Lone Cubs

Genesis

By Matthew Keefer



Measureless Oceans Press

Sign Here and...

...Pass to a Friend

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To Clara & Nate:

The future is there
Waiting
Stand up and grasp it

My wedding band
Ten years bound to your mother
My personal library
Hand-picked leather-bound tomes
My financial empire
Buildings and properties and businesses
Heirloom silverware, beautiful dresses, a house, a home—a homeland
None of these will I leave to you

What do I have?
Nothing
Cupped hands of
Nothing

You took:
Her soft nose
My brown hair
Her dark eyes
My humor

What do I leave you with?

You have taken it all
Added

A ferocious laugh
A whip of a mind
Passion for knowledge
Oodles of silliness
A dance
A remarkable, celestial
Dance

You have taken it all
All of it
Everything

What have you left me?
Joypainloveterroragonytenacity
Light—
No, everything
You have left me
Everything

And the hope of a future

GENESIS

Flames ripped up grasses of green wheat.

The horsemen tore up the barn, they threw planks into the flames. They tossed an ox cart into the flames. The ox had been shot, riddled with angry bullets. One of the marauders kicked its broken ribs in.

A young woman screamed on her porch. They didn't come for her yet. But she screamed: the fire ripping apart her farm was ripping the flesh off her body. It was her labor, her sweat and her life.

The marauders were torching everything about her. And her future.

The leader stared at her with crossed arms.

His second in command laughed. He kicked the porch apart with his heavy boots, but she was too rent to pieces to notice any further damage.

Her home was destroyed. Her livestock were dead.

The leader grabbed her arm. She kept screaming, her hands grabbing at the air, as if trying to save what was already destroyed. What was now ashes outside.

He forced her inside her small house.

The second in command found a pie on the windowsill. He grabbed a lump from it and ate it, and then picked it up and tossed the pie into the grasses, laughing. He then smashed the window with his heavy pistol, clearing the shards with the barrel. Rage satisfied, he calmed himself and peeked in through the broken window.

Many yards away, a small girl watched her home in flames. The fire blew wind through her chestnut hair. Flames danced in her dark eyes.

A young boy motioned for them to leave to the forest. Leave the destruction. Find safety until the marauders moved on.

The flames continued their hunger. The young girl watched.

EPISODE I: AWAKENED
Part 1: Strangers in a Stranger's Land

I saw you were
Hollow
Your lips quivering
Your eyes
Endless pits of tears
You couldn't form
The wind to scream
I held you
We cried
That was enough that night

Is that what hollow is?
Do you cry
Over an empty past?
I miss you
But all that is torched now
Cinders

He took you
From you

I know you kept
What you could

I walked the battered
Empty fields
I watered
I sowed
You left
And right now
The new sprouts of me are
Coming in

****

The sun pushed out from the horizon in blazing orange.

Light spread across vast, open farm fields of empty tan soil. Waves of dust tumbled across it. The land was flat and long.

A charred wall of a barn rose a few feet from the dry soil. The remainder of the barn was blackened timbers broken onto themselves. An old cow munched on a tuft of dry grass climbing through the ruins, and a mule swatted its rear with its tail. A rooster crowed into the quiet, and the cow and then the mule flicked their ears.

The dawn touched upon a small house with a sagging roof and a porch cobbled together with broken wood planks and flat stones. Dark dashes of charred wood scarred along the frayed shingles of the house, damaged by marauders who had razed all they could several years ago. A young Hispanic man carried two pails of water toward the house and set them on the porch. He stretched slowly and yawned and walked around the

corner to a paneless window covered with an old cloth sheet, flicking in and out.

Sweat clung to Jake's temples and matted down his frizzy sideburns. He was tan, black hair, and cut at long, lanky angles. His limbs were wiry yet strong. But his face was soft, and his eyes even softer, reminiscent of the round cheeks and buoyant laugh he had as a young boy, before the bombs fell, before the world became broken.

He yawned again and rubbed his nose, scratched the light dusting of his mustache. Jake sighed at the bedroom window. The cloth window shade fluttered slightly outside the frame. The glass had been broken long ago and was cleared off. He pulled the sheet aside and glared at his niece, Cristal. She was balled up on her bed and facing away from the window, and he reached in and slapped the mattress behind her hard, trying to shake her from her sleep. "¡Cristal, despierta! ¡Tienes que ir por los huevos!"

Cristal sighed. She turned over and stared up at the ceiling.

Jake slapped her mattress again. He continued in Spanish, "Cristal! Get going, you lazy butthead! I'm not doing all the chores again."

Cristal nodded. She closed her eyes for a slow moment and sat up on the bed.

Cristal was tall and scrawny, thin and unimposing even for a girl of seventeen. Her skin was naturally paler than Jake's and constantly rosy with sunburn. Her brown hair tumbled down straight but then twisted once at her shoulders and then knotted a few inches past. Her expressions were more subtle than Jake's, like her forgotten father's, and her face maintained some of the softness of her distant past: high cheekbones, a little softness in her cheeks, a slightly rounded jawline. Her eyes had a slight dullness to them, like an overused knife, but still kept the promise of luster under them. While the children

in the city would walk by with painful stares, lost and no longer feeling hunger, Cristal's deep brown eyes had always kept hope. When the rare novelty came across her path—a colorful bird perched on a barren tree passing its way through; a hard, fresh apple, red and sweet and crisp with wet, yellowish flesh inside—her gaze became honed, and her dark brown eyes flickered on like warm coals, and she became, for a moment, a teenage girl again. But, in this world, those occurrences were uncommon.

Cristal took the two buckets of water Jake left on the porch and brought them into the kitchen. From one pail she poured two glasses, poured some water into a metal baking pan, and then filled a pitcher with the rest. She brought the metal pan of water back into her room, wiped her body down, and dressed in an old tee and worn mesh shorts. She tossed the dirty water outside. Cristal returned to the kitchen and drank a glass of water. She took the second cup of water and went into the main room.

Her mother Sara lay in a recliner, lightly snoring.

Cristal placed the cup down on a wood folding table next to her mother. Her fingers gingerly glided up and off the cold glass, as if she were leaving a delicate glass flower behind for her. The earthy natural dyes on her woven blanket had faded into gray and dirt. Cristal furrowed her brow in sadness. She stared at her mother with a faded hope that she would one day stand up, maybe later today, and Sara would become again the mother who had loved and hugged and played with her many years ago.

Her mother made no motion toward the sweating glass of water. Cristal turned away in sadness and picked up the empty pail to do her chores.

Chickens cooed in their coop. The door opened and light came in. The chickens cooed louder and shook the sleep from their wings. Cristal picked up a chicken and let her down

on the dirt floor. The chicken ran outside. Cristal took the egg she left behind in the basket.

A brown rooster inspected the chickens out in the yard, clucking at them. Cristal scattered dry seeds and old scraps onto the hard dirt. Her thoughts flew to places off the farm and impossibly far away. The chickens flocked hungrily to wherever her hand promised food next.

Jake carried half a pail of fresh milk toward the house. The day was warming and sweat glistened down his sideburns and chin. He wiped the sweat with his open hand and dried it on his cutoff jeans. He picked up the pail, looked around, and took a warm sip from it. Cream clung to his light mustache and he licked at it delightedly.

Cristal bent down and plucked weeds from around the tomato plants. Their fruit was full but still green. It would turn red at some point, and bugs would cut rough lines near the stem in their hunger. Cristal saw in the tomatoes a slow, predictable suffocation.

Jake hummed as he brought the pail of milk into the kitchen. He walked over to his older sister Sara and kissed her on the forehead tenderly. He placed a glass of milk next to the glass of water. The water had been sipped lightly.

Jake tossed a cow chip into their brick fire pit outside and cooked the three of them eggs. He left a plate on the wooden table next to Sara.

Cristal sat in the kitchen and dove hungrily into her plate of eggs.

Jake sopped his plate with his finger then wiped it clean with a rag. “How are the tomatoes looking?” Jake said.

“Some are still green, Uncle Jake,” Cristal said. “But we should get a couple soon.” She had said this about the tomatoes for three days. But her mind was elsewhere, somewhere between the embers of the past and light of an unseen future.

Jake shook his head. “You know I don’t like when you call me uncle.” He sighed. “Could you split some more wood? We only have a little left.”

Cristal looked at her mother. Her plate of eggs grew cold on the table next to her. Slowly she had given in to sleeping more and more, but the change during the last few years was the most dramatic. She started to sleep most of the day, most every day, and now it was hard to imagine that she had once been their protector. She had been a good parent to them both. But still, the old flames. Things come and things go, and luck had left tired Sara behind.

Cristal nodded at Jake’s request to split more wood, but she kept her gaze on her mother. She couldn’t tell anymore if staring at her made her feel empty or angry. Or shame.

No, it wasn’t shame. She’d always wanted justice for her. A justice that had never felt further away than now.

Cristal softened her gaze from her mother to the ground. She directed her question to Jake. “Could you read dad’s letter tonight?”

“I can right now,” Jake said.

“Tonight,” she said. “After the wood.”

“I told you I always will,” he replied.

****

After sunset, Jake knelt by his sister in her bed.

“Lo siento mucho, Jake.” She stroked his cheek.

“No lo digas,” Jake said.

“I’ll try my best tomorrow,” she said in Spanish.

Jake smiled.

“I love you,” she said. “You two should head up to San Benito. Visit Tío Viejo there. He’ll take you both in.”

"I love you, too," Jake said. He patted her hand. "But we don't need to. We're happy here."

"Please do it," she said. "Mi amor, please."

That night, Cristal heard Sara's coughs, like most every night. But something was off.

She sat up. Jake's room was silent. He was with Sara. She was talking to him in English, and Jake replied back in English as well.

Her coughs were always bad, but the hoarseness had turning into wheezing. Jake walked past Cristal's room. Cristal put on clothes and got up.

Jake rifled through the two cabinets. Most of the kitchen had remained smashed from twelve years ago. He continued in English, "Where's the honey?"

"¿La de Tía? La usamos hace mucho tiempo. Hace cuatro años."

Jake returned to the two cabinets and reshifted the jars and open cans in there, giving it another search. "No, we should have a little left. Your mom needs it for her throat."

"No hay nada," Cristal said.

Jake stared into the cabinet. His face reddened.

She continued in English. "We used the last of it for the cake when we visited Tío Viejo. We're out."

Jake shook his head, still looking at the almost empty cabinet.

Sara shook with horrid coughs. She closed her eyes and relaxed her body for only a moment. And then the vicious coughing attacked her again, making her jump and writhe in bed and almost throwing her out of it.

Jake came in and knelt by her, rubbing Sara's shoulder. He told her she'd get better. Cristal watched idly, powerless, and Jake asked her to get another cup of water from the pail. When she came back, Sara was panting, exhausted from her sickness.

"Cristal, you can rest," Jake said. He wrapped his hand tightly around Sara's. "I'll stay up tonight."

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Sara's room was silent. Dawn was still hours away.

Jake knocked on the threshold of Cristal's room. He motioned for her to get up. Cristal hadn't slept. She nodded to him.

The bedsheet was over Sara's face. Her nose jutted the sheet into a tent. Cristal could imagine her face, her smile, her laughter; her scolding, her tears.

Cristal lifted the sheet.

Her face was gray. Her eyes were closed. The flesh had sunken down even more, but she looked calm now, relaxed. Cristal placed the sheet back.

"I'm sorry," Jake said.

Cristal nodded and returned to her bedroom, staring up at the ceiling until dawn came.

****

The rooster crowed at dawn.

Cristal lifted a chicken and took her egg from the basket. Cristal placed it in the pail. Another chicken cooed in its sleep until Cristal lifted her up. She found no egg in the second basket.

Jake carried a pail of milk toward the house. Cristal looked up from the tomato plants. He stopped and lifted the pail. His mind caught in a thought, he lowered the pail without sipping, and then continued toward the house. Cristal turned

back toward the tomatoes and scratched the soil idly with her finger.

Jake cooked eggs in the outdoor pit. Cristal sat down in the house and they ate their breakfast. “We have enough wood for a while,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

The two sat quietly together.

“Mom talked about San Benito,” Cristal said. “We could stay with Tío Viejo. She wanted us to be there.” Cristal remembered little from their last visit four years ago other than his criticism of her. But she could withstand his criticism if it meant leaving the past.

“Maybe,” Jake said. “He was never a fan of us. But it’s been a while.”

“Can we…?” Walk toward the future, was Cristal’s finished thought.

Jake wordlessly scratched the back of his frizzy mop of hair. Cristal knew to give him space in his rare moments of quiet. Without Sara’s light snoring the house was as silent as the black sky at night.

Jake turned away from Cristal and wiped his eyes. “I think she’d like the view on the far hill. What do you think?”

****

They took turns digging.

Jake started the hole, and corrected Cristal when she took over.

“Let’s dig it this way,” Jake moved his hand in a straight line. “That way she can look out over there.” Jake’s hand cast over open, rolling fields.

Cristal nodded.

The sun gently laid down into the hills behind them. It cast purples and yellows on the two as they dug a grave for their former protector.

On the opposite side of them spread out vast, flat, dusty fields stretching for miles and leading toward a lake on the horizon. The foot of the grave was toward the fields and the lake, and lying down in the grave one could sit up and look over it: the old farmlands, now dried, but still broad and noble. A few withered trees ringed with skeletal grasses. Acres of hard dirt and swirls of dust and sand. And, soon enough, the sun would rise over the distant lake again, soon it would cast the gentle oranges and reds and yellows of morning across the distant waters. The flowing fields of amber grains had long passed, but Jake was still right: it would be a beautiful view for the woman they loved and who had loved them.

"Can we…?" Cristal said.

Jake nodded. He sat down next to the fresh grave and pulled his knees to his chest. "Tomorrow. Yes."

****

Dawn climbed into the sky. The chickens cooed lightly, asleep in their baskets. Cristal opened light into the coop.

Jake held a chicken down on a stump, his hands far from her neck. Cristal cracked down an axe.

A headless chicken dashed about their yard and collapsed, feathers pinked with blood. Cristal scooped it up and tossed it into a basket.

Jake squinted his eyes and used long tongs to pull a chicken out of a boiling pot. It slipped and splashed water on him. He blew coolness onto his arm.

Cristal plucked steaming feathers from a bird with her

bare hands. The bird was meticulously cleaned of quills. She cracked through the breastbone with a large knife, removed an organ, and tossed it into a pile of wet feathers before placing the other organs into a small pot.

The pair walked their mule and their cow down a dirt path, clanging with pots and pans and the slap of a sack of food and the jangle of a bottle of homemade wine past the farm and through the fields and down to the highway.

****

From two miles out, San Benito looked as flat and normal as a town can be after a global catastrophe.

Long ago, San Benito had been an old Texas oasis that didn't exist anywhere except to its inhabitants. When the railroad came through, the town had become a small, well-to-do community dependent on rich migratory tourists. On Tuesday, old couples would make their way south for a day trip in Mexico; Thursday, they drove an hour east to hobnob at the state's most beautiful beachfront resorts. Friday was cocktails at Corpus Christi. After the bombs, after the gas and the migratory rich dried up, a handful of rich families controlled the town and its surrounding area. Their sheriff recruited from the worst slums in over a hundred miles and guaranteed loyalty and efficient brutality. The five old, wealthy clans of San Benito were a hand wrapped around the throat of every man and woman in the Rio Grande Valley.

Cristal and Jake clanged toward the old town down Highway 69. They prodded their cow and mule to maintain their pace and wiped sweat off under the noonday sun. A child not quite ten rode a small bike out on the road and met with them. The young boy had a dark latin tan and his hair had been

combed viciously to look as straight as it could despite its fluff. He wore a button-down shirt and slacks, a few sizes too large, and he maintained a calm professionalism even as sweat soaked through his own clothes and streaked down his full cheeks. The boy kicked his feet off the pedals and propped up on his bike.

"Where y'all from?"

Jake caught Cristal and answered. "Rancho Viejo," he said.

"Rancho Viejo?"

"Rancho Viejo."

The boy crooked his neck. "Not from Mexico?"

Jake shook his head and Cristal followed.

"Good. Y'all don't do that thing with your arrs." He stared at Cristal. "Who are ya?"

"Jake."

"Cristal."

The boy studied Cristal. "Okay, and why y'all here?"

Cristal felt an old arrogance in the small boy's gaze. "We're here to see our uncle Pedro."

"Pedro Rios," Jake finished.

"Rios?"

Cristal nodded. "Pedro Rios."

The boy looked them up and down and bent his head to inspect the animals. "Okay," he said. He spat. After a few quiet moments they watched him ride his bike back into town.

If it weren't for their encounter with the boy, they would've thought no one lived in the very clean and very kempt crumbling town. They walked street after street of the desert levittown, at a loss as to how to find their great uncle. Jake regretted not asking the boy for directions.

Cristal and Jake set their animals in the shade of a house and sat on the porch. The house was a perfect property for a two parent, two-and-a-half child home with a cat and a

dog and municipal services. It was empty now. The paint was peeling, and the other houses on the street were painted no more than two shades away from its light tan. Cristal and Jake took off their boots and aired their feet out.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Cristal said.

"Yeah," Jake said. "Let me see if there's water."

Jake tried the front door but it was locked. Cristal pumped her shirt to get cooler air under it. Jake walked off the porch and Cristal heard him test the other doors until one gave him access. Cristal saw three dark-clothed men approach her.

The shortest and fattest man, with a black cowboy hat and black shirt, dark shades, black jeans, stopped twenty feet from the porch. He wore a large, shiny wristwatch on his left hand and a large holster on his right hip. He was flanked by two men in dark gray attire who were clearly his muscle. The short man, the leader of the three, glanced at Cristal, then at her burdened livestock, and then back to her.

He spat on the ground. He drew his eyes up again on Cristal and let them linger on her for a couple minutes.

"Y'must be Cristal," the short man said.

Cristal shook. "Yeah."

"I'm the sheriff here," he said. He pulled a tin from his pocket and pulled a plug of tobacco from it. His wristwatch was large and metal and had a black face. He tucked the plug in his lower lip and started to chew. "Where's Jack?"

Cristal felt a chill on her bare arms and instinctively rubbed them. The front door behind her unlocked and Jake came through. "I'm Jake," he said. "Good morning, sir."

"Sheriff Sanchez," he said and tipped his hat. "How'de'do, Jake. Y'all know you're trespassing on this property right here?"

Cristal said, "We were looking for water."

Sheriff Sanchez looked around the property, surveying it from his vantage point as if to see if anything were missing.

He slowly turned back to Cristal and Jake and smiled cruelly. "No."

The three lawmen waited in front of the house silently. Sheriff Sanchez tapped his foot, and the spurs on his boots jangled. After a couple more minutes, he spoke again.

"Why y'all trespassing?"

"We're looking for Pedro Rios," Jake said.

"Well he don't know you."

"He's our uncle," Cristal quickly explained.

Sheriff Sanchez put his hand on his hip and shook his head slowly. "No."

The two other lawmen looked at each other and at Sheriff Sanchez for direction. He stood before the house, still tapping his foot and jangling his spurs. After another minute, he stopped tapping his foot and sighed. He spat off to the side again. He rubbed his nose and lowered his other hand to his side. He unbuttoned his holster and patted a large chrome revolver. "Come along," he said.

****

Sheriff Sanchez led the procession five feet ahead. The two lesser lawmen walked in front of Cristal and Jake and peeked back frequently. They talked about a litter of pigs. The pots and pans clanged on the two animals at the rear.

"Lucky we kept even a one," a lawman said.

"That's a shame."

"Yeah, but the others, they was good tender bacon."

"Yeah."

Cristal and Jake exchanged nervous glances with each other. They remained quiet. Cristal's stomach turned about, not sure of what to make about their casual stroll and its danger.

They saw one other townsperson in an old-fashioned dress and the sheriff tipped his hat to her and smiled and that was all they did.

They came to a newly painted cinder block jailhouse. It was one level and squat, with old cruisers maintained well and sitting useless.

Sheriff Sanchez stopped before the prison building. He pointed to a bike rack. “Tie ‘em up there.”

Cristal and Jake led their animals to a loose bike rack and started tying their ropes to it.

“Get ‘em water,” Sheriff Sanchez told the two other lawmen.

Jake turned to the sheriff.

He pointed to the animals. “Them’s worth something. Y’all can just sweat.”

The lawmen led Cristal and Jake into one of two holding cells. They scraped the bars into place and left it open an inch, careful not to latch it. The bench was hard, made of concrete, but the cell was thankfully much drier and cooler than outside.

Sheriff Sanchez sat at a desk across from their jail cell. He chewed on the tobacco plug and buffed the face of his large watch and, despite a handful of books on justice and law stacked behind his desk, he did not seem one inclined to have read a single one of those words, especially if it might contradict his own personal sense of the law.

Cristal and Jake watched Sheriff Sanchez for almost an hour with no indication of what to do next.

They watched him eat half a grilled chicken at the desk. His teeth tore into the thigh and then the breast and Cristal and Jake realized he was eating their meat. Their mouths watered and stomachs hurt. He washed it down with their bottle of wine. His lips were red. The sheriff finished and threw the carcass and the bottle in a steel trash bin. He left a lot of meat

on the bone. “Dog can’t eat that,” he said to no one in particular. He picked his teeth and resumed being bored.

Two more hours passed and Cristal felt thirsty. “Do you think he’ll—?”

Jake shook his head.

The sheriff clicked his watch on and looked at Cristal and Jake. They studied him intently. He took in a slow breath and shouted, “Shut your mouths!”

The violence of his voice echoed across the cinder blocks of the jail building.

Cristal and Jake huddled away and toward the wall. The sheriff unclasped his watch and returned to grooming it.

The door finally opened and the bike boy from the morning came inside. The sheriff was idly setting the time on his watch. The eager bike boy approached his desk and rocked back and forth until the sheriff paid him mind.

“He’s coming.” The bike boy almost hopped.

“Okay,” the sheriff said, still adjusting his watch. The boy was excited by the two new prisoners and turned back to Sheriff Sanchez. The boy looked them up and down, turned around in his head reasons they were bad and the punishments they clearly deserved.

Sheriff Sanchez yawned in boredom. “Git.” He waved at the boy. “You know.”

The bike boy nodded and smiled and dashed out of the prison.

The sheriff put his watch on again and stretched widely. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

The door creaked open again. A tall, darkly dressed man walked toward the smiling sheriff. He wore a brown rancher’s hat, his hair was graying on the sides, and his mustache was dark black. His boots clicked on the floor of the prison. His calm movements betrayed no emotion. Even when he came before the sheriff, he drew his hand up in a rehearsed manner

and he scratched his forehead in what seemed frustration. But when he lowered his hand, Cristal saw his lips parted in a deep scowl.

"Howdy, Pedro," Sheriff Sanchez said. "These yourn?"

Pedro's scowl managed to deepen further. He hadn't yet glanced toward the cell. "This isn't about Hebbronville?"

"Nope. Told you, got my best boy on it. He'll finish up soon."

Tío Viejo almost glanced at the cell. He ticked his head toward Cristal and Jake. "These two bring anything?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Nothing good."

Cristal's great uncle looked at her and Jake. His eyes were light brown but held darkness. His lip lifted in a sneer. Cristal saw on his face the anger he held in his heart. He turned from her and spoke to Jake. "I told you not to come with nothing."

Jake deflected his gaze away from his uncle.

The sheriff picked his teeth again. "You want 'em? I don't care neither way."

Pedro turned back to Sheriff Sanchez. "Whatever." He considered the offer and nodded.

The sheriff laughed. He turned to Cristal and Jake. "Now y'all won't have to be hogtied for the night."

****

The procession with Tío Viejo was also silent. Cristal felt a deeper sense of danger than with the sheriff.

He rode a horse and Cristal and Jake led their pack animals. His horse kept a trot too fast for them and they goaded their tired animals to keep up. After an hour of passing colorless suburbia and a vacant Main Street, Jake finally spoke up.

"Sara's dead," he said, panting at Tío Viejo's back.

The trot continued unfaltered.

They stopped at a small green field with a creek running through. Tío Viejo brought his horse up to the trickling water and it drank. The water looked cool and clean.

Cristal and Jake stilled their bodies to hide their exhaustion as best as they could. Tío Viejo seemed not to appreciate weakness.

He patted his horse's neck and looked at its face, entranced. "She's dead?"

"Yeah," Jake said, steadying his trembling. Cristal's legs shook and hurt from the run. "I'm sorry," Jake said.

"Doesn't bother me," he said, soothing the horse. "And you're not going to be my problem."

Cristal and Jake nodded. The horse finished drinking and he wordlessly returned to a trot. Cristal and Jake followed. Cristal wondered how cold the water was.

The road became meandering dirt surrounded by trees that slowly dried and browned along their route. Cristal made out a large house off to her right side through the brittle branches of a deep forested estate. Ten minutes later there was a second one, then a third one, and eventually they came upon Tío Viejo's estate and home: a large, spread out two-story manor painted a flaking dark brown and flecked with grasses on the verge of green. Tío Viejo pointed Cristal and Jake down the path toward the house. "Wait there," he said, his back to them, and he slowed his trot and took their animals off and down a small path on the side.

Cristal and Jake slowed their pace and walked toward Tío Viejo's manor. The crunches of their footfalls returned to their pounding ears. They took deep breaths and caught up with their own exhaustion.

"He's really unkind," Cristal said.

"Best not to think that way," Jake said.

"Why? He is," she said.

"You're going to want to prepare your mind," he said. "He gets worse."

They stood before two tall, dark doors at the entrance of the manor. The sun beat down on them, and without a breeze they sweat even harder. Cristal moved to open the door and Jake caught her back. He shook his head. The door had large brass lion door knockers that they would have to stretch up to use. The glimmering lions made Cristal turn her head down in shame.

"We need to get out of here," Cristal whispered.

"I'm thinking about it," Jake said.

"What are you thinking?"

Jake shook his head. "I don't know yet."

Cristal and Jake waited. It had been four years since she saw Tío Viejo, and she remembered two specific things about their visit. The first thing was the careful packing for the gifts they brought her great uncle, simple flatbreads and a moist sweet cake wrapped in rare pieces of wax paper to keep it from going dry. When they left, the second thing she remembered was him telling them to bring wine next time. She had stolen one last glance at the green mold covering the cake and flatbreads before she turned away to walk back home.

Cristal and Jake waited twenty more minutes until the clicking of locks behind the large, dark doors. There was a long pause and then the doors opened to Tío Viejo's sour expression. "Don't touch," he said. Cristal wasn't sure if he meant not to touch the door handles or not to touch anything in the house.

They entered the house and the largest open room they'd ever been in. The living room smelled of musty cigar smoke. A large staircase in the middle bent up toward the second floor. There were exotic animal skins draped on the walls like tapestries. A small upright piano was pushed against the wall on the left, and on the wall next to it were a leather couch and a large leather chair. A dark wood end table offered

a crystal decanter and a single drinking glass next to the leather chair. On the other side of the staircase there was a decorative table with wood and clay pots, the table that had once held Cristal's and Jake's moldy gifts. Tío Viejo pointed behind them to a shoe rack though he kept his own boots on. "There," he said.

Jake walked quickly and removed his boots, and Cristal followed suit. She placed them gingerly next to a pair of embroidered women's boots. They turned back to Tío Viejo's cold stare.

"Your room is at the end of the hall." He pointed at the left side of the room, past the piano. "Don't poke around what's not yours."

He faced toward them and kept his hand pointing at the hallway until Jake understood his command and then Cristal followed. The hallway hung with small frames and trite homey sayings from an old, trite store. It was clearly decorated by the woman of the house. At the end of the hallway a door was open and Cristal and Jake passed in.

There was one small bed, and the room was also small and still held a useless sewing machine set up at a table. "We'd better rest," Jake said, and he closed the door until they were called for dinner.

****

Tío Viejo went over the rules of the house at dinner.

"Call me Señor Ríos in this house. Outside this house, you will not speak my name."

Cristal and Jake were to respect the man and the woman of the house. They were not to speak unless spoken to. They were to pay $400 for rent and food, and as there were few jobs

in the area, he suggested they pickpocket at the market.

"I provide for your breakfast and dinner. Lunch is your responsibility. I will give you thirty-five dollars for your rifle. The animals are mine, and I consider that debt repaid. I already freed you from jail once and I'm not doing so a second time. When you thieve, I suggest you don't get caught."

He impressed upon them the things he found of value: silverware, skins and animal trophies, assorted fine items that belonged in a respectable household. Also acceptable was former American cash, fine foods, and, of course, working guns.

As they were family he would offer their first month of rent at half the rate, and his wife placed down her red wine and turned to him with a look of worry.

"We don't run a cheap motel," she said.

He waved her off her concern. "Let me be generous."

Cristal and Jake retired to their shared room. She sat on the bed and trembled. Jake sat in the sewing chair.

"He's worse than I'd ever seen before," he said.

"Uncle Jake." Cristal rubbed her face.

He nodded. "I know. I don't know what to do, either."

She laid down and huddled in bed. Jake sighed and folded his face in his hands. Cristal shook harder.

She said, "Hold me."

Jake nodded and wrapped his arms around the only family left to him on their small, shared bed.

****

Cristal and Jake had their breakfast in the morning.

They watched Tío Viejo and his wife gorge themselves on eggs and sausage and tortillas and charred corn.

Cristal and Jake ate two tortillas each and a cob of corn

from last night. They left to the open market.

San Benito's market was converted from the tennis court and amenities of a luxury apartment complex. It was small and lightly attended with vendors of housewares, a few grillers selling hot foods, and not much in the way of fine goods nor foot traffic. Cristal and Jake walked through and surveyed the market. They left and sat under a few dry, skeletal trees out of sight.

"There's nothing valuable at the market," Cristal said.

"At least we can steal our food there," Jake suggested. "I'm so hungry."

"Me too. I can make a distraction."

Cristal and Jake planned out their attack.

****

A fat, tan man with a mustache scraped shreds of beef on his flat grill. His white tee shirt was damp and greasy on his belly. He hummed and whistled, looking around the small market, smiling, trying to make eye contact with a potential customer.

He locked eyes with Jake. The vendor waved him over.

"Welcome, my young friend," the vendor said. "You look like a hungry fellow with a big stomach and thick wallet."

Jake nodded and smiled.

"Two dollars for a hot steak burrito, I accept bullets and seeds as well. All the onions and hot sauce you could possibly want."

Jake bent his nose toward the grill. The sweet smell of beef render ached in his stomach. The vendor pulled from a plastic bucket a fistful of cooked onions and threw them on the grill. The hot smells of carmelized onions intoxicated Jake.

"Extra butter cause I like you." The vendor scooped and

sizzled a golden dollop into the onions.

"I'll take two," Jake said.

The vendor nodded.

"I mean just one."

"Two is fine! You look extra hungry. Four dollars."

"I have a bag of corn seeds. Still good, dried last season."

"Perfect. Two cups, my friend. This much." The vendor cupped both his hands in front of Jake.

Jake nodded and smiled.

Cristal watched their conversation poking around the corner of a crumbled apartment. She picked up a warped metal pot and two chipped ceramic plates that had been discarded. She rubbed them about in her hands nervously, scraping a plate on the edge of the pot.

"Almost done with the burritos?" Jake said.

"It will be ready quicker than a grackle's wing." The vendor smiled. "But payment first, my young friend."

Jake nodded and sifted through his pockets.

"You keep the seeds in your pockets?"

Jake nodded quicker. Sweat trickled down his temples. His hands fumbled and his heart beat hard.

Until he heard the voice of an older woman behind him. Then his heart stopped.

"He does not have the seeds."

Jake turned to face her. The woman's skin was dark black. Her dreads were tied behind her head, and gray reached through them deeply. She wore a light green robe with large sleeves.

Jake studied her. Her face was smooth. He studied her eyes. The woman was looking at the vendor. She returned her gaze to Jake. There was a steadiness in her glance. "Wait," Jake said. His voice was calm, not fearful, and curious about what the next step was.

"He forgot his seeds at home," the woman told the vendor.

"But I will pay for the burritos."

The vendor shot a look at her. "Four dollars."

"Three because that is already a generous price," she said.

The vendor softened and nodded.

The woman produced a small bag from inside her flowing, green robe. She took out three bills and handed them to the vendor. The vendor sighed and placed another slab of butter on his flat grill. He toasted two tortillas and put the burritos together.

"Full," the woman said. She smiled and offered him another dollar.

The vendor turned down to his grill and took the other dollar. He opened the tortillas and heaped them full. The steam from the grill collected on his nose and face. He took another knifeful of butter and toasted a third tortilla.

The woman thanked him.

Jake watched the exchange calmly. The heat in his breaths subsided. He felt he was in the presence of a placid ocean. The water rippling, the waves softly undulating. He had not seen standing water in a long time.

The woman held three burritos in front of Jake.

"There," she said. "One for both of us. And one for your sister."

****

Cristal and Jake and the mature woman sat on a half-wall and ate their lunch.

The woman's name was Esmé.

She did not say much else. The three of them ate their meal silently together.

Cristal studied her up and down. Her eyes were light brown and soft, staring off at she wasn't sure where. Her light green kimono was folded over and loose but her presence seemed to fill it, and it seemed to breathe gently with her.

Cristal saw a matron like her own mother, long ago, long before the old flames. The fire subsided, but the heat was still there, singed on Cristal's flesh. On Esmé's flesh, too, she thought. No, she knew. Cristal rubbed her arms.

There was another path. It was there and Esmé was staring in its direction. Cristal couldn't tell where the path went, but she knew it went in a direction she had once dreamt of, toward an old goal. She wasn't afraid of the path.

She was terrified of reaching that goal.

Esmé finished her burrito and sat with her hands folded on her lap. Jake took his last gulp of lunch and before it hit his stomach he spoke up.

"Thank you, Esmé," he said. "We really appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Jake." Esmé smiled.

Cristal studied her face. A pair of moles below her left eye. Her cheek was smooth with a shine in the noon heat. Cristal felt the start of that path, and she still felt the ghosts of its flames. But a path is forged by footfalls.

And a path not taken is simply an open field.

"Esmé," Cristal said, "do you live here?"

Esmé shook her head.

"Do you live far?"

"I do. In Santa Elena."

Cristal looked down. She turned to Jake, who blushed. And she returned to Esmé again. "That sounds really far. But can we go with you?"

Esmé nodded. "Yes."

The walk toward Pedro Rios's manor felt much quicker than their goaded run the day before. A breeze tousled Esmé's kimono, and its green ripples were beautiful to Cristal and

Jake. Esmé turned around and waved them in front of her. Cristal and Jake hesitated as Esmé waved them forward.

"How am I to find your uncle's home if you are not to lead?"

Jake nodded sheepishly.

They shared about Tío Viejo and his cruelty. They talked about their travels off their family farm, and the death of Sara, Cristal's mother. They talked about the marauders of long ago.

They did not talk about the start of Sara's death.

"The world is dangerous these days," Esmé said. "One must be willing to protect oneself. And always to protect another."

"Is that why you're letting us come with you?" Jake said.

"Yes, sweetheart."

"That's brave," Cristal said.

Esmé smiled. Cristal's brown hair hid her face. "Yes. It is brave, dear Sister," Esmé said. "But all bravery is made with practice."

Cristal's hair also hid her smile.

They walked down the wooded path to Tío Viejo's manor. They came to the dark double doors and the brass lion heads. Esmé reached up and knocked. The three were quiet until the door finally opened.

Pedro was ready to chastise them, but Esmé's presence jolted him. "What do you want?" He said.

"I am to take the children," she said.

"Fine," he replied.

It seemed to Cristal that Esmé standing before Tío Viejo was a wall he had never encountered in life. It made him uneasy and perhaps even vulnerable. He moved to close the door but Esmé's voice stopped him.

"They have belongings."

Pedro didn't meet her eyes. He glanced at Jake and then

Cristal. He turned his eyes toward Esmé. “They do not.”

“They are to retrieve their belongings.”

“They brought nothing.”

Esmé remained unfazed before him. Cristal expected Tío Viejo to try to close the door again. It was already a shade of an angle closed. But there was something else in the air.

Cristal’s stomach plummeted.

Tío Viejo’s swing was quick. There was a loud thud of flesh against flesh and Cristal closed her eyes. She heard calm breaths. She gulped and opened them again.

Esmé held Pedro’s forearm firmly. Her fingers pressed tightly into his muscle. He looked back at her calmly.

She twisted her wrist slightly and he almost hid the pain.

Esmé let go and Tío Viejo returned to his spot. “Two lone cubs without a lion,” he said. “Worthless.” He opened the door the one shade he had tried to close it. “Go get it,” he said.

“You may keep what we do not carry,” Esmé said.

EPISODE I
Part 2: The Surface of Water

Night had descended like a shroud on Hebbronville.

The dim streets of a former Texas suburbia were scattered with dark bled, fly eaten bodies. A single candle danced on a steel table inside a car dealership. Light flickered along bright polished doors and windshields of useless, gas-thirsty cars. The single flame danced against the faces of survivors: old, worn, tired. Deep-eyed with exhaustion.

Scared.

"We can't keep living like this."

"There's nothing we can do."

"They're coming back tomorrow."

"Where can we hide?"

"I don't see any way we'll ever…"

The remainder of the small town murmured around the single candle. There weren't many left after the last raid. They held their small children. They held each other. They held scars, ragged wounds, and, in their heads, fresh images of horses thundering.

A tall, proud man stepped forward.

His cheeks were sharp, angled. His beard full and dark. His eyes fierce. Gray dabbled in his hair. The townsfolk calmed

and quieted themselves.

He spoke calmly and in a deep voice.

"We have eight remaining guns," he said. "Those with rifles can take positions in the old Bell building by the toll gate. That'll give us three snipers. They came in through the toll last time. And they left the same way, dragging those they had left. They're not as smart as they seem."

He laid out their defenses in the town. The motel offered many places to hide and a safe getaway into the houses. They could hide the weakest in the grocery store, inside the broken coolers. They could keep their food and goods hidden in the cars; lock the trunks, keep the keys.

Even the larger children could throw rocks at their horses and knock the riders off. Stack rocks for them on the roof of the small parking garage.

They knew their neighborhood better than the invaders. He was a natural leader.

The few townsfolk nodded in agreement.

"We will survive. We must survive. We will send them packing again," their leader said.

He pinched the flame of the candle. The town silently left the dealership and shuffled out into the empty night. Their new leader had been an office manager for an IT business, before the bombs. He was now a planner, a general in the new, fallen world.

A young man called his name outside the dealership.

He caught up with the tall leader.

"I'm Derek," the young man said. He gave him the firmest handshake he could muster. "I'm glad we have someone with a cool head around."

"Good to meet you, Derek," the man said. "Get some rest. You'll need it for tomorrow."

"I know," the young man said. "I wanted to ask you, I think I met you years ago. You knew my mom Cynthia, right?

And you were at the Halloween—"

A wood crossbow bolt slammed into the young man's heart. Blood flicked across the tall leader's face. The young man remained on his feet a moment more, stuttering, shaking and shivering, and moaned and finally crumpled over. The tall leader looked behind him for the assassin, but could not make him out in the dark.

He dashed back into the car dealership.

He ducked behind a desk. "You sonuvabitch, where are you?"

"Here."

A young man in a colorful native poncho stepped before the window into shafts of moonlight. The leader's eyes adjusted.

The assassin was young, very young. His face was smooth, clean, soft. A sombrero covered his eyes but didn't hide the slight smirk that snickered across his lips.

"It was me," the poncho assassin said. "I'm the son of a bitch who killed your friend." He untucked a crossbow out from under the poncho. "And that was a warning shot."

"A warning shot?" The leader said.

The young assassin smiled.

The leader stood up full height, proud to the young assassin. "Go do it. Right in my chest, too. I'm not afraid."

"The sheriff thought you might still be trouble. We left behind six bodies the first time," the young assassin said. "But I can see I don't need this."

He knelt down and placed his crossbow on the floor of the showroom, gingerly, like a soft child.

The leader put up his fists. "Man to man?" He said. "Hand to hand?"

"Hand to hand." The assassin's sombrero nodded slightly.

"And no guns?"

"That's not my style." The assassin's sombrero shook

slightly.

The leader nodded. “May the best man win.”

“May the best man win.”

The leader kept his fists up. His heart pounded. He shifted to the assassin’s left side, keeping his crossbow behind him. He respected that he placed his weapon down, and decided to make no attempt toward it.

The moonlight cast down on the two. The tall leader and the poncho assassin stood in silhouettes ten feet from each other. The assassin kept his arms within his poncho.

He seemed unmoved.

Sweat dampened the tall leader’s dark, gray-flecked hair. He grit his teeth for the fight.

Eight feet remained between them.

The young assassin calmly removed his left arm from under the sombrero and scratched his nose. His eyes were dark under the sombrero, with a slight glint of moonlight shining on them.

Six feet.

The tall leader shifted his feet. His right foot came back, and his right shoulder would be ready for a quick attack. One that would knock off the young man’s hat and skull.

Five feet.

The tall leader swung in. The young assassin ducked to his left. Ducked under a large swing. Hopped back from a full-force kick.

The tall leader swung his arm one more time in front of him, but only connected with humid air, not even touching the colorful native poncho. He turned around and faced the young assassin.

He tipped up his sombrero and his lips curled into a smile that looked almost like a twisted laugh.

“Who, who are you?” The tall leader said.

“The sheriff sent me,” the young assassin said. “That’s

all you need to know."

"Sheriff who?"

"In a different life," the young assassin said, "Sanchez would be another grunt. He'd have nobody. But he treats me well."

"Sanchez?"

"You treat men well," the assassin continued, "and they become loyal. This one treated me well."

The leader flicked his eyes backward. The crossbow was on the other side, behind him, only five steps away. He would have to buck his own pride.

"He gave me a home. He gave me food. And, most importantly," the assassin uttered a short laugh, "he gave me a path."

The leader stood his fists up again. He shifted his right foot back.

"You need a path in this world," the assassin said. "Or you'll wander forever."

The leader shifted his body down slightly. He squinted his eyes.

"You move forward. The blood on the path doesn't matter. You leave all that behind when you keep moving forward."

"Is that so?"

The moonlight shone in full intensity on the two men facing off. It cast a shadow on the crossbow. The bow was dark fiberglass. It was loaded with another wood bolt.

The tall man bent slightly to dash into the young assassin. He had run track in high school, when there were schools and teachers, before the bombs of fifteen years ago. The assassin's sombrero tilted downward again, covering most of his face. The tall man slammed a step toward the assassin and sprinted back toward the silhouette of the crossbow. A whip's silhouette flew from under the poncho and tangled around the tall man's neck.

His eyelids flit. There was a loud crunch and vomit rushed down his lips.

The sombrero gently glided to the ground.

The tall man fell to his knees. He was two feet from the crossbow. His hands grasped at the chain around his neck until he finally shook and fell down.

"That's how you kill a man." The assassin pushed his hand through this dark, neat hair. "Round up who's left and take everyone who can carry a gun. Hopefully we'll make up our six dead bodies."

A silhouette of a man shook by the office door. "And, and if they're too young?"

The assassin replaced the sombrero on his thick, dark hair. "Same if they're too old. You know we can't use them."

The man nodded and left.

The young assassin bent down and stroked the dead leader's cheek with the back of his hand. "You know, I probably would've kept this hand to hand. I like finding new ways of blood on my path. But you, in a way, forced my hand. I don't like other people touching my things."

The assassin gently backhanded the dead man's cheek. He stood up and walked toward the crossbow, glinting in the moonlight. The name Ricky was engraved along the wood grain handle.

****

The surface of water
Is glass
You punch it
You break it, it comes
Back to shape

You open your palm
Fan your fingers
And you become it
You become the calm water
As your hand guides through

****

The warm smells of breakfast wafted in the makeshift bedroom.

Cristal laid supine on a strange bed. It was fitted with a white sheet and a flat white sheet lay on her, half on, half off. Her leg dangled on the side of the bed.

Around her were paper partitions for walls. The ceiling was painted by hand. There were people in bright, foreign dress, mythical animals, poses with spears and weapons. The ceiling told a grand, silent tale of mortals and dragons. Aromas of food filled her nose. She folded her hands under her head and sighed.

The large hall had been quietly busy for hours before Cristal emerged from her partitioned room. The main hall was a large, open room punctuated with support beams. Paper partitions marked makeshift rooms along the outside walls. Jake had been standing outside Cristal's room, impatient.

"They already started second breakfast," Jake said.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Cristal said.

"I figured you needed the sleep," Jake replied.

The first floor was large and open, other than the paper partitions, and the food hall took almost the full floor. There were half a dozen long folding tables each fully packed with girls, and still a few handfuls who jammed themselves onto the corners. Some were in their teens like Cristal, and many were

under ten. Even with a full hall of girls, and even with nothing more than paper partitions dividing the hall from the rest of the building, the volume of their conversations gently melded together and the large meal was as calm as if only a pair of them had sat down to eat.

Cristal and Jake approached the breakfast station and scooped eggs, took a piece of fruit, and poured themselves water. One tray had a scant few pieces of grilled meat on it. Jake piled pieces on his plate.

"Oh my god," Jake said. "It feels like forever since we had pork!"

Cristal whispered. "Put it back."

"But," Jake stopped and looked at the remaining two pieces of meat on the tray. He nodded to himself and placed his pieces back, keeping only one. "I'm sorry."

"My stomach's grumbling too," Cristal said.

They searched the calm breakfast room for two places to sit, but there wasn't even one. Cristal and Jake walked toward the main exit when one of the girls rapped her knuckles on the table. It was the loudest sound in the hall.

A red haired girl waved them over.

Those at the table pushed themselves tighter to offer a spot. Cristal and Jake found folding chairs by a makeshift room and sat down at the new open space. The girl on the other side of Jake gave him extra berth.

"I'm Anya." The girl's bright red hair was woven into a thick braid. The few freckles on her pale face punctuated her expression with vivaciousness. She wore a yellow tee and green cutoff shorts. She was in her late teens.

"Thanks Anya. I'm Cristal."

"You're welcome, Cristal," Anya said. "You look kind. It's important to be kind."

The table resumed their normal conversations. Cristal smiled and the girls were excited to have new people. They

shared stories about farming, about chores, about tricks played and games and gossip. Cristal laughed. Jake patted her shoulder.

"Yeah?" Cristal wiped mirth from her eyes.

"I'm the only one," Jake whispered.

Cristal yawned and stretched and looked around the meal hall. The girls were finishing up and cleaning their places. Cristal studied all the faces and he was right: Jake was the only young man in the room.

He continued to eat his meal glumly. The girl next to him had finished her meal and picked up some time earlier.

"Uncle Jake," Cristal said.

"It's okay." Jake continued his slow meal. "Not your fault."

Cristal turned to Anya. "Hey, Anya?"

Anya turned to her. "Mmm hmm?"

"Who runs this place?"

****

Esmé sat on the wood floor with her legs tucked under her.

Hers was one of two rooms on the second floor with solid walls. Her room was hung with prints of old watercolors: a waterfall, koi fish, a tsunami. She wore a white kimono and held a narrow brush by its very end, giving slow strokes of letters onto a smooth piece of white marble.

Cristal barged through the open threshold. She paused for a moment to watch Esmé fully engrossed in her hobby but knew that patience would not serve her purpose with her.

"Esmé."

"Yes?" Esmé nodded, still intent on her brush strokes.

"Why isn't my uncle allowed here? Why are there only

girls here?"

Esmé nodded again, this time in agreement. "This is a very important question, Cristal, and I thank you for bringing this up. May I share something before we continue this conversation?"

Cristal sighed. "Yes. Go ahead."

"Thank you, Sister." Esmé finished on the marble tablet. "I write haiku. It soothes me. I will read you this one:

"What is wisdom?

"It is the scar you show another

"To keep her from her own.

"What do you think?"

Cristal scratched her head. "I'm not sure I get it."

Esmé laughed. "Then it is doubly terrible! You don't get it, and also it's the wrong number of syllables!" She shook her head at the poem and faced Cristal. "Yes, now about Jake. Let me answer your question about who is allowed here. But give me a moment to explain." Esmé wiped the stone clean with a cloth. She stood up and motioned for Cristal to walk with her.

They passed slowly by soft conversations and warmup stretches as the older girls shifted around the last few paper partitions for morning classes. "This is our Sisterhood, Cristal. That is how the outside world knows it. This was a small factory in another life. It manufactured linens and curtains but now it is home to the castoffs of our crumbling world." She turned to Cristal. "And, in all honestly, all of our castoffs are young ladies, like yourself."

"Then what about the young men who are castoffs?"

Esmé smiled. "You understand. The Sisterhood is here to protect each other. And part of that protection is safety. The Sisterhood belongs to the sisters within it. And they do not feel safe with a man nearby, even as kind and handsome as Jake is."

Cristal grimaced. "But you run this place, right? Why don't you let him in? If you say he's kind and whatever."

"I would," Esmé returned, "but that is not one woman's decision." She placed her hand on Cristal's shoulder. "You have found the right fight here. I had fought it and lost. Our safety was more important than my ideal. Compromise was necessary."

"I'm not compromising my uncle."

"Nor should you, my Sister," Esmé said. "But understand compromise is the blessed breath of angels. It is the language in which we understand another." She waved to Cristal. "We will not compromise your uncle. Come, my dear love."

Esmé and Cristal walked to a collection of houses packed closely, half an acre between them. "You and Jake will sleep here," Esmé said. "This is where we sleep at night. And you are welcome at our main building. Though Jake, but for our meals, is not allowed there."

Cristal nodded.

"Come."

They walked on the other side of the main building. Esmé offered her an anecdote of living in Paris, long, long ago. When she was an idealistic youth. "Being black was acceptable there," she said. "Not perfect, but acceptable."

"I'm not sure I know anyone who's black," Cristal said.

"I hope soon you shall know me!"

The pair stopped at a large, deep hole dug into the ground. Cristal estimated it was over ten feet deep, and at least forty feet around.

"This is our koi pond." Esmé laughed.

"Koi pond?" Cristal said. "Where's the water?"

"That is to come." Esmé turned to Cristal. "I love koi, and I dream of the pond almost every night. Rebecca dug this for me, the start of our koi pond."

Cristal scratched her head.

"You build a thing from hope. And its second step is action." Esmé said, "We do not have the water, nor the fish, to

fill a koi pond. As of now, no. But we shall."

"It'll take a week to get enough water if you have a well," Cristal said.

"That is a lovely plan," Esmé said, "but we need that water to drink. No, Cristal, this koi pond will be filled when the skies weep beauty and release upon us. We work endlessly so we may give Mother Nature the relief she so deserves. When she is ready, the heavens shall pour down for a restful week and fill this empty hole like a thirsty cup."

"Is that ever going to happen?" Cristal asked.

"Of course!" Esmé placed her hand on her heart. "And I pray that you find that day, though I may not greet it myself. Then this place shall be a wonder of color. For now, I shall work on healing Mother Nature. And when the rains come, the next woman shall find the fish."

Cristal thought. "And Rebecca dug the hole. She was the start."

"Yes, my Sister." Esmé turned to the pond. "A thing of beauty is knit from hope. And it is consummated with action." The wind ruffled Esmé's flowing, white kimono. "When I look at this hole for koi fish, I see Rebecca's love and care for me. I see the water and the fish swimming in it whenever I pass." She turned back to Cristal. "Rebecca is a beautiful human herself. And she is the one who fought not to allow young men among us. Understand that she will not be your ally in this. But she is nonetheless worth knowing and loving."

Cristal sighed. "I'm not going to win, am I?"

"Come sit." Esmé sat down by the hole and patted a spot next to her. Cristal followed. "Paris taught me many things. About freedom. About exercising one's freedom, and one's decision to fight, or not." Esmé folded her hands on her lap. "A fight is not about the victory. It is about the victory within yourself. You will win sometimes, and you will lose mostly. But your losses show you how to forge the needed

victories. I will fight with you on this. If you want my assistance."

"Of course!" Cristal said. "Why would I not?"

"Very well," Esmé said.

The two stared at the open pit. Cristal could start to see the water that would fill it. A calm surface. A reflection of glass.

Her reflection.

"Esmé?"

"Yes, Sister?"

"You say you love Rebecca, right?"

"I do."

"And," Cristal thought for a moment, "you said you love me, too. Though you really don't know me."

"Cristal, I do know you: you are my daughter, my Sister; my love and my limitless sky above."

Cristal trembled. "Why?"

Esmé kept looking at the ditch, seeing visions that Cristal could only guess at. "You are inquisitive, and I suggest you always keep that. But know that love is not a question. It is always a statement. It can hurt, and it can weigh down: but love is life and it will forever bind."

The sun felt hot on Cristal. "But, still, why?"

"Because love is the only choice that is always worth making."

****

Cristal and Jake were given a room on the first floor of a shared three story house.

Their room had two bureaus. Cristal and Jake put all their clothes in each. They half-filled two drawers. The other drawers were empty. He placed three cartons of bullets on top of his bureau.

Jake propped the hunting rifle in the corner of the room.

"It's okay," Jake said. "I get they don't want me around. It's just that vibe."

"I'm sorry," Cristal said.

They sat on their own beds. The room was empty. Cristal felt some sort of loss in the emptiness.

"It's still better than Old Bastard's place."

Cristal nodded.

They went to third dinner together, the last dinner of the night. Anya invited Cristal again and they sat down. She looked at Jake. He was still ostracized. Cristal turned to Anya.

"Anya, what can you tell me about Rebecca?"

"She's the official head of the Sisterhood," Anya replied.

Rebecca did the day-to-day work, helping the lead farmers, making sure the kitchen kept running, organizing classrooms, providing all the things her Sisters needed, including mediation for any arguments.

"How do I talk to her about—?"

A look of shock came over Anya. "About what?"

Cristal shook her head. Jake finished his dinner.

Nighttime fell and the girls closed the curtains around the building.

Cristal and Jake sat silently in their beds in the dorm. Cristal placed a blanket underneath her bed and laid down in her mesh shorts. She looked up at the ceiling. Just white paint.

****

It wasn't a noise that awoke Cristal.

It was the silence. The half-moon shone through her window. Nothing stirred.

Cristal sat up and looked out the window. The moon's

light painted a halo upon the main building. The curtains were closed but lights flickered dimly within.

Someone was in there.

Cristal got up. She walked to the other room on her floor. She opened the door slightly. It creaked. She heard light snoring from inside.

Cristal's heart beat heavily.

She walked to the two bedrooms upstairs. Each were unoccupied except for books and other personal belongings. She walked to the attic room, and it was likewise packed with belongings but no owner.

Cristal returned to her bed. She stared out the window, wondering why so many candles were burning so late at night. And if there were figures flitting between them.

****

Cristal woke up. Jake had already left to bathe. She opened her bureau.

The top two drawers were filled with new clothes. A third was packed full as well.

She opened Jake's bureau. It held the same amount of clothes, minus the set he took to switch into.

Cristal knocked on the bathroom door.

"Almost done," Jake said.

He finished emptying the bathtub and tossed his used water. As he was leaving, Cristal stopped him.

"I'm fighting Rebecca on this," she said.

"Okay, but just don't punch her," Jake said. "That's not going to get me in."

"You know I wouldn't," she said.

"I'd like to think that," Jake replied.

Cristal bathed in cold water. She laid her back down into the bathtub. She crossed her arms and twisted her face in thought.

She waited outside the meal hall until second breakfast for Anya. She and Jake sat at her table.

"Did you like the clothes?" Anya asked Cristal.

"What? That was you?"

"Yeah! We found some clothes lying around that might fit you," Anya said.

"Oh, thank you."

"It's important to be kind. I try to help where I'm needed. Also, you're my size." Anya shrugged but couldn't contain her smile.

"Thanks, Anya," Cristal said. "So how do I ask Rebecca about bringing a man into the Sisterhood?"

Anya grinned uncomfortably. "You mean Jake?"

"Yes."

"Ummmm." Anya fidgeted nervously.

"Please, Anya," Cristal said.

"Her room's also upstairs."

"Could you come with me?"

Cristal, Jake, and Anya approached Rebecca's room on the second floor. The door was closed.

"We should go," Anya said.

Cristal knocked on the door.

There was shuffling within. "One moment!" Rebecca said.

Rebecca opened the door. She wore an orange tee and worn jeans. Her hair was reddish and darker brown than Cristal's, short, and just below her ears. "Oh, hello Cristal! Hello Jake. Just be aware you're not supposed to be up here normally. So tell me, what's up?"

"Rebecca, I'd like to discuss that." Cristal sized her up as best as she could. Rebecca exuded a vibrant strength that

almost contradicted Esmé's calm. "I wanted to know if Uncle Jake could be considered part of the Sisterhood."

Rebecca's mood dampened. "We don't do that here."

"Why not?"

Rebecca crossed her arms. Anya fidgeted behind Cristal and Jake. Cristal kept her gaze on Rebecca.

"We don't and we've discussed that before," Rebecca said.

"We can discuss it now," Cristal said.

"Did Esmé put you up to this?"

Cristal shook her head.

"She came by this morning. I guess now she has a reason to push for it." Rebecca shook her head. "I'm not sure you both understand what a Sisterhood is." She sighed. "Or why."

"Can we talk about it?"

Rebecca licked her lip in contemplation. "Yes. But not here. With the rest of the Sisterhood."

Cristal nodded. "When?"

Rebecca frowned. "Tonight. Tonight will be fine."

"Thank you, Rebecca."

"You're welcome."

The three turned away. Anya's face was red. Jake was pale. "Cristal," Jake said.

"Yeah?"

He smiled. "Stop calling me uncle."

****

The sun was going down and the paper partitions were folded against the walls.

Most of the Sisterhood was present. Cristal and Jake sat before the others. Esmé sat next to Jake, and Rebecca some

distance from them.

Cristal counted one hundred twenty-three girls and young women, the majority young girls. The Sisterhood sat cross-legged: mostly Hispanic girls, a dozen Caucasian girls mixed in, such as Anya, and two teenage Chinese sisters.

The room was louder than their meals together.

Rebecca spoke up. “Ladies, we know why we’re here: to speak of Jake’s admission into our Sisterhood.”

The seated crowd murmured.

Rebecca turned to the trio. “Esmé?”

Esmé started. “We have talked about letting young men in before. Here we have one. This is Jake, whom many of you have met. He is Cristal’s uncle. He is a generous, kind soul, and I believe his fits the temperament of our Sisterhood just as well. I would like to hear from anyone whether we should or should not allow him into our fold and under our protection.”

The girls talked amongst themselves. A dark-haired girl stood up.

“Hello Jake. How are we going to trust you?”

Jake looked at Cristal. He looked exasperated.

Esmé spoke up. “Jake has been assisting us with several chores, such as cleaning and carrying water. He has earned my trust, and I understand if he has not yet earned yours.”

The girl shook her head and sat down. Rebecca craned her head toward the back. “You may speak.”

A girl in the back stood. “I don’t get why a boy should be in our Sisterhood. Right?” She shrugged openly. “Right?”

The conversations bubbled up more. Rebecca took charge. “Very well, very well. We can give our guest a chance to speak. Let him answer that for himself.”

Cristal looked at Jake. He scanned the audience. He fumbled to stand. Cristal stood up first and helped Jake up as well.

“I, I,” Jake clenched his teeth.

"He's my uncle and I will fight for him on this." Cristal glared.

"As will I." Esmé remained seated. "Our Sisterhood is merely a name. What our Sisterhood truly is is a collection of members who trust and understand each other." She turned to Cristal and Jake. "You may sit down. You need not stand before them."

The second girl spoke again. "See? They don't get how we run our Sisterhood. They don't get us." She waved them away and sat down.

The Sisterhood's conversations bubbled louder.

"Hold on, hold on," Rebecca said. "Anya, you want to say something?"

The girls around Anya encouraged her up. She stood up trembling. "Jake is a really good guy. He's not a girl, but still he's," she struggled with her thought. Anya looked around her. "I'd like him with us." She sat down quickly.

Rebecca stroked her chin. "Well, that was a little unexpected. Thank you, Anya. Anyone else?"

The room was silent.

"Then we'll vote," Rebecca said. "All for Jake joining?"

There were a few votes for him, including Anya. The next vote was overwhelmingly against him.

Rebecca turned to Cristal and Jake. "There you have it," she said.

Esmé nodded once. "Thank you for hearing our side." She stood up and gave Jake her hand. "We can go."

Esmé led Cristal and Jake out of the hall and toward their room. The light was dimming.

"We did well," Esmé said.

"No one wants him here," Cristal said.

"It's okay," Jake said. "I get it."

"We did well," Esmé repeated. "Last time, I had two with me. Anya changed her mind. A few others as well. People

do that when they talk and share." She patted Jake's shoulder. "Give this some time. You have friends here."

Cristal shook her head. "I'm just so angry!"

"My love, my dove," Esmé said, "you did well."

"We didn't win."

"We had a small victory here."

"Next time we will." Cristal said.

"Maybe not."

"Then the time after."

"Maybe so." Esmé nodded. "Good night, kind Sister."

Cristal and Jake wished Esmé a good night. The sun finished its final rays. The shades were shut in the main building. The candles were lit.

****

The silence was deeper than the pitch of night.

Jake was snoring in his bed. Cristal's foot bounced in restlessness.

She stood up and left quietly.

Her bare feet crunched softly on the open dirt. She tiptoed toward the main building. There were fewer candles lit than last night and figures darted in front of them. There was a slap of a body on the wood floor.

Cristal's heart beat hard. She lost her balance and fell, catching herself on her right hand.

The figures stopped flitting between the candles.

Cristal remained squatting. She crawled on all fours toward the main building. It was silent. As she got closer, she heard soft sounds of light footfalls and hands slapping against flesh again. There were harder and deeper sounds as well.

Cristal approached one of the windows. The shade was

closed, but she pressed her face close to the glass and was able to see slightly through. She made out silhouettes of figures running and jumping and holding sticks, swinging them at each other.

They were sparring within the linen factory.

Cristal watched for some moments. She could make out vague traces of powerful gymnastics.

Then she held her breath. Her heart skipped two beats.

"Well," Rebecca said behind her. "You might as well come in."

Cristal turned slowly to her. Rebecca nodded and fanned her hand toward the door.

Cristal walked in. The space was still open and paper partitions remained folded against the walls. Twelve of the older girls were sitting cross-legged on the floor. Candles flickered soft light over their intent faces. They had wood swords, nunchaku, staffs, brass knuckles, wrapped fists. Cristal made out a few girls she knew, Anya and most of the older girls. They silently watched her.

Cristal stood before them. She turned to Rebecca behind her.

"You must keep quiet about all of this," Rebecca said. "And you can choose to join us or not. But for our safety this must always be a secret."

"It will remain with me," Cristal said. She turned to the seated girls. "And if you would."

Rebecca turned to the girls as well. There were no objections. Rebecca nodded once to them and turned back to Cristal. "Welcome to the Sisterhood of the Hidden Blade, Cristal."

EPISODE II: A NEW FAMILY
Part 1: A Pair of Sister Dragons

A large manor spread out in the dry countryside. The soil around the manor was bare other than tufts of brittle grass occasionally stabbing up.

A collection of crystal knick-knacks and filthy glasses and mugs and long-emptied liquor bottles cluttered up a stuffy bedroom. Pencils surrounded a messy stack of papers. One of the pages had the hand-written cursive title, “There Is No Life Worthier,” and the page signed by V. Dennings.

He laid on his bed. Silver-haired Victor lay naked on top of the duvet and sheets. His body was old and graying and splattered with many dark moles and bulbous skin tags. The duvet was worn and old and patterned with intricate dark brown paisley designs. His eyes were closed and he was smiling, his head rocking gently on a paisley pillow. He slowly stretched his arms up and yawned as if it were just past the break of dawn, and not the crack of noon instead.

A woman got up from the bed wearing a maroon dress. “Are you feeling better?”

“Mmm hmm,” he mumbled.

“I’m glad. Is there anything else I can do for you, Victor?”

“Yes,” he mumbled. “Do not speak my name. You don’t

have one, so don't sully mine."

"Yes, sir," the woman said. "Can I get to the pantry?"

"I keep my word, always." Victor peeked open an eye at her. "Keep yours to yourself. Next time, don't talk."

"Okay," she said.

"Let this one out," he yelled.

A man shy of forty motioned to the woman in the maroon dress. She undressed and gave him the fine vestment while she returned to her more ragged clothes. He escorted the woman through halls decorated with paintings of vast landscapes and unknown ancient oligarchs. The middle-aged man wore sporting gear appropriate for a fox hunt, though updated and more colorful than the tasteful and cracked paintings. The woman compared him to one painting they passed, one of an old, stylized hunt, though foxes had perished more than a decade prior. The woman had a long, smooth scar across her left cheek. She smiled to the man. As they continued their walk through the mansion's halls, the woman slowed her gait.

"Keep going," the man said.

"Yes, but—"

"Keep going." The man enunciated harsher.

He let her outside. The woman turned to him, her smile faltering. She rubbed the pink scar on her left cheek. The man pointed out toward the fields.

"But I, where's the corn? The squash? What are we going to eat?" She wiped her eyes. "My brother, I, we were promised—"

"Catch a rattler," the man said. "Better 'n corn."

"But, but, you mean?" Her hope drifted.

The man returned into the mansion and closed the door. The woman closed her eyes tightly. She turned around and walked toward the fields, the dusty gray fields tufted with brown grass and punctured with jagged tents of a shantytown of slaves.

****

In the early morning of Santa Elena, a foursome of girls carried brooms and buckets, rags and dusters through the small town to their destination.

Cristal and Anya carried the buckets of water, the stronger of the four. Gabriela was the tallest and carried two worn brooms under her armpit, clenching a fistful of rags. Her skin was one shade tan, her hair two shades darker than that and well past her shoulders. Mariposa's skin was dark, burnt caramel, and her hair jet black, wavy, tied back in a bursting bun. She was the unspoken "beautiful one," and thus the girl to talk to the homeowners. She carried an empty sack.

Mariposa knocked on the door of a square one-story home far in town, surrounded by similar houses tightly packed. There were sounds of children inside and she waited in front of the door and smiled and hummed. The door opened and a young boy waved at her. "Hola," he said shyly. The three other girls waited outside the threshold of the house. He mustered his courage and said, "Ven acá, mi mamá está aquí," and waved her in.

Mariposa entered and thanked him, followed by the other three. The boy's mother was in another room carrying an infant in her right arm, and she greeted the girls, "Mis ángeles dulces!" She wrapped her open arm around Mariposa and gave her a tight hug. The girls got to work.

The sun descended slightly from noon.

The four girls left the house and Mariposa turned around and thanked the family, her sack filled with raw vegetables and cuts of meat and sprigs of tea. The girls kept a slow pace on the way back.

Anya laughed at Mariposa. "Carlos has a thing for you!"

She shook her head. "My gosh, Anya, he's not even six."

"What a cute little crush," Anya said. She turned to Cristal. "He's twelve, by the way."

"Well, I'm nineteen and lovely and have many far more mature suitors," Mariposa said. "I am blessed and luckier than some."

"Oh, shut up Mariposa," Anya said.

"Ahhhh, jealousy," Mariposa replied. "It's part of God's difficult gift."

Gabriela shook her head and sighed.

The girls laughed and poked fun. Mariposa shook her head and deigned not to entertain their frivolousness in favor of her own. Cristal glared at her, squinting her eyes, shooting death glares as best as she could. When it was quieter, Cristal asked,

"Is it in a few days?"

Anya nodded her head. Gabriela shrugged.

"It'll be in two or three days," Anya said. "But honestly, no rush. Victor isn't going anywhere."

"We tend to be fashionably late, anyway," Mariposa said. "I bet we'll waste five days cleaning and babysitting everything in town instead."

Gabriela yawned and stretched her arms, keeping the brooms pinned under her armpit.

Cristal's interest was heightened. "So, who's going to go?"

Anya lifted the empty buckets and motioned to them. "Us. Rebecca. Hope and Hannah. Maybe Alex, but she's still a bit young."

"Hey, Gabriela," Mariposa said.

The four stopped. Mariposa pointed to a blooming white flower pushing out from a small tuft of grass.

Gabriela placed down the brooms and pulled a short knife from her back pocket. She flicked it open and pinched the tip of the blade, slowly lifting it up to eye level.

The knife plunged near the flower and kicked up dust. It had landed two inches from the stem.

Gabriela bent over and returned the knife to her pocket. She picked the flower and gave it to Mariposa. She twirled it in her fingers.

"Missed," Gabriela said.

"Well, I couldn't even get close," Mariposa said. She placed the flower in her ear.

"Right, so probably seven of us." Cristal hardly held her excitement. "Who's going to use them?"

"Me," Anya said. "And Rebecca will use the Big Sister, of course."

****

Women strive for peace
To lift the burdens of all
We sisters by blood

there's so much to learn
this is a tough way to write
a pretty poem

****

Esmé and Cristal sat by the koi pond in the afternoon. Esmé finished painting her haiku on a marble tablet and painted Cristal's on another one. Cristal was entranced by the contradiction of the gentleness of Esmé's strokes and her deep focus. Cristal

stayed under the spell of the brush until it lightly kissed its final punctuation on the stone and she glided it down on a tray beside her.

Esmé nodded softly at the poem on Cristal's tablet. "It is nice and an excellent first start," Esmé said. "It looks lovely written out, as I suggested."

"Yours is better," Cristal said.

"It is a matter of different approaches," Esmé said. "But I believe we share much in common, regardless. You are invested in learning, which were the first steps on my path, as well."

"Will I ever be good at haiku?"

"I did not write mine to be good," Esmé said. "Like yours, I wrote mine to discover. Knowledge is led by curiosity. Are you done with today's poetry?"

Cristal nodded.

Esmé wiped down both smooth tablets with a cloth.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"I am erasing our fine work."

"Mine I get, but yours was so beautiful!"

Esmé nodded. "Thank you. Do know that I write for myself and not for posterity."

"For what?"

"For future generations," Esmé replied. "What we learn, what we experiment with we bring into ourselves. On this planet we are all flowering gardens, and we grow the most verdant parts of ourselves within ourselves. The finest poem written on stone is merely the outmost twig of a poem blooming from within."

"But," Cristal paused a moment. "You're saying it's more important to learn things than to keep them?"

Esmé raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I suppose that is one way to put it. The process is the goal, not the product. I appreciate your view."

"Okay." Cristal nodded. "I wanted to ask some things."

"About tonight's meeting?"

"Yes."

Esmé folded her hands on her lap. "Please, let your curiosity feast."

Cristal said, "There'll be seven of us?"

"There will be seven."

"You won't be there?"

"I will stay at home. Healing others is a warrior's most important task."

"And what can I choose?"

"You can choose any spare weapon you wish. I suggest one of the longer knives, as you seem most comfortable with a blade."

Esmé waited.

"All these questions were going to be answered tonight," Cristal said.

"Yes, they would be." Esmé said.

"I've got one more question."

"And I would like to hear it."

Cristal scratched her head and fidgeted. "The katana?"

"Yes, the Sister Dragons." Esmé tilted her head up in contemplation. "You must understand, the pair of katana need to be entrusted with our strongest warriors. Keep training, dear Sister. You are simply not ready to carry the burden of their fire."

"I know," Cristal said. "That makes sense to me."

Esmé asked, "Then you had a different question?"

"Tell me about them."

She smiled. "I would be honored to. Near Austin, six days north, there is a Japanese museum. A few years after the destruction, I visited it one more time to grow fond of the brief year I had spent in Japan, after I came back from Paris. The museum this time was largely empty, and, at first, I thought

someone had absconded with its most valuable tenants: a pair of authentic, Edo katana."

Cristal rested her face in her palm.

"I was deeply saddened, as I'd used a true blade before, but never had the opportunity to keep one in my care. And these katana would have remained lost, but for a quiet voice that spoke in my ear. I followed those whispers to where the two Sisters were hidden, wrapped together, hiding in a garbage can filled with old boxes. The whispers were from the younger Sister, asking to rescue them both from forgetful history. So it became I, myself, who absconded with these elder ladies after all!" Esmé laughed.

Cristal smiled. "Tell me more about them."

Esmé unfolded her hands and brought a hand to her chin. She contemplated. "It is curiosity that supposedly killed the cat. But know that is a deception. You must always seek questions. For, the cat, with its curiosity, simply grew wise and ascended.

"Proper katana come in a pair, a daishō. The first blade, the tachi, is the larger of the pair of dragons, a Big Sister to her smaller wakizashi. This Big Sister is a four-body blade; it cuts through four bodies when properly handled. Her Little Sister is a three body-blade, making this one of the finest daishō outside of Japan. Only a samurai may wear the two, and the code of bushidō is necessary to keep the flames of the Sister Dragons from consuming the bearer.

"Listen, my curious Sister.

"You must always return the blade sated with blood; you must never draw a sword for sport, nor for intimidation. You mustn't strike in anger, for the spirit of the steel dragon absorbs that anger and that anger shall grow a life of its own. Its pure metal heart will warp, and so will yours, yours of softer flesh and blood." Esmé's voice declined slightly. "Now listen: Anger can only be a master, and there is no living being

strong enough to be its master. Should it make its home in the dragon's steel heart, it will command the blade as well as the woman. Anger will always fight, it will never lay down, and thus, you must always be willing to lose to it…"

****

Jake wiped a healthy amount of sweat from his forehead.

He picked up his hunting rifle. He held the barrel of the gun like a bat and swung. His feet danced along as he followed through, swing to the left, swing to the right. He held the butt and the barrel and made an imaginary block. He swung the rifle down and dispatched his invisible enemy.

"Uncle Jake."

Jake returned the rifle to his side. He faced Cristal.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Jake said.

"Well."

A vast silence parted between the two.

"I'm sorry about the Sisterhood," Cristal said.

"It's okay," Jake said. "You know?"

"What?"

"You're happy. This is the happiest I've ever seen you."

Cristal's face reddened. She wished the same for Jake. "I'm going to," she finished the thought by pointing to their dorm.

"Yeah." Jake nodded.

She nodded as well.

Cristal laid in bed. It became pitch out. The stars kept each other company. In his own bed, Jake murmured softly to himself.

Cristal waited for the deepest quiet and snuck out barefoot.

The curtains on the main building were closed. Cristal

entered the candle-lit hall and sat down with the twelve other girls. They whispered quietly to themselves. Anya turned to Cristal.

"You don't have to," she said. "You can just listen and not go."

"I know," Cristal said. "Thank you."

Rebecca came down the stairs carrying a large white board. She propped it against the wall and laid a paintbrush and tray of paints beside it. The girls quieted.

"You've started your training," Rebecca told Cristal, "and I think it's best to keep working on it till you're more comfortable. But…"

The girls looked to Rebecca.

"… but, as many of us trust you, and appreciate your company, you are welcome to join us on our next mission. But, please, decide after you hear us out. And consider staying back this time."

"I'll listen," Cristal said.

"Okay. So, to recap, tomorrow night we'll travel eight days to San Marcos. Victor Dennings was an old politician before the bombs. He was old then, and he's older now, probably in his seventies. He didn't have a direct role in the bombings. But he did have a major role in taking apart the former United States and really made his people suffer. He split families across continents, and stole their homes from them. He pocketed the gains while parents and children lived in cages, if you could call that living. I've heard San Marcos practically got more livable after the bombs."

Rebecca picked up the brush and dipped it in the paint. "Cristal, you'll have to use your imagination here. My art is not as beautiful as most." She drew a large square and three smaller circles to the left, below, and the right of it. "His town is small, this square here, and we'll be traveling from the south. We'll spend half a day avoiding these three towns. Everyone

there are his eyes and ears. So, we'll have to go all the way around, dodge all travelers, and come from the north to get to his mansion."

Rebecca laid out their plans. Weapons, provisions, secondary plans should they be discovered too early.

The girls nodded through their mission. Cristal nodded as well. When Rebecca finished, the girls turned to Cristal.

"I'll take the long tantō knife," Cristal said.

****

The sun filtered light through the holes in a worn tent.

A woman sat up off a rubber mat. She rubbed the pink scar on her left cheek. Her brother had already been sitting up, face buried in his bare knees.

"Up all night?" She asked her brother.

"Sí," he replied.

She yawned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She aired out a loose, grimy, sleeveless tee shirt. She bent toward him and rubbed his shoulder.

"I'm sorry big brother," she said.

He lifted his head up. His eyes were drowsy. "I'm going today."

"But, please. Don't. Tomorrow we'll—"

"Be hungrier than yesterday," he said. "I'm holding you back."

"Please. You're my only family left."

"You're scrawny."

The woman rubbed the scar on her cheek. She couldn't argue with his logic. But the heart breaks, and it breaks hardest when you have to survive. When you have failed every other option.

"I love you," she told her brother.

"Te quiero, hermanita."

"I'll get us more. I promise." She kissed his hair.

The woman surveyed outside her tent. There were scant tufts of brown, sharp grass and a loose scattering of tents, blankets bleached by the sun. The landscape was unforgiving to every manner of living thing, and especially to the tents: a third of the tents were collapsed, lacking inhabitants. The tent nearest hers was loose, with a flap blowing in the light breeze.

Its owner was also likely dead not many days ago.

The woman with the scar walked farther to a tent that promised human life. She called outside the tent and then peeked her head inside.

"Jim," she said. "Did you hear me?"

A deeply bearded old man looked up at her. He was middle-aged but his stare was vacant with years of bodily and mental wasting.

"We need to figure something out. Jim, if we get everyone together, we can get through this."

The bearded man lightly shook his head.

"But, Jim, if we don't, we're all going to starve to death."

"I'm already dead," he said. "You know it."

"Jim, please. Don't say that."

"We're all dead, sweetie. Give it another month to show." He laid down on the bare dirt and closed his eyes.

The woman walked toward a thin treeline. She took off her shirt and sat against a shady tree. She wafted her shirt in front of her to gain a small, cooling breeze. Sweat plastered her hair down in dark dashes around her face.

She draped the shirt over her head and walked toward a quiet murmuring. Her feet started kicking through the knives of brown, stiff grasses. She minded where her feet fell, but after a few more minutes, her feet thudded with exhaustion on hard ground and needles of grass. The grass became greener and softer. Her feet slapped into a shallow of muddy water.

Two other people waded in the small pond. The pink-scarred woman dipped her shirt into the water. She raised it above her head and drenched her face and mouth with it. Her face bathed in the coolness of relief.

She approached a young man sitting in the shallow part of the pond. “Damien, we need to break into Victor’s mansion. All the food is there.”

The young man’s gaze stayed on the thin mirror of water. He shook his head.

“We can’t make it this way,” she said. “Not another season like this.”

“I just like the water,” he said. “That’s all. Let me have that.”

“Okay, Damien.” She turned away. She looked for the other person but now there was no one else enjoying the water. She knew what their answer would have been as well.

The scarred woman walked through the thin treeline again. She stopped against a tree and ripped off a brittle branch. She stripped the smaller limbs from it and fashioned a simple spear.

She walked to the tent closest to hers. She struck the loose flap with her simple spear and she heard the rattle of threatened snakes. The woman took a deep breath. She slowly slipped her spear under the flap and tossed the covering aside.

A deep shading of ants calmly caressed what was once her neighbor. Two rattlesnakes had nestled under the dead body’s shoulder.

The woman froze in place. She evened her breaths out. The pair of rattlesnakes had gone out of sight. The ants marched endlessly over the corpse. Their paths pulsed and flexed slightly over the corpse’s bare breasts and belly. She looked at the rhythm of black ants on the reddened, puffy flesh.

The scarred woman took a step back. Her eyes scanned the ground. She left.

She peeked into her tent. It was empty except for a dusty backpack.

The woman closed her eyes.

She scanned the landscape again.

She opened the backpack and pulled a small, colorful finger puppet from it.

She draped her moist shirt over her head again. She walked in the direction opposite the treeline and water. Soon her feet shuffled over packed, bare dirt. She walked over shards of hot, flat stones. Her toes started to blister. The pain wasn't there, though. The woman knelt down into the harsh, scalding earth. She kissed the finger puppet.

"Adiós, mi hermano."

His body was splayed out like a red starfish across the arid soil. A bright red finger puppet of a parrot laid on his blistering chest. The wind whipped more dust onto the sticky corpse of her brother as the scarred woman shuffled away and back toward the shantytown.

****

The Sisterhood took their breakfast in the morning.

The hall for second breakfast was the loudest Cristal had heard it. The conversation at their table was two shades louder for their meals today. The seven girls chosen for the mission sat together with the youngest girls, four and five, and all were packed in tightly. Jake sat next to Cristal and the two talked about their old friends back home in Mexico and those farther north in the US. The seat next to Jake was open.

Mariposa was the center of their table, lightly punctuating her wisdom with her finger. "Now, you must keep in mind, beauty is an endless pursuit." She passed her hand through

her hair. “And not everyone is so blessed. But you are! I see a pretty face on every single one of you! So, you have to always, *always* pursue beauty, or it may pass you by. Like a grackle hopping off a tree and flying right in front of you.” The girls took in her words. “But you’re a lot prettier than grackles. I mean, yeah.”

The smallest girls were hungry for her stories and attention. She told them, and some of the younger teenage girls at tables next to her, about boyfriends and flirtations that bordered the possibilities of reality and fantasy and often crossed well past. Gabriela stood behind Mariposa holding her plate of food, looking at the youngest girls and crossing her eyes and puffing her cheeks to make them giggle. Mariposa turned around and glared at Gabriela.

Gabriela rolled her eyes. “Oh shush, silly butterfly.” She waved a hand at Mariposa.

She growled at Gabriela in return. “Now girls, if you cross your eyes, it’ll stick and you’ll look just like our Sister Gabriela.”

Gabriela rested her hand on her chest. “Yes, you can be perfect and brilliant like me.” Gabriela blew a kiss at Mariposa. She smiled at the young girls and took the seat next to Jake. Jake turned his eyes nervously toward his plate of food.

“Hello Jake,” Gabriela said.

Jake mumbled an acknowledgement in return.

Cristal attempted a conversation with Jake about playing music with one of their old friends but soon paused. Jake offered no responses. It was another rare moment of silence for her gregarious uncle. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or embarrassed.

“You can eat,” Gabriela said to him. “You don’t have to be shy.”

Jake mumbled again and nodded.

“I know you’re not shy,” Gabriela said. “Okay.”

Gabriela started eating her meal. Jake glanced in her direction, no higher than her plate, and devoured his breakfast faster than Cristal had ever seen. He stood up with his nearly empty plate—another rarity, for usually it was as clean after the meal as before it—and he nodded to Cristal and left.

"Your uncle eats fast," Gabriela said. She continued her meal.

Cristal stared at the threshold where Jake had left through. "I guess really fast today." Cristal turned to Gabriela. "Everyone calls him my brother."

"Well, he is your uncle," she said.

The day passed by Cristal quickly. Her excitement beat within her as she prepared for their journey at night. After Cristal finished her chores, she sat on the porch of the dojo. She wrapped her arms around her knees. The sun set gracefully before her. Darkness draped over her world.

The candles remained unlit this night.

In their room, Jake snored. Half his body was draped over the bed. He was fidgety and restless, as if another scary dream overtook him, and Cristal could no longer wait for his dream to subside. She quietly opened her dresser and took two changes of clothes.

She wiped her body down with a wet rag. She combed her hair and tied it back. She went outside and met Rebecca and the five other girls in hooded white cloaks. They gave Cristal a filled backpack and a white cloak and she tied it around her neck.

She was now officially one of the Sisters of the Hidden Blade.

They left toward a small road passing east. They would make it to FM-755 East in a few hours. The night was cold, and the other girls tied their cloaks close around them. Cristal's blew open in the gentle wind. The air was dry and its chill nuzzled against her bare, prickled skin.

"You're really into the cold. Are you a snowgirl?" Anya

said to Cristal.

Cristal shrugged. “I just like the cold.”

“No, she’s an eskimo. Isn’t it obvious?” Rebecca said.

“What’s that?” Anya asked.

“It’s someone who lived in the snow,” Rebecca said. “They lived far north, where it’s cold all the time.”

“I heard of snow but I don’t remember what it is,” Gabriela said.

“Oh, yeah. It stopped snowing a few years before the bombs,” Rebecca said. “There probably wasn’t any more snow when you were four or so.”

“I lived north before the bombs,” Cristal said. “But I don’t remember snow.”

Rebecca showed Cristal how to navigate the highways and the mile markers on the side. She told her the directions of the highways, and that they were always confusing or wrong and to always follow the map. When they took a break, she showed Cristal their worn road map, and she studied the complicated, colored roots that ran through every part of Texas. She went over the old rationale for intrastate and interstate highways, back when states had legal borders. Back when laws were conducted by the main government.

Back when laws were voted and enforced and unjust.

Rebecca told Cristal how that old world looked, how it felt. How she had been in public school still—there were schools back then, did you know?—and how her dad drank and left and her mom worked and she raised her younger sister until she got sick and died and then they parted ways.

“This is why we do what we do,” Rebecca said. “We can’t bring back the dead, but we can finally give them justice.”

“Our missions,” Cristal said. “There’s a list?”

“There’s a list,” Rebecca confirmed.

Things do not happen. Someone causes them to happen through action or inaction. It takes only a blind eye to injustice

to be unjust. That is enough to let evil consume and grow and fester.

And it consumes the lenient, because the wicked can never sate their hunger. That is one of the three facts of evil.

"At a feast, he will never be full." Rebecca said, "In company, he can never meet another. And in his soul, he will never find his center. Evil is hunger, loneliness, and emptiness. Esmé wants us to ground our core in love." Rebecca cast a sideways glance at Cristal. "But I'm impatient. I prefer to always battle evil."

During the day, they kept vigil down the highway for rare other travelers.

It was hot.

The sun blasted its light and heat like a furnace. They continued with few breaks. Their white cloaks deflected the sun from them and from heating up their weaponry.

Other than Gabriela's naginata and Hope's axe, the seven travelers appeared unarmed.

It was too hot to speak, but Cristal knew more about her sisterhood in silence than in conversation. Hope and Hannah were Chinese and sisters by blood, but almost planets apart. Hope was short and limber, even with an axe seemingly half her weight. Hannah was younger, half a head taller, nervous and a nerd. Mariposa was mostly quiet on their travel, unlike in Santa Elena, and Anya's steps seemed to speak of some hidden joy.

They moved silently and efficiently and made it to their camp ahead of time. They waited for the sun to go down before they pitched their black tents.

EPISODE II
Part 2: Sisters by Blood

Victor Dennings' estate was opulent for a world that had been destroyed a decade and a half ago: a desiccated garden of once-exotic trees and bushes; a repaired and uninhabited horse stable; an open pasture with fallen fences; and, cruelest of all, a large, empty grain silo surrounded by a scattered, sad shanty town of ragged tents pitched by sad human creatures. Even the estate's dry overgrowth was a visual feast for those starved by the images of dust and ruin and wind. The shanty town was left to fend itself from being consumed by the wild fields and slithering fauna.

Rebecca looked pensively at the small, drab tents.

"Esmé didn't mention all these tents," Rebecca said. "We have to get in without being noticed. Any thoughts?"

"We sneak around to the other side," Hope said. "The one with fewer people."

Hannah shook her head in exasperation.

"We have some food," Mariposa said. "We can bribe them."

The women fumbled for solutions. "We say hello," Cristal said.

Rebecca shook her head. "We want to lay low."

"We are here for them," Cristal said. "We have good work to do. It's time to be brave."

Cristal broke apart from the group. Rebecca caught up to her and the other girls followed. They kept pace with Cristal until they came to the first tent. Cristal stood a respectful ten feet from it.

"Hello," Cristal said. "Is someone in there?"

A small unwashed girl poked her head out from the opposite side of the tent.

"We are here to bring Victor before you for judgment. You can come with us if you want."

The girl shook her head.

"Very well," Cristal said.

"Do you want food?" Mariposa asked the girl.

The girl nodded and smiled, and Mariposa gave her a large piece of stale bread.

The girl pointed to a denser side of their encampment. "That way."

"Is it safer?" Cristal asked.

The girl nodded.

The girl watched the well-armed group pass by the other huts, talking briefly to the other filthy girls, to the old women and the sad old men, and watched people from the tents flocculate and follow the women warriors toward the mansion of Victor Dennings.

****

A young man in light blue sporting gear entered the bedroom with Victor splayed across his bed.

"Mr. Dennings," he said. "The girls are making a fuss."

"Then fuss them up," he returned, eyes still closed.

"Something's off," he said. "It feels different."

Victor parted his lids and rolled his eyes. "Then maybe

you want to live in the dirt with them. If you can't handle them."

"Well, but, Mr. Dennings—"

"I had enough of your buts." Victor waved his hand. "I have things to attend to. Be gone."

"Yes, but—"

"I also have plenty more sons." Victor closed his eyes and folded his hands under his head. "What's one less to me?"

The young man nodded and left down a hallway filled with oil portraits and animal trophies.

He turned the corner of the hallway and met with four other men, dressed in neat, colorful, aristocratic garb. "Victor's being useless." The young man shook his head.

One of the aristocrats furrowed his brow. "What're we gonna do, Josh?"

"Yeah. Looks like they're up to something," another man said.

Josh undid the collar of his blue sporting outfit. He passed the other men and opened a carved wood cabinet. He pulled a rifle from it. "Not anymore."

A group of ragged old women threw stones and epithets at the entrance to Victor's manor. A trail of young girls huddled behind them, growing louder and bolder. Their rocks slammed into the wood and masonry stone with loud thuds. One crashed through a window and the group grew more vocal.

Five armed men paraded from around the corner. Josh shot a round into the air. The men behind him followed suit. "Everyone's gotta leave," Josh told the crowd of angry women.

The old women turned their stones upon the group of men. "You burn in hell!" Rocks flew on them in rage.

The group of men blocked the projectiles with their rifles. "Come on!" Josh yelled at their fury. "Git, now!" He turned to the group of men and nodded. They lowered their rifles on the angry women until a woman's shout came from behind.

The men turned to face Rebecca brandishing her tachi before her.

"Guns down," she said. "I'm asking only once."

Josh laughed at the lone warrior several yards away. He motioned to his relatives to set their sights on her, and they prepared to shoot her down until a man in the back nearest the old women gasped and fell forward, pierced in his back by a large throwing knife.

Josh looked around him. “Who’s—?”

Mariposa pounced from behind a potted plant. Her nunchaku swung at Josh’s hands and she broke his fingers, disarming him. Rebecca brought her katana down on the man next to Josh, slicing him from the collar to opposite hip. His eyes rolled back and his torso slid down the rest of his body. The men drew their weapons on the two warriors and Gabriela parted through the rioting slaves to ram her naginata through one man, from his spine to his belly button. The attack continued through the twitching body and wounded another man. The last remaining man yelled for help.

Victor sat in a bathtub and bathed himself with a cloth. Silvery chest hair darkened and clung to him like seaweed. A young lady dressed in a white nightgown knocked on the bathroom door. “Do you need me, Sir?” She said.

Victor turned to her and smiled. A pop rang out into the air. He became startled and held up a finger to pause the woman. He looked out the window. He watched a small garrison of his sons march into the battle.

****

Cristal swung her flattened arm into a rifle and knocked it from one of the men.

She whipped a twist and plunged the long tantō blade into his neck just above the breastbone. He gasped and sputtered blood on her and she closed her eyes and wiped it off her face.

The man's head spasmed wildly and she shook the body to loosen her knife from him. He tumbled to the ground with a thud and in her eye's corner, Cristal caught the motion of a whirlwind…

…as Anya dove into a trembling huddle of men. She knocked into one wearing a green puffed shirt and he fell to the ground, ricocheting her body toward the three others. Her body rotated off the ricochet and in one fluid gust of wind her left arm flew out, her straight limb joined with her katana, and it slashed through the man on the right of the group, from right breast through left rib. She threw her back into the tumbling corpse and ended her ricochet to throw her left arm over and behind her head, jamming the tip of the katana into the left-most man's skull and out through his lower jaw. The remaining man in the middle was flanked by a brainless corpse and an unstoppable whirlwind. He wrapped his arms around Anya and she bent her left knee down and threw her momentum to take them both into a tumble.

The man with the green puffed shirt sat up on the dirt and fired a pistol at the pair.

Two bullets thudded into Anya's foe and his grip loosened from around her. He slid off and stumbled on his feet while Anya lunged toward the man with pistol. She pushed it down onto his groin and headbutted him, breaking his nose. His face grimaced and he grasped at his swollen nose but Anya stepped on his chest, stood with her katana pointed down, and pushed into the bloody mess.

She turned to the remaining man with two bullets in his back. He struggled to get back on his feet, balancing himself up on his right hand. Anya hooked her toes under him and flipped him over. The man fell harshly onto his back and a blood-stained leather boot smashed into and through his throat.

Hope motioned quickly to Cristal and Anya: with two motions she marked six with one hand, and with her other

hand, pointed her axe toward the far corner. A piece of brain slid off the axe.

Anya nodded and Cristal looked up toward the mansion. The roof was ornate with concrete gargoyles on pedestals. Cristal thought she saw something move up there but it was just an open window with curtains flowing out.

****

"Shit," Victor said. He wrapped himself with a fine towel and marched out of the bathroom.

Victor slammed the bedroom door open and sifted through empty bottles of liquor on the armoire and furniture. He tossed sofa cushions looking for something that he couldn't find. The woman in the white nightgown followed him and stood watching him push knickknacks aside, dropping bottles on the thick carpet.

His heart beat and his face became heated.

Victor increased his pace through the assorted junk of his bedroom. The woman folded her hands in front of her. "Sir, shall I service you?"

"Shut your mouth!" He pushed her aside and walked toward the closet. "Can't you see we're being attacked?" His eyes dashed across the bedroom in panic.

"Sir," the woman said. "I understand this is a stressful time. But I suggest that my pleasure might soothe you right now."

"Stop stop stop it!" He grit his teeth and struggled to check under the mattress.

The woman walked to one of the dressers. She unfolded her hands and picked up a bottle of brandy. "This may help, Sir."

Victor threw a pillow at her. "I can't think!" He launched himself on the bed and his hands dug hungrily behind the

ornate headboard. “Can’t you see things are going to shit? You dumb bitch!”

She walked toward him calmly with the bottle. He watched her climb on top of the bed, standing on the mattress towering above him. She swung the bottle against the wall and glass and drink rained down upon his head. The woman plunged the broken bottle down on him and he grabbed her forearms. The blades of glass scratched at his chest, drawing blood. His hands slipped on the alcohol. Victor’s brow furrowed and sweat poured down his temples.

The woman smiled and pushed down on him with all her might.

Her footing on the bed shifted slightly, and Victor kicked her off onto the floor. His search ended and he pulled a beretta pistol from under the headboard and shot the woman once. She laid on the floor and grabbed her shoulder.

“Ungrateful whore,” he said. He shot two more bullets into her.

****

Cristal drew her tantō knife and jumped off the garage of the mansion.

She landed her blade into the tallest man in the final group. The knife tore into the top of his skull and through the top of his mouth and pierced through his lolling tongue. Cristal’s blade kept going down and the body took the weight of her jump. His corpse slammed into the ground, the knife in his skull skewered into tufts of boot-worn grass. His severed tongue tossed onto the dirt and bounced twice.

The last five colorful men panicked.

Two of the five broke ranks to run away. Hope swung

her axe toward one of the fleeing pair. The weapon crashed through the side of his skull and left his face a mess of loose teeth, shattered skull, and soft brain mush. Hannah threatened two short swords toward the second man and he jumped back. He fumbled for his pistol in his holster and found nothing in there. He had dropped his gun during his panic and he saw it lay undisturbed four feet from the body of the first man.

His body fell down with a large, open ex slashed across his chest, hitting the ground two feet from the other corpse.

Cristal blocked the remaining three men from escape. She attempted a strike against one of them with her shorter backup blade, but the men adjusted and she held herself back defensively. One of them broke ranks and flanked Cristal. He wrapped his arm around her throat from behind and another man landed blows on her. Cristal swung her leg at him to clear him away. But she was too slow and he grabbed her ankle.

He held on to her right foot in a chokehold and Cristal's body was stretched from her neck to her foot. The man locked onto her foot stretched his hand to pull Cristal's tantō blade out from the surprised skull. His fingertips grasped the knife and he flipped the blade upward, ready to saw off her foot. He grinned hungrily.

Until the bang of a gun. His grin twitched. Saliva dripped down his teeth and chin and the spittle was followed by blood. With his last breath he swung the blade and glanced her calf before he finally collapsed dead.

Hope braced both ends of her axe and bunted the man off of Cristal's neck. He fell onto the ground and held his arms up to defend himself. She beat him with the handle into a pulpy, unrecognizable mess.

Cristal laid on her back, panting harshly. Her calf was bleeding. Hannah tore a piece of fine cloth from one of the corpses and tied a makeshift bandage to staunch it. Cristal looked in the direction of the gunshot and saw Jake walking

with his rifle from the vantage of a full green tree.

Cristal's panting slowed and she relaxed.

She turned in the direction of a distant motion. An orange blur receded. The last man got away.

****

The seven women and Jake huddled under the shade of a garage overhang.

"Victor wasn't here with them," Rebecca said. "He's much older. Hope, Jake, you stay with Cristal, make sure she's safe." She pointed to an old, useless car. "Hide behind there."

Rebecca split their group into two and she gave them orders. There was a gunshot and a loud bustle from the other side of the mansion. Rebecca darted out from the garage.

She watched an old, silver-haired man run down one of the fields wearing only a bath towel. He yelled and threatened the gods and tossed the towel away.

He held a black gun.

Girls from their ragged hovels peeked out their heads to watch their former master make a long escape. He waved his pistol in the air and shot it again.

Rebecca turned to Jake. "Can you make the shot?"

Jake shook his head. "It's too dangerous from this far."

Victor ran naked through sharp grasses disturbing grasshoppers and snakes there. He stopped and bent over, panting. Sweat poured off his old body. He looked back. He had run a little more than a hundred yards. His path ahead was much farther.

He straightened himself and continued running until he stepped on something soft. He felt a puncture on the top of his foot, and then he heard the rattle. He pointed the pistol at the ground and pulled the trigger, hitting dirt, dirt, dirt, and then his own foot. The trigger stiffened and stopped collapsing in. The gun was empty. He was growing woozy. The filthy girls

had come out of their filthy tents and watched him struggle with a snake he couldn't find. He pointed the pistol at them and attempted to pull the trigger, but it was already compressed. He looked at the gun and realized he had been out of bullets. He waved the gun at the girls and they watched him with slightly more curiosity than usual. He threw the pistol toward one of them and he bent over and panted.

When he turned up, there were twice as many girls as he'd seen a moment ago.

He sat down. He was tired. Victor closed his eyes and rubbed his face. It was getting cold. Colder than usual. His teeth were chattering. He struggled to regain his breath.

He opened his eyes. Above him was a young woman with a pink scar across her left cheek.

"I, which, which one are you?"

Her eyes passed over him calmly. "There are no snakes left to eat," she said.

"What? Could you, I, I need," Victor struggled with his words.

The scarred woman kept her stare on him. "Let me answer. I'm Alicia. I'm that one." She turned to the woman next to her.

"I'm Harriet."

"I'm Isabel."

"I'm Miranda."

"Mary Anne."

The names kept piling on him thick and stifling as a wool blanket. It was getting harder to breathe.

They walked closer to him. Victor's assassin had stopped rattling, escaped. The girls watched him lie down. Then curl up. Then they watched him grab his arms and cry out mumbled, unintelligible things while spittle frothed on his lips and his body seized. His face almost jumped from his body. His eyes registered intense pain for a moment and then dulled, frozen in terror. Then the young women then watched the foam on his lips drip down his dead, gray jaw onto the dead, gray soil.

****

The eight warriors returned to their home at night. Jake parted to his bed and the seven young women returned to the dojo. The candles shined on them.

They bathed and cleaned their wounds. Anya and Gabriela gave Cristal a sponge bath and helped her upstairs to Esmé's room in the dojo.

Esmé wrapped a clean, white strip along Cristal's right calf.

"Esmé," Cristal said. "I'm sorry."

Esmé kept her attention on her wound. "For what?" She said.

"I let one of them go. He got away. I failed."

Esmé pursed her lips in deep focus. "No, my dear Sister, you did not fail." She wrapped slowly and tightly. "Flex your foot."

Cristal winced. "I should have gotten him. But instead I got cut up."

Esmé rewrapped Cristal's calf looser and wrapped a support around her ankle. "My love, my darling. Understand this: pain is part of the lesson before you. The blood you spilled two weeks ago will burst bluebonnets in two months. You gave everything, and it is all kindly received. Nature wastes no effort."

"But he got away. I failed the Sisterhood."

Esmé pinned the bandage together. "You all survived. That is our victory, each and every day. Winning is not causing another's defeat. Cristal, you have won, and you have won gracefully and beyond our wildest dreams." She petted Cristal's hair. "Thank you, be quiet, and go rest. You are always loved and you wake up to that tomorrow."

****

Cristal rubbed her eyes awake in the morning. A handful of white and yellow flowers perched in a vase on her dresser.

She stared at the flowers. "A woman wanted to make sure you were okay," Jake said. "I forget her name. You cleaned her house."

The breakfasts went unperturbed in the dining hall. Even when Cristal hobbled into the dining area, the conversations were no louder than the murmur of a soft stream. Two younger girls set up a chair and stool to prop her leg and gave Cristal a tray to take her meal. When they finished, one of the girls hugged Cristal and rushed away without making eye contact.

After, Gabriela and Anya followed Cristal back to her bed.

Gabriela placed a pitcher and cup on the dresser. "That was a long jump," Gabriela said. "The garage was tall. Get better soon so you can do stupid stuff again."

Anya rubbed Cristal's shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Cristal said. "Anya, I've never seen you move like that."

"What do you mean?" Anya shrugged. "Something gets into me. I see them. The way they look, their faces. You know?"

"Not really," Cristal said. "It's like," Cristal thought, "it's like you were dancing. I don't know how to describe it. It looked so, I guess, beautiful."

Gabriela shrugged her shoulders. "The girl came to us like this. Who knows?"

Anya's eyes twirled. "You know, I never thought about it." Her mouth twisted in consternation. "It feels like a dance."

"With who?" Cristal said.

"Myself, I think."

"Then better yourself than with anyone else," Gabriela said. "Cristal, Jake's going to be fine."

"He didn't get hurt," Cristal said.

Quiet passed between the three. "Oh," Cristal said. "Thanks."

"It was all Gabriela," Anya said. "But she's right. Uncle, brother, sister. Whatever he is, he's our blood, too."

****

The girls did their rounds.

Younger girls dropped off trinkets and smooth stones to Cristal and wished she get better. The girl who hugged her met her eyes and Cristal hugged her back. She breathed her name, Catalina, softly and shyly.

Her sisters in battle came by as well. Hope shook Cristal's shoulder in excitement (she had a numbing grip). Mariposa informed her to be more careful because male suitors do not appreciate scars on a woman. Hannah came later with Rebecca and offered Cristal a joke.

"What creature has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and one by four thirty-seven in the evening?"

Rebecca grumbled. "Dear god, Hannah."

"It's a good one," Hannah said. "Do you know which animal, Cristal?"

Cristal shook her head. "I don't know. A turtle? I have no idea."

"Your dumb ass!" Hannah snorted loudly. When her laughter subsided, she said, "The riddle of the Sphinx? Do you get it?"

"This one actually made sense," Rebecca said. "They're all pretty bad, though. I'll explain it later."

Several girls came by to cheer and jeer Cristal up. But she was waiting for one person. The day grew dark by the time Esmé came.

She gave Cristal an apple. "Simple pleasures," she said. "It's a little sour."

Cristal bit into the apple. "It's good, anyway. I miss apples."

"Hopefully the apple tree will mature and give a full yield next year."

"When did we have an apple tree?"

"We all have the one. Its owners share. But this apple is mostly a reminder about last night. About the man who worried you. The one who escaped."

Cristal nodded slowly.

"Plants don't bloom overnight. Beautiful things take time and water. You are doing well in your training. Still, drink your water."

Cristal pointed to the pitchers and cups on the dresser. "But I have too much water!"

"And my other point about last night."

"About bluebonnets?" Cristal said.

"About being loved." She patted the overfull bureau, crowded with water and tidbits and stacks of random gifts. "You awoke to love like I said."

"Everyone's been so kind," Cristal said.

"Because you are also kind. Receiving love well is a gift back. You are always loved because you love. Don't be perfect. Be you." Esmé patted the top of the dresser. "That is all you need from your training. Be you. Remember simply that. Nothing more. Good night, dear Sister."

****

Cristal yawned and stretched in the night. It was silent out. The Sisterhood of the Hidden Blade had returned to their training.

She would return in a few days as well.

Cristal folded her arms across her body. Thoughts flit through her. She felt a type of exhilaration. A sense of justice. There was something in her work for the Sisterhood that spoke to her. It freed her. It made her happy.

And a part of it made her question herself.

"Uncle Jake, could you read dad's—?"

She didn't hear a response. Cristal turned to Jake's bed. It was empty.

****

There were old posters in a large bedroom. Posters of movies no one could watch anymore. Posters of musicians no one could listen to anymore. A black and white poster of Amelia Earhart smiling next to her bi-engine plane was prominently pinned beside a tall mirror.

"Jake," Gabriela mumbled.

The two lay in her bed under a sheet. Her body was wrapped tightly behind his. She stroked his hair back softly. "It's nice to hold you," she said.

"It's nice to be quiet with you," Jake said.

Gabriela let her arm down and wrapped it around his belly. She pulled him in tighter. He felt her hot breath on his shoulder. Then she pressed her cold nose into his warm neck.

EPISODE III: PLAYTHINGS AND THEN PATHOS
Part 1: Life on Mars

Should there be
Life on Mars?

I have lived
On the moon
It is unkind

Station oneself
In a cave
There the heart won't break

Mars, then
Is quite perfect
Crystalline ice beauty

I find it foolish
Give up a weeping
Aching, mother's heartbeat
For a cold breathless stone

****

A large, paved platform stretched across the desert.

Wind howled across the cracked concrete. The air warped above the concrete, thick and heavy and woozy. Dust whipped up into small twisters and died down again. Wrappers of food and plastics tumbled by, danced in circles, flew out of one circle of trash and into another.

At the edge of the concrete platform lay the rusted bones of a steel structure. It had once been the tallest space-craft umbilical tower in the world, servicing the tallest rockets in history, and well above sixty stories high. And now it was tumbled over, crumbled and laid out over a thousand feet, dark bones warped and sagging and bleeding rust onto the largest worthless launchpad in the world.

Half a mile away, a panel of solar cells and a small, bent radio tower marked the underground control room.

The air in the large chamber was painfully humid yet far more habitable. A handful of tables held dozens of guests and their glistening, aromatic foods. Service people dashed from table to table, eager to clean, replace empty trays, swap pitchers for more water, make polite conversation with their indulgent masters. They dashed back into the kitchen, bowing their path around a growing heap of broken tables and chairs and, now, pungent organic refuse.

The heaviest and darkest table was a thin triangle. It sat eight figures across the two long sides, seven men and a woman, whose attitudes had so closely merged over the past twenty years to the point that, even with different attire, their mannerisms painted them as one and the same organism, their monochrome clothes like millipede legs up and down the sides of the table. At the head sat the ninth figure who was a plump old man wearing a brown and maroon bodysuit with a tattered insignia

on his chest. The name under the insignia read Commander Logan. Logan's hair was a long white combover fallen away and to the opposite side, fluttering and sticking out far past his shoulders. His belly was round and soft, reminiscent of Buddha only in shape, and his jowls round as well, but his countenance was not jolly nor jocund. His lips twitched into and out of a naive and innocent smile, he blinked his eyes harshly and made faces, and his focus darted in random angles rapidly and at unpredictable targets.

The conversations at the triangular table were punctuated with his piercing, nasal laughter.

"Ha ha, ah ha ha!" He pointed down the table.

The married couple, seated next to him, ignored his attempts for attention. They wore a dark blue dress and a tuxedo, their clothes worse for the wear after years of ill-repair. The couple chatted with each other and their neighbors, and when a server offered a full dish to them, they continued their conversation and bent politely out of the way. Round Logan plucked moist meat off a bird with his fingers, and the woman chastised him, to no avail. A small female server replaced his wine bottle with another, and then poured his cup full.

"This is not very good white wine," Logan said to her.

"I'm sorry," the server said. "It is all we have left."

"We need a different wine," he said.

The table continued their discussions of old culture and topics that had long passed. A middle-aged man at the far end of the table placed down his silverware on his plate, his dish crammed up against the other place setting across from him. He wore ill-fitting clothing from a man formerly at the table. The middle-aged man watched Logan argue with the server, and he adjusted his overly large formal shirt.

"There simply must, must be better wine!" Logan shook his head, his wispy hair fought in the air, and the server drew a long breath and calmed herself.

"I am sorry, Sir, but this is the best wine we have."

He picked up his cup and swirled the watery drink in front of her. "I want something sweeter."

He slammed it down and the drink splashed over onto the chicken and the table. The married woman in the dark blue dress dabbed up the wine and tossed the handkerchief toward the head of the table.

Logan picked up the glass again. "And see?" He shook the cup in her face. "It's not even full!"

The woman stepped back and Logan grabbed her arm.

"It's not full it's not full! It's not sweet and it's not full!"

The server yanked her arm away from him, but she could not get out of his grip. The married woman told the server to calm herself or she would regret it. The server bent farther away and nodded at Logan's complaints.

"It's not even cold," he said. "There's no ice, no ice, it's not sweet, it's not salty, it's not cold or full or unfull. Or unsalty!"

"Of course," the woman kept nodding at him. "I am so sorry, Sir, and I could get you more if you would let go."

"Of what?" The round man's innocent smile turned into dark cloud. "Of what? Let go of—no! NO! I tell you, I tell you what to do. What happens. You. YOU." He pointed at her, "You serve. You don't say what happens."

The server's tears came down hot. "Yes, yes, of course." She nodded rapidly. "Yes, please, you are right, Sir."

"I am going to hit you," Logan looked around and rested his hand on the wine bottle. "I am going to hit you with this wine bottle."

The man in large clothes tensed and watched from the opposite end of the table. The server looked for allies nearby.

The married couple continued their meal despite the server's hushed entreaties.

"Oh, yes," the server said, "of course, Sir, that sounds like a good idea." She patted Logan's fingers, gently rubbing

and trying to get his grip to slip off. “Yes, the bottle. Okay. That is your choice, Sir.”

The married woman nodded without making eye contact.

Logan picked up the bottle with his available hand and peeked into it like a spyglass. “How pretty,” he said, smiling. He swished around the thin wine and took a sip of it. “Tastes okay,” he said.

The server closed her eyes and nodded slowly. “Yes, Sir. It’s good wine, isn’t it? Very yummy.”

The round man studied the wine bottle at awkward angles, smiling and softly laughing.

She peeked open her eyes slightly, trying to gauge his temperament, and still rubbing his fingers little by little off her arm.

Logan swirled the remainder of the bottle and offered to the server. “Yeah? Yes?” He nodded vigorously. “There’s a little left. It’s good.”

The server leaned back farther. “No, why, that’s generous, I—”

Logan shrieked and slammed the bottle into the server’s skull. The man at the opposite side of the table watched the server tumble onto the floor, and Logan yelled at the woman until he was hoarse. The married woman adjusted her seating to keep the server from escape while Logan jumped up and down and plunged at her with the broken bottle.

Round Logan sat back in his seat, his face dripping blood and painted with a cherubic smile. “She liked the wine!”

The middle-aged man at the opposite side of the table watched him erupt in shrieks and laughter. Logan’s laughs shook him like a water balloon and he pointed the broken bottle at the dead woman. “Which way’s the kitchen? She looks moister than the chicken. The chicken’s too dry.” He jabbed the bloody bottle into the air like a fencer. “Who wants a real meal? The chicken’s always too dry.”

****

As the sun rose, Esmé lay out before the koi pond, her plain kimono stretched across the soil and her head relaxed on her hand.

She looked idly into the cloudless sky. Sweat beaded on her temples under the noon sun. A few drips ran down across the shine of her cheeks. Her eyes focused on nothing in particular, drifting off, and then she would shift her gaze off elsewhere.

Dust picked up and settled on her kimono. She shook the sleeve of her other arm. She scanned the sky and stopped.

High above, light white wisps folded and unfolded and rolled slowly through the gentle winds. The cloud was two drops of milk scattering and tumbling through the blue sky.

Esmé followed the cloud as it drew closer to her and slowly passed overhead.

****

Jake mumbled in bed and squeezed his pillow.

Cristal slapped his mattress hard. “Uncle Jake, wake up. I’m up even before you are!”

Jake squinted his eyes. “You’re up before me,” he muttered.

“Yes!” Cristal said. “You were supposed to be awake already, and now we’re going to be late. Hurry!”

Jake grumbled and rubbed his eyes. “Don’t call me uncle.” He drank from a glass of water and yawned, stretching his shoulders out and lying back in bed. “Call me later.”

Cristal slapped his bed once more. “Get up. Gabriela calls you my uncle, and you’re fine with that.”

"Gabriela calls me a lot of things I won't let you."

"We're already late," Cristal said.

Jake shook his head. "Late for what?"

He cricked his neck and finished rubbing the gunk from his eyes. When the world came into view, he saw his niece Cristal wearing a fine, ceremonial kimono and an air of impatience.

****

In the dojo, Esmé wore a flowing white floral kimono and carried a cup of hot tea.

The main floor was silent but for the hushes of a cooking fire. Anya, Mariposa, Gabriela, and Hope knelt in line along one side of the dojo. The sisters wore different colored and patterned kimono. Nine tea cups lay before Anya, and plates of sweet bread lay before Mariposa. A brand lay before Gabriela. Rebecca knelt at the head of the line, and Hannah sat several feet aside, working a small kiln and boiling more tea.

Cristal and Jake knelt opposite of them. Cristal wore a pale pink kimono, and Jake wore a long sleeved shirt and pants. They faced the Sisterhood.

Esmé knelt down and offered Cristal a cup of hot tea. Cristal nodded and sipped, silently thanking Esmé. Esmé walked to Anya for another cup of tea and placed it before Jake. He nodded and drank and silently thanked her as well.

Mariposa offered a plate of sweet bread to Esmé. She carried it to Cristal and placed it before her. Mariposa offered a second plate for Esmé to carry to Jake.

The Sisterhood partook of their ceremonial tea and desserts.

"Ichigo ichie," Esmé told Jake. "Every encounter is unique. It can never be repeated." Jake met her eyes. "Savor

this one and be as present as you can."

Jake nodded. He ate his sweet bread half a breath slower. Esmé stifled a laugh.

She sat down next to Rebecca. Rebecca walked up to Gabriela and she offered her the brand.

Rebecca walked toward Hannah. Hannah slid aside. Rebecca placed the brand into the fire.

The tip glowed.

Rebecca walked toward Cristal. She held the brand before her. "Fifteen years ago, the wealthy and powerful of the world attempted the assassination of our planet. We train in strength so that we may defend the weak. Do you vow to be the weapon of the weaponless?"

Cristal bent her head solemnly. "I vow."

"Do you vow to uphold justice for the unjust?"

"I vow."

Rebecca raised the brand and nodded. Cristal opened a fold of the kimono and offered the top of her left breast.

Rebecca placed the hot brand on her flesh. Cristal heard the fire on her flesh first, then felt the sear of flame through her breast and into her heart.

The fired steel left the mark of a serpent's ess woven around a curved blade. The brand of the Sisterhood of the Hidden Blade was red and charred on her skin.

Cristal bowed and touched her head to the floor. Rebecca returned to the fire and reheated the steel brand. She glanced at Gabriela as heat entered the metal. Gabriela fixed eyes on her. Rebecca nodded once.

She took the brand out. It glowed white.

Rebecca walked toward Jake. His hand instinctively flew to the top of his shirt. But he paused.

Rebecca took a deep breath.

She held the brand before Jake. "Fifteen years ago, the wealthy and powerful of the world attempted the assassination

of our planet. We train in strength so that we may defend the weak. Do you vow to be the weapon of the weaponless?"

Jake nodded to her. "I vow."

"Do you vow to uphold justice for the unjust?"

Jake bent his head. "I vow."

Rebecca waited until Jake met her eyes. She nodded to him and raised the brand. Jake unbuttoned and pulled down the top of his shirt and offered his left breast as well.

Cristal smelled the acrid smoke slowly rising off Jake's chest.

****

Lunch at the Sisterhood was vivacious.

The girls waved to Jake. He smiled and waved back to them, and Anya and Gabriela pushed aside a space for him to place a chair. Cristal was slightly limping and late.

"Wounded girl, you're no longer the talk of the town," Mariposa said. "You tried to steal my thunder." She placed a hand on her chest, "Moi! And now Jake carries all that thunder." She flicked her eyes back. "And he carries it far better than you ever did. I'm not even jealous of him! Ah. Ha. Ha. Ha."

Cristal growled and placed her chair down at the corner of the table.

Mariposa continued. "I lied. I *am* jealous your uncle-brother-*et cetera* has stolen my sweet Gabriela from me."

"Knock it off!" Gabriela shushed her.

"Ooooo, someone's delicada. My dear, I understand why you're head over heels for him," Mariposa flicked her lashes at her, "un *chico*, but the wounds, they still pain me."

Gabriela blushed and turned her conversation to Jake.

"Ignored!" Mariposa motioned to Cristal. "Can you see

how quickly best friends become the deepest enemies? Boys!"

"Shut up, Mariposa." Cristal stuffed her meal down her gullet.

After lunch, Cristal ran along her familiar path through the town, down the main thoroughfare and toward a long-closed shop. She adjusted her path into bushes and outdoor toys and sun bleached play cars, leaping over each as hurdles on her workout. She made it to the old convenience shop, windows long shattered and empty inside, and instead of turning down the one-way road, she jogged in place.

Cristal surveyed around her. There was a tall, brick municipal building a few blocks off. She turned her path in that direction.

****

The older girls of the Sisterhood swept and cleaned up the open space of the linen factory to prepare the afternoon classes. The partitions were propped against the walls, and between repairing some of the paper panels, Gabriela tossed a blue rubber ball at Mariposa. Mariposa swept together a pile of dust and junk and then steadied the rubber ball in front of her, hitting it back toward Gabriela like a hockey puck.

Hannah dragged a paint-chipped wagon stacked with milk crates of books. The blue ball flew fiercely to the other side of the room and landed with a satisfying thwack. Hannah surveyed the open floor space and took a crate off the wagon. The ball returned on its path, a flying a few feet from Hannah, and she startled backward to protect the books. "Do you two ever stop fighting?" She said.

Gabriela bit her lip and drilled her sights on Mariposa. "Nope." She shook her head and whipped the ball across.

Mariposa deflected with the broom and growled. She glanced at Hannah in exasperation. “Nope.” She then followed as the blue ball slowed its roll, picked it up, and concentrated on her retaliation.

“Could you actually stop today? Now?” Hannah threatened a finger toward each of them and at the ball flying back. “If you tear even a single page of even one of the comic books,” she finished the thought by huffing harder.

Mariposa raised her hand and beckoned to Gabriela. Gabriela rolled the blue ball hard in her hands. “We can feud outside,” she said, following Mariposa.

Hannah watched the two exit and then deposited stacks of books on different spots across the open flooring. When she finished, she called Anya in, and Hannah directed her to size the afternoon classrooms. Anya darted back and forth, and Hannah pulled out the last full crate and stacked the empty crates back into the wagon. She heaved the one crate chest level and placed it back on the floor again, grumbling. She walked over to where Mariposa had been sweeping, swept up the dust pile, and grabbed the last crate of books to bring upstairs, followed deftly by Anya.

Esmé knelt down in her quiet classroom beside a young student. The girl pointed in her book. It was a graphic novel and she traced her finger under an italicized word to her teacher. “Oh,” Esmé said. “That word is Japanese. We don’t use it in English much, but let me tell you what a rōnin is.”

Rebecca peeked her head into the classroom. “Is anything the matter?” Esmé asked her. Rebecca shook her head and left.

Esmé shared with her young student things she had loved about the graphic novel series. The wisdom of the rōnin, his duty to his child. How many times she had read it, both as a young lady, and now, as a teacher. She pointed out a detail in one of the panels, and the child flicked her hand away, wanting to discover the next secrets for herself. Esmé laughed and

nodded in agreement and looked up when Rebecca came back into the classroom.

"Have you seen Cristal?" Rebecca said.

"I believed she was with you," Esmé replied.

****

Cristal's bed was stacked high with clothing and her room was missing her dresser.

In the back yard, Cristal knelt slightly, brandishing a long, wooden bokken and steadied it by her right side. She straightened her knees a little and brought the bokken above and behind her head.

Cristal twisted her mouth.

She bent the bokken back and forth and angled the wood blade far in front of her, then back a little more, testing to find where it fit naturally with her. She knelt slightly and shifted the bokken to her side, loosening and refirming her grip on the tang of the sword. She raised her sword slowly again, in front of her head and angled forward, and slowly brought it back down to her side.

Cristal snapped the blade up in a high pose, Jōdan-no-Kamae, and brought the blade down upon her foe.

"Hyah!"

She slowed the bokken enough that it tapped the top of the beaten dresser. More hits landed on her imaginary foe, left and right and top, again and again.

Cristal steadied her blade by her side and turned to the doorway.

Rebecca stepped into the backyard. "You practice a lot. I see why you're improving so quickly."

Cristal nodded.

"And I can see why you're not passing basic math."

"I study what I need," Cristal said.

"And what you don't need is a skull harder than your bokken," Rebecca said. "You need math, you need literature, you need everything you can learn."

Cristal hooked the sword in a woven belt. "I'll go, then."

"Why?"

Cristal blinked. She was caught off-guard. "Because you told me to go."

"I'm not telling you to do anything," Rebecca said. "I'm saying you need to understand everything you can."

"And I need math and books," Cristal said.

"Why?"

Cristal frowned. Her hand rubbed the tang of the sword at rest by her waist. She tried to form good reasons why a warrior would study math and stories and old books, but she came short.

Cristal shook her head.

"Math, language, everything we teach are tools of the mind. Like your bokken is a tool to learn kendo and laido, and your tantō a tool to protect yourself. If I gave you a tantō and never showed you how to fight with it, what would you use it for?"

Cristal shrugged.

"You could probably chop potatoes." Rebecca placed her hands on her hips. "Maybe pick your teeth if you're careful. And I'm taking the risk that you'd start doing that, now. But, do you get what I'm saying?"

"I think so."

"Math, science, and language are all invaluable tools on the battlefield as well. Cristal," Rebecca stared her in the eyes, "don't come to school until you can find one single use for them. Got it?"

Cristal nodded. Her eyes darted back and forth, and she

shook her head as well. “What if I can’t think of anything?”

“Then you’re going to be chopping potatoes with calculus, and that gets really tough.”

****

Cristal sat by the koi pond, staring at the textbook.

Pre-algebra was not something that would come to her, even with a furrowed brow and the focus of a trained bushi. Cristal rubbed her forehead, grabbed her scalp, tightened her eyes closed and forced every trick she could come up to make the numbers to soak into her consciousness.

She tossed the book aside and gazed at the dry koi pond.

She imagined whispering water softly lapping on the bank of the pond, a few grasses, green and sprouting, climbing up and up well above the foam gathering on the moist clay.

“Hi!” A small boy waved.

Cristal turned to him. The small boy ran up to her and patted her shoulder. “Can I use your book?” He said.

Cristal nodded and pointed at where it had landed.

The boy dashed and laughed, picking up the book. He carefully tore out two pages.

“No, wait, put it down!”

The small boy ignored her, stuck in his own process. He placed one piece of paper on the cover and folded it slowly and carefully, tucked it in his ear. He folded the other piece of paper and compared them side to side. He dashed to Cristal, smiling.

“Pick one!” The boy offered Cristal her choice of paper airplane.

She rubbed her forehead in exasperation.

The small boy pointed to the other side of the koi pond.

"I bet I can fly farther," he said. "This one's better." He placed the airplane in Cristal's hand.

Cristal studied it and sighed.

"Like this." The small boy showed her how to throw it. Cristal made similar motions. The boy shifted her hand away from the tip, farther down the paper fuselage. "In the middle, like one half."

Cristal stood up and prepared to throw it.

"Down!" The small boy said. "You have to sit! You're taller than me. That's cheating!"

Cristal nodded and sat beside the boy. She threw the airplane and it landed on the opposite bank.

The small boy shook his head. "Watch me, you go like this." He squinted and pulled back slowly. He guided his arm gently through the throw and the paper airplane sailed several yards past the opposite bank. It scattered its landing just short of a stretch of old paved road.

Cristal turned to him. "That's really impressive. You almost hit that street," she said. "You must've had a lot of practice."

"No." The boy shook his head. "You threw it wrong. You need to throw it at a forty-five degree angle." He pointed his arm halfway above his head. "Like in the middle. That's the best angle to throw far."

****

During the evening, the older girls of the Sisterhood placed their weapons on racks in the candle-lit dojo. The girls and Jake sat down in rows and waited for Rebecca to come downstairs.

She brought her whiteboard and paints. "This one's

a long one. We tracked down one of the most self-obsessed magnates of the old world."

Cristal whispered to Anya. "Why a magnet?"

"A magnate," Anya replied. "A rich prick."

"Oh," Cristal whispered back.

"… outside Houston," Rebecca continued, "which is about two weeks' travel. It's going to be a long one, and we have a few stops we're going to make along the way to rest up. The second to last stop—" Rebecca stared at Cristal. "I mean, the penultimate stop…"

Cristal looked at Jake. He shrugged in confusion.

Anya tapped Cristal's shoulder. "That's the second to last stop, the thing before the last thing."

Cristal turned back to Rebecca. She continued, "… to rest our feet and salve any blisters. We want to be one-hundred percent before we face Logan."

"That's when you're tip-top," Mariposa tapped Cristal hard from behind. "You have a hundred cents, pennies. Those are coins."

"Shut up, Mariposa."

"Fifty percent is half, like half a pie." She patted Cristal's shoulder. "You're welcome, Sister."

Rebecca stopped. "I'm glad we're all paying attention. Mariposa, what are we going to bring with us?"

Gabriela started. "We'll get—"

"If I wanted to hear the truth," Rebecca said, "I would've asked you. But I want a good laugh. Mariposa?"

Mariposa smiled. "We're going to bring our weapons, our unique experiences, and our good humor."

Jake shook his head. "Idiot," Hannah said.

Gabriela turned to Mariposa. "We need to build a bridge, so we're each going to pack six bricks. So we can get across their dry moat. You'll carry the mortar, too."

Rebecca pointed at Gabriela. "Knock it off. Her butterfly

brain might think you're actually serious."

The girls picked up their weapons and Anya took the daishō upstairs to hide it. Cristal followed Hannah outside. "I want to ask you something," Cristal said. "How important is reading when you fight? How do you use it?"

Hannah's eyes lit up. "I want to be a hero," she said. "That's what matters."

She went into the most famous stories, all her favorite ones, and unraveled Gilgamesh and Enkidu's questions about mortality and the endurance of friendship. The mythical Odysseus and Achilleus, mortals half born of gods who, indeed, strove with the immortal gods, who fought unimaginable battles and creatures and explored and loved and lived the biggest lives possible. And, of course, even Superman, the only good comic book character, who himself was immortal, and yet kind and human and principled, showing that even if evil is eternal, good itself can never die, and thus must always be victorious in the end.

"Oh, I see," Cristal said. She thanked Hannah and went off to bed.

****

By midnight, a man in an orange frilled outfit made it to town. His clothing was sweaty and thickly dusted and ill-suited to the travel he had just undergone. He spotted a motel.

It was cheap and the motel was broken down and paint-chipped. He walked from building to building and picked up a fallen sign, "BOOKING." The arrow pointed left, and the booking office was closed, no sign. The windows were smashed in, and a desiccated corpse lay inside.

The orange-garbed man sighed. He unbuttoned another

button on his moist, filthy shirt.

He wiped sweat and caked dust off his face and surveyed a plot of small businesses and squat houses by the highway leading in. He picked the house without smashed windows and knocked.

An old man answered from within. “What do you want from me?”

The fancy-dressed man yelled. “Are there any hotels around here? Any good ones?”

“A what?”

“A motel.” He enunciated the em hard. “Are there any motels open?”

There was shuffling inside the house.

The fancy-dressed man peeked inside the window and saw the old man argue quietly with his wife. The two froze and turned to him.

“A hotel, a motel,” he said. “I want a place to take a nice bath and sleep tonight. And a clothes shop, or whatever you have out here. I’m guessing no tailors.”

The old man shook his head at him and his wife pointed. “You’re one of those!” She yelled.

“One of those what?”

“One of those bastards!” Her husband tried to calm her. “One of those arrogant assholes who want, want, want. You’ve come to take everything.” She picked up a pair of old shoes and dangled it by the window. “Here! You can take everything! Take take take take! This is everything this whole damned town has. The joke’s on you, you fucking asshole!” Her husband tried to pull her back from the window but she wrested from his grip and continued to swear him out.

The orange dressed man scratched his head. “What do you mean?” He said. “Someone’s taken everything from you?”

The woman shook with wrath. “They took our candles! They took our chickens! They ate our pets!” She screamed.

"They've taken everything from everyone. There aren't even enough graves left."

"So they have everything in this town? Food, clothes, the guns?" The orange clothed man said.

The old man nodded while his wife wept.

The orange clothed man shook his head. "That is so unfortunate," he said. "Who are these terrible people? Please, tell me, and I'll do my best to get you your chickens back. It's the least I can do."

****

Logan woke up from the dark triangle table.

His cheek was red with folds through it, and wetted with drool down to his chin. He was the only one seated at a table and the staff worked around him to clean up the remaining places. A man tossed a broken chair into the pile of refuse in the corner. Logan searched the room, trying to reorient himself, until the tuxedoed husband approached him. He walked around the large blood stain on the floor and lifted Logan up by the arm.

"Let's go," he said.

Logan chattered at the quiet man about the endless depths of space, the infinite and the unknowable, the unimaginable radioactive power of the sun, black holes taking spaceships—time? human thoughts?—to parallel dimensions.

"Bed time," the tuxedoed man said.

"Yes, yup," Logan said.

Logan continued about the mining potential on the moon, the fires of Venus powering infinite kilns, the minerals on Mars dissolved into powder drinks, no different in structure from those on earth.

Logan panted excitement at the tuxedoed man. "Yes? Yes?"

"Go," the man said. He pointed into his bedroom.

Logan nodded and went into his bedroom. The door closed and it was dark. He turned around and across the wall was a painted solar system, not to scale, of each planet and the moon, all highlighted in weakly fluorescent paints. The earth and the moon were circled, and many arched paths crossed from the moon to Mars, in pen, pencil, gouges, other colored objects.

"John Carter John Carter John Carter," Logan repeated.

After some time, his body was spent, and he sat his round body on his bed.

He pointed at Mars, held his hand there.

He then pointed to Jupiter, and jabbed his finger at the large gas giant vigorously.

He nodded and continued conversation to himself, and he grew more tired. His eyes became droopy. They closed.

His lips trembled. He screamed with all his might.

The screams pierced through the walls and the floor and the ceiling. The middle-aged man who had watched Logan stab a woman to death sat up in bed and he heard for himself the murderer's terror.

****

As the soft moonlight filtered into the dojo in Santa Elena, Rebecca and Hannah prepared the backpacks for their travel the next day.

EPISODE III
Part 2: Never a Cloudless Sky

The Sisterhood followed alongside an old paved road.

Their white cloaks were moistened with sweat and caking over with dust. Rebecca led the group of eight warriors. Jake and Hannah brought up the rear.

The wind blew dust into Jake's sport jacket and he tucked it around him to keep the dirt out. "You can tap on the body and play it that way if you're out of strings," he told Hannah.

"I really don't have any musical sense," Hannah said. "Common sense a-plenty."

"I can show you," Jake said. He mocked holding a guitar and poked at it with his fingertips, slapped it with an open palm.

Cristal walked next to Anya. "You're so fast," Cristal said. "And so quiet, too."

"I roll my feet," Anya said.

Anya showed Cristal her stride. Cristal attempted Anya's smoothness of stroke and gave up.

"That's exhausting," Cristal said. "Thanks for showing me, though."

"Of course," Anya replied. "Generosity makes us all stronger."

Gabriela and Hope kept a conversation with themselves.

Rebecca halted the group and Mariposa turned her attention back inward, quiet.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Rebecca said. "It looks quiet, so it's probably not."

The Sisterhood approached a silent, concrete settlement and split into four pairs. The buildings were concrete and steel, and the village was still. Cristal and Anya started their search on the leftmost outskirts.

A few deceased chickens had been rotting and scattering their feathers into the wind. Anya pointed to the first building and Cristal approached the doorway. It smelled foul.

Inside was a putrid pair of half-clothed bodies, jelled and brown.

"Dear god," Cristal muttered.

Anya peeked into the next building and nodded. Cristal checked the next and shook her head. The five buildings on the outskirts were bereft of living human life.

"This is so sad," Anya said. "And the chickens out here, just rotting."

The doors to the main building were open. It was a two-story square structure. As Cristal approached it, the smells from within became stronger and stronger.

Six bodies lay inside with two large knives. The knives were darkened with ichor, and the bodies were peacefully lying beside each other.

Cristal retched. The presence of the bodies and evidence on the knives unnerved her. Anya squeezed her shoulder.

"They did it out of mercy," Anya said. "It makes me so, so sad to think that was their best option."

Rebecca motioned for the girls to leave the room. She entered and after a few moments, came out with a few cans of food.

"Plenty of stores," Rebecca said. "But there's no water left. It's better to die by your own hand than to dehydrate."

Rebecca passed the few cans out and the Sisterhood continued on.

****

The feast in the main hall was well underway.

Logan continued laughing and nodding at the head of the table. The married couple motioned to a male server. He came close and they pointed to an empty vegetable platter.

The server nodded and apologized, and left with the empty platter toward the kitchen.

It was hot and aromatic, and the cooks sweated profusely. He asked one of them for more vegetables.

The cook turned to him. “All out,” he said.

The server frowned. He grabbed a large, worn cardboard box and carried it along the edge of the dining hall, carried it through a few passageways, up a stairwell, and opened a door. Heat rushed in and he grabbed a baseball cap before exiting.

He walked in the sweltering heat of the desert, following a thin, paved road. He looked up and shook his head. The server continued on, carrying the empty box, and felt woozy, looking up again and squinting. Then he stopped and stared.

The eight of the Sisterhood walked toward the server.

Rebecca removed a canteen from her belt and offered it to the tired man. He followed her motions, followed her hands when they unscrewed the canteen, grabbed his arms, shook the empty box from his hands and placed the canteen in them instead. He was certain the ghost was kind, and when the coolness of water hit his throat, his thoughts became alive again, and he started hearing the questions coming from the ghost.

The server wiped his forehead. “It’s over there.” He pointed to the entrance.

The server picked up the cardboard box and continued on toward the food stores. He peeked behind him to see the Sisterhood enter into the bunker. His memory of the cool water

bringing life into his body lingered for another moment, quickly faded, and then he turned back onto his path.

Rebecca and the warriors descended the stairs quietly. She motioned to the girls numbers with one hand, and directions with the other. Mariposa, Hope, and Anya went down one hallway. Rebecca and Hannah went down the main hallway, and Gabriela, Cristal, and Jake went down the third hallway.

Gabriela peeked her head into the room. She turned toward Cristal and Jake and twisted her face in consternation. She shrugged and pointed inside.

It was dimly lit with white, pale light. There were two dozen humanoid robots stationed in open cocoons, buzzing. The robots had large black eyes, white plastic bodies, and a strange, etched in smile.

Each of them also appeared to have a smooth piece of weaponry on their right arms.

Gabriela thought for a few moments. The three turned down back into the main room and looked around. Gabriela pointed to a stack of steel folding chairs, and they brought them to the robot room.

There was only the one entrance out of the room.

Gabriela, Cristal, and Jake stacked and worked the folding chairs together as an obstacle. Suddenly, white flashing lights flickered silently down the hallway, and the robot room suffused with red light.

"Dammit," Gabriela whispered.

Cristal peeked within and the robots shuddered away. A wire popped from each of them and two thirds of them mobilized. The last third attempted their first steps and collapsed.

One of the robots with large black eyes and an etched smile turned to Cristal peeking in. Its head wobbled and it raised its arm.

Cristal dashed down the hallway with Gabriela and Jake and a loud gunshot hit into the wall. The three stacked the

remaining chairs at the other end of the hallway, and the white lights silently flickered as they waited for the robots to fully awake and come through.

Gabriela cursed. She stationed herself at the barricaded hallway, and Jake and Cristal stationed themselves at the two other hallways. The staircase leading up was open and unguarded.

Mariposa, Hope, and Anya hid in one of the thresholds of their hallway. The white light flickered silently, and they heard a loud bustle and panic in a large, echoing room.

Mariposa put her ear to the closed door to listen within, and Hope and Anya waited near the hallway, weapons drawn.

A stampede of food-smelling cooks and wait staff pounded down the hallway past them. Most of them looked at their three intruders and paid them no mind. After the stampede came the sounds of loud shoes and boots, calmly but briskly marching down the hallway. Mariposa turned around and readied herself.

By the millipede sounds, they would be vastly outnumbered.

As the first two gentry crossed their threshold, Mariposa and Hope grabbed them and Anya took a high pose in front of them.

"Halt," Anya said. "Right there."

The next few swung fists at her and a quick flick of her katana dropped one of the fists on the floor, masterless.

Anya readied herself again into a high pose. The blade of the katana steadied horizontally above her eyes. A drip of fresh blood trickled down by her right foot.

"Who's your king here?" Anya said.

****

Logan remained alone at the head of the triangular table in an empty hall.

Dishes and food were scattered across all the other tables, across the floor of the hall, across the large, brown blood spot from three weeks prior, and even smacked into the walls and slowly sliding down.

The white light continued to flicker through the empty food hall, and the married couple reentered the room, pointing to him. They turned behind themselves.

"It's Logan. It was always Logan," the wife said.

Three armed warriors approached Logan: a katana, an ax, and another weapon. It was wooden with a chain. Logan studied the third weapon, carried by an attractive, dark-skinned young lady, and he stared at it but couldn't place what kind of weapon it was.

He shivered and scratched his arms.

The three young women surrounded him, and he turned around to look at the novel weapon. It was two sticks attached with a chain. A pair of them. The young woman held them with limped wrists, and one stick was a handle, and the other was to swing from the chain.

They were nunchaku. Logan remembered nunchaku.

The slow and graceful movements of the nunchaku hypnotized him until a hard smack came across the back of his head.

"It's this bastard," the married man said. "He's been doing this for his entire miserable life."

Logan laughed and looked around. The three armed young women took a perimeter around him. He was surrounded by the people who had feasted in the hall with him, and their whispers grew louder and louder. Logan shivered harder, unable to grasp what they might be talking about, and they started shouting as well.

One of the sweaty cooks came into the hallway.

He marched past the assembled gentry. He rolled up his sleeves and cracked his knuckles. Hope, Mariposa, and Anya stepped back to give the man more space, and he pointed at the giggling fat old man.

"You killed my cousin. All he ever did was make you laugh. He didn't deserve your hate. And then you stabbed his face in. Why? Why did you do that, you fat fascist pigshit?"

Logan batted his lashes at him. "Why? Why? Why because now he flew off to Mars, and his arms are, boy oh boy, so tired."

Anya stole a glance at Mariposa.

He cocked a fist back and knocked Logan square in the face.

A server walked up and stood over Logan. "You goddamned fat little shit! You shitstain motherfucker!" He shook his head and cracked his knuckles hard.

A woman spat on Logan, and the plump, old man muttered, spitting out a tooth. He giggled softly and blood poured down along his lips. Another cook kicked him hard in the stomach and motioned for the others to gather around.

The girls watched the beating silently. Anya looked at Hope and Mariposa. Something was wrong. One by one they yelled him down over conscienceless deaths, and Logan was still giggling, twisting his body on the floor, laughing between screams.

One of the younger men drew next to Logan and raised his foot above Logan's head. "Wait," Anya said.

The young man looked at Logan, prostrate on the ground. The fat, old man started curling into a ball, and the young man stepped back to let the next victim in.

The attacks lightened on Logan. He continued giggling, writhing on the floor. The married woman went to a table and grabbed a large knife.

"I'll save us," she said, marching toward Logan.

Hope and Mariposa looked at each other.

Anya stood close to Logan. "Don't kill him," she said.

The married woman continued on her path. She turned the blade downward, and within a few feet of Logan, lunged into the giggling fiend with every ounce of strength and rage.

Anya flicked her katana and the married woman's arm flew past Logan, the knife tumbling from her grip and skipping across the floor.

The married woman held the stump of her remaining arm, sliced cleanly at the elbow, and her husband held her, his face down to his belly button flicked with his wife's blood.

"I said stop," Anya said.

The crowd gathered tighter and louder around the three girls and Logan. They grabbed plates and platters and tossed them at their new enemies. Hope and Mariposa readied their weapons and deflected the bombardment from the incited mob, protecting themselves and Logan from the incoming barrage.

Their rage boiled against Logan's new protectors. The mob threw food and everything their hands could immediately grab. Some of the men slowly learned how to flick the knives more deftly toward the young women.

Anya's steel dragon danced, chopping down plates and silverware and cups. The projectiles shattered against her, leaving scratches up and down her arms and legs.

Mariposa and Hope sweat, knocking away the barrage. Hope knelt down and protected Logan from flying debris.

Anya's breaths labored. She danced along, protecting her sisters as best as she could.

The violence lessened.

The mob's weapons and anger were running low. They tossed a few more pieces without conviction. They held plates and knives and forks, and soon there was silence in the room. They stood with their dinnerware held limply in their hands.

The three girls of the Sisterhood panted heavily,

scratched and bleeding from the now-calmed fusillade.

The husband held the pale corpse of his former wife, staring into the bitterness of her face.

Anya readied her katana high and horizontally, Kasumi-no-Kamae, and prepared for the next barrage. The bright steel dragon framed the sweat and blood and exhaustion on her face.

And Logan laid on his back, sweeping his arms and legs, cutting across an area of smudged open floor, pushing shattered ceramics and silverware aside, and clearing open spots in the silhouette of bloody, simple angel.

****

In cloudless skies
Crows end their mocking cries
For they see
There is nothing important left to say

****

The remainder of the inhabitants talked to the Sisterhood.

The conversations were somber. The middle aged man who came freshly into the uppermost stratum approached Anya. He fidgeted with his large dress shirt.

"Thanks for stopping them," he told Anya. "I knew something was up, but it's so hard to speak up sometimes. I'm not sure if that makes sense."

Anya nodded, the scratches across her face red and clotted. "It's hard to speak up on your own. I get it." She looked at Logan, wrapped in a blanket and blubbering. "You

just have to do it, you know?"

The middle-aged man shook his head. "It was you three against, what, fifty of us? Even if I was armed, I still," he turned his eyes to the ground. "I wouldn't take your side."

Anya watched Logan searching around the room. "You have to believe in something," she said. "I believe that justice is always kind. And I would die for that belief, too. I couldn't live any other way."

A gathering of waitstaff and gentry surrounded Rebecca and Hannah. "There's no more water," Rebecca said. "You'd have to dig a well, and that would probably take too much time for any of you to survive."

Hannah looked at Rebecca. "It's got to be at least one hundred feet," she said to Rebecca. "It's so dry here, it might be more than twice that. And that's if you dig in the right spot."

"Probably eight days every hundred feet. Just a random guess." Rebecca smiled.

The people discussed among themselves. The middle aged man spoke up. "I don't want to tell everyone what to do, but Houston is only fifteen miles away."

They talked amongst themselves. They weighed the inevitability of their deaths against the fear of the unknown.

The tuxedoed widow heard the arguments.

"They're going to try to kill us."

"No, I mean, how will they figure out?"

"It's obvious who we are, they're gonna know."

"We can dress like, like them, no offense."

"If they know, an they'll know, they'll know alright, they're gonna kill all of us."

"How about…?"

He watched the remaining group argue amongst themselves. It was clear: die in a few days certainly, or risk death and travel out. He shook his head.

They turned to Rebecca. "If I were you, I'd collect all

the food and water I could, and risk the journey. Some will die, some will not. This is your last chance to save yourselves."

The cooks and the servers and the gentry looked amongst themselves. They picked up and packed the food still left on the tables. And then the food on the walls, the floor. They put the cooking water into bottles, no further belongings, and prepared themselves for the deadly journey.

The middle aged man looked upon the distracted, chubby Logan. "He's so sad," he told Hannah. "But for the grace of God go I."

"I wouldn't wish any of that on anyone," Hannah said.

"I'll get him there," he said. "No matter what."

Rebecca knelt down and picked up a knife. She showed the middle-aged man a few mock cuts with the dull side of the blade. "It's a quick death and the least pain. Remember those points." She tapped four areas. "In that order. Do what you can, but don't let him die alone out there. Give him mercy if he can't get there."

The tuxedoed widow rubbed the cold face of his dead wife. He He placed her body aside and watched the busy, new group bustle throughout the soon to be abandoned home. He caught the attention of an old server woman. "I'm sorry I—"

She thrust an empty container into his hands and kept going. He got to picking up food off the ground.

The white cloaked Sisterhood passed by the barricaded hallway, jammed with limbs of white, glowing robots. They met the new, bustling tribe at the entrance of the bunker. The two tribes parted ways, the warriors toward their distant home in Santa Elena, and the last survivors onward to their dangerous journey ahead.

****

Cristal and the young boy stood before the koi pond.

The boy licked his lip and tossed a paper airplane into the wind. It landed far from the opposite bank. Cristal rubbed a rock in her hands, drew back, and tossed it in the direction of the grounded plane, skipping near it.

Hannah lay across her bed, her stomach down and legs kicking in the air. She licked her fingertips and flipped to the next page of a Superman comic, the Krypton hero blasting through a tumbling skyscraper. She flipped the page again and saw him taking Lois Lane up in his arms, huddled into his chest. She showed the comic book to her sister, Hope, sharpening the blade of her ax on a leather strip. Hope looked over and shook her head, and Hannah softly sighed and returned to her comic.

Mariposa pumped the blue rubber ball in her hands. She tossed it underhand toward Anya, and she kicked it roundhouse back toward Mariposa.

Jake lay on his back on Gabriela's bed, and the two talked and laughed together. A candle flickered in her room. Jake sat up and slung a joke at his girlfriend and stuck his tongue out. Gabriela in return placed her hand over his face, and pushed him back down on her bed.

In the dojo, Rebecca sat on the floor by Esmé, the two painting haiku by candlelight. "She really impressed me," Rebecca said.

Esmé waited in thought, her paintbrush pinched at the upper end. "Anya is certainly incredible. I am deeply impressed with her judgment as well."

Rebecca stared at Esmé's empty marble stone. "She made the right choice," Rebecca continued. "Logan wasn't all there. I would've let them tear him apart and eat him for steaks."

Esmé placed the paintbrush down again. "This isn't a matter in which Anya is right, and you were wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"You would be right to give them justice against Logan." Esmé stared at her blank stone. "He has caused such pain, created such a rift in this world, that yes, he does deserve their full judgment, however they determine that to be."

Rebecca looked up at Esmé. "But Anya was definitely right, though."

Esmé folded her hands and sat up before Rebecca. "Let me share an experience with you.

"I was a young girl as well. And it took me a long, long time to understand violence. To understand when it is needed, and when it must be avoided.

"I was taught in what was called a ghetto school. That's a clever way to say the students were black and unwanted. I had one friend in that school, a girl a grade up, Tyreisha. Tyreisha and I hung out at the mall until it closed, and then we hung out at our street corner after.

"I had it in my head for a long time that if I fought Ty, and won, I would be accepted by the older kids in her grade. I wanted to be seen, like every child in that school.

"The teachers were black, mostly, and some were white. There was a substitute, Mister Gerald, who was the oldest teacher in the school, and the boys loved him deeply. He was a veteran of World War II. He had seen things that even the boys in our school could not fathom, and his presence was deep, his presence was calming, he was small, yet wise and immense. He hardly spoke a word, and the boys, and many of the girls, listened.

"I came at Ty from behind on her thirteenth birthday. I beat her and beat her and I screamed and pulled her hair, and when she tried to hit me back, I hit her even harder. At first it was her shoulders, her back. But I saw her face, and I kept punching that poor little girl, again and again, in her face again and again. I broke her jaw that day.

"Mister Gerald shouted. I saw him coming down the hall. He stomped up to me, grabbed my shoulder, and pushed me back I believe ten feet, at least. He picked up my poor, bruised friend, and cradled her face in his hands.

"I watched him inspect her. The poor girl's eyes were black and puffy, her nose bleeding, Ty, and I was so, so deeply ashamed. He studied the damage, just like a doctor. I don't know. There was something dispassionate about it. I saw for a moment, just a moment, there was some memory in the man stirred.

"His eyes. I remember his eyes and what he told me. He stared me straight in the face. And this man, whom rarely spoke, never in my presence, he asked me, 'Why would you want to bruise such a beautiful girl?'

"And his eyes, oh Rebecca, his eyes spoke so much more I could never see, and never fear to understand."

Rebecca and Esmé sat in silence. The candles flickered on the pair. Rebecca was lost in thought. "I'm sorry, Esmé."

"Don't be sorry for that little girl, my Sister. She heard those words, time and time again. She ran away from school, that poor girl had no more friends left in the world, and still she heard those words chasing after her. Fight after fight after fight, she heard those words as she threw herself at strangers, at people she thought she could beat up.

"At people she knew better than to challenge.

"And I kept away from mirrors for a long time. I didn't want to see the bruises on my own face. I ignored the bruises across my body as best I could. And, one day, when I was nineteen, I looked into the mirror. I didn't notice my bruises, dear Sister.

"It was my eyes. I thought about him, about Mister Gerald, and that these were the cold, dead eyes he had seen in that foolish, violent, scared twelve-year-old child. My shame had gotten the best of me.

"And so, these fully ripe days, I look in the sky for his words, and in each cloud do I hear him, Why would you want to bruise such a beautiful girl? Perhaps it was his white hair, or some calmness, some transparency about Mister Gerald, but I see his words in every cloud that passes by. Even when I don't see a cloud, my searching for them brings me those words talking from within."

Rebecca poured a cup of cold tea for herself. "My god, Esmé, you've had a wild life."

"It's the nature of youth," Esmé said. "I share my wisdom because the only other way to understand it is in bruises. Anya understands something more at her age than I grasped at your age, and that is miraculous to me. Violence can always be chosen, and it took me time to understand that it is the moral solution only when it is the last solution. But we must take peace if there's a path to it.

"And Anya, today, in her wise youth, taught me something more.

"There is always a path toward peace, and this beautifully humbles me."

Rebecca nodded. The two women shared a quiet bond between them.

Rebecca said, "We're a decade apart. I'm proud of her, so damned proud, but if she didn't make it back. I don't know, Esmé. Anya's something else."

"Wisdom is not in years, but in the choice of a heart." Esmé picked up the paintbrush again and dipped it in fresh paint. "She understands the risk."

Rebecca nodded. She rubbed her stone with her thumb and cleaned off the one line of her haiku.

"I know where I shall start," Esmé said, and began painting her first haiku of the night.

EPISODE IV: WHAT A WOMAN FIGHTS FOR
Part 1: A Vision of the Future

There is a vision
It is not far
It is in sight
Reach out

It is the future
The future is waiting
Stand up
Grasp it

Or watch it
Watch the future fall
No one there to hold it up
No one to build it

You have the power
Your blood shapes this world
Let it course
Shape it
Forge it

****

The man in the orange frilled shirt came into a silent town.

His shirt was once orange, but now it was coated in gray grimy filth and dried and rewetted sweat. White salt stains wrapped around his collar by his throat. Above his collar, his face was bright red, not used to leaving the old Dennings manor nor to being out in the sun more than a day.

The man's tongue was dry and rough. He shifted himself up to a house and knocked harshly on the door. It creaked inward and he peeked inside.

"Water?" He begged.

But the inhabitants would offer him none. A couple lay on the floor, holes in their chests.

The man in the orange frilled shirt entered the home.

He walked out onto the street carrying a pail of water and a fistful of meat. He took another big swig from the pail and then doused it over his grimy, soil-matted hair, shaking the filth out with his fingers. He picked at the bone and slowed his pace.

A small family lay strewn by the road, each member shot in the back.

He finished picking the meat off the bone and tossed it aside. He turned a corner and saw ten bodies scattered over the road, freshly killed. The man in the orange frilled shirt turned to the other corner.

A young man in a colorful native poncho leaned against an old light post. His sombrero tilted down over his face.

The man in the orange shirt walked toward him. "Did you do this? Was this all you? Do you work for someone?"

The young man withdrew an arm from under his poncho and rubbed his nose.

"Do you ride with other people? Do you do this a lot? Do you have a lot of guns?"

The young man hid his arm again, spat aside, remained unmoved by his questions.

The man in the orange shirt strode quickly past more bodies and up to the young man. "Do you own this area? Do you know who does? You must've done all this. I've been to ten different towns. Can I ask you something?"

The poncho assassin tilted up his sombrero. "What do you want?"

A large smile came across the man in the orange frilled shirt. He breathed heavily. His excitement overtook him.

"You."

****

Cristal stood before the koi pond.

Long grasses ringed around the pond. Wet clay surrounded the water, and within the pond: oranges and purples and flashes of whites shooting through the crystal water like hot lightning.

She knelt in the wet mud of the bank. She stuck her finger into the water.

Cold.

A large orange and black-spotted koi swam slowly up to her. She saw its eyes. It looked into hers. It nibbled on her finger.

Its mouth felt like the light licks of a curious kitten.

Cristal stood up on the mud bank. She raised her hand toward the pond. A purple and white koi leapt and brushed against the underside of her hand. The orange spotted one shot up and slapped her hand with his tail.

They were inviting her.

Cristal jumped into the pond.

She took their invitation.

She swam naked and felt the cold, wet flesh of the school of koi brush against her soft skin. She dived down. The pond was dark. It was deep.

There was something down there. Something farther than she'd understood.

The crack of a footfall on dusty soil fell behind her.

Cristal sat before the empty koi pond, her legs crossed. Her eyes were closed and her hands folded on her pelvis. A red bandana was wrapped around her right ankle. "Not Esmé," Cristal said.

Jake shook his head. "No. And you can hear everything, I swear. It's creepy."

Cristal turned her head toward him, her eyes still closed. "Creepy. Unlike you and Gabriela."

Jake's eyes bugged out and he blushed heavily through his darkly tanned face. "Hey, wait, what do you mean?"

Cristal opened her eyes and saw him fluster. "I'm sorry. It's not creepy. I'm getting used to you two, I swear. And you look so happy with her. I shouldn't have said that."

"Thanks," Jake said. "Esmé wants to chat with you."

"Thanks for letting me know, Uncle Jake."

"Also, niece, you should let up from the running five times a day thing."

"Why?"

Jake rolled his eyes. "Your limp is coming back. You realize you need to stop so you can, gosh, rest? Heal up?"

Cristal turned back to the pond.

"You get upset I tell you to slow down, but not when I call you niece?"

"That is our relation, and I'm not upset that we're related. Uncle."

****

The Sisterhood's lunchtime meal returned to its polite level of conversation.

The Sisters of the Hidden Blade spread themselves across different tables. Mariposa flicked her wavy hair and gave the youngest girls her attention. Jake and Gabriela chatted with each other.

Cristal sat next to Hannah. "Oh, hi Cristal," she said.

"What's new?"

Hannah shook her head. Her pitch black hair shivered back and forth, glancing on her shoulders. "Not much." She took a bite of stewed potato. "Well, actually, since you asked."

Hannah related to Cristal the old theories of the solar system, the music the planets would supposedly make. Astrology, how the alignment of celestial bodies would create unknown phenomena on our very Earth, and determine its future.

The exploration of space, of the moon, of Mars and beyond, pushed by men not entirely unlike chubby Logan, but more by those starry-eyed trailblazers who sat down, who buried a nose in a book, in each and every book that came across their paths, and how study and motivation and a good, clean vision was necessary to unfold the secrets of the stars.

"Thanks, Hannah," Cristal said.

"You're not doing too bad," Hannah said. "Math looks like your strong suit."

Cristal glanced elsewhere at her table to find suitable conversation. Catalina looked up, her young face curious and shy to Cristal's, and she bent back down to her meal again.

"… is why we start with ex, the independent variable, then logically, the next and dependent variable—"

"Hannah," Cristal said, "could you tell me about yourself?"

Hannah clicked her tongue. “What?”

“Something about yourself. Not the textbooks, the novels you read, but something about yourself.”

Hannah shrugged. “Okay.”

The small girls at their table chatted with each other, but a silence spread between Hannah and Cristal.

“So.” Hannah started.

Cristal struggled with a question to ask Hannah. “Well, um, I guess do you like guys?”

Hannah arched her eyebrows and stared at her plate. “I mean, Cristal?”

“I don’t really care either way. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Hannah sighed. “I mean,” she scratched her head nervously. “I do. They don’t like me, though.”

“Oh.”

“And there aren’t too many here to attempt to date. As far as I know, there is the one.” Hannah pointed to Jake. “I think you might know that one.”

Cristal sighed.

“Look, I know what all of you think of me. I know you’re maybe intimidated?” Hannah searched for the words. “I think, really, I think you feel sad for me. Like I’m alone. Lonely.” Hannah crossed her arms. “I am. I’m not ashamed to say it. I am lonely.”

“I’m sorry, Hannah.”

“No. I read those books not to learn about everything in the world, you know.” Hannah nodded to herself. “I read those books to learn about myself. I only care about learning who I am. Everything inside me. And books, in them I find little pieces of myself. Good, noble pieces, and things I’m not proud of but need to face. I want to see all of myself. The good, the lonely.”

“Oh,” Cristal said.

"I'm not afraid of me," Hannah said. "Hope, she kind of has more doubts than you'd guess. Mariposa's confident, cocky, but she's really deeper than you see. And me," Hannah shook her head, "I guess I think of myself as a Jules Verne. Julia Verne, maybe."

Cristal gave her a blank stare.

"I like to think to myself. I like to imagine things, wild, impossible things, and that keeps me busy, and it keeps me company. Even if there were a dozen men, a hundred men in our Sisterhood—our Siblinghood—I'm a rare cup of tea, Cristal. And I probably wouldn't find the one in a hundred. Or in a thousand."

"Could you ever find him?" Cristal said.

"The one I'm destined for would have his head buried in a book." Hannah smiled. "He'd have weird things to say, and so much more to teach me. About everything, about himself. And I'd find even more of myself learning from him."

"That sounds really beautiful," Cristal said.

"Yeah. It feels beautiful, too." Hannah nodded. "Until then, I have my lovely sisters to learn with, and I appreciate all of you, even though you're not as bright as me. Or Mariposa."

Catalina laughed and the pair turned to her.

"But don't take anything she says seriously!" Hannah warned the young sister.

****

In the evening, Cristal stood by the koi pond. It was empty and filled only with the night's darkness. She shuffled up to Esmé's room on the second floor of the dojo, but she wasn't there.

"Esmé usually goes for a walk at night," Rebecca told her.

Cristal shuffled back down the steps. She crossed Esmé entering the dojo as she parted. Esmé paused, and Cristal cleared her throat.

"You wanted," Cristal stumbled on her sentence, "Uncle Jake said you wanted to talk to me?" Cristal's eyes flitted shyly. "I'm sorry my head's not in things. A few months ago, I just, umm, I don't know."

"I would be honored if you could join me, and would appreciate your company," Esmé said. "Let me get my scarf."

The two walked in a direction opposite the town. The pitch of night made it difficult for Cristal to navigate where she was, but Esmé kept forward, the route worn into her feet. Their path steepened and soon they were hiking a tough hill. "I like a good stroll to cool myself and my thoughts," Esmé said. "Tonight is a little cooler than I expected. But it will make our view that much more magnificent."

They reached a flat top of the path. Cristal heard the wind whisper against an outcropping of a cliff and her eyes adjusted to the delicate moonlight. It didn't sound very far down, but she still couldn't make out the ground beneath the cliff.

Esmé sat down and patted the earth beside her. "Don't go too far out," she warned.

Cristal sat down next to Esmé and crossed her legs. Thoughts passed through her mind and flitted back, like quickened koi dashing and slapping long, full bodies against each other, trying to navigate to some specific place. Cristal turned to her mentor, and the moonlight poured a soft shine across Esmé's cheek. She couldn't see much else of her but she felt calmer. She breathed slowly. She realized that her breaths matched pace with Esmé's.

Cristal's mind formulated excuses and reasons and purposes.

I wanted to ask you about— But Cristal could not find a

question.

I feel like— But she did not pin down what she felt within her.

Maybe you could— But there was nothing she needed.

Esmé sensed her restlessness. The sweat on her cheek glimmered gently under the moon. “You pursue knowledge voraciously,” Esmé said.

Cristal nodded into the dark, knowing Esmé would sense her agreement.

“I was going to wait, but now I am certain. I’d like you to take a student under your wing, so to speak.”

Cristal glanced at her. “I don’t know. What would I teach her? I don’t know anything.”

“Perfect,” Esmé said. “As long as you realize that fact will not change, your lessons will remain grounded. You can start by showing her how to protect herself.”

“I’m just learning how to fight,” Cristal said. “Why me? I’m not ready to show anyone self-defense.”

“Why you, Cristal? Because she requested you,” Esmé said.

“Oh,” Cristal said. “It must have been Catalina. I don’t think I can.”

“Look above,” Esmé said.

Clouds obscured the sliver of the moon. Its light gently suffused the dark clouds. Cristal glanced through the rest of the sky, and a star came into focus. As her eyes adjusted, more and more stars pushed through the infinite darkness and made themselves know to her. “It’s pretty,” Cristal said.

“I have been thinking these two thoughts on many of my walks,” Esmé said, “and now that you have joined me, I believe one end has finally connected with the other. We are all sparrows, Cristal. Consider that.”

The stars shined through the freckled dark, and as Cristal’s eyes adjusted, the stars grew and multiplied.

"We sparrows all help each other with our flights. We show each other how to aim higher, how to glide farther, how to navigate harsher winds. You are more capable than you realize, Cristal. But at some point, a sparrow is a sparrow—and a sparrow that helps another becomes something else. It becomes a hawk. A hawk becomes a dragon.

"That is how we grow: with one another. That is why I have decided to agree to Catalina's request for you to train her. She is young, too young to fight properly, but you have many other things to teach her. Beliefs she will need before she can wield her body and her strength for combat. Will you mentor her?"

Cristal felt a sudden chill through her. "I, yes. I will. Thank you."

Her heart pounded. Her mind darted into visions of what she could teach her first student. Strength, resolve, focus. Her thoughts calmed and dissipated. Her breaths followed Esmé's again.

Esmé gazed skyward. "It takes some time to see the stars, even on a cold night." She said, "I want you to think of where you came from. Where we all came from."

"Stars? Star dust?"

"What is around the stars?" Esmé pointed above.

Cristal gazed deep into the night. "The dark? I don't know. The night?"

Esmé folded her hands in her lap. "Nothing. We all came from nothing, Cristal." She paused her breath. "We all came from nothing and we are all nothing as well.

"This is my second thought. I thought about holding my son, when I had a son. I held him on my breast. He was soft and cool, and I held him close and tight. His drool felt cold on me. He was something, he was the whole of the universe." Esmé sighed softly. "And one day, he was nothing. He was nothing all along, and something as well."

"I'm sorry, Esmé."

"He was nothing before he came into this world, dear child. Before I was pregnant." Esmé said, "I came from nothing as well. How much power, how much strength and magic must breathe in this universe, in life itself, to be nothing one day, and to become something—something important, someone important—in a matter of years? The world is magic, Cristal, and vast existence blooms from a pinprick of void. From that void our destiny is the dragon, can we accept it. How terrifying we must be to nothingness, to be of it and to be everything in this universe and the next." She turned to Cristal. "I wonder if my thought is clear enough to you."

Cristal stared back into the night sky. She tried to find the answer up there but came up short. "I'm not sure," she said. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. I must not have finished these two thoughts yet," Esmé said. "Stay here a while longer. Talk contradicts wisdom. Only silence can confirm it."

Cristal opened her mouth to form a word. But instead she yawned and gazed upon the stars quietly. Both women sat in silence under white pinpricks in the sky, the distant guardians of an eternal future.

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The stars glimmered down upon the earth. Clouds glided past the sliver of the moon and its wan light shone upon a dry, vast field of short grasses.

Three ranchers in cowboy hats and boots bore smoldering torches through the fields. They were silent and marched wide apart and spat into the brittle, loud grasses. Flames rumbled and flicked light on the corners of their intent faces.

A herd of brown Holsteins stood quietly and close to each other. They mooed gently into the night. Their tails twitched back and forth in their sleep.

A young dark-haired woman panted and sweat behind a cow. She closed her eyes and bent her head against the cow's flank.

The herd stood on alert. The woman looked up.

The three ranchers waved their torches and the wind whipped smoke over the herd.

The cows moaned and turned to face away from the smoke. They started pacing from the danger.

The woman shook her head. "No, please no."

She held on to the flank of a cow. The herd picked up their pace and panicked. Curls of smoke licked and bit at the frightened cows. The woman gripped onto the Holstein's flank with all her might. It strode heavily. It shook its body to rid itself of her. The woman held on. The cow's path swayed back and forth with the herd.

The cow ran into another cow, crushing the woman between them. She let go.

The cow stumbled away. The herd pounded on past her, followed by a few wisps of smoke. The woman sweat and grasped her twisted ankle. She looked up at the three ranchers.

"I, I, please. I didn't do anything. Not, not to my Lord. Someone lied to him."

The three ranchers stood before her. A large black man in overalls passed in front of them. His arms were bare and a thin tee shirt showed the musculature and thick veins of his torso. A light coat of sweat made his large muscles stand out like chiseled obsidian. He stood over her.

"Oh please," the woman said, "Mister Corey, please. You know she lied, she did. I would never!" She shook her head.

Mister Corey's face slowly turned from disapproval to

lightness and joy. “You were pregnant. You mean, you didn’t kill Lord Hughes’s baby?”

“No, no!” She shook her head harder. “I was sick, sick, that was all! I ain’t never. I was sick!”

Mister Corey rubbed his hands together. “Well, that’s a first.” He beamed his smile upon her.

The woman smiled back. “Yes! Yes, you understand!”

“You’re lying. That’s a first.” His smile stayed unwaveringly bright. “Or maybe not the first time. You’re good at it.”

The woman waved her arms. “Please, no, I ain’t never,” she grasped her swollen foot. “Please, I can’t walk no more!”

“Won’t need to,” Mister Corey said. “I’ll carry you, missus.”

The woman bit her lip. “You sure? Thank you, Mister Co-Co-Corey.”

Mister Corey turned to the three ranchers behind him. One of them broke ranks and carried a large, dark box toward him.

The woman’s lip quivered and she shook her head.

Mister Corey took the box and opened it. “You see, missus, Lord Hughes likes you. A lot. He was hoping the cows would’ve killed you. But they only got your ankle.” Mister Corey smiled looking at the contents of the box. “The cows didn’t get you. And Lord Hughes ain’t here. It’s just me and the boys.”

Her tears ran hot and she sobbed uncontrollably.

“That was a girl child you killed.” Mister Corey pulled shiny pieces out of the box. “I know it. And you know how Lord Hughes likes his girls.”

Her body stopped shaking. She whimpered.

Mister Corey turned his face toward the woman with the fullest, brightest smile. He rose his right hand, glimmering with long, pointed steel claws on his fingers. He clicked the heavy blades together, shining under the full moon. “Now

we're gonna check out that belly of yours," Mister Corey said.

The woman buried her face in her hands. She curled her legs up to her chest and rocked herself.

"I ain't gonna lie to you," he said. "I ain't gonna lie and say I'm sorry about this. I like this. I'm gonna like this one a lot. But I ain't gonna lie. I ain't like you, missus."

****

Candlelight flickered on Lord Hughes as he combed his long, snow white hair.

His bedroom in the ranch was decorated with tapestries and wood panels and other warm affects to keep the winds from blowing in. The rugs seemed to breath slightly hanging from the walls. Hughes gently handled his long, snowy locks in front of a large vanity mirror. He guided his hair over his left shoulder and it rested midway on his chest. He passed a brush rhythmically from scalp to tip, holding the long strands of white like a precious pet. His brush got caught midway through the length of his hair and he became flustered. He grabbed near the base of his scalp and yanked the brush through in pain and anger. The knot came undone and he continued his smooth, rhythmic passes through flows of hair. "Have you ever owned another animal?" He said.

A blonde man laid in a large, canopied bed. He shivered under several layers of bedding. "Like?" He paused. "A pet?"

Lord Hughes smiled and shook his head slowly. "No, not at all."

"Then you mean? What?"

Lord Hughes combed his hair. "You feed cattle, you give them water. A fence for a home. The cattle will love you, then. You are their god."

"Okay." The blonde man closed his eyes tightly.

"He'll be back soon," Hughes said.

"I can go," he said.

"Not yet. Wait."

Hughes slowed his pace. His comb glided through the flows of it, slowly, and Hughes saw himself mounted on a strong, muscled steed, sweaty reins in his hand, hooves pounding hard. He counted in his head, one, two … his horse galloped and angled dense flocks of wildebeest across the savannah … four, five … a single jerk of the reins and generations of beasts bent at his command … seven … and herd after herd tumbled off a cliff, crashing violence into bloody, jagged rocks … ten. He closed his eyes and sighed. He slowly opened them to see his male lover in the mirror, staring at him.

The blonde lover's jaw quivered. His eyes were set upon Hughes like distant prey.

Hughes sneered and turned slowly around. His presence seemed to expand like a threatened predator and filled the whole of the room. "What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," the lover said.

"You didn't have to come tonight."

"You told me to."

"You still love me."

The lover sat up in bed. His body trembled. "Yes. Just the same. Always the same."

There was a knock at the door.

Hughes' eyes flared. "Git." His face ticked toward the window. "Don't get caught."

His lover stood, shaking. He struggled with the old latches of the window and forced it open. He ducked through it and dropped onto the dirt, gently closing the window, and his soft steps passed off into the night.

Mister Corey knocked loudly on the door again.

Hughes got up and sat down in an ornate, upholstered

chair. “Come in,” he said.

Mister Corey opened the door and waited at the threshold. Hughes’ night robe was fine, shiny silk, flickered by licks of candlelight. He propped his leg up on the other and rocked his ankle impatiently. “Come in,” he said again.

Mister Corey passed into the room, his white shirt and overalls spattered in blood and flecks of flesh. He was followed by another rancher who was dwarfed by Mister Corey’s size. Mister Corey paused a few respectful moments. “She’s gone,” he said.

“What was the baby?”

“You was right.”

“It was a girl, wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

Hughes thought for a moment. “Very well,” he said.

Mister Corey turned to leave. “Wait,” Hughes said. “The boy here.”

“Yes?”

“I caught him stealing.”

“I’ll deal with that,” Mister Corey said.

“This was his last time,” Hughes said.

Mister Corey lightly shook his head. “I’ll deal with that. Where you want him?”

“Far. Not in the forest, farther, and no grave. Digging would be a waste of your time.”

“Okay.”

“You may leave,” Lord Hughes said. “And don’t knock so loud at night.”

“Okay.”

Mister Corey left the bedroom and picked up a torch hanging outside the manor. “He’s a weird one,” the smaller rancher said.

“Steers and queers,” Mister Corey said. “And this one’s queer in every way. You’ll learn about the ways of the house.”

"Yeah," the rancher said.

Their boots clicked down the wood stairs of the porch. Candlelight flickered outside the window of Hughes' bedroom. It cast soft shadows on the terrified face of the blonde lover.

****

The candles flickered in the dojo.

Girls swatted and sparred and swept kicks at each other. Soft slaps of hard flesh on open palms. Feet danced almost silently on worn wood.

Cristal nodded. Catalina wiped off sweat and threw a punch at Cristal. She caught her wrist and arm. Catalina's long, black ponytail swept in her face.

"Fix it," Cristal said.

She twisted her hair back and secured it into a bun.

"Good. Catalina, this punch doesn't come from your hand or your shoulders. The power of this punch comes from your thighs."

Catalina looked confused.

Cristal motioned for her to step back. She stood two arms' lengths away. Cristal stood square, foot beside foot. She pulled her right arm back. She swept across an open-palm attack and stopped halfway. She tapped her elbow and her shoulder.

"This position causes a lot of strain on the joints," Cristal said. "Back up two more feet."

Catalina stood back. Cristal reset herself. She guided her right foot back and angled the plane of her body that way. Cristal bent her arm back and slowly took one step forward, pausing on the ball of her right foot.

"Look here," she said, patting the top of her thigh. She backed up again, reangled her body, bent her arm back,

and swept her arm through a slow attack, taking the same step through. She stopped almost at the end of her example swing. She remained on the ball of her right foot again, paused in mid-attack, and rubbed the top of her thigh.

"I'm walking through the strike." She remained paused and rubbed the right side of her body. "Try to keep your upper body stable. It'll make your punch more solid. Don't twist too much. Angle your torso the same as your hips. You'll hurt your spine."

Catalina nodded.

Cristal finished through the slow attack. "I'm angling up with my hand, and pushing down with my thigh. It's a slight uppercut. See it? My punch now has the momentum of my body. My leg has set my body in motion, and now my attack has the full strength of my body, plus the momentum I built at the start of my pose. You walk through the strike. You punch with your thighs."

Cristal pointed at a bamboo stick. Catalina picked it up.

Cristal reset her pose and kept her feet side by side. She shifted her right foot back. "Ignore my hand. Watch my feet and thighs."

Catalina held the bamboo stick up. She squinted her eyes. Bamboo splintered over her face. Catalina jumped back and gasped. She struggled to catch her breath.

Cristal's open palm was extended through the full attack. She slowly drew her body back, and then reset her feet again, side by side.

"The bamboo," Cristal said. Catalina tossed it to her. Cristal flipped it over to a clean spot. "We'll start slow. You'll feel your muscles and where they tighten. Stretch first, you'll be sore going slow."

The sounds of fists and knees and feet slowly dissipated in the dojo.

Catalina wiped the sweat from her forehead and temples.

She undid her bun. “Thank you, Cristal. I learned so much from you tonight.”

Cristal nodded.

“I heard you flew through the air a hundred feet. And killed three of them before you hit the ground.” Catalina smiled. “You’re so brave.”

“I stood before our Sisterhood for my uncle. You were there. That was braver,” Cristal said.

“I want to be brave, just like you,” Catalina said.

“You are. We all are.”

Catalina shook her head.

Cristal said, “Brave is doing the right thing at a tough moment. Tell me something you did that was brave.”

“I’m always shy and scared,” Catalina said. “But you’re not. You’re never scared.”

“No,” Cristal said. “We all have different fears, and we all have different ways we need to face them. Do you know how you know you’re doing something brave?”

Catalina shook her head again.

“It’s when you’re the most scared you’ve ever been,” Cristal said, “and you do it anyway. That’s when you’re brave. It hurts very bad. Your body freezes and you fight through the ice in your blood. And you keep going. Then you shed that shell of fear and grow into your next body. When were you most scared?”

“I left my mom back in Zapata. I heard about the Sisterhood, and it took me almost four days. I think about my mom a lot. About what they—” Catalina stopped herself and wiped her eyes.

“I was more scared facing all my Sisters than fighting a few men and some guns. I was afraid that if I lost, if I fought for my uncle and didn’t win, I would lose everything. My home, my new family.”

“That sounds really scary.”

"That's what being brave is. And it's scary every time," Cristal said. "But every time it's worth it. Look at how much you've learned."

"Yeah." Catalina nodded. "Thank you, Cristal. You're so wise. I'll try to keep being brave, Sister. Good night."

"Good night, my brave Sister."

****

A ragged figure shuffled through the deepest parts of night.

The blonde lover was no longer blonde. His hair was shredded by the wind and thick black with dirt and sweat and dust. His face was gaunt and his belly was bloated and his body was clearly past its end. But his feet kept going slow and insistent like the moon's unstoppable tides.

"Santa Elena," the man repeated. "Santa Elena."

He limped toward a direction obscured by darkness. A shaft of pale moonlight cast through the dark and rubbed gentle light on the destination he had sought for weeks, upon his safe haven of Santa Elena and the kind Sisterhood that made their home within.

EPISODE IV
Part 2: The Fallen

The man in frilly orange garb trotted on a horse down a dirt path.

He was surrounded by three other riders wearing jeans and buttoned flannels. They trotted to a field and came to a small brook. They stopped and the horses lapped up the water.

The man came to a large, dark manor and dismounted. He waited for the three other riders to dismount and knock on the door. Large, fearsome brass lions looked down upon him. The man waited, smiling, and the door gave way.

Piano filled the room. He took a seat in a leather chair and his host gave him a cup of scotch. They toasted and he almost choked but took another polite sip. The heat of the alcohol warmed his face. He smiled wider and took another small sip. He nodded to an old man's questions.

"There were a dozen of them," the man in an orange shirt said. "All just girls. They had weird weapons, like Chinese things, I don't know." He nodded again. "Yeah, all younger than me."

He nodded his head again. "Wait, one brown Mexican guy," he said. "Fluffy hair, you know. He was the only one with a gun. Just him."

Another question. “It sounded like a crummy gun. One shot at a time, like a gun to hunt coyotes. And not all were spics, no offense,” the young man said. “A chink, no, two. A redhead, one white trailer trash girl.”

There was a pause. The young man was offered more scotch. “Trailer Trash? I don’t know, brown hair? Pretty face, but kind of a bitch. You can tell, that kind of girl.” The old man asked another question in a deeper voice. “What? Oh, ummm, dark eyes? She had a knife. I don’t really know. She was the boy’s sister, I think.”

The old man almost whispered his last question. “Did they say her name?”

The young man frowned and shook his head. “Nah.” He unbuttoned his frilled, orange shirt. “Well, maybe. Claire? Something with a cee. Cuh, cuh, oh I don’t know.”

“I see.”

“Can I go? It’s quite a ways back.”

The old man echoed him. “Back.”

“Yeah, back to San Marcos. With dad gone, everything’s finally going to be mine!”

The three other riders in jeans surrounded the man in orange.

“Ya need anything else from me?” He said.

The old man motioned to the female pianist. The music stopped.

“I guess,” he patted the armrests, “then I, I think we’re all set here.” The man in an orange shirt attempted to stand with the glass in his hand. The three other riders pushed him down into the leather chair again.

The pianist picked up a glass of dark wine and found her entertainment there.

“Right? We’re good, now?” The man’s teeth chattered. “I helped you, right? You got what you wanted?”

“There is no going home,” Tío Viejo, the old man, said.

One of the riders took the glass from the man's hand. He pinned his wrist down.

The man in orange felt numb. He looked at his other wrist, pinned down as well. He was getting tired and dizzy. The third rider pulled a large Bowie knife from behind him and flashed it in front of his face.

"Hey. Ha! That's a real nice—"

He slashed the man's throat open. He screamed. His throat gargled blood and he viciously spasmed, kept in place by the two other riders holding his wrists. His hands dug into the chair's arms and he shook violently, rocking the chair loudly back and forth.

They held the man in orange down until he stopped shaking.

His body started to set in rigor mortis. The two riders used the barrels of their pistols and pried his fingers loose from the armrests, took the body outside. Tío Viejo approached the chair and dabbed his fingers in the blood. He flicked it on the face of the third rider.

"I told you to mind the chair," Tío Viejo told the rider. He rubbed his hand down the rider's shirt.

The rider nodded profusely and shook. Tío Viejo stood before him. The rider took off his blood-streaked shirt. He turned around and sopped up the warm pool of blood in the leather chair.

His wife smiled from the piano and Tío Viejo ticked up two of his fingers. She returned to playing music again, and the old uncle poured himself a snifter and simply said, "Family, family, family."

****

The blonde traveler laid in bed in one of the Sisterhood's dorms. A sheet covered him up to his neck and as his chest rose, snores lightly came, and then his chest subsided.

The room was sparse, and in it was the bed, a nightstand with a cup of water, and Esmé seated next to him. She was reading a book of French poetry. She licked her finger and passed on to the next page. "Here's another," she said. Rebecca knocked on the door. "One moment," Esmé said to the blonde man and she dogeared the page.

"Do you want us to wait on the Wilsons?" Rebecca said. "Oh, sorry I'm interrupting."

"It is alright," Esmé said. "We'll help our guest here before we continue down that path. Besides, it might leave them conflicted."

"She might be fine. It doesn't sound like either of them would lose any love over that mission."

"It is unfair to ask that of them, even if they weren't so new to our Sisterhood."

"Brotherhood?"

"Community."

Rebecca nodded. "I think I'm starting to like that better, actually."

"It's what we've always been," Esmé said.

"Don't be too wise." Rebecca smiled. She nodded toward the blonde man. "He said Palito Blanco, which is probably Stanley Hughes. A cattle rancher and human trafficker."

"In those days, they made a killing in selling humans. The cows were probably practice." Esmé said, "We'll get to Hughes first. Besides, we need to see how deep the River connection goes."

Rebecca nodded. "Enjoy your poetry," she said, and waved goodbye.

Esmé turned back to the blonde man. "Sorry for that interruption. I believe you will like this one."

Her voice flowed like a gentle stream through the French sounds and meter. The velvet of her voice was thicker and more luxurious than wine. The unconscious man smiled in his sleep and his breathing slowed. The poem cradled him and rocked him gently.

"… Il dort dans le soleil, la main sur sa poitrine tranquille. Il a deux trous rouges au coté droit. This is a poem I enjoy, and I felt very much I wanted to share it with you."

The man's snores relaxed into light hums.

"It is a beautiful story, a sad story of a soldier who finds peace in his passing. I find it restful and hopeful, too, in the beauty of nature, and our return to Her." Esmé closed the book. "There's another one I shall also share with you. I know it very well, and it has served me in moments of great sadness. It is called 'Demain, dès l'aube.' It's about the loss of a child, and—" Esmé's mind drifted and she turned to the window. "Let me recite it. It is simple and you may understand:

"Demain, dès l'aube, à l'heure où blanchit la campagne,
"Je partirai. *You see, I know you're waiting for me.*
"I will go by forest, I will go by mountain,
"Away from you I can no longer remain.

"I will walk with eyes fixed onto my thoughts,
"Without seeing outside, nor hearing any noise,
"Alone, unknown, my back bent, my hands crossed,
"Forlorn, and the day for me will be night.

"I will watch neither the gold of the falling evening,
"Nor the sails in the distance descending on Harfleur,
"And when I get there, I will put on your grave
"A bunch of green holly and blooming heather."

Esmé sighed. "I think of tranquility," she said. "It is

rare in this injured world, and therefore we must take our time and cultivate it intentionally. A raging fire has its power, its chaos. But a stream, its soft murmur, its crystal prediction and unceasing heartbeat, that force is the most powerful force in a world such as ours. It is what will save our dying planet."

The man shifted slightly on his side. Esmé studied him and watched him drift into another world. She saw past his haggard face, past his suffering in the past several days, and of the past several years. She saw a face of youth. A face of gentle rebirth.

"Now, that poem. I memorized it long ago." The future's face came into view for her, a youthful face of her distant past. "It's a poem that—" Esmé halted. She turned to the tranquil sleeper again. She patted the cover of her French book of poetry and glanced out the window. The town lightly bustled outside and her mind caught up in a thought far and just from reach.

****

Classes broke for midday.

Cristal sat on the landing of the dojo. From within poured forth a bustle of small, boisterous girls. The small girls ran past her and dashed into the nooks and colors of the town. A pair of hands covered Cristal's eyes.

"Guess!"

"Catalina."

"Lucky guess," Catalina said.

Catalina took a seat next to Cristal and showed her a scary book. "This one's about a ghost haunting a house. The ghost is a girl who was killed by an evil stepdad, and she makes the family she's haunting go after him. I think you'd like

it, if you like scary books." She offered the book.

Cristal smiled. "Maybe another time, Catalina."

"Oh, okay," she said. Catalina rocked on her bottom and kicked her legs up and down. "Can you read, Cristal?"

Cristal's smile dissipated. "I can't."

"I can show you how, Big Sister."

Cristal nodded. "My dad wrote a few things. He liked poems. You don't have to show me, but I'd like that."

Catalina told her everything she knew about the alphabet, and words, and the stories that made her soar. Cristal smiled and nodded at her enthusiasm. She gushed and continued and when the bell rang, she hugged Cristal and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll teach you tomorrow!" She waved behind Cristal, "Bye Esmé!" and darted back inside.

"I didn't want to interrupt." Esmé carried an old paperback. "Your ankle is getting worse. May I see?"

Cristal opened her lips to respond but ceased. She untied the red bandana around her ankle. It was a darker blue than in the morning.

"There is a doctor not quite ten miles out. He is studied in podiatry. You should go."

"But then I can't teach Catalina," Cristal said. "She was starting to get her stance down, and I won't be able to help her. I'll fail her, now."

Esmé sat next to Cristal as the young students finished passing in. "Fail her? How so? Catalina is excelling in her studies."

"She is?"

Esmé laughed. "You didn't notice? Catalina was the shyest girl and now she's a social little butterfly. When she asked me about you, I was thinking she had wanted a Big Sister, not a warrior. And now you have more than filled the role she needed."

"Oh, I didn't realize."

"You thought you failed at your task but succeeded where it truly mattered. That is why we always try." Esmé laughed again. "Furthermore, you now have a more consistent reading tutor than I can be! She is already the top reader in her group. But allow me to head back in now. My students are hungry for their algebra." Esmé stood and bowed.

"Wait, Esmé, I want to ask you something. You said something a few days ago." A thought caught in Cristal's mind. "So, a sparrow," Cristal struggled. "No, a dragon." Cristal furrowed her brow. "When the sparrow flies higher than the dragon, farther than the dragon—"

Esmé squeezed Cristal's shoulder. "Then the sparrow is the dragon, and the dragon the sky, oh wise one."

****

In the afternoon, Cristal limped toward her bedroom.

Two voices conspired and laughed from within.

"Hello Gabriela," Cristal said.

Gabriela covered Jake's face with her hands. "Oh, hello Cristal. Jake's not here."

Jake's muffled voice came from behind Gabriela's hand. "You're so weird."

"You like weird," Gabriela said.

"Not this weird," he mumbled at her.

Cristal laid down in her bed. "I don't mind it anymore," she said.

Gabriela wrapped her arm around Jake's shoulder. "Would you mind if we stole your uncle for his first official mission?"

"What do you mean? I'm going, too. He's going to carry my backpack."

Gabriela rolled her eyes. “Darling Cristal, you can barely walk twenty minutes. What makes you think I’m going to carry your ass for three days?”

“We’re not going,” Jake said. “Also, I’m going to be the one carrying her lazy ass for a whole day.”

“What do you mean?” Cristal said.

“You’re barely healing up, so I’m bringing you to Doctor Edwards. Esmé’s orders.”

“I’m fine,” Cristal said.

“Cristal, you would be fine if you stopped training for once.” Gabriela shrugged at Jake. “I tried with her, darling. Good luck. Don’t strangle your niece. She can’t control her moods.”

“I don’t have moods!”

“Oh, just the one,” Gabriela said. “Grumpy. Bye! Jake, dear, don’t strangle.” Gabriela kissed him and left.

“Well, let’s get going,” Jake said.

“Now?”

Jake nodded vigorously.

“My ankle hurts.”

“Oh god, girl.”

****

At nighttime, a candle flickered upon the blonde man as he lay in bed. His face was serene, his eyes softly closed, and his breaths a calm, gentle flow. A young girl of the Sisterhood brought a bucket of water into the room. She wore a white handkerchief tied on her head. She placed the bucket on the bedstand next to the blonde man. She rubbed her nose and scratched the back of her head. She dipped a clean, white rag into the pail of water and lifted the bedsheet. The blonde man

yanked the bedsheet from her grip. He slowly opened his eyes.

"Oh," the girl blushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

The man gazed at the ceiling. "It's fine," he said, and kept his gaze far from her.

The young girl waited for more from the man, but there was silence instead. She placed the rag on the lip of the bucket. "I'll get Rebecca," the girl said.

****

Next to a dusty highway, Jake pitched a tent under the night sky.

He fixed the poles together into the skeleton of a box and stretched the nylon canvas. He hammered the ties into the earth. The wind pushed at the tent and it collapsed.

"Dammit." Jake turned and shook his head at Cristal, who was sitting down and watching him.

Cristal pulled off her backpack and opened the top. "It's okay. We have the sleeping bag."

Jake huddled against Cristal inside a large, well worn sleeping bag. "It's cold," he said.

"You're cold," Cristal said.

"You're hot. Like a coal." Jake stuck his hands under Cristal's back. She jumped. "Thanks," he said.

"Your hands are freezing," Cristal said.

"You always liked the cold."

Their breaths puffed and unraveled into the night. Jake coughed on Cristal's shoulder and cleared his throat. Cristal shook her head.

"Uncle Jake, do you think about my mom?" Cristal said.

"Yeah," Jake mumbled.

"Why did she deserve it?"

Jake looked at his niece.

"She never did anything bad. She was good to us, and you always said she put us first."

"She didn't deserve it, Cristal. I don't know why it happened."

"Is there a god up there?"

"Yes, but it's complicated."

Jake mumbled to himself. Cristal looked into the pitch of night. "She was a good person," she said. "Why don't good people get the good things they make in life?"

Jake shook his head. "She had you, Cristal."

"So?"

"She told me you were the best thing to happen to her." Jake hugged her. "She never got along with your dad. But she was glad she had you, so it was okay. You saved her. She told me time and time again, you kept her true, you made her selfless. She had monsters in her and you kept them at bay."

"Monsters?" Cristal turned to him.

"She hated this world," he said. "She wanted everything gone. Everything burned to a crisp, the bombs could've taken every single building, she wanted that. Her heart was clouded with silent violence. Sometimes I could feel that anger in her, just being in the same room. But you gave her love and it was bigger than this planet." Jake wiped his eyes. "You gave her a reason to keep hope, even when it was hard. Bad things happen to good people, but they get the most magic in life. Every time."

"And her rapists?"

"They gained nothing from her. Their hearts were dead, and a dead heart keeps nothing inside. Sara kept the good you brought in her every day. Even when she was dying. Your dad saw the good in her, and he always loved that about her, too."

"Uncle Jake."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. You have a good heart, like her."

"You do, too. You just have to let it hurt sometimes."

Cristal gazed into the infinite heavens.

"What do you think is really up there?"

"I really don't know."

Cristal searched the stars for an answer. They flickered down upon her. She played thoughts in her head, thoughts of nothingness, thoughts of what somethingness is. There was no final answer, but there was always another question.

That is the comfort of companionship.

She felt Jake's hot breaths on her. Cristal discovered more questions in good company, and that is how we gain our wisdom. We find the questions, the curiosities that have been growing within our experiences. With questions, we build the noble essence of the soul.

And when we ask and share those same questions with another person, and they, in turn, share to us their questions, their yearnings, then have we found a true companion in another.

With sharing, back and forth do we weave the most beautiful tapestries together and they extend infinite.

"Do you know what I think is up there?" Cristal said.

The stars held their unending sentry.

"I think our family is up there. I think my father looks down and sees me. I think he has always been watching. And when he gazes close, really close, I think he's proud of me. That's what I feel.

"I think my mom is up there, too, now. I don't think she's looking out on the farm, where we buried her. She never loved the farm. I never really did, either. I think she's somewhere up there, struggling with all that has happened to her. And I think she will find her peace as well, at some point. At some point not too far off.

"I think there is nothingness up there. And I want to see her glide through the night, from star to star, gathering light,

gathering fire from each star, until she finds her peace. She will find it. I don't know when. I think I'll die before that. But she will find her peace. Just like my father has.

"I want to see her doing that, so I think that's what I'll see."

Jake turned his head toward the sky. "You know what I think?"

Cristal shook her head.

"I think space is vast. It's unending. There's nothing up there, nothing for us people, down here on Earth.

"I think we're all huddled down on this planet, like you and me, in this chilly sleeping bag. I think we're all huddled together, and we're all here to give each other warmth. We're all here to guide each other through this hard life.

"I look at the sky, and all of space above, and I see nothing useful up there. But I see the people who look up into it, who see gentleness and purpose in the empty heavens, and I think those people are incredible people."

Cristal nodded slowly.

"I'm going to read it."

Cristal smiled.

Jake reached over to his backpack. He pulled out a book and from it took out a dark, soiled envelope. He carefully opened the brittle flap and gently pulled a folded piece of paper from it, protecting it from dust and wind. Jake flipped on his stomach and flattened the letter on the sleeping bag, and Cristal propped her head up and gave him space, careful not to touch the old paper. Jake carefully traced his finger starting on the first line so Cristal could follow.

"My Dearest Love,

"I want to tell you this.

"I laid down next to a tree. I brought a book with me—I wrote the book—and as I laid on my back and brought the pages

within my sight, I withdrew them again.

"A maple.

"A trunk expressing its limbs into the open air.

"A pale blue sky.

"Light green leaves, five veiny digits each, gentle in the calm air.

"Let me give you this…"

"Wait, Uncle Jake," Cristal said. "One second."

Jake turned to her.

"I like thinking about trees," she said.

"Me too."

"How high do you think they grow?"

Jake thought. "I don't know. I remember they grow wide, so when the sun gets too hot, it's like an umbrella. It's cool and green under and it feels so good."

"I think they grow high, too," Cristal said.

"I'm sure they do." Jake studied his niece. "Should I stop there?"

Cristal nodded. "I like reading the rest of his words in my head, sometimes."

"I do that a lot, too." Jake glanced down the rest of the sheet. He folded the letter back and placed it in the envelope, and gently placed it in the middle of the tattered book, and rested it into the backpack again. "Your dad was a dreamer, too. Just like you."

Cristal closed her eyes.

"I wish you remembered him."

"I kind of do."

"You remind me of him. In small ways."

"Thanks, uncle Jake."

"You're welcome," he said. "You sniff a lot, like him. And you twitch your nose at weird angles. Just like he did. It's dumb to say that."

"I still like hearing it."

Jake yawned and huddled into her shoulder again. He stuck his cold hands under her back once more. Cristal jolted.

"You're cold," she said. "But I like those people. The ones who are umbrellas to other people." Cristal started to drift into sleep. "Those are incredible people, too."

****

Beside the blonde man's bed, light flickered on Rebecca standing over him and on Esmé, seated and watching.

The blonde man gave as much information to the two women as he could muster. His eyes were vacant.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His hands shook.

"Mister Corey," he said. "The claws of Mister Corey. Please be careful. He's a bad one. A real bad seed. Please."

Esmé reached out and held his hands. "Thank you for sharing all this with us."

Rebecca asked a few more questions of the blonde man. He opened his eyes and divulged to her as much detail as he could muster. Rebecca smiled and thanked him. She turned to Esmé.

"We will talk after," Esmé told Rebecca. She kept her gaze on the man and gently rubbed his hands. "A warrior must know when to fight and when to heal. Rest up, both of you. We will give him his justice, dear Sister, only when we are fully rested and ready."

****

Cristal propped herself on Jake and limped into the town.

They arrived at a well-kept house. A young man was nailing shingles back into place on the side. They knocked on the door and an old, white-haired doctor greeted them and welcomed them in.

****

The band of warriors traveled along a road under the noon sun. They were robed in white cloaks. At the head of the group was the blonde man, sweating into his white cloak. His eyes were fixed on the path that lay in the distance before them.

His mouth was open and he was heaving hard breaths.

Rebecca led them to a pair of trees some distance from the road. The blonde man lay against them in the scant shade. Rebecca offered him her canteen. The man shook his head.

She rested her hand on his shoulder. She looked into the man's eyes and nodded. He wiped sweat off his head and took a deep drink from her canteen.

****

Cristal sat up in a salt bath. Her legs were straight in the bathtub and nearly touched the other side. She drew slow circles with her injured ankle.

The doctor knocked and offered Cristal sliced squash on a plate. Cristal circled her ankle the opposite direction, crunching on the crisp food.

****

The warriors stood outside the ranch, hiding behind an outcropping of cacti. The blonde man pointed out different locations and buildings on the ranch.

Night fell and Rebecca stood beside the main door of Hughes' mansion. Mariposa ducked under the windows and stalked toward the ranchers' quarters.

Gabriela and the blonde man hid around the corner of the crumbling servants' quarters. The blonde man leaned a metal-tipped spear against the side of the building.

Anya practiced light-footed dance moves under shafts of moonlight in the opening of the barn, a twist here, and an opposite twist there.

Hope and Hannah climbed through a wood fence and snuck into the sleeping herd of cattle. A cow opened its large eye. Hannah looked into the deep, gentle eye. She pet its soft neck and placed a finger on her lips to silently shush the beast.

Hope slowly weaved through to get to the gate. She hooked her ax on a fencepost. She turned around and fixed her gaze on Rebecca. Her hand rested by the gate's latch.

Rebecca lifted and held her fist straight up. She waited several moments until she brought her fist down, stood before his door, and called out Stanley Hughes' name.

****

Cristal had laid down to bed. Her ankle was wrapped and was propped up on a few pillows. She brought her face close to the window and searched through the limitless expanse of night. Her breath fogged the glass. She pulled her face back

from the pane. She slowly tapped her finger on the fog, tracing a squiggle.

She turned to her other side. Jake was twisting around on a small cot.

Cristal turned back and searched the dark sky again.

****

A rancher waved a torch in offense.

Anya twirled a dodge and slashed her katana in an upward strike. The torch fell and she picked it up, shook off a loose hand, and tossed it onto the ranchers' quarters.

Gabriela and the blonde man directed the old and slow servants out of their quarters and away from the violence. A few stood by and watched the ranchers' quarters alight.

The last few cattle stampeded out of the corral. Hannah followed the stragglers, spanking them loudly.

The dust from the stampede started to settle. From a distance, a horse slowed and stopped its trot. A large man dismounted. He dropped a dark lacquered wood box by his feet.

Hannah turned around and watched the large stranger calmly approach her.

****

Jake yawned and stretched as wide as he could manage. He stood up and rubbed his eyes. He walked toward Cristal's bed and her head shifted slightly back and forth. Jake picked up a bedsheet balled under her arm. He carefully unwound it and

laid it across her chest and the top of her thighs.

He walked into the bathroom and poured water into a glass. A light flickered from one of the rooms.

He peeked into the room. Books lined the study and it was musty from the old, brittle tomes. The doctor turned up from an old book he was reading. He waved Jake toward an open chair. Jake sat down and kicked his feet onto an ottoman and drank his water. The doctor returned to his book.

****

Hannah knelt and threw knives at the large fighter.

He blocked two of them with his shiny steel claw. The third knife hit him in the middle of his thigh. He looked down at his thick cords of muscles and pulled the knife out. He watched his blood drip down the blade and tossed it aside.

Hannah drew her two short swords and tipped up on the balls of her feet, shifting in the dusty soil.

Anya's katana danced through the air, throwing and reflecting orange light from the smoldering rancher's quarters. She paused.

She turned to the empty corral and watched a large man plunge a steel claw through Hannah's body. He tossed her aside several feet. Hope ran yelling toward her sister.

Anya knocked out the last rancher with a roundhouse. She swore and sprinted toward Mister Corey.

****

Jake was slumped back over the chair.

The doctor laid a throw over Jake's chest.

He went into the kitchen and picked up a tea kettle.

He filled the tea mug on the table next to Jake.

The doctor placed the kettle back on the cold stove. He entered the room and heard Jake whispering something. A word. A name.

The doctor straightened the throw on Jake's restless body. He tucked him tighter. Jake's sleep slowly calmed. He patted Jake's head and picked up an old candle snuffer, and then the study went dark.

****

Hope held her axe up horizontal in front of her. The metal claw crashed down on her weapon and she staggered back.

Mister Corey's face turned into a slight smile.

Hope righted her axe. Her fingers felt the grooves freshly cut into the wood handle of her weapon. Her heart pounded loud in her ears, and through her body, and it shook her entirety. She slowed her breaths and paced around Mister Corey's right side. Hope slowly raised her axe a few inches higher.

Mister Corey tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

She swung at his neck full bore. Her footing slipped. A blade from the claw cut across her right arm and she fell into her own attack, almost fell down and tumbled by his large feet, except she twirled farther than she had planned, a seeming twist of wind caught her back and her loosened foot hit earth again, and then the force of wind pulled her back. Her feet scrambled to keep up pace, to stay under her legs, and when her heart stopped pounding, and her vision unblurred, she felt

Anya's hand gripping her left arm, and her other arm firmly wrapped by her waist. Anya let her go and she almost fell.

Anya tapped Hope's shoulder twice.

Hope propped herself up with the handle of her axe.

Anya tapped her shoulder twice. Harder. Hope nodded and slowly walked back.

Anya straightened her pose and held her katana vertical to her left side, Hassō-no-Kamae.

Mister Corey walked toward her.

His attack came at her left side, and Anya pushed her katana into the claw's path. She blocked his swing and used the momentum to twirl clockwise and toward his arm—the one with the claw—and followed through to sever his elbow. But Mister Corey flicked the fingers of his claw back and deflected Anya's strike and punched her in the chest with his opposite hand.

Anya stumbled. She took two steps back and got her feet under her. He was faster than she anticipated.

She drew her katana by her side again but the claw strikes came from seemingly every angle. As she deflected one blow, he flexed his fingers and she had to deflect two more blows from a different direction. The five blades twisted toward her gnashing like teeth of a monster. Anya's katana danced through every direction she could figure and she twisted her body as hard as she could to keep from losing too much ground. She prayed Hope had already gotten away so she could make a break from the furious attacks.

Mister Corey pushed Anya farther into the dark, and his blades were becoming harder for her to see. Hope said something from behind her. She wasn't sure what she could do. It was a losing position and there was little time left.

"Corey!"

Mister Corey brought all his blades together and swung full force at Anya's core. She blocked with her katana and was

knocked far back. Hope caught her.

It was a hit to knock her down. Not to finish her.

The heavy strike of Rebecca's loud call still rung in Anya's ears.

Mister Corey turned around. The light of the dying fire cast Rebecca in a silhouette. Her longer tachi was curved toward him, above her head and pointing at the level of his neck. She raised her other hand and brought two fingers beside the face of the blade.

****

Cristal flexed her toes.

Her ankle ached. She bent down and rubbed it. She should have been more generous with her rest.

A pinch shot up from her foot through her entire leg. She paused for a moment, and then relaxed her leg down.

Cristal closed her eyes. She would feel lonely by herself, sometimes. Sometimes she felt like she was falling through an endless pit, her stomach turned, pulling straight down. Sometimes she would grab at the rocks and roots on the sides of the pit. Sometimes she would find a handhold, and sometimes not. Falling forever and still falling. Tonight was a perfect night for that, for closing her eyes and descending into endless thought.

But this time she landed on something. It was hard. It was like a steel platform.

It was Jake, who was too soft for her to deal with, but who was always there at the right time. It was her mother for, even though most her life she was chair-bound, Cristal had seen the weight of her mom's responsibility and felt her strength when she took that responsibility upon her own

shoulders.

It was her father, a man she met when she was too young to remember, who was a phantom and yet whose brief love continued to ripple through her.

It was her new family, Esmé and Hope and even Gabriela, the kind Anya, the obnoxious Mariposa, Hannah's dumb jokes and Rebecca's tolerance of them, all of whom were her footing in this new life.

As a stomach is satisfied with food, a heart fills with memories. Cristal's memories of the people who loved her were not actually steel plates, though they felt strong, nor were they the ground beneath her feet.

They were her.

Cristal looked at Jake's empty cot. She smiled thinking of his restless stomach. She thought of the vow they shared with the Sisterhood, to deliver justice for the wronged. To defend those unable to defend themselves.

And she thought for a moment that was the same as defending the love that had strengthened her heart.

****

The claw came quick.

Rebecca gripped the handle of her tachi and held the far end of the blade against her two fingers. She deflected the rapid strikes of Mister Corey's incessant claw, the clang of his metal and ringing Japanese steel fighting each other in her ears.

He spread his fingers apart and flicked his blades slashing at her, cutting wild angles through the air. Rebecca saw the blades of the claws, the orange reflections of coals from the torched ranchers' quarters, each blade a blood red thrust at one of her vital points.

The tachi connected with each deadly firefly shooting toward her. Her sword rung, deflecting each attack. It sang and then she pinched the top of the blade firmly and when the next firefly came, she hooked it and arched the attack back toward the man.

Mister Corey flinched. He carefully guided the blade from out of his side. A dark slash oozed blood down through his jeans and he flung his claw up to block Rebecca's next assault.

She came down upon him in rapid strikes of steel lightning. Mister Corey straightened his claw like a shield to protect himself from her hammering.

Rebecca continued her strikes from above and pulled back her tachi and when Mister Corey took half a moment to breathe the steel dragon flew up from under him and sliced through his thumb.

One claw dropped straight into the ground. Its luster was pockmarked with dents and dings and also blood from his severed thumb trickling down an edge.

Rebecca's fury rained down upon him twice as hard. Mister Corey kept his claw straight and he continued blocking the attacks. He moved into a defensive position and propped up his claw with his other arm. Rebecca came at him faster and pulled back to deliver the finishing blow. But the loose claw flew toward her, kicked up into the air by Mister Corey, and she dodged the flying blade and severed thumb but didn't manage to dodge being rammed by Mister Corey's heavy shoulder.

Rebecca fell to the ground. He kicked her and flicked his claw at her face. He was losing strength, but she could barely deflect the heavy blades from her poor position. Mister Corey's blood flicked over Rebecca's face and she grit her teeth, desperate to outlast his failing strength.

Mister Corey's face was slowly fading and he was starting to get drowsy when a sudden shock shot through his

eyes. He snarled and kicked Rebecca hard away. She rolled and struggled to get up.

Mister Corey turned around to face the blonde lover. He pulled the metal-tipped spear with his claw from out of his back. He gripped the wood handle with his claw and destroyed it.

The blonde man trembled.

Mister Corey towered above him. Sweat dripped down his jaw and off his chin and ran into drips of blood and ran down his muscular chest.

The blonde man looked up at Mister Corey. His breaths slowed and he stood before the man who would kill him.

The four claws sliced through the blonde man and Mister Corey sighed in satisfaction. An axe thundered into the top of his skull. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. His eyes bulged and twitched, and then rolled back.

Mister Corey fell onto his knees. His body shook and he finally collapsed.

Dust kicked up from Mister Corey's corpse. Hope slowly set her foot on his back and pulled her axe from his skull.

****

Rebecca walked toward the main residence. The door was ripped off its hinges.

The servants stopped gorging themselves and watched Rebecca walk by. Her tachi dripped blood onto the fine carpet.

The bedroom door was locked. Rebecca slammed her shoulder into it and broke through. Lord Hughes turned toward her and rapidly combed his hair. His face broke into a nervous smile and he petted down and neatened his silk night robe as Rebecca approached him.

She stood over him. Lord Hughes smiled as brightly as he could.

She grabbed him by his silk collar.

She dragged him out before the entrance of the main residence. The servants, old and malnourished and scarred, crippled, watched Rebecca toss Lord Hughes onto the dirt.

He pushed himself up and glanced up at the young warriors surrounding him. Hughes smiled and nodded to them.

Rebecca grabbed the back of his robe and sat him up. He continued to smile and nod vigorously to the unflinching warriors. Rebecca stood behind him.

She drew up her tachi high and almost swung down.

She closed her eyes.

Rebecca turned around and looked at the servants crowding Hughes' porch. Some of the women peeked through, wearing his rich, large robes.

Rebecca flicked the blood off her sword and sheathed it.

She motioned for the Sisterhood to give more space around Hughes. His former servants inched closer. One frail man broke away from the crowd and walked into the Sisterhood's circle.

The frail man glowered down on Hughes. His smile trembled away. The frail man smacked Hughes loudly. He almost jumped at the frail man but Hope took a step forward and Hughes sat back down again.

Hughes' smile contorted. "I, I, I—"

The rest of his servants entered the circle and gave Hughes a piece of mind. The Sisterhood watched. The sky lightened a shade and then the dawn started to come. The people shuffled away, back into their beds, and Rebecca dragged Lord Hughes' body off.

****

The worn young women entered Santa Elena.

They marched toward the dojo. Esmé came out before the dojo in a sky blue kimono. She watched them approach silently.

The girls stood in front of her. Hope trembled and didn't meet eye contact with her. Gabriela carried Anya, pale and shivering. The girls parted to the sides quietly.

Rebecca carried Hannah's bloodied body toward the dojo.

Esmé took the body of Hannah from Rebecca's arms and cradled her. "Get inside," she said. "I will take care of our fallen Sister."

The warriors humbly entered the dojo. The small girls scattered out of their way and whimpered.

****

Rebecca wrapped herself tightly in blankets. The sun was full and heat flowed through the dorm room but Rebecca was huddled in bed with a cold sweat dripping down her temples.

"I just, I don't know." Rebecca shook her head.

"I'm sorry," Esmé said.

Esmé's blue kimono was browned with dried blood. A young girl came into the room and gave her a tray with hot tea and an apple. Esmé thanked her and placed the tray to the side.

Rebecca shuddered and heaved. "I, I, Hannah. The claws. Right through her."

"I'm sorry, my love," Esmé said.

Rebecca slowly shook her head. "He warned us. He was so big. But I didn't think he was fast. He was really fast. Hannah. And almost Hope. Almost Anya."

Esmé held Rebecca's hand.

"You're going to say something, right?" Tears pooled in Rebecca's eyes.

Esmé shook her head.

"Something smart." Tears dripped down her cheeks. "Something wise. I don't know."

Esmé squeezed her hand tightly. "I am here and I share this pain with you."

"Something. Anything." Rebecca rubbed her head. "Something has to come from her death."

"Maybe," Esmé said. "It will not come right now."

"It, it hurts so bad, Esmé. So bad."

"I hurt with you, my Sister."

Rebecca squeezed her eyes. She wrapped herself tightly with the blanket and her teeth chattered. Esmé squeezed her shoulder.

"Why?" Rebecca said.

Esmé shook her head softly.

Rebecca turned on her side and shook. Esmé patted her thigh and watched the terrible pain she was in. She stood up to get the cup of tea.

Something caught Esmé's attention.

She turned to the window. She was silent for a moment.

Esmé turned to Rebecca. "Sister." She squeezed Rebecca's shoulder hard. "We must get up. Now."

EPISODE V: THE STOLEN FUTURE
Part 1: Fire

Doctor Edwards wrapped his hands around Cristal's ankle. "I'm going to press," he said. "Tell me if you feel any pain. Any pain."

"I will," Cristal said.

"Okay," Doctor Edwards said. "I'm starting now."

His fingers pressed around the back of Cristal's heel. He studied her face. He pressed harder, and studied her face again. He moved his fingers under her ankle and pressed. He looked at Cristal. He pressed harder. He studied her face again.

Cristal rotated her ankle. She pointed directly at him, flexed back, pointed at him again.

He felt her shin above the ankle.

He wrapped his hands around her ankle again. He pressed his thumbs into the tendons.

"Ow!"

"Oh!" Doctor Edwards withdrew. "I'm sorry."

Jake bit his lip. "Doctor, is Cristal going to fully recover?"

Doctor Edwards smiled. "She's more than recovered. Your niece is tip top. I just dug my thumb in there to make sure she wasn't lying about the pain. Remember, Cristal: pain warns you about serious damage. Listen to pain. Now you two are

good to go."

Jake thanked him and they left to follow the highway back. "I like Doctor Edwards. He's a nice guy."

"Me too. Do you think people are born that way?"

"What way?" Jake said.

"Nice," Cristal said.

A gust of wind kicked up a brief toss of dust and Cristal pulled her hood tight.

"You're nice," Cristal said.

"Really?"

"You always consider me and Gabriela. I think I got jealous. But you're always thinking about other people."

"Oh. Thanks," Jake said.

"You make me think people are born nice."

Jake shrugged. "Sometimes they are."

The sun hit its apex. Jake covered his head with a loose light blue handkerchief.

"It's tough for me."

"Your foot?"

"Not that," Cristal said. "Being kind. Thinking of other people. It feels like I have to force it."

"Huh?"

"I don't know."

Jake's handkerchief darkened with sweat. Dust clung to it, making it look aged. Cristal pumped air through her white cloak.

Cristal said, "I don't like that it's hard for me to think of other people. I don't know why people like me, sometimes."

Jake said, "We all have talents. That's what we're given. But sometimes where we place our energy is more important. Those decisions show us what our values are, where we invest our talents."

"That's really wise," Cristal said.

"Esmé taught me that," Jake said.

Santa Elena slowly crept into view.

"Do you think that's why they're kind to me? The Sisterhood?" Cristal said. "Because I try?"

"I think that's a plenty good reason," Jake said.

"And if I was naturally nice, like some people," Cristal smiled, "you think they'd like me less?"

"Who said I liked you? You're my family."

"Gabriela got to you. Now you're mean."

"Well, I am stuck with you."

Cristal said, "But what if my kindness was just who I was?"

"They'd still like you," Jake said. "The Sisterhood values choice, and also who you lend your talents to."

Cristal took down her hood. She slowed her pace, studying the destination of their journey.

Jake said, "I mean, as long as you keep doing decent things. Though, sometimes, most times, I wonder about you."

"Something's wrong," Cristal said.

****

The old linen factory was quiet, abandoned. A group of horses had trotted before it and sighed, shifted with impatience.

"This the one?" A rider had said.

"Seems it," another rider said.

Eight mounted cowboys stood in front of the linen factory. They wore dark shirts, blues and grays and monochromes and near-monochromes. They wore pistols and a few wore rifles on their backs, single shot, semi- and full-auto. Two held torches. Their horses shuddered and flicked their ears at the air. "Let's check," the second man said. He nodded to one of the riders in the back.

A young, clean shaven rider approached the front of the group and tossed a clump of rags.

A pile of bloody clothes hit the ground a dozen feet from the entrance of the abandoned linen factory. It hit with a thud and dust kicked up from the impact.

The dust settled. The horses continued to flick their ears.

"Must not be the place," the second rider said.

****

Cristal and Jake passed through on the main thoroughfare of Santa Elena. It was quiet, unstirred by conversation or work or wild, playful pets. Cristal felt eyes peer upon her as she passed each house.

Jake pointed. "Over there."

A splintered door was ripped off its hinges, far from its home. Two ragged bodies were tossed not far from the fragments of the door.

Cristal peeked inside the open house. Nothing within stirred. Cristal entered the house and came out brandishing two large cooking knifes.

She handed one to Jake. He took up a position on the opposite side of the street. Cristal slipped by the edge of the house on the corner. She glanced around the corner of the house.

"Oh, dear god," she said.

****

The first rider had motioned for the cowboys to trace backward on their path, away from the linen factory. The first cowboy had started to lead the group away at a slow trot, with the second cowboy at the rear.

He smiled.

The second cowboy shouted to one of the mounted men. He grabbed one of the torches, and yanked the reins of his horse and back to the linen factory again. He tossed the flaming torch on the roof of the building and stood by.

The group of cowboys halted and faced the building as it started to smolder.

"It's empty, anyway." The second cowboy laughed. He motioned for two riders to follow him. They lightly trotted to the other side of the building, and the cowboy chatted with the pair following him until a knife flew through the air and thudded into his temple and he tumbled forcefully off his horse.

The group panicked.

They unloaded clip after clip of bullets into the burning building. The first cowboy shouted to the men to hold their ammo. The group split into two and surrounded the exits of the factory.

"Come out, come out," the first cowboy said.

One of the riders thought he saw a brief flash of steel from within.

****

Cristal and Jake gazed down the main thoroughfare.

A black crater had opened up before them, a large, hard scab in their once-boisterous town. What had once been their dojo, where they trained, where they ate, where they learned and gossiped and laughed and comforted each other, it was

gone. All that remained were the charred ribs of a building, rising up from a broken foundation.

The houses surrounding the dojo had been blackened, collateral damage, and the few closest to the dojo were decimated, no longer recognizable. They were collapsed in upon themselves.

And strewn about every part of the wreckage were bodies. Foul victims littered the street, were frozen in retreat from the collapsed homes, were blackened with blood, some broken, some unrecognizable.

For all the carnage and destruction that had happened, it was the smell that got to Cristal.

"They just left them all here," she said.

Jake grasped her shoulder.

The niece and uncle walked toward their former home. Flies buzzed. The bodies were more mangled than what they saw from a distance. The silence of the town was suffused with persistent, soft, spine-tingling murmurs of maggots as they walked by. Jake shivered. Friend and foe were strewn about. Horses rotted open sores under the sun. Limbs turned up with no clear owners, but Cristal paid those no mind. She studied the bodies for their faces, their names. The girls she knew. She tried not to, but her eyes drew to them.

"Rebecca," Jake said.

****

A knife had thudded in the flank of one of the horses.

Another young cowboy was thrown off his mount. The horse screamed and jumped, dancing wildly in pain. The other cowboys jerked their reins in an attempt to calm their steeds. Young girls poured from the factory through the windows, dashing into the corners of the town. The men trained their rifles

on them, shooting, until the young cowboy's severed head flew up into the air, and over them, and landed behind them skipping in puffs of dry soil.

A quiet whoosh, like the sound of a bird's flight, and a man's shrieks of agony. The hit of a limb on hard soil. A white glint of steel stuck in another man's eyes for a few moments.

The first cowboy searched around for the hidden enemy. A slip behind him, the crunch of a shoe on dirt, and he saw them—her—a hawk in flight, the eyes of a hunter. Hair tangled in gore. The guidance of a bloodstained katana.

Reinforcements came and shot the remainder of their scouting group and kept shooting until they eventually hit their intended target.

Cristal turned Rebecca onto her back and folded her arms across her chest. Cristal stood up from her leader and looked at the entrance of their dojo—the pile of ash that was the entrance—and tried to make out something there. She walked closer. She halted herself and closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Jake said.

"She fought," Cristal said.

****

The reinforcements had been sizeable, over a dozen horses and men. They had dashed around the aching inferno and whooped and shot in the air.

A fresh-faced cowboy dismounted and laughed. He peeked in one of the windows. The cowboys behind him goaded him. Dared him.

He glanced at the doorway. He pointed his pistol in and laughed.

The group of cowboys cheered his bravery. The

fresh-faced recruit nodded to himself and dashed into the raging blaze gun first. He slipped backward right at the doorway and Catalina was grabbing his arm and was twisting it around and back almost full circle. He was disarmed of his gun and before he could make sense of why he was lying on the floor in a burning factory with a teenage girl glaring down at him, there was a fast motion—something large, a blade, an axe—came down upon him and he wasn't sure why nor where it came from, only that it was the end.

****

Cristal folded the arms of Catalina and Hope onto their chests.

She got up. Jake stood on the opposite side of the ashes of the dojo. "This way," he said.

Cristal and Jake followed a trail of bodies strewn about, all over the street, mangled and devastated, horses and girls and townsfolk and men and very young men drawn by a false promise of power.

Jake's footing stumbled. He fell to his knees. "Gah, Gah, oh goooooood." He retched and spilled his stomach out on the ground.

"Get up." Cristal said. "Don't sit down. Stand until it passes."

She offered her hand. Jake grasped her and she pulled him up, straight into a tight embrace. His arms wrapped around her with the weight of lead. "Oh Gaby," he said.

****

Girls had screamed and ran down side streets. Within two moments hooves thundered down chasing after them.

"Oh god, I'm going to die with you."

"It was destiny, Gabriela."

"Shut up."

Gabriela and Mariposa hid behind a wood fence, ducking out and directing their young charges down different paths.

Thundering hooves started closing in.

"Maybe two blocks," Mariposa said. "You know, it could be worse. After all, I have to die with *you*. And your boringness!"

"Can you ever, ever shut your mouth?"

"Is it prettier open or closed?"

"CLOSED."

"I walked into that one," Mariposa said.

The first rider rounded the corner.

"Thank you," Mariposa said. "For back then. For all of it."

"You already thanked me."

"And now I'm thanking you again, my friend."

"Thank you, too, my friend." Gabriela said. "I'll let the first two go by."

"Two?" Mariposa studied the rider's trajectory through the slits in the fence. "You think I can't handle three?"

"You're too pretty for that. But I'll let you try."

Mariposa knelt and limped her wrist, holding a rope lasso. "You think I can hit my target this time?"

Gabriela readied her naginata. "You've got good aim," she said.

Jake placed his hands on Gabriela's crossed arms. Her eyes were closed, in rest. Cristal folded Mariposa's arms, farther off.

The sun started its descent.

****

Hateful gray smoke had poured into the open air through Santa Elena.

A sweaty, bearded cowboy had picked up a sparring stick from the hard ground.

A girl had grit her teeth, raising her hands, ready to partially block the incoming hit.

A hand deftly had wrapped up the loose sleeve of a light blue kimono, rust brown with dried blood, around the wrist and then tucked firmly in.

The man raised the sparring stick into the smoky air and he swung down with his entire might. The gentle hand slipped just above his grip.

The man stumbled forward, losing his footing and the stick.

The man turned around to face Esmé in a bloodstained, sky blue kimono. He lunged at her and she held the sparring stick in front of her, keeping her distance between them. The man pulled back a hard swing and young arms wrapped around it and threw him down to the ground. Esmé tossed the sparring stick to its new owner.

Esmé continued walking down one of the more distant streets and shouted loud commands to the girls and to the house owners along the way. She pointed and yelled and directed the frantic traffic.

A small girl lay in Esmé's path crying. She held her knee.

"Come here, my child," Esmé said as she picked her up.

She waved the last few stragglers into houses quickly closing their doors.

The riders came down from the other end of the street.

Esmé held the small girl close to her breast and

whispered to her.

The riders torched houses with loose burning planks and brands as their horses tore down the dirt street. They surrounded Esmé. She pet the small child shivering in her arms.

The hooves slowed their thunder and they lightly shifted in the dirt back and forth. She was surrounded completely.

The cowboys chatted amongst themselves. They looked around aimlessly. A few broke ranks and continued lighting homes on fire.

The trot of a horse stopped and a man in a black cowboy hat and black clothing dismounted.

The riders parted for him. "It's done," he said. "It's over. Y'all're done. All of you. Dead."

Sheriff Sanchez spat. He turned his head up and slowly resumed to his chew.

"This town now? It's a crater. In two hours—no, less—there won't be a single house in this shithole. It's not even going to be a shithole left. No one will come by to even shit in this town no more. It's not a town. It's done. It was one, and now it's done."

Esmé whispered susurrus to the child in her arms.

"Everything you've done: gone. Everyone you know: dead. Everything you've ever wanted to do: the wind. It's all gone." The sheriff tapped on his watch. "In four minutes, you'll be dead. No, you won't even be dead. You'll be nothing. There'll be no one left to say your name. No one will be shit dumb enough to make that mistake again."

The child nodded off in Esmé's warm breast.

"It was a good run, you know. I've heard things about all y'all." The sheriff smiled at his men. "Maybe y'all can believe it. You never know. It's possible." He turned back toward Esmé. "Now everything's over. It's even worse than that: it's undone. Everything you've done in this life is gone. Dust in the wind. It never existed."

The child flitted her eyelids on Esmé's breast. She rubbed her thumb gently over the girl's hair.

"Only I'll know what your name is. And in one more minute, I'll never need to remember it again. It's about power. It's about strength, it's might, it's all power. Horses, guns. These things win. They win battles. They win wars. They win all of history. Didn't you know?"

Esmé faced Sheriff Sanchez.

"Was that too much of the truth for you, you stupid bitch?"

A howl of wind threw a coil of smoke through the group and through Esmé. It scattered off again. The child cooed lightly in her arms and Esmé's soft eyes lingered on him.

"Nothing? Nothing at all?" Sheriff Sanchez grinned. "Nothing for me to forget?"

Esmé kissed the sleeping child in her arms. The riders tightened ranks around her.

"In the grand arc, I persist."

****

Cristal sat by Esmé's body.

Cristal's legs were folded in. She kept her head down. Her eyes were closed.

Her chest rose slowly and sank slowly again.

Her shadow cast over Esmé. The sun was on its way to setting.

"Cristal," Jake said.

Her breaths continued slow and unperturbed.

"Cristal, we have to bury them."

Cristal nodded.

"We can use the hole Rebecca dug. It's what we got."

"That's a koi pond," Cristal said.

"Then help me."

Jake hammered a pickax into the soil. Sweat streamed down his bare chest and ran rivulets down his back. His sweat dripped heavily off his elbows. He swung hard, he swung with hate and pain and fear. He rested the pickax by his side, and while Cristal shoveled out the dirt he loosened, he wiped his brow with a balled up damp shirt.

An old woman laid down a tub of water and two glasses for them and left.

The sun splashed the land in hues of red. Jake and Cristal continued their tedious, hard work.

A small boy peeked out from a charred ruin. A girl peeked out from behind him.

Jake hammered in at the earth. He wiped his whole face and panted into his shirt. Cristal tossed the dirt onto a soft pile. Her eyes stared only at the hole, and when Jake started to break the next hole into the dirt, her eyes fixed only on that.

A man with a shovel took up a spot four feet from Jake. He tapped the tip into the soil and slammed his foot on the lip of the shovel. It didn't budge. He left and came back with a large hoe to scrape at and break the hard dirt.

The night cast itself over them.

A young girl planted a torch in a loose mound of dirt. She lit it and the fire crackled and light tore through the darkened graveyard.

Men and woman worked around Jake and Cristal, breaking up the soil, digging holes in the dense earth every four feet, and around them scores of candles lit the spaces for the next graves, placed every four feet.

****

It was past noon when Cristal awoke.

Her bed was a sticky hot sponge of sweat and sore muscles. She rubbed her shoulders out. She rubbed her thighs out. Her hands tightened. She rubbed her palms out, carefully, slowly and going up and down each finger.

Jake lay face down in another bed.

They were in one of the Sisterhood's farther dorms. There was a third, unoccupied bed. There was one dresser. Two plastic buckets of stuff. Their old bedroom was now cinders. No belongings. Nothing left.

Jake shook his head into his pillow.

Cristal continued stretching herself out. She slowly plodded out of the bedroom and out of the small apartment building. She looked around outside. Some doorways had been ripped open. No loose doors in the street. No charred houses, not in the far end of Santa Elena.

A boy dashed toward Cristal, and adjusted his pace. He walked quickly and balanced a plate of breakfast in his hands and dropped it off at Cristal's feet.

Fried potatoes and eggs. The boy dashed back with a second plate, and his brother dropped off Jake's rifle and a box of bullets. A small girl met eyes with Cristal, and she laid down something wrapped and bound in a sack. Cristal unwrapped it.

It was the wakizashi. The smaller of the pair of daishō.

Cristal slowly unsheathed the blade up from the scabbard. She stopped midway, looking at the blade. She returned the younger dragon to her scabbard, her home, then picked up both plates and Jake's rifle and returned to the dorm.

****

The katana lay across Cristal's bed.

Jake continued on another plate of food.

Cristal opened the top of the dresser. Jake watched her pull out stacks of clothing.

"I'll ask around for something," Jake said.

Cristal sorted the clothing into piles. "There might be something here."

Jake tried on a printed tee. "Too tight."

He held a pair of wool dress pants in front of him. The legs spilled past his feet. "Nope."

He twirled a pair of happy cartoon bus undies. "No thank you."

Cristal caught the pair of cartoon undies mid-flight. "Who do you think lives here?"

Jake licked his finger and attacked the remaining yolk on the plate. "Storage."

"But the Sisterhood never had men. Or boys. Or women this old." Cristal held up a dull cotton nightie.

"Well, they clearly welcomed one man, and maybe they were prepared to expand their ranks." He finished cleaning the plate. "At least they didn't predict having my size anywhere."

Cristal stacked the clothing on her bed by age and gender. One of the piles she placed down crackled.

"There's paper," Jake said.

"So? It's in someone's pocket."

"I can read it."

Cristal patted through the articles of clothing in the pile. She found the crinkle in a pair of jeans. It was three sheets of folded paper.

Jake unfolded it and studied it intently.

"What is it?"

Jake showed the paper to her. "It's a list."

"A list of what?"

"Names."

Cristal looked the paper up and down. “Names? Like Victor Dennings?”

Jake’s finger traced over the writing. “And Stanley Hughes, Palito Blanco, TX. US Cattle Co., human trafc. Logan Evers, X-Plore. Under Victor it says San Marcos, TX, media. And then it has some random letters. These are the names. All of them.”

Cristal sifted through a plastic bucket. There were knickknacks and toys and odds and ends. She dumped the contents on Jake’s bed next to him.

“Toy cars?” Jake said.

Cristal held a large class ring. “And jewelry.”

The two sorted through the bucket of junk and tossed back the garbage. They were left with the heavy emerald class ring from ‘71, a wine cork with a cursive name P Wellington, and a cracked plastic badge.

“This one’s on the list.” Jake mouthed the name off the badge. “Estéban Garcia, Riviera, TX. Sen, chair of,” he struggled, “something, ENR, some initials. This picture’s worthless, though. It’s too young, and he’s wearing some stupid sailor hat.”

“Where do you think this stuff came from?” Cristal said.

“Esmé loved to travel.” Jake flipped through the list. “Do we know a Patricia Wilson?”

“No. Why?”

Jake frowned. “She lives in San Benito. Just like Old Bastard.”

“What’s it say about her?”

“Patricia Wilson, San Benito, TX, donor, and a really big number. No, two really big numbers.” Jake shook his head. “Some sort of ID or something. I don’t know. You think Tío Viejo knows her?”

Cristal said, “She’s scum enough to be on the list. Of

course he knows her. Half of San Benito is cruel, snobby assholes."

Jake nodded. Cristal cleared her bed back into the dresser. The katana lay across the bed. The sheath was decorated with mythical creatures, the tang tightly wrapped in dark leather.

Jake folded the three sheets of paper again and placed them in the dresser. "Let's see how far this Garcia guy is."

****

Cristal and Jake sat in the ashes of their former dojo. Cristal propped up a whiteboard on a remaining piece of burned column. She tapped at her paintbrush.

Jake guided his finger over a roadmap. They meticulously planned their route and Jake added up the distance as precisely as he could.

He scratched his eyebrow. "It'll take three full days," he said.

"You think he did this?" Cristal said.

"He probably knows who did."

Cristal tapped a rhythm on the paintbrush.

Jake stood up. "How do you think we'll find the right one?"

Cristal tied her katana to her waist. "We just have to find the old man who thinks he's still calling the shots."

"Vague as usual."

Cristal tapped one last rhythm on the katana. "Uncle Jake," Cristal said, "could you write something for me?"

****

Two figures walked from Santa Elena and away from the declining sun. The graveyard by the former dojo was marked with pieces of wood and small stones, some with initials, many with only markings of a cross or a heart.

At the head of the fresh graveyard sat a white slat of marble. On it was a poem, painted crudely in green.

the elder dragon
walks the earth, wings of pale sky
always lifting up

EPISODE V
Part 2: The King of Nothing

You command one life
Just yours
Just that
And when you command another's
You give up your own helm

****

A large, dark room held over a hundred canvasses of all sizes of portraits of all colors. Each portrait was of a different vestment on the same man; he sported suits and tuxedos and robes and war gear. The subject of the portraits had white hair, blue eyes, and a vibrant, healthy face with a stern smile and a strong chin.

A youthful painter wiped sweat from his brow. He scratched his nose and smudged paint on his face again. He sighed in exhaustion and heat and undid a button on his vari-stained shirt, dabbing his brush in paint again. He returned to painting his benefactor.

The old gentleman sat wearing a loose white robe, perched on a stool. He adjusted his spine from a slouch and scratched at the bald spot in his white hair nervously. His chin and jawline were stubbled with salt and pepper wisps, and his cheeks had red folds from much and frequent sleep. His eyes were also red and puffed, and his upper lip not smooth and not shaved, but lightly hirsute, the extent of his natural mustache. Where the red folds that crossed his face did not draw attention, the skin on his cheeks and face drew tightly and dryly, stretched off of harsh angles of cheek bone. His body drooped into a slouch again and he propped his tired chin on his palm, rubbing his face in frustration. It was an effect of birdlike nerves and angles that made him look like a crow perched on a loose wire. "Are we almost done?" the benefactor moaned.

"A moment, Your Highness," the youthful painter, Lee, said. He always maintained his composure with His Highness's impatience. "Just a little more and then I can finish the rest."

The benefactor yawned. He turned to a middle-aged woman reading a tattered paperback. She pushed a few blades of bright blonde hair behind her ear. Her green eyes fixed in her copy of "Le Comte de Monte-Cristo."

"You're jealous," the benefactor said to Eve.

She raised an eyebrow. Eve closed the book and turned her attention to him. She adjusted her facial expression from surprise to a smile, and she responded, "Yes. I am."

"Of course you are," the benefactor said. "My strength does that to people. Even women."

"It does," Eve replied.

The benefactor turned toward the wall again. His eyes almost grazed past the sweating man painting his portrait, but he made sure not to acknowledge him with so much as eye contact. The benefactor kept talking to Eve. "Man lusts for power. He will always do anything to take that power. And

woman, too, often enough."

"Yes." She turned back to her tattered book. "That is true."

"Power turns the skies and it commands the seas. It takes strength to wield power, and only a god's will to use it. It shapes nature and brings people to heel. Power is the prow that cuts through the chaos of waves."

"Indeed," the woman said, focused on her book.

"I wonder if you might find you want to take mine," the benefactor said.

"I wonder as well," she said without conviction.

The benefactor grew bored and yawned again. He stood up and stretched. "I am done," he told Lee.

"Thank you," the painter said. "That was impeccable timing, of course, my King. You may leave, Your Highness."

"Don't forget my garland," the royal Garcia said while marching out.

"I will paint it in," Lee said. The portrait showed a healthy, full-cheeked and virile god in an elegant Greek toga. He wiped his paint-dabbled brows and dipped his brush into the green shades on his palette and sketched the outline of a garland. When King Garcia left, Eve stood up, opened a shade to let in light, and sat back down to her novel.

****

The sun poured down upon a long road stretching through the dusty wasteland.

Cristal and Jake marched beside the road and through sweltering waves of heat. Cristal's white cloak lightly fluttered with their pace, and Jake's sport jacket was soaked through with sweat.

"It's too hot today," Jake said. "We should take a break."

"Justice should not rest," Cristal said.

Jake took a sip from his leather canteen. "Water's low," he managed in the heat.

It took some time for the pair to come to a small town. They passed empty gas stations and hollow warehouses and broken businesses and, eventually, empty monochrome houses. In search of water, Cristal knocked on a weathered house.

The door creaked open with her knock.

She briefly glanced inside. The small family was desiccated, long dead, and there was no longer a smell, nor any animals to have feasted on the dry, dark cadavers. She turned to Jake. "Probably a ghost town. Bodies still here," she said.

They followed green tufts of grass to an almost empty pond. There was brittle moss stretched up the dried banks of the pond, and the sun had ruthlessly battered the last pieces of aquatic life out of the remaining large puddle. Jake cupped his hand and took a sip. He pushed his leather canteen in and continued drinking.

"We can shelter here till it cools," he said.

Cristal lightly shook her head.

They continued on, walking beside the broken highway. Heat rippled off the pavement and the smell of hot tar emanated from it.

Cristal glanced at Jake. "If I were fighting for you, I wouldn't slow down."

"I'd want you to be safe," Jake said. "You don't need to avenge me. Even if I were dead."

"I would need to for my own conscience," Cristal said.

The wind's howls started picking up in the distance. Jake glanced back at Cristal.

"Don't let your conscience forget your own safety," Jake said. "Esmé talked about love for a reason."

"Love doesn't hold the sword to those who murdered our Sisters."

"Love is why you can walk again," Jake said. "Love is why I want people to finally get their fair justice. It's not about taking, love is about giving and receiving. And I'm starting to see why she found it so important."

Cristal took a sip from her canteen. "I love you, Uncle Jake, which is why I wouldn't want to lose you."

"And I don't want to lose you to vengeance," Jake replied. "I love you, too. I think maybe that's the one thing that really counts."

Cristal sighed, tired from distracting talk. "We have work ahead of us," she replied.

****

Lee continued touching up the portrait. He heard a glass placed on the table next to him, and he turned to watch water flow into the glass from a pitcher. The young man sighed relief.

"You are the coolest water in all of Riviera," he told Eve. "Thank you, my love."

"You're welcome," she said. She placed the pitcher down next to the table.

"Eve, wait." He held out his hand.

Eve smiled and placed her hand in his. "Please, don't."

He cupped her hand in both of his. "Every day I need you and every lifetime I would die for you," he said.

"Then be alive. I want to see your face tomorrow," Eve said. She shook her head with sadness. "Lee, you know love is gone from the world."

Lee smiled at her. "No no no. Not when I see your face." He kissed her hand.

"Then please don't let him catch you," Eve said. "If you died, I'd have to forget you."

He squeezed her hand and he gently placed it by her side. "I know. Give it time," Lee said. "We'll find a way."

"Not in this life. Maybe after," Eve said. She kissed his forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Lee turned back to the portrait. He made some strokes around Garcia's eyes. He heard Eve's footsteps toward the door. "Eve, arrêtez-vous là!" Lee said.

Eve laughed. She stopped and smiled to herself. She crossed past him and picked up her tattered paperback off the chair. She kissed his forehead again and left the study.

She stroked the paperback gingerly like a soothing pet. The sun was waning but the heat had not started abating. Sweat traveled around her green eyes. She glanced upon the remnants of the city of Riviera. Sickly bone-limbed children took respite in the shade of a collapsed house. Blackened homes once owned by outspoken enemies had been torched down recently. An angular old woman sat on a crate, her eyes set somewhere off into an abyss.

These sights had splayed out before Eve for several years. She was lucky to have protection and food. And her eyes had managed to avoid the abyss that eclipsed the souls of most of the survivors of Riviera. Yet, day after day, year after year, it continually tugged at the softness in her heart.

She stopped by a tan and empty house with broken windows.

Eve looked down at her paperback. The open edges were darkly worn by her hands. She flipped through with her thumb and opened to a page within it. There was a handwritten note, *Fernand is totally insane! Remind us of any royal pain we know?* She flipped a few pages later and read a second note, *I love you. No notes on Mercedes, I'm not clever enough. I just wanted to scribble this in so you know where my heart forever*

lies. Eve felt a small but encompassing moment of peace. She held the paperback to her chest and closed her eyes.

She saw what she truly needed in this life. She saw an impossible love with Lee.

Eve sighed and drew her book down by her hips. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She forced a smile and walked toward the shore, toward a large, beached white mega yacht from days past, listed onto the sands and weeping black grime from each porthole: she walked toward the crumbing home of her forceful and frequently painted ruler, the Revered King Estéban Garcia.

****

The night shrouded Cristal and Jake with darkness and cold. Dust swept across the cracked highway. They continued their travels.

Cristal's cheeks were rosy with the cold. Puffs of condensation curled from her mouth. Her face was serene, indulging in the chill.

Jake rubbed his chilly arms. He huffed clouds of breath into the night. "Too cold," he said.

"It's perfect," Cristal said.

"I forget you're an ice princess."

"Come now, Uncle Jake," Cristal said.

Jake grumbled.

"If we keep pace it won't take us four days."

"There's no rush, Cristal," Jake said. "Besides, I want to talk about Sara."

"Yes." Her boots scraped on the hard crunch of dry earth. She paused the conversation to reflect on her mother for a moment. "What about her?"

"She accepted her fate," he said.

Cristal slowed her pace to process.

Jake continued. "For years, she told me that all of us are grains of sand on the beach. We're small specks, nothing more important than a piece of dust, and together we make this world. She made her part in it, too, being there for us when we were small."

Cristal replied, "Now it's our turn to make our part in it."

"Our part can be anything," Jake said. "We don't have to continue the Sisterhood's mission. And if we fail at taking down Estéban, there will be consequences for the town. Santa Elena isn't able to defend itself from another attack. They deserve peace, not more guns."

"Our fallen Sisters deserve their day. The small children as well."

"Then let me ask something." Jake saw the determination in his niece. He said, "What keeps you going forward? I know why I'm going after Garcia."

"Justice," Cristal said. "Same as you."

"Not justice." Jake shook his head. "Love. Love is always the next step in front of me."

"Then the same," Cristal said.

Their footfalls crunched quietly in the night. The stars flickered down upon the pair whispering to them of celestial lives burned out eons ago. The two shared a pause of silence. The moon lit upon their cold puffs of breath. A gust of wind floated Cristal's cloak gently and placed it down again.

"Okay," Jake said, unconvinced.

****

Candlelight flickered on Eve's gentle cheeks. She was sitting up in bed with laced pillows and a plush comforter. She flipped to the next page in her Monte-Cristo. Her face softened at something written there. Her eyes waxed wistful and her chest rose and sunk with the flow of beautiful words.

Estéban sat up and studied her face with curiosity. "You are beautiful reading."

"Thank you." Eve hardened her face and continued in her book stoically.

The bedroom was a converted captain's quarters. The walls were decóred with further paintings and portraits, and where the wall was bare, it was white and riveted. The shush of waves lapped at the torn hull far below.

"What is the book?" Estéban said.

"'The Count of Monte Cristo.'"

"What's that about?" He said. "I've heard of that one."

Eve calmly closed the novel and placed it on her bedstand. "It's about true love and pain, and how the heart never ceases to find its one and its home."

"I thought that one had swords and stuff," Estéban said.

"It has swords."

Estéban nodded. He studied her face more intently. "I might like to read that one," he said.

"It's in French," Eve said.

"Then you could read it to me."

"I could."

"It's been some years since I read a book."

"I know," Eve said.

The candles flickered their dim light on Eve's face. Estéban rubbed her shoulder lightly to convince her. "Now is a good time to start."

"Very well." Eve picked up her novel emotionlessly to guard herself from Estéban's curiosity. "Do you want to hear it in French or should I translate?"

She glanced upon Estéban, who smiled cruelly at her. Following his command, Eve opened to the title page and began to read when Estéban squeezed her shoulder hard and slipped his other hand into the opening of the book. He pulled it in front of himself and Eve folded her hands quietly on her lap.

"This is French," he said. "This is very French."

"It is, my king."

Estéban flipped a few pages into the novel. "But I recognize some of these characters."

"It is a classic."

"This one fellow here," he said, "I don't know this one. He says, 'I would voyage this world for you and conquer all the—" Estéban yawned.

Eve's heart pounded. Her expression tightened against her will and she wrung her hands.

"Some poetry shit about a boat and stuff. Pardon my French. Who's that one?"

Eve remained silent. Her heart thundered inside her.

"Who's this fucker with his notes in your book?"

Eve turned away to hide her face.

"I know who," he said.

A tear ran down Eve's face to her chin.

"It will be a shame, but he already made enough portraits. My legacy is secured." Estéban tilted his face within two inches of her cheek. "That's the man, right?"

"No," Eve said. She shook her head softly, though it was too late.

"You will learn real love. Honest love. And I've had enough of his shitty paintings anyway." Estéban tossed the book to the floor, spine broken. "You will love me, you bitch." He drew up to her cheek slowly and kissed her. "Don't pardon my French this time," he said and he laid down to sleep.

****

Lee slept soundly on a ratty cot. Two families and their children were tightly packed into a single room. A flicker of torchlight slit upon Lee's eye.

The door opened. The two families stirred from their sleep. They quickly grabbed their children and parted themselves against the edges of the room.

Lee awoke and his face turned from disturbed slumber to surprise and then to terror. He screamed at the intruders and pushed his arms out to keep them at bay. He then pulled his arms toward his head to deflect the first blow.

A mother rocked her small son. She kissed him and whispered into his dirty hair. A splatter of blood flung across her young son's unflinching face.

****

The sun rose over the slums of Riviera. Its squat skyline was dotted with scorched houses of former enemies. Cristal and Jake strode down the road leading into the crumbling town. They heard no signs of life on the main street. A young girl darted from their path and rapped harshly on one of the doors. The door didn't readily give way and she dashed frightened by the strangers into another yard and disappeared.

Cristal and Jake smelled rancid fat and foul flesh. They came upon a wood pole erected in the middle of the street. Ants made a long, black trail up the pole. At its top was a half-fleshed skull, and perched on that was a crow nibbling at pieces of scalp and hair. Cristal stared at the dismembered head.

"This is the right town," Cristal said.

Jake said, “I’ll knock on a door.”

He approached a silent house. Jake knocked gingerly on its front door. The house was quiet as death, and Jake knocked louder. “Come out,” he ordered.

The door creaked open no more than an inch. “What do you want?” Said a quivering, female voice.

“Where is Estéban Garcia?” He said.

“Garcia? We have a Garcia two houses down,” she said. “To the right.”

Jake glanced two houses down. It was another unassuming single-story house.

Jake pointed to the pole in the middle of the street. “He’s the one who left this message?”

The door closed and locked.

Cristal walked toward the house. She motioned for Jake to step back and knocked on the door.

She waited.

The door unlocked and the woman opened it a creak again.

Cristal pointed to the festering pole. “Who was he?”

The woman behind the door mumbled. “Just a nobody,” she said. “A nice young man. We don’t have any of those left here.” Her voice trailed off in sadness.

“Estéban will account for his actions.”

“No, he’ll kill you,” the woman said. “And then he’ll kill me.”

“He will not,” Cristal said.

A breeze tousled Cristal’s white cloak. The woman was quiet. The door closed. She unclicked the lock and opened the door the entire way. She was a feeble old woman and after many hard years her eyes glimmered with the hope of justice. “I believe you and I can’t say why I should. Follow me to the shore, young lady.”

****

Five men stood holding rifles, making a half circle in a small, tiled courtyard with small, dry trees and an empty cherub water fountain. Their stances corrected against the heavy tilt of the beached mega yacht. The faux-marble tiles gave the deck of the mega yacht an illusion of a desiccated Greek garden, except for the ship's rails a few feet off. On the other side of the cherub fountain sat Estéban on a black fake leather chair, wearing a loose velvet robe with a bright green plastic garland made from a plastic plant. He beamed with pride. Next to him sat Eve in a white lawn chair, her hands folded on her lap, her eyes dulled and looking off into nothing.

"Give me the report," Estéban told his royal guard.

One of his guard stepped forward. "The people are happy again," he told him. "They are back in your control. Riviera recognizes its king, and they are graciously in your hand once more."

Estéban smiled. He turned to Eve. She made no motion.

He asked his guard, "Tell me again about the betrayer, Lee."

Another of his guard stepped forward. "I was the one who slayed him," he said.

"Good," Estéban said. His eyes fixed on Eve's stoic face. "More."

"He cowered before me, my King. I severed his head and kept his skull intact, like you said."

They heard the distant click of boots on the deck of the yacht. The second guard continued his report.

"He cried and wept for your forgiveness before I slayed him. I offered him none." The man waited. "Do you wish to hear more?"

Eve stared blankly into a distant, emotionless abyss.

The boots became louder. Eve turned dully to watch a white cloaked stranger approach the dry cherub fountain. The stranger turned toward Estéban.

Estéban ignored the unsightly intrusion and turned his attention back to the guard. “No more. I understand my kingdom is secure?” He said.

The royal guard froze before the silent stranger. Cristal removed her hood and broke their silence.

“You are Estéban?”

“Yes,” he said. He stared perplexed at his guard. “Well?”

They fumbled in embarrassment. One drew his rifle up and a quick steel flash parted his arm from his shoulder.

“Guns on the ground,” Cristal said facing them, her katana dripping with blood. “Then you may leave.”

The corpse of the guardsman finished falling over next to his loose rifle. Blood poured from the severed shoulder down the canted deck.

The royal guardsmen took their rifles off their backs.

“You disarm or you die today,” Cristal told the remaining four.

They watched Cristal slowly untie her cloak and toss it aside. She calmly brought her blood-stained katana up and to her side. She slowly shifted her right foot back.

“Well?!” Estéban’s body turned cold and clammy. “Just shoot! What’s one sword to your rifles? Cowards!”

“One last chance,” Cristal said.

Estéban watched his dumbfounded royal guard flounder. He stood up and ran deep into the mega yacht. Eve casually watched the four men falter before a single warrior.

One of the guardsman slowly pointed his rifle at Cristal. “She’s too far to get us,” he said. “I got her.”

The other three nodded.

He aimed his rifle on the unmoving warrior. “You smug

little sh—”

A shot rang out and blew through the guard’s soft belly. He collapsed into a pool of blood and pieces of stomach.

The remaining three guards ducked behind benches and the fountain and aimed their rifles, trying to locate the sniper. A man pointed in the direction behind them. “I think he’s by the tall house on the beach!”

“You made your decision,” Cristal said.

One of the panicked guards turned toward the woman warrior. “Who, who are—?” His teeth chattered and he didn’t finish the question.

Another man looked into her blank face. He saw no glimmer of emotion there. But in her eyes was a flickering light. It seemed to him a flame in her dark eyes.

He drew his rifle up toward her.

Her stare. The flames.

He felt weight of the planet on his arms.

Another shot rang out and beside him another ploosh of blood and goo.

The guard’s hands and then his rifle shook like an earthquake. Cristal calmly shifted her right foot farther back, perpendicular to her left, and knelt down her center of gravity slightly and that was the last sight he had in this life.

****

Eve led Cristal down a staircase to a lower deck and past a green swimming pool. Eve wore flats and stepped through cans and bottles and other discards with no visible sign of discomfort. Cristal’s boots crunched through an empty beer bottle.

“Thank you for leading me to Estéban.”

Eve remained silent.

Cristal glanced behind her. She saw Jake making his way toward her, his rifle shouldered.

"Estéban has wrought devastation to Riviera," Cristal said. "What has he done to you?"

"Nothing," Eve said.

"He has not wronged you?" Cristal said.

"He has done nothing to me." Eve replied, "Now I have nothing left."

They passed a splintered black stage and walked up a flight of stairs to the top deck again. She brought Cristal to a small wood-paneled helm, a fake, elegant steering room on the deck, set with two armed guards in buttoned-down shirts, passing glances to each other by the wrought iron entrance.

"Wha-what do you want?" One guard said. Eve turned to walk away.

Cristal drew her katana and readied it in front of her, Chūdan-no-Kamae pose. The two guards were thirty feet away. She stood before them, still. Silent.

The other guard drew his pistol on Cristal. The warrior was unmoved before him, calm as a statue. Wind pushed gently at her hair, whispering quietly past her ancient pose. The blade in her hands was long and still. Her eyes were set ahead, at neither guard, and her body gave not the slightest notion of fear. The tip of the sword was out in front of her, short of eye level, the katana impossibly unmoving as well.

The guard's pistol shook, then his hand shook, and then his arm, and then he steadied his right arm with his left hand under his elbow. The tip of the sword was several yards away, yet the gunshots not long ago signaled she was a significant foe. He needed to get a good shot on the silent figure. Now was his only chance. But his pistol grew heavy. The guard grew tired, or nervous, or afraid, he couldn't tell. The warrior stood at the ready for minutes now, her katana perfect in the air,

neither she nor her weapon perturbed by their guns. Even the gun in his own hand felt worthless. The guard's body trembled uncontrollably.

Cristal broke her pose. She pointed her katana at the door. She motioned at the hard tiled deck in front of each guard. "Guns," she said, and returned to her impeccable pose.

The guard with the rifle kept her head in his sight. She readied back into an offensive stance and stood still. The guard felt unnerved at her calm; never had he faced a foe who had clearly fought with Death and yet moved forward. He looked over to the other guard, the one with the pistol, and the other guard knelt and placed it down on the ground before him. Cristal turned back to him.

The guard with the rifle sweat. He tried to keep her in his sights but her head got blurry. His aim swayed back and forth, the warrior in and out and in the sight again. Salty perspiration soaked his brow and trickled down and stung his eyes. He forced them open but they burned. He closed his eyes tightly.

He knelt and placed the rifle down.

Cristal straightened her katana vertically and pointed downward, arm's length in front of her. She guided her left hand below the hilt. She nicked her left pinky finger on the blade. A small drip of her blood traveled down the blade almost an inch. She sheathed it.

"The dragon has its blood," she said. "You may leave."

The guards hid their faces and left from their sentries. Eve turned around and watched them walk away, frightened toward their homes.

Cristal tested the door handle. It was unlocked. She turned it and entered.

The main room was stacked with more portraits of Estéban's stern face beaming proudly and shining from every corner of the room. Canvasses were stacked five deep or more.

There was a small, open liquor cabinet with empty bottles. On the right was an open gun cabinet with rifles knocked over each other and one that had tumbled off its ledge. Cristal heard his whimpers from behind the cabinet.

She walked toward the open gun cabinet and Estéban jumped out from behind it. He stumbled and drew a large black pistol on her.

"Stay back," he said. "I'll shoot you."

Cristal continued walking toward him. His jaw trembled and he closed his eyes and his finger squeezed the trigger. It stopped halfway. He opened his eyes again and looked dumbfounded at the pistol.

Cristal kept walking and her boots clanked loudly in the fake wheelhouse.

He cursed and studied his pistol from every angle. He pointed the gun at her again and pulled the trigger, again, to no avail. Cristal placed her hand on his and his grip failed and he yielded the firearm to her.

"It's, it's broken," he said.

"The safety," she told him.

"Wait," he wiped sweat from his forehead. His white hair clung to his scalp. "How did, the safety, how did you know?"

"It didn't shoot," she said, tossing the gun behind her.

Estéban's body shook in terror and his knees wobbled. Cristal pushed him back. He tumbled onto his rear. He watched her lift her leg and place her boot on his chest and press him down to the floor, hard.

"Tell me who killed the girls."

Estéban's teeth chattered. "I, I don't know."

"Then I won't need you." Cristal drew her katana from its sheath. She slipped her boot down to his stomach and placed the tip of her blade on his chest. Estéban watched the tip of the katana cut through his shirt and cut lightly into his chest where

his heart beat loudly. A line of blood seeped out from the sliver of the fine wound. The pain was smooth and cold and stung hard.

"Wait!" He lifted his hands near the katana and pulled them back, rethinking his reflexes. "I do know! I do know!"

"Who?" Cristal said.

Estéban's head shook like a jackhammer. "I can't tell you! They'll kill me. But I'll show you. Spare me. Spare me! I'll take you to them!"

Cristal lifted her katana a few inches off his chest. Blood coated the tip of the blade. She withdrew and Estéban clawed himself up on his feet. He knelt down again, on his hands and knees, and bowed to her.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for sparing me."

"We leave now," she said.

He nodded furiously mid-bow and laughed giddily. He stood up and looked around the room. He walked toward the liquor cabinet and grabbed an item off of it. He turned to Cristal and she drew the edge of her katana next to his throat.

"But," his white hair was matted down with hot sweat and waves of moisture dripped off his face. "But I can bring you to them."

"Wellington did it," she said. "The name on the wine bottle."

"Yes, it was her. I can show you where!" He offered the empty bottle to her. "Here, take it! It's empty, but please, please, spare my life."

"San Benito," Cristal said. "I won't kill you."

She drew the edge of her katana away from his neck. His teeth chattered a frightened smile. She straightened the katana in front of him, exactly in front of his chest and belly. She withdrew her tantō knife from her waist and held it beside her, handle first.

"You have business," Cristal said. "He and I are done

here."

From the threshold of the fake wheelhouse, Eve stared at the knife offered to her. She walked toward the knife, took it in her hands, weighed it and studied it with no further passion.

"And you," Eve said. "You will hear what you have left of me."

Eve continued to gaze on the dagger. She spoke to the broken king the destruction he had wrought upon her life. The spite he poured down on her, and that she drank up to survive. The abyss she saw now, that hole in her town that was his selfishness and his violence. She wiped her eyes and when she finished, she looked up to find an old coward trembling on his tired feet.

"Why? Why did you take everything from me?"

Estéban scratched his head in consternation. "You and Lee wasted love. I protected what was mine." He shook his head in puzzlement. "I'm a king. Lee was pathetic and I saved you from him. I command my subjects to live and to die. You don't understand that?"

Eve's lip quivered in anger. "You've never felt love other than crushing it in your hand. Men like you destroy the beauty they've never had."

"I bring light into this world," Estéban said. "It is a burden you cannot understand."

Eve felt the tip of the tantō.

"If you extinguish me, the world will collapse into chaos and lust and the winds will howl with fury." He tried to reason with Eve. "The burden. You can't understand it. It's not something you can wrap your small mind around. You don't see what I see."

"I see a void. A king of insanity. Of nothing." Eve lifted the knife toward the insane king. "I crown you King of Nothing."

"Eve," the former king put his hands in front of him. "You can't! If you do, the world will—!"

Eve plunged the tantō blade into his chest.

He dropped the wine bottle and it burst across the fake wood of the mega yacht's deck.

Estéban tumbled down, onto his rear, mumbling unintelligible disagreements with her. Eve stood over him and plunged the blade into him again. And again. And again. Estéban's body hardly registered Eve's attacks and she realized he had been dead for a few moments. She closed her eyes and stood, taking a deep breath, and walked toward Cristal.

Eve offered Cristal back her tantō. "Thank you," she said, and left.

Cristal picked up a wine cork and showed it to Jake, standing in the doorway. The fancy signature of P. Wellington was printed along the length of the cork, and the cork was fingerprinted with fresh blood. "Uncle Jake, let's visit Patricia Wilson," Cristal said.

EPISODE V
Part 3: A Sword Is Forged in Flames

There are hard times
Hungry times
Desperate, wounded
Times
Yet see
There still is time

Time marches
One marches
May you march
Beside it
To time's end
And farther
And with me

****

Tío Viejo sat at the dark wood dinner table taking lunch with his wife.

Mrs. Rios brought the glass of red wine to her nose. She breathed the wine and imbibed the heavy fumes of the alcohol. She closed her eyes, and slowly opened them, and brought the brim to her lips and the drink rushed across and down her tongue.

Tío Viejo ate a fattened pork chop when a knock came on the door. "Let me in," Sheriff Sanchez said.

Tío Viejo looked at his wife, who seemed far away. He snarled and walked toward the door, letting the sheriff in. "Take a seat on the leather chair," he said, pointing in the main hall.

"This is about Esmé. Bitch is gone."

"We are eating," Tío Viejo said. "Take a seat."

"I ain't got much time," the sheriff said, but his host had left to the dining room and took a seat back at his plate.

Sheriff Sanchez watched the couple enjoy their meal. Before the last bite, he said, "So she's gone."

"You said," Tío Viejo replied.

"Harrison's gone, too."

Tío Viejo turned to his wife. "I'm guessing your sister-in-law will pay us a visit."

Mrs. Rios shot a harsh glance at her husband. She took another sip and softened her gaze.

Tío Viejo finished his last bite. "How was it?"

"We lost a lot of men, but the problem's gone. All of them. Just a bunch of stupid girls." The sheriff smiled. "None of ours mattered, other than Harrison."

"I didn't ask that," Tío Viejo said. "How did Harrison die? That's what I want to know."

The sheriff laughed. "Swords, bullets, everything." He poked forward at the air three times. "Fifty-three holes in him. More. I got bored counting. Can't spend all day like that, you know."

Tío Viejo smiled. "Idiot had it coming," he said. "If you act like a cowboy, you'd better shoot like one." He tried to catch his wife's eye but missed. "And then there were four," he said.

"Can't hold a gun, don't hold it."

"My grandniece?" Tío Viejo said.

"Yup." The sheriff nodded. "All of them."

"A shame. She ran with the wrong crowd."

The sheriff tapped his watch. "You got another battery? Mine's toast."

"No," Tío Viejo said. "I do not."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I am sure."

Sheriff Sanchez watched the old patriarch stand up and take his plate. His wife offered him her lunch, half eaten. He took both plates toward the kitchen.

Sheriff Sanchez waited. "I best be going," he said and left.

Tío Viejo rinsed the dishes quietly. He hummed to himself. He placed the two dishes to dry and another knock came on the door.

"Could you?" He said.

Mrs. Rios walked to the door and opened it with a sip and a half left in her glass. "Hello, Gloria," she said. "I am so sorry."

"You fucking, you selfish, spoiled, fucking bitch."

Gloria Wilson entered and jabbed her finger at Mrs. Rios. Her hair was platinum blonde fading into light gray, with two magenta streaks through it. She wore a bright, patterned blouse and purple leggings. "You evil bitch. You goddamned whore! You could've stopped him."

Mrs. Rios grimaced.

"Your own goddamned brother, your own fucking brother, Pat, and you push him to this. You fucking rot in hell, you goddamned filthy—"

"You will no longer address Mrs. Rios this way." Tío Viejo walked up to Gloria. "You may come in and take a seat, but you are not allowed you speak to my wife with such disdain."

"Disdain?" Gloria whipped her head back and forth.

"Does this sound like *disdain* you backstabbing, grimy thieving spic piece of—"

Tío Viejo smacked Gloria hard. She tumbled down before him. Blood vessels broke across her cheek and dark spots rose on her pale powdered skin.

"I understand you are in grief," Tío Viejo said, "as is expected of a new widow. My apologies for your loss. But you are not allowed to enter the Rios household and accost us with your disrespect." He stood over her. "Take your time to grieve. I understand fully. But, also, Harrison chose to track down trouble. He was far too old, and he wanted to prove himself."

Hate burned from Gloria's eyes.

Tío Viejo continued. "It was a matter of time until his foolishness caught up with him. Again, my apologies and condolences for your loss. Now, if you may, Miss Wilson."

Gloria stood up. Her mascara bled around her eyes. She was eight inches short of Tío Viejo and he remained unmoved.

"Very well," she said. She cast one last hateful glance at Mrs. Rios and turned and left. Mrs. Rios tried to hide her shaking.

Tío Viejo poured himself a scotch. "I will retire soon. I will see that our sister-in-law not bother us further," he said.

****

Cristal and Jake walked past the swimming pool on the canted mega yacht when a gunshot thundered through the second deck.

The bullet struck the edge of the green pool and flicked chips into the mucky water. Jake ran toward an overturned table for cover.

The shot echoed off the steel walls and in Cristal's head

and it kept echoing and kept echoing. Her ears rang loud.

She turned around and ran toward the shot. Her legs were wobbly, and the heavy tilt of the beached mega yacht was hard to fight. She felt like she was falling down along a cliff. Her boots slipped under her and her head pounded. She forced herself up and found the sniper. Her hand burned. She struggled toward him and attempted to draw her katana, and the glass in her palm jabbed sharp pain and soaked blood into the leather handle.

Another shot rang out from behind her. The sniper tumbled down.

The explosion of sound hit every part of Cristal's skull. Her head pulled far from her. Her ears were now a soft muffle punctured with a hard, screaming ring. She tried to walk, but the world spun until it gave out from under her and she fell fully into the depths of shadows.

****

It was black with a soft ringing.

She was on a small, stiff bed. Her hand was bandaged and continued to burn. A cold glass rim pressed against Cristal's lips. Something was whispered to her. She opened her eyes.

Eve seemed to tell her to drink. The water was cold and its coolness kept her attention from the throbbing in her ears.

Jake said something.

"What?" Cristal said.

"I said you were out a day and a half!" Jake looked like he was yelling but his voice was far away.

The ringing continued.

Jake told Eve something. She nodded.

They had brought Cristal to a beachfront house nearby.

It was small and windy.

Eve told her something. Cristal shook her head.

"I said this is my family's old cottage!" Eve yelled.

Cristal nodded. Her head pounded and she pulled a sheet tightly around her. Jake tucked her in firmly and Cristal fell quickly into a silent, ringing sleep.

****

Three days later, Cristal's head still throbbed.

She and Jake had met several members of Riviera and they all shared their gratitude and stories of loss. Livestock taken. Family members stolen. Cristal nodded through their stories of grief.

"Thank you." Eve said as she washed bedsheets. "Lee will never come back, but now I won't need to forget him. I don't need to just survive. I can find a way to move forward. I get to do that, now."

"You're welcome," Cristal said.

"He was my one love," Eve said, "but not in this life."

Cristal watched her knead the cloth hard. "Yes. In this life. I believe so."

Eve shook her head.

"That love doesn't go away," Cristal said. "I always thought it did. I have people I care about, who cared about me. They're gone. And I still carry them with me, like you carry Lee."

Eve paused her work.

"It hurts thinking of how they died," Cristal said. "And it feels good thinking of how they lived. I have to take them with me whole. If I leave their pain behind, it's like," she thought.

"Like what?" Eve said.

"Forgetting someone is like," Cristal searched for the

words. “It’s like you have a broken part of your body. It hurts, it’s a broken piece of you, but you can’t cut out the broken piece of you and expect to be whole. That’s what forgetting someone is.”

Eve nodded. “Yeah. That makes sense. I think.” She dried her wet hands on herself. “I’m going to,” she pointed to the door and left silently for a walk.

As she left, Jake ducked in from the porch. “That’s really wise of you,” he said.

“You are one of those people I carry, too,” Cristal said. “I wouldn’t want to lose you.”

“Thank you.” Jake said, “The last girl I liked was Andrea Nunes in the first grade.” Jake shrugged. “Andrea was funny and weird. It was just a six-year-old kind of love. I haven’t thought about her in a long, long time.”

“What made her funny?” Cristal said.

“She always played bloody knuckles,” Jake said. “She tricked me and won every time. Always distracted me and said something ridiculous. Maybe that wasn’t exactly funny. But I guess I like the mean girls.”

“You still remembered the good about her,” Cristal said.

“I do. I appreciate her, too, and don’t want to let go of the good.”

“I’m sorry about Gabriela. But I hope you remember the good about her as well.”

“Thanks. And I do.” Jake sighed. “Whenever you’re ready we can go.”

“I’ll be healed up in two days.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “I’ll see what we can get from the people here before we leave.”

Cristal shook her head. “No. We stay. This is where we start, Uncle Jake,” she said.

****

On the beach, Jake pointed a pistol at a distant rock.

Cristal closed her eyes.

He steadied the pistol with his other arm and rang out three shots. Cristal opened her eyes again.

"I hate small guns," Jake said.

"That was fine," Cristal said. "My ears are healed now. Let's try it on the yacht."

"What?" Jake said. "So you can blow your ears out again?"

"So I can face my fears. I need to battle at my weakest."

Jake shook his head. "Why are you going to ruin your hearing? I've never seen anyone with ears as sensitive as you."

"What do you mean?" Cristal said.

"You literally hear everything!" Jake said. "I can't sneak up on you. Why are you going to pop your ears?"

"I have good hearing?"

"Really good hearing!"

"Well." Cristal closed her eyes. "Move quietly somewhere."

Jake tiptoed several feet past her side. The waves murmured around them. His toes sunk into the sand, scraping. He paused.

"One moment," Cristal said. She knelt and felt around her feet. She felt a smooth stone, and then half a shell. She picked up the half of the shell and tossed it.

She opened her eyes. It had landed two feet beside Jake. "Holy crap," he said. "And you want to go on that dumb boat and blow out your eardrums?"

"It's hard with the waves crashing," she said.

"That's hard for you? Then what's your easy?"

****

Cristal wore a red bandana across her eyes. She waited in the corner of a dark, candlelit room. “Let me know when,” she said.

Jake picked up sticks wrapped with pillows and rearranged them across the basement floor. He grouped three of them together, set some in the middle, another in a corner. He scratched his head looking for places to stand the last few dummies up.

He walked toward Cristal. “You’re lucky they’re pillows. Otherwise you’d bonk your head on them.”

“I need to hear them. That’s why they’re pillows.”

Jake was confused. “Pillows don’t make any sound, Cristal.”

She wielded her sheathed katana. “Exactly.”

Jake spat on his fingers and extinguished the candle.

Cristal walked through the pitch black room and swung her sheathed katana. She hit dummy. Air. Dummy. Dummy. Air.

She came back to her corner again and pulled down the bandana. Jake lit the candle off a lighter. Several of the dummies were knocked down. “Seven of twelve,” Jake said. “That’s not too bad.”

“Five left is too many.” Cristal refixed the bandana. “Again.”

****

Cristal sat with her legs folded together. Her eyes were closed. One hand was nested into the other.

The ocean shushed insistently along the shoreline. The seawater breathed its calm rhythm onto the sands and then sighed itself away.

Thoughts in Cristal’s head slowly melted. The clutter

subsided. Her hearing felt clean, sharp.

But only for a moment.

Rage flickered in Cristal's heart. It panted like a wolf and saliva flicked off of its hungry tongue. Cristal saw so much loss. She felt emptiness. She was a hollow pit, an endless mineshaft, and she was also falling through the pit and through darkness endlessly and forever.

She conjured a face.

The kind folds of her smile carried her. She bent into the hard soil, picking weed after weed, until her mother shouted behind her. She turned around. Her mother knelt down and felt the leaves of one of the sprouts. "Corn," she told her, a crop easy to mistake for crab grass, a simple weed. Cristal avoided killing the gentle sprout of their food. She studied the different leaves side by side and nodded to her mother.

Cristal grasped onto a handhold along the endless tumble of shaft. Rebecca lifted her up, told her how strong she was becoming. How agile and silent her strikes were becoming. How she would be a terror to the shadows and monsters still in the lands. Rebecca's hand felt firm and warm.

Cristal stood on an outcropping. She turned around and there was a long platform across the endless pit echoing below. Winds pushed through her grayed dreadlocks, and Esmé beckoned Cristal onto the platform. She wore a long, flowing red kimono, one she had never seen before, and it extended well past her hands and past her feet, pouring off the edges of the solid platform that held both of them up.

Rage, melancholy, terror, and murder boiled in Cristal. But she was now in a cool, dark shelter and she sat down in respite. Four shadows stood around her, several steps back. Waiting.

Wind caressed Cristal's hair. She opened her eyes and stood up, spying an outcropping of land in the ocean. The salt spray was savory in her nostrils. She walked into the water and swam and made the outcropped land her destination.

The brine water was cold, choppy, and refreshing.

****

Cristal walked toward Eve's cottage. She slicked her hair back. Jake rocked in a chair on the porch, adjusting the three rifle bullets wedged between his fingers. He picked up the hunting rifle and pointed it toward the shore, the bullets still wedged between his fingers. He drew the rifle up, adjusted the position of the bullets, and drew it up again. It was evening and the smell of cooking came from inside the house.

"You fall in the water?" Jake said, placing the rifle beside himself.

"I need to clear my thoughts," Cristal said. "I'm still hearing too much."

"Like, in your head?"

Cristal nodded.

"That's because you're crazy." Jake returned the bullets to the ammo box. "Eve's making some soup."

The three of them sat at a small table with steaming bowls.

Jake picked up a green mass from his bowl. "I never had seaweed."

"He'll like it," Cristal told Eve.

"You don't know that." Jake said with a mouthful. He chewed and finished the large bite. "It's good."

Eve sipped from her bowl. "I thought about what you said, Cristal. About cutting out the broken part of you."

Cristal pushed Jake away from her bowl. "And you think what?" She said.

"I carry Lee with me not because he's a broken part," Eve said. "I carry him because he makes me stronger. His life and his death."

"I understand," Cristal said.

"I still feel his love from when he was alive. And now that he is gone," she said, "I need to help you. I need to protect

his loss."

Cristal paused.

"I need to make sure it doesn't happen again," Eve said. "I want to stop this pain for others, and that stops my own pain. I'll get your backpacks filled for you to travel. Anything you can use, we have a lot. That's how I want to heal from losing him."

The three of them were silent. Eve pushed the remainder of her bowl toward Jake.

"We make each other stronger." Jake took a long sip from her bowl. "I guess even when someone passes away."

"It's important to know that," Cristal said. "I miss Esmé and her wisdom."

"That wasn't Esmé," Jake said. "I taught her that. I always said we make each other better. Esmé told me how important that is, and maybe she already knew that, but maybe she didn't. She was good about helping someone find their own wisdom."

Eve smiled. "You miss Esmé."

"Yeah," Jake said.

The table was quiet. Jake looked at Cristal's bowl, but it was finished.

"I told you my uncle would like the soup," Cristal said.

"It's stupid when you call me uncle." Jake picked his teeth. "And how did you know I would?"

****

At night Cristal laid in bed. Two crickets chirped to each other across the dark beach.

She walked along the shore under the dim moonlight. The sand ground against her feet. She stopped and flicked it off her toes, and then sat down. She closed her eyes.

She sat on the platform in the endless mineshaft. Esmé was gone. The four demons, Rage, Melancholy, Terror, and Murder surrounded her, several feet away.

Smoked tumbled from Rage's blistered mouth.

Fire surrounded Cristal and the demons closed in on her. Rage knelt down to her and offered a hand of flames. Cristal stared into the endless pits of Rage's eyes, farther down and more infinite than the unending mineshaft below her. She remained seated. Rage grimaced and two other demons grabbed her and lifted her up.

Then Cristal fought back.

Flames ripped across her arms. Flames ran down her back. Flames sprinted up her legs and over her belly and spread over her entire body.

The fire started to tear inside her chest.

Cristal's heart beat rapidly, and Rage's fiery fangs sunk deeper into her being, encompassing her heart of mere flesh. It was going to consume her. She was going to be left with nothing.

She couldn't stop the fire.

It ate at loose parts of her being. It ate across parts of her she loved, her kindness, her growing compassion. It bit into parts of her shame, her cowardice, the parts she hated about herself. She would lose everything if she couldn't rip it back from their hunger. She dug her fingers in and tugged back, but the demons tugged harder. Their fire laughed hotter than hers and it tore into every piece of Cristal. She could not win against them, she could never master them, so she submitted to their flames and let them win.

They did.

She opened her eyes. Her body smoldered on the platform. Memories of fire singed her flesh. The heat slowly dissipated. When the smoke cleared, an armored knight stood before her. She felt his pride, his bravery and valor. The knight's armor and his sword shined brightly, and orange heat

slowly faded from the new steel.

What she had lost in herself was not lost. It was different. Hardened, flexible, light.

Rage's flames had finished passing. The knight genuflected before Cristal.

The demons Melancholy and Terror stood farther off. The last demon, Murder, was not Murder, but revealed itself to be the caped being known as Death. It watched Cristal from afar.

They stood on the platform until Cristal stood up and started climbing the walls of the endless mineshaft. The knight followed, with two demons following in submission.

Cristal awoke from her dream to the midnight tide shushing before her. The moon speckled bright dust across the waves, and sea foam popped and swayed. The ocean was a large, breathing body, and Cristal stretched her breaths to match its depthless heartbeat.

Cristal watched the endless sea sigh and shush before her. She had a beautiful world to protect.

****

Cristal wrapped the red bandana around her eyes. The candle flickered on her in the basement.

Jake rearranged the pillow dummies. He stood next to Cristal holding the candle. "You sure? We can practice a little more."

Cristal nodded.

"All set," Jake said. "I thought you could tell already. Cause pillows make a sound, right?"

"They are the opposite of sound," Cristal said. "They are a soft dent in the sound. That is how you hear them."

Cristal unsheathed her katana. It rang a clean, precise

pitch. She steadied it in front of her.

She ran toward the near corner. Her blade flashed through dim candlelight and soft masses padded on the hard basement floor. She dashed to the far corner, limping and flicking her wrist. She made one last twirl and drew her blade through the full attack.

The slashed pillow blew feathers into the air.

Cristal nicked her left pinky and sheathed the katana. She drew her bandana down.

A thick carpet of feathers littered the basement floor. "Eleven of twelve." Cristal grimaced. "There's still one left."

"Don't worry." Jake folded his hand like a gun and cocked his thumb at the surviving dummy. "I got him."

****

Mrs. Rios lay in a large bed with a dark headboard, inlaid with mother of pearl.

The door opened and Tío Viejo carried a candle into the room. He was smiling.

"You seem to be happy," his wife said.

"I am," Tío Viejo replied. "Do you want to know why?"

His wife shook her head. "No. Please don't say."

He laid in bed. "We are husband and wife. We share everything in this world. You will hear why."

"Okay," his wife said. "And then after this life?"

"As they say, till death." Then Tío Viejo picked up a candle snuffer and extinguished the bright candle.

EPISODE VI: THE FUTURE AND THE PAST
Part 1: A Boy Nursed on Blood

The town of San Benito stretched out lazily under the noon sun. Its two-story houses yawned far along the crumbling Texas horizon.

The small boy of ten biked out along the highway wearing buttoned, oversized professional clothes. He approached a pair of strangers.

One stranger removed the white hood of her cloak. "Cristal," she said.

"And you're Jay, right?"

Jake wiped sweat from his forehead. His sweat darkened the armpits of his sport jacket. "It's Jake. Can you show us to Patricia Wilson's home? We have business with her."

The young boy scratched his head. "Who? The Wilson estate? Don't think you have business no more. Meet me by the old cinema. I'll show you there."

The young boy turned his bike and left. "Our sisters will have their day," Cristal said.

"Sanchez is going to set up a trap," Jake said.

"It will be," Cristal said, "and they'll be lucky to get out alive."

****

The old Barrymore Cinema on Main Street had closed down long before the bombs fell. It once housed movies of joy and laughter, and old '50s actors in black and white, and war reels before that. For the past several decades, though, it housed the ghosts of the town and memories from distant Hollywood. The marquee was stylized from the 1930s and half tumbling off the front. A segment of the roof had collapsed in.

Jake walked toward the side of the cinema, graffitied and spray painted with colorful and crude images a generation before he was born. He paused and looked around: there were a pair of men on a roof two buildings down watching him. An armed man was likely in the window of an abandoned fashion store. Jake waved at the men on the roof and kept his rifle slung. He continued on his path to the side of the cinema.

An armed cowboy exited from an olde style saloon with swinging doors. He walked toward Jake. "There's another," he said. "The girl."

Jake betrayed no reaction to the cowboy's statement. "You can still walk away from this."

"Well, but you're here." The cowboy stopped fifty feet from Jake. "What is it you want? Some business with the Wilsons?"

"Yes, and not with you."

"Well their business is mine."

"Then your business is killing girls," Jake replied.

"It is, sometimes," the cowboy said.

"Why?" Jake said. "They were innocent."

"Not innocent if they need to be dead."

The cowboy spat. His fingers idly touched the pistol on his belt. Jake looked up at the roof. The two shooters there were no longer visible.

"You're just one," the cowboy said. "You think your rifle is faster than me?"

"No."

He grinned. "After you, it's just the girl."

"Yes."

The cowboy shook his head. Jake looked at the fashion store. A man inside trained a rifle on him.

"Go on," the cowboy said. "It's on your shoulder. At least get it by your side."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, give you a fighting chance."

Jake nodded. He unslung his rifle and pointed it down at the ground. "Like this. Unbutton your pistol, give you a fighting chance, too."

The cowboy smiled widely. "It's been ready."

"Good," Jake said.

The cowboy shook his head in mirth. "How should we do this?"

Jake looked at the fashion store again. A second man trained a pistol on him. "Count to ten."

"Ten?"

"Ten."

"Good." The cowboy chuckled.

Jake's heart pounded. "Slow count?"

"You count any way you like, son."

Jake nodded. The cowboy cracked his neck and placed his hand by his pistol. Jake held his rifle pointed down with both hands.

"Ten," Jake said. "Nine."

The cowboy said, "I like your style, son."

"Eight. Seven."

"Shame you're gonna die."

Jake looked at the fashion store. "Six."

The cowboy's fingers floated by the handle. "Gutsy

fellow like you…"

Jake's heart pounded. "Five. Four."

"… coulda rode with us."

Jake glanced once more at the fashion store. The window was smeared with blood. "Three. Two."

"Shame."

"¡Ya acabé!" Cristal yelled from one of the stores.

The cowboy turned to find the source of the yelling. His instinct betrayed him. He turned around to face Jake's rifle and the loud bang of a gunshot. "Shame," Jake said. "You could've walked away."

Jake walked toward Cristal, leaving the cowboy with a look of surprise and a bullet in his forehead.

****

"That was somethin' else, Mister." The bike boy nodded to Cristal. "An' Missus."

The three passed through the town. A cleanly dressed older couple came across their path. The man almost greeted them, except his wife yanked and shushed him and the two passed quickly by.

Cristal watched the couple run away from them.

"Never saw nothing so cool as that," the boy said. "And you speak Spanish."

Jake nodded to the boy.

"Wish I could be killers like you."

"Don't." Cristal kept her gaze ahead. "Taking another person's life is taking part of your own."

The boy looked perplexed.

"Let the other man make that choice. Don't make it for him."

The boy waxed thoughtful over it. “Okay.”

He led them to a lightly wooded area. He pointed down the unpaved path.

“Two driveways, and then the next left,” the young boy said.

“Thank you,” Cristal said.

“No one’s there,” the boy said. “Sanchez is gonna get you. It’s another trap.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. “Why are you telling us that?”

The boy shrugged. “’Cause. I don’t know. Seems unfair.”

“Because you want to make it fair,” Cristal said.

The boy nodded.

“That’s how you become a man,” she said. “Keep following that path. Make it fair.”

The boy blushed and turned away in embarrassment. “Luck,” he told them. “You’re gonna need it.”

“Good luck to you, too,” Jake said.

The boy turned back. Cristal and Jake continued down the unpaved path. They came to the trickling stream and Jake wet his hair in it. “Tío Viejo’s down to the right.”

“We’ll pay him a visit soon enough,” Cristal said.

****

Tío Viejo scraped the remnants of supper into a compost bucket.

His wife watched her husband clean up. It was hard to tell from his calm composure, but it was there, it was always there. The cold burning hatred. “If nine more men aren’t enough,” Tío Viejo said, “what makes you think one will do?”

Sheriff Sanchez picked meat from his teeth. “This one’s good, right up her alley. Boy’s been killing since six. Your

niece is new to blood, but this one's born drinking it like milk."

"Very well," Tío Viejo said. He washed their dishes. "As long as Cristal doesn't make it here."

"She won't."

"We'll need to find more men after this," Tío Viejo said.

"That's no problem," Sheriff Sanchez said. "There's always enough tough times to birth 'em."

Tío Viejo laid the dishes to dry and tucked the towel onto a cabinet. His wife watched him turn around to face the sheriff. "And where is the boy now?"

Sheriff Sanchez pointed to the compost. "May I?"

Tío Viejo shook his head. "By all means, I won't stop you."

The sheriff's spurs jangled as he walked toward the compost bucket. It smelled musty and moldy. "I'm sorry, it's gonna be a little dirty." He picked out a corn cob and showed it to Tío Viejo and his wife.

His wife took a sip of red wine. She watched the sheriff scrunch his nose. He whipped the cob behind him, fast.

A flash flew through the house and slammed into the wall.

The corn cob was pinned and split on a crossbow bolt. One half loosened and fell off the shaft of the bolt and rolled away from the wall.

It rolled up against a fine, embroidered boot, and a man picked it up in his small, gloved hand. The young man wore a native colored poncho and a large sombrero. Ricky studied the severed piece of corn cob. He walked to the wall and studied the other half of the cob, still stuck. The young man frowned and pulled the wood bolt out, shifted his crossbow under his poncho again.

"Too much tension," Ricky said. "I split the cob."

"And then my wall?" Tío Viejo said.

Sheriff Sanchez smiled. "That's going to be your

niece's skull," he said. "This is my best man. Trust him with this one."

****

Cristal and Jake took the left that the bike boy had directed them. They walked down the winding dirt driveway past scant foliage and came to the mansion of the once-proud Wilsons.

A heaping pile of cold cinders blew loose ash into the wind. Every piece of the former home had been blackened by fire.

Jake picked through the ruins of the mansion.

"Were they in there?" Cristal said.

Jake overturned a slat of burned drywall. "Not sure. But I can tell you what's not here."

"What?"

"Silverware, trophies, and jewelry." Jake said, "All the goods of a fine, respectable household."

"Figures," she said.

Cristal and Jake turned back down the Wilson's driveway toward the Rios estate. Cristal slowed and then paused. She gripped Jake's shoulder. "Horses," she said.

"Damn." Jake looked around the thin forest. "There's nowhere good to hide," he said. "Half the trees here are dead."

"It's a good thing you worked on shooting fast," Cristal said.

****

Nine riders trot down the dirt path toward the Wilson's ruined estate.

A rider turned to their bald leader. "You think they're still there?"

"No, but we gotta check anyway," the bald leader said.

The horse in front of their group halted and the other riders stopped quickly, crowding each other together.

A figure in a white cloak blocked their path. The cloaked figure neither moved nor acknowledged the nine riders.

"Hey!" The bald leader said. "Move it! We gotta get through."

The other riders watched the stranger. Wind gently whispered at their cloak. It floated slightly, softly pulsing on the breeze. The figure's silence unnerved them.

Four of the riders broke ranks and gently trotted to flank the figure. The bald leader tugged his reins and glanced at the remaining riders behind him. "Hey, we're looking for a girl and her," he thought, "her brother. You see either of them?"

The figure remained still before them. Four riders blocked the escape routes of the cloaked figure. The horses panted softly and the men behind the bald leader trained their guns on the lone cub.

The figure took down her hood. Her chestnut hair tumbled out.

He studied her face. Her eyes focused at a spot several feet ahead of her, on none of the men. She was clearly defeated, captured.

"Disarm and you'll live," Cristal said. "If not, you'll be the last one I kill."

Cristal turned to the bald leader.

He saw something in her eyes burning limitless.

"Then you're her, right?" The leader laughed and shook his head. He aimed his pistol at her. "This is the girl we're gonna—?"

Four shots rang out in quick succession. Behind the bald leader, two riders tumbled off their horses to the ground and another horse screamed in agony, hit by a bullet. The wounded horse whipped its head around and its rider could not control it, hooves stomping on the two freshly fallen bodies. Behind the bald leader, the other rider pulled out his pistol, looking for the cloaked woman, and the leader turned back to where she was, except now she was gone. One of the horses flicked its head back and forth, trying to shake off its mane the blood and pieces of brain from its previous owner, and one of his men stared at him with dull eyes and a knife in his chest, blood percolating through his buttoned shirt. The knifed rider slanted and fell off his horse, and a headless body fell off another horse, and the bald leader looked at the ground to try to figure out how many freshly fallen limbs were scattered around him. He turned around again and now another man was down, sliced in half and falling off his screaming, wounded horse, and then also the woman was climbing on the other horse, pushing off the truncated stump of the seventh rider that was part of his group. The bald leader panicked and searched for his last man, but there was only a riderless horse there, too, and when that horse shook its head, the bald leaders saw the last rider's two fists still clenched on the dangling reins.

The stump of the handless man hit the ground hard.

The wounded horse slowed its screaming, tiring out. It was only him, now, the bald leader facing the cloaked woman who cantered her horse in his direction, except she didn't meet his eyes, but rather focused her gaze a few feet to his side. He tried to convince himself he was still alive, that the cloaked woman hadn't already sliced him and he wasn't simply waiting to figure that out. He drew his pistol on her, surprised it was already in his hand, and the woman kept her eyes focused several feet on his right. The bald leader clicked back the hammer on his revolver. The sound attracted her eyes directly

into his.

Her eyes burned in the brightness of passion. But fear had no sway over those flames. Its immortal heat instead forged a new path far into an unbounded future.

Sweat beaded on his scalp and raced down and along his sideburn. He had to be imagining it.

Her dark eyes. In them was a fierce glow of flame-held steel.

She cantered her horse toward the frightened leader. Her eyes terrified the bald man, and he knew the only way he could stop her was with the cocked revolver in his hand, and he gripped the heavy pistol with both hands and went to pull the trigger and kill the girl except for two burning bullets that cracked and struck him in the shoulder. He grabbed his aching, bloody wound until he saw the flash of the blade that took from him the last of his fear and pain.

****

Cristal and Jake trotted their horses from the Wilson's path and to the main wooded lane.

"I should've guessed Tío Viejo was the lead snake in these parts," Jake said.

Cristal kept quiet.

"Whenever something bad happens, he's got two fangs in it."

Cristal stopped her trot. Jake slowed and turned around. "What is it?" He said.

A crossbow bolt slammed into the trunk of a tree four inches from Jake's face. Jake looked around to find the sniper.

Cristal stared directly at him.

Several yards off, a young man in an old, native-dyed

poncho held a crossbow in their direction. He tipped his sombrero to them and reloaded the crossbow. He shouted to Cristal and Jake. “Off your horses,” he said. “You only get one warning shot.”

Cristal and Jake slowly dismounted.

Ricky walked toward the pair with his crossbow trained on Jake. Cristal heard the jangle of a chain. “Kick it over here,” he said. “Nice and slow.”

Jake turned to Cristal. She nodded once toward him, and Jake took the rifle off his back. He placed it on the ground and hooked his foot under it, launching it at Ricky. Ricky bent slightly as the rifle flew past him. It landed two feet away. He turned his crossbow toward Cristal.

“I saw the mess you two made of those morons.” He picked up Jake’s rifle and slung it across his back. “You’re impressive for a pair. Maybe you’re more dangerous off the horses. But I don’t like hurting horses.”

Cristal and Jake stole glances at each other. “And you just watched us kill them all?” Jake said.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“They didn’t complain.” Ricky smiled. “You two will be a good challenge.”

“What do you mean?” Jake said.

Ricky smiled and backtracked a few steps. He hid behind a pair of trees.

Cristal frowned. “Cristal,” Jake pointed to the trees, “We can come around and flank him.”

She put her finger to her lips to silence him.

“He’s just—”

Cristal grabbed him and slung him to his right. A bolt hit the tree on his left side.

“He’s fast,” Cristal said. “And quiet. Stay here.”

Jake nodded.

Cristal dashed from behind the tree to the next tree and to the next. Her ears picked up Ricky's soft feet treading across hard leaves, loudly crunching echoes through the thin, skeletal forest.

The footsteps paused. Cristal hid behind a tree.

Her heart pounded. The footsteps resumed. She dashed out as quickly as she could toward the source.

She grew closer to the gentle flow of water. Its calm trickle mocked the pounding in Cristal's heart. Her breaths grew hot and harried, and when the footsteps stopped again, she hid behind another tree.

The steps were slow, likely on the other side of the stream. Cristal tried to pick out what Ricky's angle of attack would be, and she shifted slowly around the tree.

The twang and the bolt of the crossbow slammed through the edge of the tree and through her white cloak. She looked at her left arm. There was a slight scratch, and blood seeped through her sleeve. She was lucky.

The stream continued its gentle whispers. The footsteps picked up again, and Cristal followed the unseen figure. As she drew closer to the stream, a thought occurred to her.

A thought of Esmé.

Esmé could be painting haiku if she were still alive. She would be teaching comic books and arithmetic to her in the afternoon classes, if she were still alive.

Anger bubbled in Cristal, anger at how unfair the world was. At evil's victory over good. At the fact that good people must necessarily die and be forgotten.

And were Esmé here, she would run her hand through the shallow stream. Let anger be its own master, and not hers.

Cristal came to the bend of the clear water. It gently trickled clean, pure water, tumbling across smooth stones and tan soil.

Cristal stuck a finger into it.

It was as cold as it looked.

Her mentor would have flowed with it. The calmness of water didn't mock Cristal's exhaustion and fear.

It nibbled on her finger, licking lightly like a curious kitten.

Cristal's heart slowed its pounding. Her target was far away, more dangerous with the growing distance.

Were Esmé here, she thought. But it occurred to Cristal she was here. She wasn't forgotten. She wasn't the stream, but her breath was in the water's insistent whispers.

Esmé was gone, long dead. But nothing good is forgotten.

Cristal took her finger out of the water and took a small taste of it. The cold taste pricked an awareness in her mind. She surveyed the lightly scattered forest. She found a denser part of the forest off to her right, and ran toward that.

****

Fine, embroidered cowboy boots crunched softly through a scattering of dry leaves.

Ricky bit his nails and cursed.

Cristal was in a tough part of the forest. He held his crossbow and propped it on his left hand, holding a large hunting knife. Jake's rifle pattered on his left shoulder and his breaths labored. With the dense trees, his crossbow's distance was almost laughable. He was worthless with a rifle, and he wasn't as skilled with the knife as she was with her katana. Ricky was now fighting a bladed warrior on her home turf.

He'd only have time for one shot. But he still held one more surprise for this samurai warrior. It was going to be a challenge, but a great victory by the end.

Ricky slowly walked past tree after tree. His eyes

caught the flicker of movement and without a second's pause, his crossbow trained on the target and slammed a bolt straight into the center of his enemy with a loud, echoing thud.

The crossbow bolt jabbed into a white-cloaked broken tree.

Cristal leapt from the tree next to it and came down hard on Ricky. Her katana slashed into the crossbow, slicing through the cables. He tossed the useless weapon and shifted his left foot back, bringing the hunting knife to the fore. Cristal flicked her wrist and her katana disarmed Ricky of the hunting knife immediately. He backed away and brought his hands up, palms flat.

"Mano y mano," he said. "It's only fair."

Cristal took the Seigan-no-Kamae pose, her katana in front of her. "I don't fight for fame. I fight for the justice of my Sisterhood."

Ricky smiled. "Then come at it."

Cristal shifted closer to Ricky. She stuttered an attack toward him and withdrew, and instantly a chain wrapped around her katana.

She yanked and couldn't pull it back from him.

They struggled over her katana. With each tug, the grip of the chain grew stronger.

She needed to let go. Her anger would not serve her.

Ricky pulled the katana from her grip and wrapped the chain around his arm. He smiled at his defeated foe.

"I never thought I'd need a manriki," he said. "I found it in this museum in Austin. It's good for crushing bones, but damn, is it good for grabbing swords."

Ricky threw her katana into a tree. Cristal shifted a foot back and raised her arms defensively.

Ricky twirled the chain of his manriki, laughing.

She could attempt to find a thick stick to wrap the chain around, or sacrifice her left arm if need be.

It was not going to be an easy fight against an armed enemy.

"You're one of the more talented foes I've faced," Ricky said. "I've faced bigger, faster. Stronger men. But you," he pointed toward Cristal, "you're smart. You might be in my top five battles."

Heat pulsed across her face.

"Well," he said, "you're probably thinking about getting a stick. Don't bother, little girl." He pulled the chain taut between his hands. "A manriki can break a weak katana. But you're welcome to try it with brittle wood."

Cristal saw his arrogance and almost the certainty of his victory. She nodded. He let her bend down and pick up a stick. She picked up the thickest branch within arm's distance.

"This work for you?" Cristal said.

"I didn't expect you to be that dumb," Ricky said. "But I'll leave this part out of our story."

The chain swung and he drew closer to Cristal. She slowly gave ground to him, and he whipped his manriki through branches and thin trees, shattering them in splinters and loud cracks. Cristal brandished the branch like a wooden bokken. She made an attempt toward him and the branch shattered into nothing. She gripped the remainder of her weapon, thinking about her bones.

"Then the game is up," Ricky said. "It was a beautiful fight."

He twirled the manriki quicker until Jake came from behind and grabbed his rifle. He tripped Ricky and flung him into the leaves of the forest floor. Ricky brought his manriki hand up and Jake grabbed his hand, no longer giving him room to attack him with it.

"I don't fight for fame, either," Jake said. "I fight for the people I love."

Ricky stuck out his leg and twisted back onto his feet.

The manriki swung weakly but enough to hit Jake in the gut and he grunted in pain. The rifle flipped over downward and in front of him—Cristal had pushed it over his shoulder from behind—and Jake ran to grab it, pushing it into his crotch. Ricky jumped back, but the rifle was wrapped around his shoulder, and Cristal blocked his escape. Ricky cursed and Jake moved in close, shooting a round down and into his thigh. Ricky tumbled.

Jake came in at his face but left himself open to one more hit by the manriki. He stumbled back. Ricky limped backward on his feet, looking at his surroundings, and he limped toward Jake, swinging and slowly gaining momentum with the chain.

And then Ricky's face twisted in pain.

He turned to face his murderer. Cristal pulled her tantō knife from his back. He flung the chain toward Cristal and she deflected, but his strength had already failed him and with the follow up attack he instead fell into the scattered leaves and far into the darkness of death.

EPISODE VI
Part 2: Old Uncle

Two cowboys stood sentry beside the entrance to the Rios's home. The home was vast and two stories. It stretched out languidly and trees and bushes filled the surrounding grounds. A mounted gunman trotted around the perimeter. The two cowboys turned to each other, one fidgeting with his Stetson hat in his hands.

"You think they got them?" The one cowboy studied his hat.

The other cowboy shook his head.

"That last shot might be it, ain't heard no more." A sudden itch came at the base of his neck. "Maybe them's gone, maybe they did get them."

"That was a while ago," the other cowboy said. "We'da heard from the others, then."

The one cowboy returned his Stetson hat to his head. The mounted gunman slowed by the two cowboys, as if to add to their conversation, but then kept up his trot again and continued his orbit.

Cristal and Jake surveyed Tío Viejo's manor hidden by an outcropping of vegetation. Cristal sheathed her katana. "Two men by the front, two in back, and one rider," Cristal said.

"Should be easy," Jake said.

"We don't know how many are waiting inside," Cristal replied.

They watched Sheriff Sanchez round a corner on foot. He spoke to the men by the Rios's entrance and they offered him one-word replies and vigorous nodding. The sheriff turned back on his route and disappeared again.

"I'll clear out the forest," Cristal said.

"And me?" Jake said.

Cristal picked up a revolver and shook off a loose hand. "You'll be a distraction. Save your good bullets for when I'm inside." Jake took the pistol from her. "Not as accurate as your rifle, but still loud."

The mounted gunman rounded the corner of the manor. As he approached the front, six shots rang out. His horse tumbled and pinned him under. He struggled and when he got out from under the dying beast, he grabbed his shoulder, looking around.

"That's them," the second cowboy said.

"You think Terence got them?" The first cowboy said.

"Didn't hear his gun."

"You think he'll get them?" The first cowboy said.

"You shitless fuck. Let's go." The second cowboy stared him down. "Get them before they get us."

The two turned and walked toward the gunshots. Then blood flicked along the back of his head. His neck felt slick, and he examined the blood on his trembling fingers, and knew when he turned around he would have only one shot against death.

Two more cowboys took positions by the rear of the mansion, several yards from where the mounted cowboy hid behind his dying horse. One of the pair hid by the statue of a wolf and found it too short for decent cover, then dashed back to the corner of the mansion by his partner.

"How many you think?"

"One, just one," he said.

"They said there was two," the other said.

The dismounted gunman steadied his arm and his gun on the fading horse. Two gunshots burst from the direction of the forest, and the gunman's head burst and his body fell across the horse.

"He's a good shot," he said.

"I ain't that good." The other cowboy steadied his pistol in the direction of the gunshots. "Wish me luck I hit the sonuvabitch."

"Disarm."

He flicked his arm around and it was caught in the shine of a blade. His hand still held the pistol and both lightly tossed into the air silently and then tumbled softly on the ground. Both cowboys looked at the open, bloody stump. He pointed it at her and threatened her with a weapon that was no longer there.

"I, I."

The other cowboy turned around to face the attacker. A white-cloaked woman stood before him. She held a katana tilted in his direction, still several feet away.

"Go, her, get, get," The cowboy pointed with his stump.

"Yeah, I, I mean, I will, I," the other cowboy stuttered.

The second cowboy drew his pistol on her. The woman slowly tilted her katana vertically, her rhythm unperturbed by the danger of the man's gun pointed straight at her. "If you do not disarm," she said, "then you will die."

The second cowboy shook his head. "Naw, I," he looked down at his pistol, to make sure it was still there, "I got this."

The wounded cowboy collapsed. The second cowboy flicked his attention to the corpse, and in the corner of his eye, a blur came his way. He pulled the numb trigger as many times as he could, and turned to face where the bullets were landing.

Tree, dirt dirt, brambles, dirt, dirt. The trigger stopped yielding. The gun was empty.

The woman stood four feet on his left. She tilted her katana toward him again.

The man squeezed his gun and closed his eyes. Still empty. He squeezed his gun one last time.

Cristal slicked blood off her face. She looked up and down the mansion. No stirring from within. She turned to the forest and nodded to Jake.

She walked to the front of her Tío Viejo's mansion. The large lions stared haughtily down on her. Cristal raised her hand high and rapped on the cold, brass knockers, brandishing a blood-stained katana, and waiting for her great uncle to answer.

****

Tío Viejo stood by the dark liquor table. He poured himself a tall, dark scotch.

"One for you?" He offered to his wife.

She stared at him palely. "Are you going to answer the door?"

Tío Viejo turned to the sheriff. "Then one for you?"

"After," Sheriff Sanchez said.

"After." Tío Viejo nodded and took a burning drink from the deep glass.

He walked toward his front door. He opened it fully. "Welcome Cristal," he told his grandniece.

Cristal stood before him, silent and unmoving. Her katana was drawn toward him.

"No need for that," he said. "We have a gun on you, of course. Take a seat."

Tío Viejo led her into the vast vestibule. The table was

empty where her gift of bread had molded years prior. Glasses were piled on the liquor table. The stool by the piano was empty, and Tío Viejo's wife stood by the entrance of the kitchen, off to the side.

Sheriff Sanchez held his colt, a large, shining, piece of bright steel trained exactly on her heart.

"Jake's around somewhere," Tío Viejo told Sheriff Sanchez. "Be aware."

The sheriff stood off to the side to keep a wall to his back.

Tío Viejo motioned for Cristal to take the leather chair. "Please do. We have much to talk about," he said.

"We do not," Cristal replied.

"Very well," Tío Viejo said. "Firstly, I want to apologize about my callousness toward the passing of my niece Sara, your mother." In one more gulp he finished his scotch. "Family is important, and I have neglected my duty to my own blood. I should be ashamed of myself."

Cristal stared at Sheriff Sanchez. She pulled up her sheath to place the blade away. She guided the blade of her katana with her fingers above the sheath and she twisted quickly back and to her left. Cristal flicked off the fresh blood and returned her katana in front of her. Behind her, a young cowboy became dizzy and fell face first into a pool of his own blood. She held the gleaming tip of her katana six inches from Tío Viejo's chest.

"You would be best not to," Tío Viejo said. "Even with me dead, my sheriff will dispatch you immediately. Besides, we are family."

"You are a bloodletter," Cristal said. "And my duty to spill your blood goes beyond my duty to protect it."

"Then have at it," Tío Viejo told her. "But you will be dead, and you won't get your revenge on the three of us."

His wife hid in the kitchen.

Tío Viejo smiled. “You see, Cristal, in this world, all there is, all there can be, is the strength of will. A sharp mind only can guide the pure force of unbridled—”

An explosion thundered through the vestibule and Tío Viejo’s eyes flew wide open. His mouth stretched out and his chest burst apart. Chunks of meat and breastbone flew against Cristal. He seemed to attempt one last breath though no longer having lungs left in his body. He tumbled over and Cristal sprinted toward the empty table. Gunshots exploded and the sheriff’s bullets trailed Cristal’s path, blowing splinters into the air, until Cristal knocked the table over and took refuge. The ringing in her ears slowly faded.

“I don’t know if you can count,” Sheriff Sanchez said, “but we might be on equal ground now.” He pocketed the last bullet and speed loaded the empty chambers, flicking the cylinder back into place. “Something else you might want to know,” he said.

Cristal bent her back against the tipped table and slowed her body.

“Your mom, what’s her name, she was important to me too, you know.”

Cristal turned her ear to his direction.

“You see, she made me realize I can’t do seconds. I’m not a follower. I’m first place. Every time.” He rested his gun on his left arm and trained it on the table. “Not no second fiddle, not to that faggot. Him and your mom. Anyway, her pie was shit. Both of them.”

Cristal grit her teeth. Anger warmed her face.

“You know how I know it was your momma? I told old Rios, back when he hired me. He said it was her, his niece. You know what he did then?” The sheriff smiled. “He laughed.”

Cristal closed her eyes.

“Laughed. But I laughed last. Two generations of Rioses, stopped. And now you’re the third. Some people lose,

girly, and some just win." The sheriff purred. "Three's a good number. It's a lucky number. It was nice, girly, and thanks for dying."

Sheriff Sanchez's boots clicked on the wood floor as he walked to a better vantage point. He pulled the trigger. The table exploded to Cristal's right, jabbing splinters of hard wood into her arm. He paused for Cristal's reaction. "Shit, I must be out," he said.

Cristal knelt in a sprinting position. She paused—she remembered the sheriff had moved from his spot. "¡Te, cerca del piano!"

"The fuck are you talking about?" The sheriff shot twice more, blasting Cristal's barrier apart. She sprinted toward the sheriff in black.

But there was a pop and a window near him shattered. He flinched and his last three shots burst on the floor beneath Cristal. "That fucker!" The sheriff dashed up the spiral stairs while Cristal limped and took cover by the base of the staircase.

Jake's voice shouted from the other side of the house. "¡Ce, en el baño!"

"¿Cúal? ¿El primero?"

"¿Cúal es el primero?"

Cristal cursed.

She quietly climbed the staircase. The hallway on the second floor divided to the left and the right of the main staircase. Cristal bit her lip and went left.

Sheriff Sanchez emptied the casings from his chambers into his hand. He placed them softly on the sink in the bathroom. He reached into his pocket and loaded the bullet he placed there.

Cristal walked slowly along the hallway. Blood trickled down her right arm, jabbed with shreds of wood. She stood before the door to the main bedroom and slowly tapped it open. The Rios's bed was large, fitted with dark brown silk sheets

and fixed with a mother of pearl headboard. Boxes and crates were stacked in one corner. Along the wall were an old trophy, a tall mirror, and fine knickknacks from an era long ago, with no purpose left in the remaining future. Cristal checked the large closet, filled with furs and fine clothing, and then she turned to the bathroom and its closed door.

She clenched her jaw. She moved the bedstand beside her and propped herself up on it, steadying her wounded leg. She lifted her good leg and prepared to kick the door open.

Sheriff Sanchez hid behind the toilet. There was plenty of space between him and the doorway, but he knew Cristal was fast. His heart pounded. A loud crack came from down the hallway.

Sheriff Sanchez stood up.

He peeked his head out of the bathroom. The noise came from the main bedroom down the hall. He kept one eye out into the hallway and his colt was trained in Cristal's direction.

Cristal limped toward the entrance of the main bedroom. She stood by the doorway. She looked around the room. The boxes were filled with more fine goods, none useful for any purpose that would aid her in fighting the sheriff.

Cristal heard the slow jangle of spurs coming down the hallway.

"Girly," the sheriff said from the hallway, "I know where you are, and now you know where I am. You know what I'm going to do to you."

Cristal turned to the bay windows and unlatched one.

Saliva dripped off the sheriff's grin. "You're gonna be a mess like your uncle, lying down there. You're not gonna be pretty no more. Not that you were, really."

Cristal attempted her weak leg outside the window. She pulled herself back inside. She couldn't manage that as an escape.

"Maybe you would've liked it." The sheriff crept closer to the bedroom. "It's different with seconds. They don't act like they're there. Firsts are good, they scream, they fight."

Cristal hid behind the bed, katana at the ready.

"But you fight too good," he said. "That's a compliment, you know. But bad for fucking."

The sheriff stood before the bedroom threshold. Cristal wasn't in sight. He checked the side of the threshold and entered.

"Time for you to die, girly."

No movement stirred within.

He surveyed the room and a quick flash of steel jumped in his eyes.

Sheriff Sanchez whipped his colt and it thundered, shattering a body-length mirror.

Cristal flew over the bed toward him.

The sheriff blocked Cristal's katana with his heavy pistol, and the blade deflected off the finger guard. Cristal drew back for another attack but the sheriff closed in on her and butted her down with his gun. She propped herself up with her wounded right arm and pushed herself back with her left, avoiding the jangling spurs of Sheriff Sanchez's fierce boots. Cristal struggled to get up again and he swung down on her with the chrome gun, the hit only partially deflected. He kicked her down and stomped his foot on her chest, digging his spur into her stomach. The sheriff panted and sweat poured off his face. Blood seeped into the rug by Cristal's shoulder.

Sheriff Sanchez pointed the large colt at her head. "You're lucky I'm out. Otherwise you'd be a big ole hole in this nice ole carpet. Maybe I can add you with what's her name, your momma."

"Sara was my sister," Jake said.

Sheriff Sanchez turned around but already two bullets blasted into his side. He tumbled down and aimed his gun toward

Jake. He squeezed the trigger but Jake's boot crushed his hand, and one more loud bullet thundered off into the storage boxes, exploding fine china and sterling silver pieces. The colt clicked empty, and the sheriff looked up at Jake.

"My sister's name was Sara," Jake told him.

The sheriff shook his pinned hand. He clicked the colt one more time and snarled.

"Say it," Jake said.

The sheriff gathered spit and hit Jake's shin.

Cristal pointed her katana by his head. "I lose often. And every time, my loss prepares me for the victory I need." A trickle of her blood dripped off onto his cheek. "Now, like my uncle said."

Sheriff Sanchez grumbled. "Sara. And also, go fuh—"

Jake swung the butt of his rifle down time and time and time again, and the sheriff's skull collapsed, and then his face became a dark black and red pulp, and then what was left of the sheriff was unrecognizable, and, in brief time, the sheriff became a forgotten word on the boundless winds. Then Jake swung one last time and stopped and finally his pain and his suffering were satisfied.

****

A bloodied Cristal and Jake marched the widow Rios through the main street of San Benito.

Ms. Rios turned to her relatives by marriage, and by coercion, and attempted to make polite conversation with them. They remained silent. All the townspeople of San Benito stood on their porches and watched the bloody pair march the former matriarch toward the center of town, a spectacle for the well-to-do and the impoverished alike. The widow Rios turned to the

wealthiest as they passed by, laughed and made light with them as well, as if today were a family stroll and they were welcome to join. But even the wealthy shook their heads and the poor laughed and both watched Cristal and Jake march her through the main thoroughfare.

The three of them came to the empty cinder block jail-house. The well-dressed boy of ten followed them inside.

"You are very, very intelligent young people," Patricia Rios said. "And I wholly understand that I deserve some punishment befitting of, of…"

Cristal pushed her into an open holding cell.

"…of, well, I have done some sort of wrong. Certainly." Patricia rubbed her hands. "But you are incredibly intelligent, so I hope," she pivoted. "After all, you knew about my wine! Was it good, did you try some? The name seemed distinguished, it, it's fancier than Wilson. It tasted fine, yes, didn't it?"

The boy watched Cristal slide the door closed.

"How long should I be?" Patricia said. "What would be appropriate? I mean, I didn't kill Sara. I didn't kill anyone! I'm not even sure what I did was all that bad." She giggled nervously. "But I should be punished, absolutely, and you are very intelligent, both of, very, yes, both of you, and I hope you find an appropriate…"

Cristal leaned and pushed the door in place.

The door clicked.

"…appropriate punishment? No, justice. That is the right word. I hope you find an appropriate sense of justice here." Patricia pressed in against the bars. "And I think, yes, being locked in is very appropriate, a very wise punishment for me. How long should I remain?"

Cristal bent toward the bars, inches from her great aunt's face. "You'll need to make new friends to survive."

"And, and," Patricia drew back from the bars. "Then how long?"

Cristal stepped back from the bars. Jake tossed a tin cup toward his aunt. It clanged against the metal bars with a dull ring. “I guess water might be tough,” he said.

“Water?” Patricia said. “I’ll be fine for one day, don’t worry, I’ll be fine. If you think two days is fair, I think I’ll be fine for two days, as well.” She wrapped her hands around the bars. “Two days?”

The young boy watched Cristal and Jake turn away and leave.

The door closed behind them. “You,” Patricia yelled to the boy. “You, boy! Over here! Get me out.”

The boy stared at her.

Patricia pointed in her cell. “I said over here! Get your ass over here and get me out!”

The boy shook his head. “Can’t.”

“You, why? Now! I can’t stay here two days!”

The boy shrugged. “Ma’am, you’re gonna have to.”

“Why? I’m sorry I wasn’t the nicest.” She threw her hands up and paced. “I was a little mean, I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” She turned to the boy. “Now, please, please I’m asking, get me out of this rancid cell!”

The boy shook his head again.

“Where’s the button? There’s a button, right? Or keys.”

The boy pointed to the desk.

“Then, please, what can I give you to press the button? A new bike?” She waved her hands. “I’ll get your whole family new bikes!”

“It’s electric,” the boy said.

“Then, then, the generator, you can start the generator. Do you know how to start the generator?”

“No gas, ma’am.”

“But, the keys! There have to be keys!”

The boy sat at the desk and kicked his feet up. “No electricity, no gas, and no keys, ma’am. The sheriff said never

close this door. That's cause it won't never open again."

"It's got to open," Patricia said.

The boy folded his hands and leaned back in the sheriff's chair.

"Can I get some water until we figure this out?"

The boy rocked back and forth in the large chair. "You've been awful mean, ma'am, but if someone wants to fetch you water, I ain't one to stop them."

****

Cristal and Jake cantered on horses down toward the forested part of the town.

Their horses bent down to lap water from the murmuring stream.

The skies dimmed, preparing for sunset. The stream was clear to the bottom. "This has been a lot," Jake said.

"It has," Cristal said.

"I'm not sure I recognize who I am anymore," he said.

"Me too," Cristal said. "I think."

They passed the turn toward the Rios's manor and continued down the hard dirt path.

"Esmé said the sparrow becomes the dragon, and the dragon becomes the sky." Cristal turned to Jake. "Growth, something like that. I feel like we have grown. Where do you think Esmé is? The sky?"

"I don't know," Jake said.

"Could you tell me what you think?"

Jake nodded along with his horse's canter. "I'm thinking about your mom. You said something about her in the heavens, gaining her fire. I think she has it, now." He turned to his niece. "You said you wouldn't ever see that. She has it. As her

brother, I know she does."

Cristal nodded. "Thank you."

"And Esmé?" Jake shook his head. "I don't know. But I think she's proud of you. Just like your dad, and your mom."

"Uncle Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"I got this far because of you." She smiled. "You should know you are my guiding star, and I'm sorry if I haven't said it yet."

"You also never say just my name," Jake said.

Cristal smiled. "That's because you're wiser than me, dear uncle."

Jake laughed. The pair stopped their horses a distance before a large ranch, earthy, orange paint peeling from the sides, an empty stable far off. Jake dismounted.

Cristal walked toward the ranch. She stood before the dilapidated mansion and drew her katana high into the air. The wind tore at her tattered white cloak. The sleeve of her shirt was matted with dark brown blood. The leather grip of her kantana was dark with her sweat and blood as well.

She stood before the silent estate. There was no sign of life within, nor did light come from the building, despite the sun's slow decline. Cristal's katana reflected orange rays from the spreading sunset and orange spots danced on the ground around her. She stood awaiting some sign from one of the remaining ruling families of San Benito, but there was no motion within the mansion nor around her. Cristal lowered her katana and walked back toward the horses.

"Young lady." A raspy voice came from a window. "One moment."

The tall, earthy-orange doors opened and an old woman with a walker stiffly shuffled toward Cristal. She muttered frustration at her slow approach. "A moment, please," she repeated.

The old woman heaved on her walker toward Cristal. Her hair was pure white, thin, and her face heavily wrinkled. "You came here for a reason. Young lady, what is that reason?"

"I will tell you this," Cristal said. "I will not return. But know that your actions will, just as they have visited Mr. Rios. The future stretches out from what we have made in the past. I suggest you forge a new path." She nicked her finger and sheathed her katana. "That is all."

The old woman nodded to Jake as he mounted his horse. "I understand, young lady. The Wilsons and Rioses were too loud for this town, anyway." She coughed and spat. "Finally, there'll be time for the quiet to speak. Thank you for your trust, young lady. We'll do our best. I'll make sure of it."

Cristal nodded once to the old woman.

The niece and her uncle mounted their horses and cantered away into the dry forest. The sun continued its descent, and the pair talked and shared things among themselves as they left San Benito and their past for good.

EPISODE VI
Part 3: The Rains Arrive

I'm nobody
Who are you? Are you
Nobody too?

Let me tell you a secret:
I love you

Now, nobody
—you are not

****

The morning was less than two hours old.

Cristal and Jake trotted their horses toward Santa Elena, off in the distance. A shadow passed over Cristal. She turned up toward the sky. Dark clouds passed by them.

A crack burst through the land. A vein of lightning shot through another cloud, followed by another large crack.

The people of Santa Elena looked out of their windows.

The sky shrouded over, and Santa Elena became dark as a thin veil of shade covered the whole of the town. Children huddled behind their parents. Adults looked on in consternation.

An old, toothless woman looked up into the sky, and her loose lips turned into a smile.

Another explosion roared through the breaking sky. Drop after drop pattered on the dry soil, kicking up dust. The rain gained momentum, and soon the ground was lifting up dust and soon the dust kicked up was matted back down again and the rains came and the soil turned from light tan to two shades north of black.

The old woman clapped and laughed.

The rain pelted down, hammering on thin roofs and echoing in hollow houses, frightening adults who didn't know what to do with the sudden downpour.

A small boy escaped his mom's grip and ran outside.

He jumped into the fresh mud and made a large, satisfying slap that blapped all over his body and even up to his face. He rubbed mud out of his eye and halted, instead, turning his face upward into the sky that was bringing down rain for the first time in several years. The mud melted off his laughing face bit by bit by bit by bit.

Children took to the streets, getting chastised by their parents. The boys slung mud balls at the girls, and the girls got mud in their eyes until the boys got too close and they hit them in retaliation. Children jumped in the mud, slid in the mud, tasted mud and the bitter grit on their lips, intentionally and unintentionally. The children with shoes sucked their ankles into the mud until they joined their friends and threw the clumps of their shoes in the direction of their homes, and then they walked through the icky, oozy cold mud squishing between their toes and up past their ankles and climbing their shins, flicking and flecking brown muck around everywhere.

A mother yanked her boy back home, and he bent away

from her, getting dragged, until the rain loosened her grip, and he fell into the filth, and he scooped a large handful of mud and flung it at his indignant mom.

A father chased his small son flapping his wild arms. The father yelled at his son and he turned around to see the matter. His father nodded toward the graveyard they were passing, and the small boy nodded as well, and he slowed his running. The father caught up with his son until they passed by, and he slapped his child on the back and the boy resumed his wild careening and shrieking.

A man walked outside carrying a mug, catching the water descending upon them, and others followed, holding up cans, bowls, cups into the sky. Adults knelt down and the children carefully drank the rainwater, soft and fresh and more pure than nectar on one's tongue.

Neighbors talked to each other, pelted by rain and wind, reminiscing about memories and dreams and hopes. They laughed, sharing simple things that had brought them lasting pleasures, long ago.

Cristal and Jake walked their horses into the mudbath that tumbled upon Santa Elena. They watched children drag their parents with them, urging them to play in the mud, and it was cold and dirty and wet and everything in that moment.

Their horses shook their manes and steam came from their breaths.

Cristal held her hand out and splatter after splatter of raindrops burst on her open palm. Jake reached his tongue out as far as he could up toward the pouring heavens and Cristal smiled and not long after joined him.

Shafts of light poked through parts of the town, and a girl shielded herself from the unexpected brightness.

The loud hammering of rain calmed itself, and homes were quieting down, no longer loud chambers for rain to bang upon. Water stopped pouring off roofs recklessly and

the streams slowed themselves and fell softly off the edges of houses.

The shroud of clouds started breaking up, taking the rain farther off into the desert. The drops were no longer as heavy, and they got lighter and started smacking on children's bare arms like light, wet kisses.

The town brightened fully, and the last bits of rains started finishing up. Adults sighed and children bemoaned the end of their play. The ground was dark and damp, and a man splashed his foot in a small puddle, splattering muck over his teenage son.

The rains had finished and the sky was clear again. The sun continued beaming down on the inhabitants of Santa Elena and they slicked off what mud they could and began to shuffle back into their quiet homes. A damp mop-headed girl frowned and walked toward her home, pushing her long hair out of her face, and her mother beckoned her back in, until a small tksh came from somewhere, and she turned around to watch a grasshopper tssshhhhhh gently through the cool air.

****

Cristal sat before the koi pond. The soil was still dark and damp, and wisps of fog lightly lifted from the drying earth.

She closed her eyes and slowly relaxed.

Jake took a seat beside her. He watched her calmness before the open pond.

"Esmé's poem washed away," Jake said. "I know I should've carved it."

"I think it should wash away," Cristal said.

Jake frowned. "Maybe you're right."

"You know," Cristal said.

"What?"

Cristal frowned. "One moment, let me think. It's on the tip of my tongue."

Jake turned to the breathing fog of the koi pond.

Cristal folded her hands on her face. "My mom used to say we're just one grain of sand on the beach."

"She always said that when we got in trouble," Jake said. "That was a long time ago."

"Just one grain," Cristal said. "Be humble. You are nothing more."

She opened her eyes. The sun beat into the open hole. The fog slowly dissipated and the bottom of the future pond lightened in color, becoming light brown, drying out. A sheet of fog remained on the bottom.

"We aren't grains of sand," Cristal said. "You and I."

Jake turned to Cristal.

"We're threads in a vast fabric. We're woven together."

Jake watched the final fog lift. The koi pond was vacant and dry again.

Cristal folded her hands in her lap. "Our destinies are knit together. You, me. Mom, Esmé. Tío Viejo."

"I think I see what you're saying," Jake said.

"Grains of sand rub against each other, no connection to the other. Completely independent. But threads of fabric, when we bend, when we change direction, we stretch the other threads around us. Some greatly, some slightly."

Jake laughed. "You let the linen factory get to you."

Cristal turned to him. "You can't cut one without damaging the ones around it. You press one thread down, with your finger, you warp all the ones around it. But, still, we are all bound together, maybe through the whole universe. And one tear in the fabric affects the opposite end, even if only a fraction of an inch."

Jake shook his head at her. "Is that what you see when

you look in the sky? Then maybe we're two threads: what we are, and the dreams we carry."

Cristal looked at her clasped hands. "There's a hole here in Santa Elena, one that we can't bind again. Families are dead. The Sisterhood is gone. This town is broken."

Jake stood up. "Santa Elena will heal itself. They're stronger than you give them credit."

"And us," Cristal said, "we've lost everything we had. We lost so many friends and the last of our family. This past year has been an entire lifetime."

Jake nodded his head. "I know. And it's also time for us to go."

Cristal looked at Jake quizzically. "Where?"

"To the other end of the fabric," Jake said.

"Our vows."

"We also have new family to meet."

Jake offered his hand. Cristal stood up and they gathered their belongings into a pair of backpacks. The two turned to shuffle off when they were interrupted. Cristal turned around.

A young girl looked at the two with longing eyes. "Sister?" She repeated.

Cristal nodded.

"Are you going?"

"Yes," Cristal said.

"Will you come back?"

Cristal knelt down. "No. See that pond over there?"

The girl nodded.

"You will finish filling that pond with water. And your child will fill it with fish."

The girl nodded vigorously.

Cristal kissed her forehead. The girl watched the

woman and her young uncle sling on their backpacks, and watched them leave Santa Elena walking toward a future that remained yet to be told.

"Are you ready to meet them?"

"Yes, Uncle Jake, I'm ready to make them."

EPILOGUE: **Dragon Meets the Sky**

Trace your soft finger
Along my roadmap of scars
Map out your safety

i hope to find a
better version of myself
at the path's next bend

Blades of a feather kill together.

Rejoin Cristal and Jake for the next exciting chapter of their journey for justice!

Lone Cubs

The Dark Blade

I've learned sometimes the future slams its door in your face. You just have to remember to kick it open again.

THANKS FOR READING!