a mass of maps in his arms. "I hope you folks don't think you're done. The Tailor may have met his maker, but he left behind all the things he made himself" He starts waving his papers around like a stock trader. "An artificial lake in the Texas desert, a system of locks north of Wichita Falls, whatever the hell this is --" He holds up a blueprint for what looks like a giant, spiked tower. "I don't know what

most of this shit is for, but I'm pretty damn sure it'll start breaking down without the Tailor around. The only thing worse than a mad scientist's shit is a mad scientist's malfunctioning shit."

"I hear Dante likes smashing things," Ahote suggests. Dante nods with enthusiasm. "Dismantling the Tailor's magnum opus sounds like a job worth doing. Count us in."

"It's fine by me, too, Ahote," Lotus says over her shoulder. "Thanks for asking."

The shaman feigns confusion. "You busy?"

"It's your compassion and courtesy that I admire most." She turns back to her work.

Jack's not letting her off that easy. "You owe me anyway, boss lady, for letting the cowboy go free. I owe that boy a beatin'."

Before Lotus can offer a rejoinder, Ahote leaps to her defense. "She's trying to learn some compassion, Jack. It's a virtue."

"You're a virtue."

"Thanks?"

Dante takes Jack by the shoulder and guides him back toward the mansion. "Don't sweat it, Jack. If the cowboy falls off the wagon, we'll tell you where to find him. You just fight the fight worth fightin' and things will turn out fine."

The Shootist has traded his duster and spurs for a prison uniform. He nods to a guard as he enters the visiting room. Lotus is waiting for him at a table near the entrance, another guard ogling her from behind. Her eyes look haggard.

He sits down across from her. "See? I'm as good as my word."

"If not, you'd have seen me sooner." She makes a gun gesture and shoots him with a wink. "Are we learning our lesson?"

"Not yet. You haven't been here to teach me. I did learn how to make a shiv, though."

"See?" she forces a smile. "You're already improving yourself." She casts her gaze down and takes a deep breath. "We could use your help."

"Does that mean I'm done here? Is class finally in session?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you've proven yourself. I'll teach you whatever I can, but I know someone else who might be a better instructor."

He puts his palms down on the table, a fire lit in his eyes. "Shall we, then?"

"Let's."

They stand up, shake hands, and then The Shootist throws their table at the guard by the far door. While it's still airborne, they rush the nearby guard and neutralize him with a blur of angry knuckles. They're out in the hallway before his back-up even gets a clear view.

At the end of the hallway, they stare down a mob of guards through the bars of a security gate. They kick the lock together and the metal shatters like clay. They're through the door and among them in a blink, knocking men down like bowling pins.

Outside, two bodies fly backwards through the front doors and tumble into the yard. Lotus and The Shootist sprint through with newly-acquired billy clubs at the ready. Rifle shots ring out from the guard towers on either side. They swat the bullets away as they run for, then fly over, the outer fence.

On the roadside, Sweetness is waiting.