

Fair, by Sophie Houlden.

--- ACT ONE ---

Chapter 1: It starts with a death.

The rain beat down heavily on the forest, shaking the trees violently. Though on a night as dark as this they were only visible at the edges of the mother's torchlight.

She looked down at her child, sheltered in her cloak, tired from the journey and feeling the mud was getting the better of her. The mother hoped this was the only hardship the child would have to face. She knew there were troubled times ahead for people like them, but like now she was going to do all she could to shelter her child from the storm.

A flash of lightning turned the night to day for the shortest of moments, the trees were nothing but an instance of movement, a single frame in their movie fight with the wind and rain.

But the mother was sharper than the lightning, she knew she saw something, but made sure she showed no signs of it though, if she was being hunted she didn't want her stalker to know that she was aware.

Another flash of lightning and she knew she was surrounded. This was a situation where she was outmatched, her only motive now was the survival of her child.

The mother stopped, moved her child as close as possible, and then put out the torch.

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The assassins probably didn't hear the child crying beside her mother's corpse as they approached, they likely didn't even know the mother had her child with her after she was hidden in the cloak. The circle of killers slowly crept towards the body, still fearful of it, if the death was just a trick, a warrior this strong could be the end of their careers... and their lives.

The child still partly covered by the cloak tried to get some kind of response from her mother, she saw the blood running down her arm, her face laying sideways in the mud, eyes wide open. Unblinking.

The girl could feel the puddle she was in was warm, she knew well enough what it meant, someone had taken her mother from her, she didn't know why, but more than anything she knew it was the most unfair thing in the world.

The girl stood up, attempting to wipe the tears from her eyes, but the rain pushed on her so strongly there's no way to know if she managed.

The assassins froze, it was clear to them now the child was with the mother, but it was not a part of the plan. One decides it's best to knock out the child but they never get the chance.

It seemed like daylight for another split-second. But it wasn't the lightning this time, when the light faded there was a circle of bodies surrounding that of the child's mother.

The child outcried the storm.

Chapter 2: Customers expect benefits.

Aella felt herself being shaken, drowsy, she opened her eyes to see a large, bald, bearded man in her face.

“Wake the hell up girl! I dont pay you to sleep on the job!”

Aella thought to herself “you barely pay me at all”.

he then shook her forcefully a second time,

“Ok... ok already! I'm up, fuck Ssa!”

“Dont give me any of that lip, serve the customers and then take the trash.”

Aella picked herself up from the sacks of potatoes she was using as a bed and straightened out her outfit, pulling her apron back into place. As she did this she noticed her mother's bracelet, the one thing she had to remember her by, was showing. She quickly covered it with her sleeve.

Who knows what the assholes who came to the bar would do if they saw something that looked that valuable, especially if they saw that one of the 26 glass beads that was embedded in it... glowed. Aella didn't want to risk losing the last connection she had with her mother.

Picking up a tray and a cloth Aella stepped out of the kitchen and into the bar to clear the tables. As usual, the bar was totally full. Aella heard that ever since the white event times have been hard for everyone. She looked at all the men drowning themselves in beer across the bar and thought them all cowards. If times are hard all they do is drink themselves stupid so they dont have to think about it.

“Hey tits! Our table needs some attention!”

this was her life ever since her mother died, cleaning up after rude drunken assholes who can barely make it to the toilet, and even when they do they make a godawful mess for her to clean up. And for what? So she could earn enough to stay alive and keep doing this?

“My name's Aella, asshole.” she took the (substantial number of) glasses from the table and wiped it down.

“no need to be rude kid, it was a friendly gesture!”

Aella looked at the mans face, she could see right past it like it was invisible and his thoughts were painted out all to clear, he was being too friendly for her liking.

“Whatever I dont like it. Dont talk to me like that.”

Aella cleared up the rest of the tables in the bar, received many similar interactions with the other customers and by the time she was done she was ready to put someones face inside out.

She dumped the glasses in the sink and grabbed the bags of trash.

“Make sure you put them in the skip at the end of the allyway this time, dont just dump them next to it” Ssa called at her from the other side of the kitchen.

“Hey that was because the skip was full! The garbage guys are too busy drinking in there to do their jobs!”

“Times are hard girl, and they need their cheer if they are to get back to work. And their cheer is paying for your room and food, dont forget it!”

stepping out the kitchen and into the alley Aella cursed Ssa, she saw how much money came

into the bar and she knew how much the beer cost, he could lecture her all he wanted, she knew he was ripping her off something rotten.

“Well hello there tits, fancy seeing you here.”

It was the asshole from the bar, blocking the end of the alley, Aella knew the trash wasn't worth the trouble of going past some horny customer alone so she turned back. Only to find someone had been waiting behind the door, to stop her getting back to safety.

“now now girl, don't try and leave us just yet, you said some pretty mean things back there, you have a cruel mouth.”

Aella turned to face the gobby one walking toward her down the alley.

“I'm sure we can find better things to do with that pretty mouth of yours, much better thi—”

“if its raping me you're after I'm not going down without a fight”

before she knew it the man behind her had Aella in his grip, he held her arms over her and she dropped the trashbags to the ground.

“well that wasn't much of a fight was it girl? But you look much nicer in that pose, it shows off your figure.”

the first man reached towards her chest but hesitated.

“what is this now, looks like you have a very nice bracelet there,”

Aella saw red, her sleeve must have come down being held by the goon behind.

“I think pretty as you are its a bit too good for you. Lets take that before we start shall we...”

Aella tensed up, not in fear but in determination and said;

“Thats one wrong move too many dickheads.”

She pulled her hands down in front of her full strength, throwing the goon holding her over both Aella and the man in front.

The first man turned in shock to see his friend smash into the skip and be knocked out cold. As he turned around to face Aella her foot was already passing through where his head was and he was knocked against the wall with a bigger headache than he had ever had in his life.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing girl?”

Aella turned around to see Ssa fuming from the kitchen doorway.

“These assholes tried to rape me!”

“So what? My customers expect certain benefits and the cost of the beer covers that, you think I pay you so much just to walk around carrying stuff back and forth!?! when these guys come to you will damn well do what they want!”

“Screw you Ssa! This isnt what I signed up for, I quit!”

“Fine, theres plenty of women who would kill for the li9fe you are throwing away, I hope you enjoy the gutter bitch”

at that Ssa slammed the door.

Fuming, Aella picked up the trash and threw it at the kitchen door.  
“ASSHOLE!”

Aella marched out the alley towards the street, she knew a place she could go to clear her head for now.

“you should have let them do it.”

Aella turned round to see a child with pigtails in a dress, carrying what seemed to be an unreasonably large backpack.

“Trust me girl, when you're a little older you'll take my side on this.”

“hey, I'm not a girl!”

“...you look like a girl”

“No, I look beautiful, I'm going to be the most beautiful person in the whole land when I'm older, and I'm not going to let the fact I'm a boy hold me back!”

“great, I'm almost mugged and raped, I lose my job and now I'm being pestered by some cross-dressing little brat.”

At that Aella turned away and started walking off along the street.

She heard the boy's footsteps behind her.

“what now?”

“well, its just that... they couldnt have taken it, your bracelet I mean”

“and you know that how?”

“well it says right here see,” the boy pulled a huge book out of his backpack and flicked through the pages, Aella stopped walking and looked at the book, it seemed to be almost half the size of the boy, and his backpack seemed to still be full.  
'this kids stronger than he looks' thought Aella.

“Ah! Here it is see, items forged in the white event cannot be taken from their owner unless the owner dies.”

Aella looked at what the boy was pointing too and all the words seemed alien to her,

“what do you mean 'forged in the white event' this was my mother's bracelet.”

“Your mother's? Are you not Anemone?”

Aella hung her head.

“no... that was my mother”

“...I- I'm sorry, so you never knew anything about the bracelet? Did it not seem weird to you that it glows?”

“Hey! How did you know it did that? And more importantly, how did you know my mother? She must have died before you were out of nappies kid!”

“well, cant you tell I'm a scholar?”

“what?”

“I'd have thought the glasses gave it away... whatever, the thing is my dad knew your mum, they used to work together studying white event phenomena, so thats how I know about her. I actually came looking for her so I could study stuff like that in the real world, instead of just reading about it, its the right of all scholars to explore the world!”

“well like I said, my mum's dead now, sorry you wasted your trip kid”

at that Aella turned and carried on down the street.

“dont you want to know about her? About your bracelet? About why she died?”

Aella paused for a moment.

“you can follow me for a while if you want kid, its not safe round here for girls”

“I already told you I'm not a girl!”

“yeah, but you look like one and that makes it not safe for you.”

“...”

“come on.”

“hey, I still dont know your name!”

“I'm Aella.”

“nice to meetcha! I'm Claire.”

“Claire?”

“whats wrong with that? Its more beautiful than the one my parents gave me!”

“...”

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“what is this place?”

Claire asked, though Aella could only really see his head over the top of the long grass. With the sun setting soon she wouldnt be able to see even that much of him.

“this is the town's orchard, its supposed to be off-limits, but I used to help the picker out so he lets me come here as long as I keep quiet, and he looks the other way if a couple of Benapples go missing.”

“its huge! Its like as big as ten fields!”

“yeah, the benapples help to go into the beer, as well as most of the towns baking, apparently they only grow round here since the white event.”

The pair sat down at the edge of some woods, looking down the sloped orchard, over the town and at the sunset falling behind the mountains on the horizon.

“This is kind of my spot, we'll be staying here tonight.”

“You dont have any other place to go?”

“That bar was where I slept before, but to be honest I think being homeless is better. What about you, why are you sleeping outside tonight?”

“I told you, I'm a scholar on my world stud-”

“save it kid, last scholar I saw on world study was three times your age, I know you arent supposed to leave the library till then.”

“...”

“runaway huh?”

“...yes.”

“... I'll get a fire started.”

### Chapter 3: Doll.

The assassin never expected to become a prisoner, the boss told him this job should be the easiest, the weakest to take from. But this guy... he had seen the assassin coming a mile off, which took some doing, the assassin was exceptionally well trained.

Amrs tied to a beam in the ceiling, the assassin tried to shake himself free.

“I wouldnt bother trying if I were you,” the assassin heard someone say from behind him, and footsteps sounded as the unknown man walked in front of the assassin.

“you are tied with pure Qi there, theres no breaking that.”

the assassin was thinking a mile a minute, he was furious, this opponent was beyond belief, not only had he managed to trap him, but to tie someone up with nothing but Qi energy seemed impossible, either the boss set him up, or more likely, the boss had no idea the target was so advanced.

The assassin knew better than to ask what was going to happen, to speak a single word would give away something about his master. This was going to be an interrogation.

“I can see from your eyes you dont plan on talking, no doubt you'll die before saying a single word. I'd be impressed if the determination was your own, or you had a worthy cause, but clearly you dont...”

“Doll, if he isnt going to talk then what are we doing here?” another voice came from behind the assassin.

“He's not going to talk, but I am... since you have brought this world back to me its time for me to be honest with myself... and with you I guess.”

at that Doll started to tense up a little, the assassin could see the shadows cast by the dim

basement light started to fall across Doll in a different way, he was... shape shifting?

Doll stretched a little, working out the kinks in her new body.

“God its good to be back to myself again, well, I say myself but this isnt the body I was born with, its just the most comfortable you know?”

before the assassin, where seconds ago stood a dirty, unshaven man, now stood a beautiful woman with hair almost down to her knees.

“wha...” a word escaped the lips of the assassin, this was too unexpected.

“ah, made you talk huh? Dont worry kid, I wont hold it against you. Like I said, I'm not after information from you, I want you to tell your boss about me, tell him he should have come himself, then I would never have stepped out of hiding, all he has accomplished today is awakened another contestant, and my goal is the same as his.”

at that Doll withdrew her Qi holding the assassin in place.

“also, tell him I dont think highly of getting others to do his dirty work, when I am ready I hope we become opponents and I shall take the points he cheated from the others who couldnt stop you assassins.”

The assassin quickly looked around, trying to assess his situation?

“I wont kill you stupid,” doll smiled “I need you to deliver the message”

at that the assassin took his opportunity and dashed out the door past Doll's friend.

“Are you sure its ok to let him go?”

“bah, I dont want to kill anyone I dont have to, especially as he isnt a match for me. If I win the contest, hopefully it will put an end to the killing.”

“So you are going now?”

“Things have been set in motion, the arena is calling louder than ever, and I can feel my bracelet's energy, it will start to pull soon.”

Doll looked at her bracelet, an ornate, expensive looking band with 26 glass beads embedded in it. One of them glowing.

Chapter 4: Encounter in the twilight.

“What do you mean my mother was a warrior! She never hurt anyone!”

Aella was almost shocked this kid had known her five minutes and was already badmouthing her mother.

“whoa there A! I'm not saying she was a barbarian or a soldier or anything, like it or not you're a warrior too-” Claire tried to explain himself

“I am not!”

“oh yeah, as far as I can tell you're the only 16 year old girl who totally caned two full grown

men in a fight today.”

“that was! ... that was different, I was just defending–”

“exactly! Warriors aren't just people who get into fights for fun, you had a reason, you believed in what you were doing, and you decided to do it yourself.”

Aella looked at the boy, already used to his girlish appearance, took a deep breath and sat back down on the log by the fire. The sun had slid behind the horizon and its light only half-heartedly tried to light the surroundings, but it was clear the twilight would make way for night soon.

Aella gazed into the fire for some time,

“So, what is the deal with my mother's bracelet then?”

from no-where some knives hit the trunk right by Aella, she quickly turned around, making sure to come between Claire and whoever was attacking.

“Who's out there!?”

a calm voice responded;

“Well I suck at sneak attacks anyway, to be honest I was hoping they would miss anyway, I'd prefer to face you with honour. Still though, it's strange you couldn't tell I was here... didn't you feel the pull?”

“the pull? What are you talking about?”

Claire was the one to answer Aella's question;

“the pull on your bracelet! It pulls in the direction of the nearest warrior who also has a bracelet like it! He's here to kill you!”

The owner of the voice dropped from the trees, he appeared to be a young man, no older than 18.

“well it's true I want to kill you, but only for a short while, I have a technique to bring you back to life if I'm quick enough, then I can take your glow and be on my way.”

“what do you mean take my glow! Why do you want to fight me?”

The boy tilted his head a little

“...you're serious aren't you, you have no idea what's going on.”

the boy walked over to the campfire, and sat down on the log, pulling his knives from it and putting them in pockets along his clothes. Aella made sure to stand between him and Claire.

“oh don't worry, I'm not about to fight someone who is as ignorant as you, it's just not honourable. I'll wait until you have learned enough, and I promise next time I'll give you warning first.”

Aella saw the boy was quite relaxed, and not defensive so she relaxed a little and sat down.

“who's the girl anyway?” the boy pointed.



“HIS name is Claire.” Aella responded.

“tomboy?”

“just boy.”

“whatever.”

the three sat around the fire in silence for about an hour, Aella didnt know what to say, Claire wasnt sure if she should carry on explaining stuff in the presence of someone who would sooner or later be an enemy, and the boy just seemed to not care about anything but relaxing by the fire.

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“OK what the hell is up with you asshole! You bust in trying to kill Aella and now you just hink you can hang with us!?!”

the boy looked up to see Claire standing over him.

“And whats with you Aella!?! You're just sitting there not doing ANYTHING, the least you could do is try and learn what is going on, and take advantage and kill this idiot who's taking you too lightly!”

Claire looked back and forth between the two.

“ANYONE WOULD THINK YOU DONT WANT TO KILL EACH OTHER!”

claire stood gasping, waiting for their response.

“well, I dont want to kill him”

“I'm not in any rush to kill her either, why are you stressing out on such a pleasant night?”

Claire was clearly more pissed off that this guy was back chatting and kicked him as hard as he could.

“ow! And what was that for?”

“If you're going to hang around then at least tell us your name!”

“... do you normally ask people questions this way?”

Claire looked set to blow again, he seemed to the boy to be like a volcano that could explode as often as it wanted, each time more violent than the next, a real nuisance.

“My name's Timon, no need to get so stressed.”

“URGH!”

Claire sat back down in a huff, crossed his legs, folded his arms and looked intently into the fire, almost as if he was willing it to jump onto Timon.

Aella waited a little while for clair to calm down before asking;

“why would we want to kill each other?”

both Claire and Timon looked at her then back at the fire.

Timon answered first, "your bracelet, there are 26 in the world, each one belonging to a warrior, its the destiny of the warriors to kill each other to take the glow from all the bracelets and claim the white event legacy."

"whats the white event legacy?"

"no one knows for sure, but the rumour is it's the power to reshape the world as the surviving warrior sees fit."

"It's not just a rumour," Claire spoke for the first time since she was fuming, "The white event itself changed the world just enough to create these circumstances, it has the power to change the universe entirely. It is powered by sheer willpower, the determination of a warrior. Whichever warrior demonstrates their will is strongest by surviving, is the only one the white legacy will respect to obey."

"but... why should we kill each other for that?" Aella asked, not happy with the idea of having to kill, let alone fight against 25 warriors.

"Take a look around," Timon said, "does the world look like its ok right now? I for one think it could do with change, and I dont trust any of the other warriors to not just make themselves dictators over all existance."

Aella stared into the fire, no one else spoke that night, and the all fell asleep around the fire.

## Chapter 5: Dawn punishment.

As the sun rises the light passes through the dojo doors as the assassin makes his way back to his master, but the light does not reach the steps to the basement where his master is waiting.

"What is it Seventeen? Why do you not have the bracelet?"

"Master, I apologise, this opponent was much stronger than I could manage, he sensed me coming and trapped me. Then... he became a she and..."

"shape-shifter eh? That means that she must have mastered controlling her Qi flow and used it to keep her power hidden from me... continue Seventeen."

"She... she gave me a message master, she told me that because you sent me she was coming out of hiding, and I dont understand it, but she said something about taking part in the contest. She thinks she will face you at some point, said--"

"that's enough Seventeen. All I need to know. Howver I sent you to collect the bracelet and you return empty handed, you have failed me Seventeen."

The assassin's master signaled to someone in the shadow.

"samurai, kill seventeen for me."

there was a flash of steel and seventeens head rolled along the floor, samurai standing on the other side of it.

"I want you to deal with this 'Doll' personally, I know it's not your style, but I want her to suffer before you kill her. It's unacceptable that she should challenge me."

“yes master.”

The assassin's eyes clouded over as the samurai made his way out of the dojo to clean up the mess the assassin made.

His devotion to his master as a samurai would surely take him to victory over the assassin.

Chapter 6: The Journey Begins.

As dawn cast its friendly glow down on the three around the ashes of the fire, Claire was the first up, he stretched, walked over to Aella and shook her shoulder gently;

“Aella, time to get up.”

Clair then walked over to Timon, and kicked him in the leg.

“GET UP LAZY!”

“What the hell kid!?! whats the rush!?!”

“In case you didn't know, we cant afford to let our guard down, you're bracelets always pull towards the nearest warrior.”

“So?”

“Sooooo... they are pulling towards each other, there could be a warrior coming for you guys over the next hill and you wouldnt notice it!”

“...this is a good point.” Timon was suddenly very awake.

Aella yawned and stretched.

“I'm too tired for people to be attacking us, it wouldnt be fair.”

Timon turned to her;

“Sorry blondie, but not all the warriors are going to be as nice as I am, there arent really any rules to this thing.”

Timon held up his arm showing his bracelet, Aella suddenly felt her bracelet almost pull towards his.

“the bracelets... do they really want us to kill each other?”

“Of course not, they are just bracelets, they dont want... anything!” Claire finished picking up his bag. “It's the beads, they contain some of the essence of the white event... its like magnets, they pull towards each other, the essence is trying to recombine.”

Timon looked at claire.

“He's pretty smart, even I didn't know that.”

“Thats why I know where we have to go, Aella needs training, and no-one knows more about her abilities than my father. And as for YOU...” Claire looked darkly at Timon, “You have to look after us until Aella is in fighting condition. If any warriors appear, you fight them off

understand?"

"geez, so bossy... whatever, I was going to do that anyway."

Aella looked around as the others got ready to set off.

'So we are going to go see someone who knew my mother' she thought. 'perhaps going with these guys is for the best.'

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"Um, little crossdreser kid..."

"It's Claire asshole, I can remember your name, why cant you remember mine?"

"Well it is pretty confusing, you having a girls name, and dressing as a girl when you are a guy, besides my name isn't 'asshole'."

"Fine, TIIIMOOON, and its only confusing to you because you are stupid."

"could you guys maybe not fight so much? You're giving me a headache." Aella was already weary, they had been walking for hours across fields, no signposts or paths.

"so... CLAIRE, just where are we going anyway?" Timon asked, probably just as weary as Aella.

"We're going to Koob of course, the capital of knowledge and wisdom? Where do you think a family of master scholars like mine would live?" Claire seemed to have lost no energy since this morning, even with her massive backpack. How she did it was a total mystery to both Aella and Timon.

After a few minutes Timon asked "Are you sure it's ok to go to Koob? Theres a lot of people there right? There could be warriors nearby."

"It'll be fine, even if there are warriors, fighting is forbidden inside the city, we can use it as a refuge until Aella has mastered her abilities."

"umm, about that..." Aella questioned, "exactly what abilities are you talking about? Like using swords and stuff?"

"I dont think so, from what I heard about Anemone her abilities were more energy based."

"energy based?" Aella was even more confused.

"she could use spiritual energy, she willed stuff to happen and it did, stuff like... telekineses, levitation, heating stuff up from across the room... that kind of thing."

"uhh, sure." Aella was skeptical

"Dont dismiss what he says," Timon could sense aella's tone, "I've seen a battle between someone who could summon fire and one who danced in a way she changed the air around her."

Claire stopped and turned around.

"Wait, you've actually seen 2 of the 26 warriors battle!! how the hell did you get away? Did you

kill them?"

"no way, I was just a kid, I ran away whilst they were fighting, it was scary stuff."

"and the winner didnt come after you?"

"no, the bracelets have only recently started pulling."

Claire thought about this for a second, and turned back continueing at his slightly too energetic pace.

Chapter 7: six years ago.

The snake of panicked people pushed through the town, the evacuation led by guards who were just as fearful themselves. The fire lit up the night sky and it seemed every building was on fire.

"Timon, cover that bracelet."

"Sorry Grandfather."

The 12 year old pulled his sleeve down past his wrist, he didn't know why he had to do it, but his grandfather always said it was important to keep it hidden.

"It's ok, lets just concentrate on getting out of the town with everyone safely ok?"

The old man looked down to his grandchild with a warm smile, looking up at his grandfather Timon couldnt help but be comforted, even when he could see the buildings on fire behind him.

There was a large explosion a few blocks away, and the fireball reached so high Timon thought it might burn the clouds.

"Come Timon, we must hurry now"

the old man ushered his grandson toward the evacuating crowd, but between the buildings Timon saw a man walking in a daze, towards the explosion.

"Sorry grandfather, but I think someone needs my help!"

at that Timon ran between the buildings just before the entrance to the passage was filled with burning rubble.

"TIMON!" the old man was suddenly very scared, "TIMON- J... JUST BE CAREFUL! STAY SAFE!"

Timon could barely hear the calls of his grandfather over the roaring of the flame, the whole town was on fire and it was screaming.

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Timon followed the man through the maze of fire, just catching his silhouette as he came around a corner until it went over a hill and into a massive crater, probably formed by the huge explosion from before.

Timon climbed to the top of the mound at the edge of the crater but stopped himself when he saw into it, the man he was following, his hands were on fire, and he was throwing fire onto things as he went past, the man Timon chased after to save was the firestarter himself.

Timon decided it was best to leave, the firestarter was too big and clearly too dangerous a man to be around. But just as Timon turned away he heard a woman's voice call out to the fire starter.

“Ignis! I always said you were crazy, I'm sad to realise just how right I was.”

There was a woman standing across the crater from the firestarter.

“Oh you would know wouldn't you Cadence”.

“What happened Ignus, when did you become this way?”

“I wonder why you want to know, do you think all those years ago, it was me that did it?” Ignus ginned wickedly

“...well, did you?”

Cadence was clearly someone strong, but she was clearly close to tears.

“Well, I wish I could say I did, I always wanted to be in a battle for vengeance, but it was someone else. I'm not your sister's killer Cadence.”

Cadence sighed and looked at the floor.

“It doesn't change anything you know, you have still become a monster Ignus.”

“Of course I have, it was inevitable, and if you're the one to walk away from this encounter, sooner or later madness will take you too, it's our birthright Cadence! I just knew to give up resisting and enjoy it!”

“I'll never become you Ignus, power...” Cadence took a flute from its holster.

“...doesn't...” she changed her stance, readying herself for battle.

“...have to...” she pointed her flute at Ignus.

“...CORRUPT!”

the two warriors launched at each other, Ignus was like a ball of fire, shooting massive fireworks at Cadence constantly, she just seemed to dance with them, and rocks and rubble around the crater started to dance with her, as she swung her flute its tune seemed to command everything inside the crater.

The battle became furious, with fire and boulders flying far past the edges of the crater, Timon feared the two would kill each other and take the town with them, he fled in spite of the awe he felt at seeing their battle.

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on a hill overlooking the town, an old man stood watching the display caused by the battle die out with a massive clap and burst of light.

The old man looked down the hill to see a 12 year old boy climbing up to him.

“Grandfather...”

"I know Timon, its time for me to tell you some things."

Chapter 8: The samurai and Doll.

Doll sat cross legged, leaning over the table on the hand, surveying the board.

"You cant beat me you know, I have faced warriors much stronger than you and won. You underestimated me today"

Doll moves her rook forward two squares.

"Check!"

Doll sits upright and smiles challengingly at the child across the table. The child looks down and after a minute thinking, they move their knight.

"Check...MATE!"

"NO WAY!" Doll feigned shock for the child "of all the opponents to defeat me, it was but a child, how humbling that you take my title. I shall never underestimate you again, for you are clearly a master."

the child thanked doll for the game and went off to his mother who was calling him.

"It's very honorable to sacrafice your game like that to a child."

Doll turned to face the samurai who was resting against one of the chess house's supporting poles.

"and pretty honourable of you to wait for your opponent to finish their battle before you challenge them." Doll took a sip of her tea, it was getting cold.

"I am nothing if not a man of honour."

"well, your own honour perhaps."

"what other kind is there, we only have our own experience to guide us."

"a shame, but true." Doll agreed taking another sip of tea. "So you're a samurai eh? I thought you guys were extinct. I especially wouldn't expect a warrior of band to be a servant. What do you intent do do if you survive the contest, will you follow your masters will, or become a ronin?"

"I follow only my master, as such I shall not survive the contest myself."

"...your master has a bracelet too huh, and that means the assassin I bumped into... he a friend of yours?"

"he is no one's friend now."

Doll finished off her tea.

"It seems your master is less forgiving than I."

The samurai looked away in contemplation, he knew his master was not a good man, but as a

samurai, his honour lay in following his master's wishes regardless. He looked at doll as she got up from the table and took her cup back to the serving hatch and wandered, it would be a shame for the world if he defeated her in battle, but it would be shame for him if he lost himself, and his own honour was the only one he had any right to consider, he would not hold back.

Doll walked back, "ok, I'm ready when you are, but I would rather we move someplace unpopulated, I believe we can trust each other enough to travel somewhere without attacking the other?"

"I believe so also."

Doll and the samurai left the chess house together and set off to a place where they would try and kill each other.

Chapter 9: Koob is a really long way away.

Claire fell over on his back; "UUUuuuugh, guys, I'm tired, lets take a break."

"ITS BECAUSE YOU MADE US GO AT SUCH A FAST PACE IDIOT!"

"I'm going to kick you again when I get my energy back."

Chapter 10: The Samurai and Doll, part 2.

The daylight shone through the trees that covered the path, making gentle dancing shadows as the leaves rustled in the breeze, above them the sky was very blue, below them Doll and the Samurai walked the path.

"There is a clearing further along this path," Doll pointed, "I think it is a suitable place, though it will be a shame for us to stain it with blood."

"...do you know this area?"

"I grew up a few villages away, but I travelled a lot as a teen, I saw people living different lives and tried a few on for myself."

"lives?"

"yes, not just because I was shapeshifter, I wanted to find my place, find me... well maybe it was because I was a shapeshifter. I was looking for something to ground me."

"and did you find anything?"

"in a way... after you have seen life from so many perspectives, there isnt really any way to settle back into a single one, I think as I am now, I am sort of living as a 'best of' collection, I took the parts I thought would make me the best person I could be... so... what about you?"

"I have only ever been myself."

"well thats debatable, but still, have you never empathised with people? Tried to see life from another angle?"



“you are curious if I will defect from my master.”

“I dont think you will, I'm more curious if you would be capable of it.”

“Well if it answers your question, I do think about what other people are going through, and why they act as they do, but it is always in the context of my own ideas and values. But wherever my mind travels, my actions remain firmly tied to my honour.”

The two walked on for a bit in silence.

Doll broke the silence, “And in the context of your own ideas and values, how do the actions of your master weigh up?”

“...you have a talent for knowing people and what questions to ask them.”

“well knowing people is kinda one of my talents after all” Doll smiled at the samurai.

“It is something I have thought of, and I imagine you know enough of my master simply from the interactions you have had with his subordinates.”

“I see... I have to say I'm impressed, you tell me he's a dangerous, possibly evil man, capable of anything, but without saying a bad word about him. Whilst I dont agree with your loyalty, I can't fault it.”

“it is a part of my honour after all.”

“I have to say samurai, I never enjoy battle, but I am genuinely sad that we must fight each other.”

“as am I, but we both must follow our roles.”

Doll looked up at the light passing through the leaves, “I wonder...”

Chapter 11: Zephyr.

“I think you've drunk enough miste-”

the barman found a pistol quickly pointed at his forehead.

“I... I'll decide when I've had enough, and its sure as hell isnt enough until I've downed as many bottles as people I killed today... you, you have a lot more pouring to do.”

Zephyr holstered his gun and gave the barman his glass for a refill.

Chapter 12: The Samurai and Doll, part 3.

Doll and the samurai stood facing each other in the clearing, the sun shone bright but neither felt it, this was to be a battle they would both regret, regardless of the outcome. In the short time that they had known each other they had made a connection, perhaps the strongest connection possible. Regardless of their opinions of the other, they both respected each other more than any they had met before.

The leaves at this time of year were just starting to fall, and a couple blew between the silent

warriors in the breeze as they waited.

They both savoured the breeze, the last thing that they would share together before the battle that would tear them apart.

“I think...” started Doll.

“I agree.” the samurai nodded, “we should make it as quick as possible.”

Doll looked at the floor, then into the samurai's eyes, he was already looking into hers.

The samurai dashed first, he was rapid, almost instantaneous, Doll was of course using her Qi to block it, she was exceptional, the only person who could have blocked such an attack, but as a Qi ability her will faltered, she didnt want to defend with all her heart.

The samurai's attack was not full strength either, Doll was cut acrossd her torso, but it was nothing that could kill her.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, facing opposite directions.

“We have both... dishonoured ourselves... and my final dishonour, is for yours redeemed.” the samurai closed his eyes.

“thank you.” said Doll, tears forming.

She made it quick, and the samurai didnt defend, he fell to the floor, with a smile on his face.

The glow in the samurai's bracelet faded, and it passed to a clear bead in Doll's.

The samurai had chosen a new master. And Doll had lost a love, at least until she was bested.

Chapter 13: A grave overlooking the sea.

There is a spot atop a cliff by the ocean, so high the gulls dont dare trespass, where the grass is lush and a single stone juts from the ground, written on it;

“Here lies a warrior of unparraleled honour, who waits patiently for his love, who he died for, and is marching to meet him with the honour he displayed”

Chapter 14: An insult he wont stand for.

500 assassins stand before their master beneath the dojo, the master is clearly furious, that somone would kill his samurai and take the glow that was rightfully his called for a drastic response, twice now Doll had insulted him, and this time it was too far.

“I dont care if you have to die to do it, if any of you dont give it your all to kill her I will kill each of you in a manner such as your nightmares would fear... go.”

in a split second the assassins vanished, and were dashing away from the dojo through the forest.

Chapter 15: Back with the trio.

“Are you still out of energy?” Timon asked.

“Well yeah, have you seen what I have to carry around?!” snapped Claire.

“I think we should stop here for the night, it's a bad idea to travel in the dark.” Aella said, looking across the fields.

“oh yeah and how do you know?” jeered Claire.

“I... I have experience... besides from here we can see all around, the moonlight should let us know of anyone coming.”

“well that makes sense to me,” said Timon “we'll take it in turns to be lookout. I don't think there are any warriors in the area, but it's best to be safe. I'll take first shift, you two get some rest while you can.”

“don't need to tell me twice.” Claire said relieved. Aella turned to see Claire had already pulled a sleeping bag out of his backpack and was climbing into it.

“just how much stuff do you carry around in that bag?”

“more than can fit, well... night!”.

Aella pushed down some grass to make do as a bed and Timon sat at the highest point of the hill they were on.

-

some time later, Aella walked up the hill to Timon.

“we don't have to swap yet, there's plenty of time before I need any sleep.” Timon smiled at Aella.

“it's not that, I just can't sleep tonight.”

“oh,” Timon paused and looked towards the moon, “is it because of your past, or your present?”

“a little of both I guess.”

“What Claire said before, after you said we should stop here—”

“My mother... we... we were traveling at night and... she was...”

“It's ok, you don't have to say, I can understand. When I was five my parents died in a flood. I kind of envy them in a way now I think about it.”

“you want to be dead?”

“not really, but if I'm going to die, I'd rather not be killed in a fight.”

“...”

“...”

“Timon, will we really try and kill each other someday?”

“I honestly dont know, I'd rather not, you seem like an ok person, even if you are a little stupid.” Timon smiled wickedly at Aella. Aella shoved him playfully, “Heeey! You keep saying stuff like that and maybe I wont have any problems killing you.”

“I wouldnt worry about it, I think Claire will kill us both long before anyone else will.”

the two laughed for a minute, then looked out at the moon.

Chapter 16: The journey resumes.

The next day was like the one before it, clear and sunny, and the three set off throught the fields in the direction of Koob as they had done before (if at a slightly more reasonable pace).

“I've been thinking Claire” Aella started.

“Careful, dont hurt yourself.” Clair responded.

“whatever, I was thinking how you are really a runaway, and we are going back to your home...”

“so?”

“so, we are going to see your father, whats he going to say when you come back after doing one?”

“He'll probably try and ground me, but I dont care, I'm smart you know? I can break out of anywhere. When you are trained up we'll leave again.”

“really? You let him worry like that?”

“frankly it's not the running away punishment I'm afraid of...”

“why, what else did you do? Oh crap you didn't steal that big book did you?”

“NO!... well, yes, but thats not the problem. The problem is... is...”

“That your dad hasn't ever seen you so pretty?” Timon joined the conversation.

“...well, yeah...” Clair hung his head a little.

“Hes not going to be the type to have a problem with that is he? Isnt he a scholar too?” Aella asked.

“I dont know, I never let him know anything about me like... this, so I dont have any idea how he'll react.”

“I'm sure you're worrying about nothing Claire.” Timon patted Claire on the back. “hey, whats that there on the horizon?”

Aella tensed for a second, and looked to where Timon was pointing.

“That's Koob,” explained Claire, “The outer walls of the city are mirrors, the idea is that the contents of the libraries and wisdom in Koob were a reflection of the world itself. Its meant to be symbolic.”

the three picked up the pace (just a little) now that their goal was in sight.

#### Chapter 17: Udo.

A long, long way from Koob, an old man sits at the centre of an almost otherworldly building, he watches the entrance which leads to a bridge so long its hard to make out the other side.

As the shadows grow longer in the arena the old man sees the bridge has been clear all day, and is thankful there are no warriors to challenge him today, the arena shan't claim another life until atleast tomorrow.

The old man begins to meditate as night draws in.

#### Chapter 18: Waiting.

Doll knew the samurai's master would not be pleased she had survived, and expected his retaliation. She climbed mount Brave, where she could be certain a battle of any scale was out of reach of civilians, even out of site depending on the weather, the peak of the mountain was usually shrouded in mist. It was also much colder because of the altitude, if there were more assassins coming after her, the temperature change would put them off, any distraction she could prepare for in advance would work in her favour.

-

there was an abandoned dojo near the peak, Doll waited atop its roof. It creaked a little in the wind beneath her, this place was chosen as a place to train because it was so unforgiving, but it was too much for even the instructors. And so apart from the most determined of climbers, Doll was the first person to visit this place since shortly after it was built. But that would change soon.

She could sense their Qi, a few hundred souls, all with orders to kill her.

If it were not for her last fight this would be the hardest battle of Doll's life, but when you kill the person you love, even if it was their wish, nothing can ever be that difficult.

Doll waited, fearless.

#### Chapter 19: Cadence.

Aella, Timon and Claire continued their march towards Koob, night was starting to take hold but they didn't want to stop when their goal was so close.

“And what do we have here?” A woman's voice came from behind the three, they turned sharply to see a woman with a long fringe and a flute, she had a familiar bracelet on her right wrist.

“you're... the town that burnt down you and Ignus!” Timon recognised her immediately.

“Oh? You saw that did you boy? You were lucky to have done that and gotten away alive.”

“Where did you come from?” Aella asked nervously.

“really dear, that is not the most important question to you right now, you should be asking yourselves 'is this lady going to kill us?' I'm well aware you both have bracelets, and the short one also has something that could benefit me.” Cadence smiled at Claire, who took a step back.

“really children, I can see you don't want to dance with me yet, and I am only in the mood to dance with willing partners. I just saw you passing by and thought I'd introduce myself.”

“you aren't going to kill us?” Aella asked.

“I might, but not today.” Cadence smiled again, eyeing Aella. Aella looked at Cadence's bracelet,

“you have 3 beads lit up...”

“you know what that means don't you?” Cadence held up the bracelet so the three could see clearly. “for each of those I've killed a warrior, it's a long way to go to get all 26, but not a bad start.”

Cadence relaxed a bit.

“Well anyway, I have places to be and people to see, and you just aren't my priority now kids, ta-taa!”

At that cadence swung her flute quickly, it made a high pitched whistle as she vanished.

“she seemed much cooler the first time I met her” Timon said.

“I think we should hurry to Koob now” Aella didn't want any more encounters.

The three ran the rest of the way.

## Chapter 20. Night attack.

Doll could feel them, they were surrounding her, she could feel the patterns of their planned attacks almost instinctively now, her attunement to the Qi of others had developed substantially in the past year.

At this moment she knew precisely how to counter their first wave, and how to cope with the assassins reaction to her counter. She had planned the battle in her head up to the point where half the assassins were subdued, but she ran out of time to plan the rest.

She could feel the assassins were about to make their move, she would just have to fight on instinct once she reached the end of her plan.

The first move, there were a hundred assassins in the air above her, Doll's determination to get through this battle was unbreakable, her Qi was stronger than ever before. All around her the beams that made up the roof of the dojo were pulled out and into the assassins flying at her.

To an outsider it would look like a tornado pulling debris in a tight vortex, but each beam was under Doll's control. Each perfectly, precisely aimed at a threat to her life.

Doll was holding back though, she didn't want to kill these men, they were only a proxy for the man she really wanted to get, Doll's attacks knocked the assassins back, but they were relentless, they wanted her dead and there was nothing she could do to stop them short of kill

them.

Doll brought in all the dojo's debris around her at once and formed a cocoon around her, it would take a few minutes for the assassins to break through it.

Falling to her knees, Doll began to cry. She didn't want to become a killer.

"Don't cry Doll," Doll looked up to see the ghost of the samurai standing before her, "I've seen you cry too much already."

"you... you're not real, just my imagination..."

"it's true I am a part of you, but you know well enough that doesn't make me unreal."

"...I ...I want to be with you."

"We both know you have things to do first, those men out there, the world that created them has to change."

"I can't take their lives!"

"their lives haven't been their own for a very long time, they are nothing but robots, doing as they were programmed."

"...I miss you already." Doll lost more tears. "...we barely got a chance to know each other."

"that's why you have to keep going. You know it mustn't happen again that way."

-

outside the cocoon the assassins worked tirelessly to break in, but suddenly the cocoon became a hundred thousand large splinters, each aimed at the heads of all the assassins.

The assassins all fell to the floor, and Doll began her sorrowful journey to the place she sensed they came from.

Chapter 21: Koob.

As the trio walked up to the Koob entranceway even in the night the mirrored walls had a significant glare about them, and when they entered it was almost more than Aella could take.

"Are those... street lights?"

"yeah, electric too. Pretty cool huh?" Claire was happy to show off his hometown.

The whole city was lit up, it seemed like magic to Aella, and even Timon was impressed, he hadn't seen a city as advanced as this in his travels. "Not bad." he said, trying his best to sound casual.

"we'll uhhh, hit the library tomorrow." Claire said, "There's a hostel a little way down over here, We'll be able to rest up there."

-

The three made their way down the streets on the outskirts of the city, it was all brilliantly lit,

and what wasn't lit was reflecting something that was, and Claire continued her tour speech;

“–and that way we can create an isolated emulation of pre-white event space, allowing for us to use technology and sciences that have since been rendered useless. For example this is the only city in the world that has a railway system, and some of the buildings are so tall they have electric powered elevators.”

“what are they?” Aella asked, still in awe of her surroundings.

“like, rooms that can move. You stand in them and they take you to the floor you want to go to, they are really cool. And you can't see it from this street, but in the center of the city is the great library, it's the biggest there has ever been, and they say the whole knowledge of humankind is in there. But because there is so much, there's no way one person can learn it all at once. Although there was a rumour that one scholar – oh, here we are. This is home for the night.”

Aella proudly pointed at a building, like the others covered in mirrors and lights, the brightest of which spelt out 'Madame Quirk's House for the weary', it appeared to be pretty small compared to the buildings around it but Aella and Timon both secretly thought it was still a really cool looking place.

“Don't just stand there gawking at it, we have to go in and reserve our rooms idiots” Claire marched into the hostel and after exchanging glances Timon and Aella followed.

Inside it seemed the whole first floor was a kind of lounge and bar mixed, with sofas, pointed at some box lit up in the corner. Aella and Timon made their way across the room over to Claire who was talking to a friendly looking woman who appeared to be in her later forties.

“Ah, so these are your friends are they sweetie?” the woman smiled at them, “You can call me Que, Claire's explained your situation so it's ok for you to stay the night free, but if you are so tight for money maybe you should consider getting jobs while you are here?”

Que looked at Aella inquisitively, “Your apron... do you have experience waitressing hun?”

“umm, yes.”

“well that settles it then, you can work here to pay for the room and food, how does that sound?”

“ummm...” Aella was unsure, her last job waitressing went very badly, she looked into Que's eyes and Que just smiled back almost maternally, “...sure.”

“well there we go then, you can attend to your business in town tomorrow and start in the evening. Now, let me show you to your rooms.”

Chapter 22: Nineteen years ago.

“it would seem I have nothing left to teach you Anemone.”

“Thank you master Udo.”

Anemone and Udo bowed in front of each other, the 18 year old girl's training was complete, a master of her abilities, it was time for her to leave the dojo and live her life, but something was still on her mind.

“however...”



“what is it girl?”

“You have taught me to harness, and master my abilities, but not their origin, not their purpose.”

“this troubles you... well I think that is a good sign. The truth is I cannot tell you why people like us can do... just what we do. My knowledge on the matter is extremely limited. But I hear tell of scholars in Koob researching the white event. Before then, no one had abilities like this. That may be a suitable first destination for you.”

“thank you master.”

“ah, and no more of this 'master' business now, you could best me quite easily I think 'Udo' is fine from now on.”

“thank you... Udo.”

“good, now, not that I'm desperate to get rid of you, but I believe I have four fresh students arriving today.”

“Its ok, I'm keen to get started too.”

“Goodbye... Master Udo”

Anemone set off to the lodge to collect her things and leave, Udo meditated in the center of his dojo, waiting for the new students to arrive.

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“Ok children sit straight in a row. Now, what are your names?” Udo asked the youngsters.

“Cadence.” said the first girl,

“I'm Ignus” announced the boy next to her.

“Mavis” the third girl said quietly.

“I'm Dolores, but you can call me Doll” said the girl with long braided hair at the end.

“Very well, children, you are here to become masters of your abilities, and the first and most important thing you need for that is discipline,” Udo stood up and began to walk to the doorway, “As such, you must remain sat where you are until I say you can move.”

Udo walked out the dojo door. “And I'll be able to tell if you move!” Udo called back.

–

An hour or so later, “Uuugh, this is so boring,” Cadence moaned, “hey, Sis?”

“what?” replied Doll, a little irritated her sister was pointing out how long it was taking.

“we could be here for days!”

“maybe.”

“u..um,” Mavis started, “are we really... are we allowed to talk?”

“well he didn't say NOT to.” Cadence said “Might as well get to know each other I think, seeing as how we could be here FOREVER”.

“God, you girls are NOISY.” Ignus complained.

“so what? You just want to sit in silence?” Cadence questioned

“I do”

“Not asking you sis!”

“ugh, I could sit still forever, but sitting with girls is really the hardest thing ever.”

“yeah? Well its not that great sitting next to you either smelly.”

–

After a long silence, “So... where are you guys from? Mavis?” Cadence asked

Mavis was unsettled by the question, “I... I dont want to talk about it...”

“Fine, what about you... Ignus was it?”

“If you must know, I'm from Norren.”

“Norren? You mean up in the mountains? Hey sis we are training with a real life barbarian here!”

“SHUT UP!”

“huh?”

“Dont call me that, I'm nothing like those animals.”

“...I'm sorry, I guess we all have problems with our past then...” Cadence looked down for a moment “lets... lets call this our start ok? We can forget everything that happened before... and this is where we start our lives.”

Mavis looked at Cadence, “I, think... I would like that.”

there was a moment's silence and then Doll looked at the others, “you think he'll let us go to pee?”

Suddenly all the children tensed up, and if they didnt need to go before, they couldnt think of anything else now.

–

five minutes later, Udo walked in, “Ok thats enough.”

“Thank GOD!” cadence didnt hide her relief.

“The toilets are out there” Udo pointed and smiled as the kids dashed away, this was definitely

an interesting group he thought to himself.

### Chapter 23: An empty dojo.

Doll stepped into the dojo, it reminded her of one she spent much time in as a child, but this had been the home to much evil, she could not find joy in a place like this. She took the steps down to the area below the basement to find that it was empty.

The master of the ninjas, and the man who the samurai lived for, had fled.

Doll hit one of the supporting beams, cracking it.

“Coward.”

### Chapter 24: Timon in Koob.

Timon walked through the streets of Koob as the dawn sun rose, all the lights were out as they simply weren't needed any more, if anything the city was even more magnificent in the day, and not just the scenery. The city itself seemed to be alive, the streets were full of bustle, people opening their shops, making deliveries, running errands, traveling to wherever they needed to be for the day.

Timon wasn't afraid to look awestruck when he was alone, and so he did.

Having left a note for Claire and Aella saying he would be doing his own thing today Timon took his time to enjoy the city, he knew it was safe and they would be fine without him, and he spent most of the day riding the trains that circulated the city, seeing as much of it as he could.

It had been a long time since he had a chance to be so carefree, and he took advantage of it whilst he could.

### Chapter 25: Aella in Koob.

Aella walked through Koob totally overwhelmed, she had a note with directions Claire wrote to get her to the library and who to ask for when she got there, but everything was so confusing, she couldn't tell the main roads from the alleys here, it was all so big.

Eventually, totally lost, she had to ask for directions and found she had almost left the city the way she was going. Her stay here would take some getting used to.

-

eventually Aella found her way to a place where she had a good view of the town, and she got her first sight of the library, it was clear the people of Koob held knowledge as more important than anything else, the library was the most prominent building in the city, it looked like a coil, circling up a great tower. From here at least she would be able to find her way to it.

-

Aella stepped through the huge entryway into the library, it felt almost like walking on holy ground, she looked around and saw a big sign that said 'reception' over a long desk with 20 or so people sat working at it.

“umm, excuse me,” Aella said, “I'm trying to find someone, a err...” Aella looked at the piece of

paper Claire had given her. "A Mister Irfan?"

"Certainly, step into the elevator over there," The receptionist pointed at a door across the room, "And ask for floor ninety four."

"umm, ok..." Aella started off a little confused, and turned around before she forgot. "Thank you!"

Aella stepped through the door into a small room, the doors closed behind her.

"err, can I go to floor ninety four please?" Aella asked aloud, hoping someone would hear.

"Certainly, if you become disoriented please hold onto the bars." said a voice that seemed to come from all around.

The room started to move, and Aella definitely needed to hold onto the bars, the elevator wound its way around the coil circling the building, she could see the whole city revolving around her. It was too overwhelming for her and she had to close her eyes until it was done, she just wasn't prepared for that.

"Floor ninety four" the voice said. Aella was afraid to open her eyes and just stayed stuck, holding the bar on the side of the elevator.

"Oh goodness who is it, I'm very busy." Came a man's voice from behind her.

Aella tried to wet her dry mouth.

"U...Umm, I'm sorry, but I'm stuck."

Footsteps sounded and came nearer.

"Oh dear, the elevator should really have warnings for people who don't like heights, take my hand, I'll lead you inside."

"...ok" Aella reached one hand back and felt a man take hold.

"I've got you now, just follow me now."

Aella followed the man inside and held the lift close behind her.

"It's safe now, you can open your eyes." Aella slowly opened her eyes and looked around, she was relieved to see this floor had no windows. She saw the man who helped her walking back to a desk and resume his work.

Taking some deep breaths, Aella found herself again and took in the floor of the library, it seemed to be two floors in one, with lots of papers, open books and large diagrams on the first, and on the second floor shelves and shelves of books.

"I haven't seen anyone so scared of that elevator since..." Aella turned to see the man was lost for words and looking right at her. "It can't be."

"u-um, are you Mister Irfan? I heard you knew my mother and I was hoping you could--"

"Aella? My goodness how you've grown! You look just like your mother did when I met her! I have to say this is a very pleasant surprise, how is your mother doing?"

Aella looked down at the floor, she didn't want to have to tell him what happened to someone

he was clearly friends with, but her reservations said enough anyway.

“...I see, that is truly a shame, your mother was one of the lights that really brightened up the dim sky.” Mr Irfan took a moment to compose himself. “But dwelling on it wont do.” I assume you met Clark, and he told you I would be able to help you out.”

“I dont know... anyone called Clark.”

“Ahh, he probably introduced himself to you as Claire, thats ok. The boy has a few quirks.” Mr Irfan chuckled to himself “Oh and if you dont mind please dont tell him I know about Claire, I'm sure hes working up to telling me himself... and now I'm rambling, just look at me!” he smiled at Aella. “Now, where was it, if you'd just like to wait on that sofa there dear, I need to dig up a few things for you and I'll be with you as soon as I can, feel free to help yourself to anything in the fridge.”

Aella looked over to the sofa, “Umm, whats a-”

“The small box with a door, its like a larder but smaller.”

-

Aella lay on the sofa, it must have been half an hour now that Mr Irfan went to the second floor. 'why am I here' Aella thought to herself. Was it for training, so she could become a warrior and kill the others? So she could kill Timon? Was it to understand just what was happening, to understand the bracelets and what they have to do with the white event?

Aella knew it was none of that really, she just wanted to somehow be a bit closer to her mother.

Chapter 26: Claire in Koob.

Que opened the door to Claire's room, are you going to get out of bed at all today?

“No, too tired.”

“It's because you always go at a pace beyond yourself.”

“uuuugh.”

Chapter 27: Nineteen years ago, Part 2.

The four children were each balancing on poles high above the ground.

“I know martial artists are supposed to do this, but does anyone actually know why?” Ignus asked

“I dont know if even the Master knows why. He hasn't told us, his master probably never told him. It could have started out hundreds of years ago as a joke.” Doll was tired of these tasks, but still determined to do her best.

The four continued to balance a while.

“Why does most all of our training involve staying in the same spot for long periods of time,” Cadence was already tired of this, “first sat in the dojo, then under the waterfall, now here.”

"I... dont... think... I have... enough balance." Mavis was struggling to stay on the pole. And as a slight breeze blew, her weight was too far forward, "aahhhh- ...huh?".

Everyone looked over to vavis, who had one foot on the pole, and one foot, standing on thin air.

"what-" Mavis was as shocked as the others.

"I cant keep that air firm for long Mavis, put your weight on the pole again" keeping Mavis balanced was taking a lot of energy for Doll, and Mavis quickly righted herself. "thanks."

"thank you, I wish I had a power like you." Mavis thanked Doll.

"stupid!" all four looked down to see a little kid standing at the base of the poles, shouting up to them. "Cant you see what her power is energy girl?"

"I can see," replied Doll, "But I'm not going to force her to use it this high up"

"and that's why you're stupid!" the little boy ran to the base of Mavis' pole and started kicking it.

"Hey, if she falls, I cant help her again! I'm not strong enough!" Doll shouted at the boy.

"Thats why now is the perfect time." The boy continued to kick the pole, and Mavis started to fall, there was no way she could have kept her balance, but once again, she stopped falling midair again.

"Thanks again Doll."

"I didn't do it this time Mavis, this is all you." as much as doll hated the boy's attitude, his approach had worked.

"I'm... I can fly?" Mavis had shocked herself.

"looks that way to me" Cadence said.

"ok I'm bored now, cya losers!" the boy was shouted and ran off up the hill, "By the way, my name's Zephyr, don't forget it!"

## Chapter 28: Timon in Koob, part 2.

It was getting late and the city lights were starting to come on, Timon realised he had been on the train most of the day, it was getting time for him to head back. He decided to get off four stops down, which was within walking distance of the Hostel.

But there was something odd, Timon looked at his bracelet, it was pulling... away from both the libray and the hostel, shocked, he looked in the direction it pulled.

"smart kid, I only got on one stop ago and you realised." A woman was sat across from him on the train, she had short, messy hair and a massive jacket, which failed to cover her bracelet.

"You know there's no fighting allowed in Koob"

"yeah, as though any of the guards round here could keep 2 warriors from fighting."

"Are you going to try and kill me?"

“Not me sugar, I'm more of a lover than a fighter... actually I'm not much of either. Normally when trouble comes I just up and fly away, it's too much hassle for me.”

“Your bracelet, it has two beads lit.”

“ahh, well theres no hiding I've killed before its true, but dont worry, I didn't like the taste of it.”

“why did you come to me?”

“Your pull was new to me, I thought I'd come check you out... the names Mav”

“Timon”

“I have to say I'm impressed, you and your friend got past Cadence, did you kill her?”

“no, she didnt want to fight, neither did we.”

“...well, I'm glad, that girl has changed a lot since we met, but it cheers me she's at least so whimsical in her deciscions still.”

“you know her?”

“I used to hang out with her and her sister, it was pretty cool, in the times before we found out what these things meant.” Mav held up her bracelet, “and some other crap split us up too, I think these days I remind her of bad stuff, but it suits me, solitude is more my cup of tea anyway.”

Timon smiled a little “you dont seem like the type.”

Mav leaned forward “And what type do I seem like?”

“solitary people dont go looking to meet folks on a whim.”

Mav leaned back in her seat, looked out the window and smiled, “you wanna go someplace kid?”

Chapter 29: Aella in Koob, Part 2.

“Sorry for taking so long, stuff piles up over the years, it took me a while to find this stuff.”

Mr Irfan was carrying a pile of books back to the lower floor for Aella, but didnt see her on the sofa, instead there was just a note.

'I'm sorry Mr Irfan but I have to start my job soon so I cant wait any longer, I'll be back again tommorow.'

“So responsible, just like her mother...”

-

Back at Madame Quirk's house for the weary, Aella was eyeing up the noisy box shaking in front of her, Koob had many wonders, but somehow a machine that washed the dishes seemed a little too good to be true. Having spent years over a sink, she waited till the dishwasher was done, she wanted to be sure it really worked well.

“Still getting used to the Koob lifestyle sweetie?” Que brought in a tray of glasses.

“Something like that...”

“By the way hun, you have a delivery waiting for you.”

“I do? But who knows I'm here?”

“It's from the library if that helps, it looks like things are quiet today, why dont you take a break and check it out?”

Aella nodded in response and headed out the kitchen

“I left it on the counter”

–

Aella sat down in her room, and undid the string around her books, on top was a note

'Aella, I read your note, and thought this collection would be worth reading in your own time, I hope you appreciate the top book especially'

Aella looked at the top book and read the cover 'Anemone's Diary, so keep out!'

at that moment, the lights cut out.

Chapter 30: Claire in Koob, Part 3.

Claire was still in his room, reading through his big book and trying to figure out why the bracelets only recently started pulling, after two hours reading, Claire found out why.

“Oh crap.”

at that moment, the lights cut out.

Claire sat up and grabbed the book, Aella burst in through the door.

“Where is Timon?”

Chapter 31: Mavis.

in Mav's apartment which overlooked a huge area of the city, she lay in bed smoking, naked and only covered by sheets.

Across the room Timon pulled his pants back on, and began to look for his shirt.

“Going so soon kid?”

“It's not that this wasnt... good, it's just, I have friends who will wonder where I am.”

“whatev–” Mav was cut off by a sharp whistling sound. “Cadence?”

“Hey kids, it looked like you had fun just now.” Cadence appeared in the room lit only by the lights outside.



“Hey, why are you back here?” Timon was suddenly tense... and with good reason.

“Well I figured I was bored, and I want to see if you and your friend are worth a dance, so I'm going to turn Mavis on.”

“Cadence, dont!” mavis protested but it was too late, Cadence pointed her flute to Mavis's forehead and said very quietly; “Brent.”

Cadence quickly vanished with a sharp shrill flute noise.

Timon looked at mavis for a moment, “Mavis, what's-”

“Not Mavis anymore.” At that Mavis shot a thousand black shadows, seemingly birds from her fingertips pushing Timon in nothing but his pants through her window and out into the sky above Koob.

It was a cold night and Timon felt it past the glass falling around him and the cut's it was giving him, he had to think quickly if he was to survive being thrown from a skyscraper.

He pulled himself upright, and threw his knives so as they would fall slower than he did, doing this he stepped on the handles of successively thrown knives and made his way across the sky to the top of a building, which he still hit hard and even rolling to land he was in huge amounts of pain.

Up in the apartment Mavis floated up in the bedsheets, which stuck to her skin by the sweat of her madness, she glided out of the window held aloft by hundreds of these shadowy looking birds which she spawned beneath her, and died the moment each one had pushed her up a little, then faded like smoke.

Mavis floating beside her apartment building looked 30 stories down at Timon, for the first time in her life she had an opponent who was proving hard to kill, 'all the more fun' she thought, and flew at Timon at top speed, a cloud of thousands of shadows behind her.

Timon looked up just in time, Mavis' eyes were wide open, her hair pushed back by the great speed with which she hurtled towards him, she seemed to Timon to be totally hysterical, it was all he could do to use his attacks and block her attack, but he didn't have the footing on this mirrored roof, the force of the collision threw Timon off the roof and into the adjacent building so hard he flew out the other side.

Timon was falling again, he knew he had never been hurt this badly before, but he had made a promise, he knew if he didn't kill Mavis, she would kill both him and Aella, and there was nothing the city guards could do to stop her. It was all on him.

Timon righted himself and landed on the nearest building, he pulled out a load of knives from his pants and waited. He was starting to run short on knives.

Panting, his focus was on nothing but the hole he made from being thrown through the building...

'now!' Timon threw his knives at the fullest strength he could manage, fifty knives, twice the size of Mavis flew at her as she passed through the building coming after Timon.

The center of the building exploded in shards of light and smoking shadow, in the center was Mavis, 'how can she block an attack like that?' Timon became truly fearful of his opponent.

The top half of the building above Mavis started to fall down beside her, like a tree being felled, it slowly crashed down and crashed through several buildings and streets. The city suddenly

changed, the lights went off, now lit only by moonlight reflected. The power must have been disrupted by the wreckage.

-

Aella and Claire ran through the darkened streets the city had a worried quiet about it, and the only noise that really stood out was a mad screaming laughter, and that is what Aella and Claire chased so hard.

They reached a point where the laughing was more above them than ahead.

“They are up on the rooves!” Aella shouted to Claire.

“Not a problem,” Claire said, and he opened his big book and started reading from it, a glowing circular glyph appeared beneath Aella and Claire's feet, it started to rise taking them with it.

“How are you doing this Claire?”

“I have my own tricks you know!”

the two rode the glyph up and around the buildings until they saw flashes of light from beside shadows jumping across a building.

Coming in closer they could see a woman sending what seemed to be smoking black birds as Timon, who was getting cut badly, he couldn't block all of her attacks. Claire and Aella circled the battle, but Aella couldn't bear to watch, she leaped from the glyph to the building.

“Leave him alone!”

Mavis turned to face Aella, her attack still unceasing on Timon, “Well if it isn't another warrior—” Mavis caught sight of Claire riding the glyph “the book! She can read it! I'll make this quick children!”

Mavis stopped her attack on Timon and launched full speed at Aella, who didn't know how to react, she ducked for cover and felt a huge force, but it wasn't what she expected. She looked up to see Mavis was blocked by a bright light around Aella, but before either of them could assess it a huge knife went through Mavis' chest, Aella's shield dropped and there was a moment's silence.

Mavis spoke “Mav... thanks you kid.” her head fell, and the glows from her bracelet floated slowly over to Timon's.

Claire landed on the roof to find Timon starting to cry, for a long time, the three and the body stayed on the roof unspeaking.

Chapter 32: Nineteen years ago, part 3 (its more like eighteen years ago now).

The four students lined up in the dojo in front of their master.

“Ok before each of you is a solid boulder, I want you to shatter your respective boulders, with some limitations,” Udo was glad his students were finally prepared for testes like this, “Cadence, you must shatter it by dancing to the same resonance as the boulder, the correct frequency will make it crumble. Mavis, I don't want you to just lift the boulder and drop it. Ignus, I don't want you to just torch the boulder until it explodes, besides I don't know how well this old dojo could take another fire. Doll, you must shatter yours by using strength alone, no

external Qi in this test. Begin”

Cadence started to find a rhythm and the boulder crumbled pretty quickly, Mavis pushed at hard as she can against the block, imagining she was throwing birds at it like how she threw birds at the air to fly, but it took her a few goes before she hit with enough force to break the boulder. Ignus was just pissed off, he knew he should be able to master lava attacks and destroy the boulder that way but he could never figure out how.

Doll thought of what she could do to destroy the boulder physically, and she remembered seeing a really strong looking warrior from before she came to the dojo, so she shape-shifted into him and punched right through the boulder.

Mavis looked over at Doll's new form and was white as a sheet, she screamed and ran out of the dojo and down the steps as fast as she could.

Doll quickly changed back and ran after her, “Dont go after her!” Udo called out, “She must cope with it on her own.”

'yeah right' Doll thought, she wasnt about to let her friend deal with whatever scared her that much on her own.

-

Doll ran after Mavis for about half an hour until the two were totally out of breath, standing on an empty path that cut through wide fields.

Doll, gasping for breath asked “Are you ok Mavis?”

Mavis for now seemed very calm.

“Where did you see that man. The one you transformed into?”

“Cadence and I saw him on the way here before we met you, he was helping a load of men build a city gateway... who is he?”

“...my stepfather, the man who killed my mother. Where was this city?”

Doll looked at mavis, “why do you want to know Mavis?”

Mavis turned around, eyes red with tears, it was clear to doll there was only one reason she would want to know where he is.

“...Mavis, I dont want to tell you if it's that.”

“If you dont tell me I will leave you all and go looking for him anyway!”

Doll could see there was no turning back for her, if she was going to do this, she needed a friend close by.

“I'm coming with you.”

-

Udo looked out over the setting sun, it was too late now, he had a very bad feeling.

“Ignus, Cadence... please could you go out and look for them, you can cover more ground if you split up.”

“yes master” they said in unison, and dashed off in the direction Mavis and Doll went.

-

The bar was full at this time of night, men exchanged stories and cheer between swigs of beer, and two young girls walked into the bar, just a little too young to be in a bar like this alone. The first girl shouted above the noise in the bar;

“We're looking for Berk!” the bar went quiet, “Where is he?”

there were hushed whispers among the patrons of the bar, why were the two girls looking for-

“Everyone out. Now.” came a voice from the back of the bar, and after seeing who it was the bar was empty within a minute.

“I have to say I wasn't expecting to see you again kid, I thought you would be too afraid to ever look for me.” Berk stood up. “You should have stayed afraid girl.”

“sh-shut up! I... I came here... to...”

Berk walked up to Mavis “I see you're still a thing of fear, what did you think you would do when you came here? Did you think you could actually kill me? I'll teach you a lesson for disrespecting me like that.”

Brent grabbed Mavis hair and threw her through a table at a wall before Doll could even react, but before she hit the wall, Mavis righted herself in the air and flew at Brent full speed, her arms hit his chest and out the other side flew a flock of dying birds and lots of blood.

Mavis, shocked stepped back and fell over, Brent looked down at his chest. “...bitch.” he fell over.

Doll rushed over to mavis to make sure she was ok, and then looked over at Brent's corpse, a light moved from his bracelet into Mavis', though mavis didn't notice, she was crying too much.

But what happened next doll noticed all too well, Brent's shadow, started to move.

It pulled away from Brent and what appeared to be an exact copy of Brent climbed from the shadow, and stood looking down on the two girls. Doll could tell that it was really a shapeshifter, different to her though somehow.

“Well isn't that an interesting turn,” said the copy, and Mavis looked up more scared than she had ever been before, “I wanted his light and waited in his shadow so I could claim two at once when he met another... but it seems I get to take three. I really am going to get an early lead. Now then... you.”

The copy jumped at Doll, forcing her through two walls into the next house, by the time he landed on her he looked exactly like her.

“This way,” Doll's reflection said, “Your friend won't know which of us to kill!”

“Dickhead,” Doll was really pissed “You assume I need her to help me.”

A burst of Qi shot straight through the neck of her reflection and the copies head rolled along the floor, spilling blood all over doll.

“Doll!” Mavis came running, but what she saw made her fall against the wall in shock.

The blood spilling onto Doll had caused some kind of reaction and Doll looked just like Brent.

“change back! Change back DAMNIT!” Doll shouted. She looked over at Mavis, who was muttering to herself, wide eyed and pale, curled up as tight as she could be in the corner looking at the image of Doll beheaded.

“Mavis, its me...” as Doll walked closer to Mavis, Mavis screamed.

“I- ...I'm sorry Mavis” Doll ran out into the night, she couldn't help her friend from here, and it was all too much for her to take, she would hide for as long as she could.

Chapter 33: Cadence and Polot.

Cadence stood atop the city wall, it was quite a fight that the kids put up, with a little more practice they may actually be entertaining to her.

With a shrill whistle, Cadence vanished from Koob.

-

200 miles away in the capital, surrounding the palace were a thousand warriors, behind them, sat on a throne illuminated by the torches around was the president, Polot.

He looked down at his bracelet, five of its beads glowing. He was making progress, but there were delays now, all because of her.

His assassins spent, his samurai dead, he awaited the return of his most dangerous servant.

With a high pitched whistle, the dancing beauty appeared before the throne.

“Did you have fun?”

“The little trio are promising me a lot, I'm going to give them some time so I'm sure they can deliver.”

“your games are tiresome, I expect you to collect the glows. Did you deal with Mavis?”

“I set her loose on the children.”

“It seems your fellow students and you have much in common.”

“oh?”

“Your all seem to have gone mad, but I think its a pre-disposition all banded warriors might have.”

“even the great president?”

“theres no way I can be certain I'm not mad, in all likelihood I already am, I'm working with you after all.”

“hah, you let me have my fun and assume at the end of it when I'm done you'll be able to beat

me and take my points, and I assume the same of you. I think we are both just confident, madness isn't something I think about these days." Cadence looked around "speaking of which, where's slicey? I thought he was your ace in the hole for dealing with me."

"I'm afraid he is dead now?"

"oh really? I like the sound of that. Who did him in?"

"as it happens, it was one of your fellow students."

"now I know you're kidding, I saw Mavis die and I killed Ignus myself."

"you are forgetting someone."

Cadence fell was taken aback "that's impossible, I saw—"

"are you absolutely sure it was her body? Because I have a shapeshifter calling herself doll who has relieved me of some of my finest warriors."

"There's no way, if she was alive she would have come to me! she would have—"

"I want you to kill her."

"what? But she's my—"

"sister? Who left you for years without a word to think she was dead? Went off and led a life without you? Left your friend Mavis when she was needed most?" Polot tilted his head, "...I want you to kill her. If you don't, I suspect she will kill you first. And probably when your back is turned."

Cadence stared at the floor in silence, this was too much.

#### Chapter 34: Leaving Koob.

The trio sat in Timon's room at the hostel together in silence.

"Claire..." Aella broke it.

"what?"

"Are you a warrior or something?"

"nope, I just, read the book is all."

"so anyone could just read the book and be able to do that?"

"No, you kind of have to be in sync with the book, it has its own energy, for it to contain all the information on white event stuff, it kind of absorbed some of its essence."

"so the book is a little like the bracelets then?"

"I guess you could say that, since the event it mostly lay dormant until someone who could read it came along and triggered it."

"triggered what?"

“umm, just the book stuff. Nothing else. It just means I can do cool tricks now ok?”

“...ok”

silence fell on the room again.

After a while claire decided he had had enough “I dont think it's a good idea for us to stay in Koob, we should leave first thing tommorow, I know you guys will want to help with the rebuilding, but I think its best we head elsewhere.”

Claire set off for her room, leaving Aella and Timon alone.

Aella stood up and headed for the door but paused in the portal.

“I wanted to say...”

There was a pause, and timon looked up, “I know... dont worry about it.”

Aella nodded and went to her room.

–

the next morning the trio gathered their things early before anyone else in the hostel was up and headed for the city gate.

“So where are we going now?” Timon asked

“Beats me” said claire

“I think I know.” Timon and Claire looked at Aella “Mr Irfan gave me my mother's diary, in it she trained at a dojo in Cinnamon Hills, with a 'Master Udo' maybe if we go there I can learn more about my powers, and I can pick up some stuff from the studies Mr Irfan did with my mother.”

“Sounds as good as any other plan” Said Timon, stretching his arms “But we need to hit up some place on the way, I'm awfully short on knives.”

Chapter 35: Only the Pull.

Doll lay in the inn bed, looking up at her bracelet,illuminated by the dim light and it's three glowing beads, Doll felt it's strong pull to the east.

Doll let her arm rest beside her and stared at the ceiling, was this the right approach? Surely the only way to get to the man she was after was by following the bracelet. It would lead her into a few other battles first, but if she was to survive the competition the other warriors would die anyway, in the end it didnt matter who killed who, a death is a death and Doll almost tricked herself into thinking she was helping the other warriors by keeping them from killing as many as she would.

The truth was she hated it, but wasn't going to change her mind, she just had to keep looking for a way to justify what she was going to do.

–

The pull on the bracelet was too strong now, she couldnt let herself sleep if a warrior was this close.

Doll opened the curtains and looked out into the village with the green roofs... there were too many people here, and she didn't know how much collateral damage would be generated by her and her mystery opponent. Doll picked up her few things and jumped out the window.

Walking through the streets to the fields beyond the town, the other warrior was definitely following her at the same pace as the pull was constant. They both intended to battle.

## Chapter 36: Night Reading.

In the middle of a field with long grass, Claire slept in her tent, Timon rested looking up at the stars and Aella read her mother's diary in the firelight.

'18<sup>th</sup> day of the walking moon, division year.

Today I finally arrived in Koob, it's not much to look at yet but everyone is excited and construction seems to be very rapid. I don't blame the people of Koob either, they built their library first and it is truly magnificent. Any city built to match such a great building will be a wonderful sight to behold.

I only got in a little before dusk, so I didn't get long to look at everything, but the library stays open all through the night, there are even sofas where guests can read and spend time if they want. This really does feel like the center of civilisation.

Anyway, most of the researchers have left for the night so I am going to wait here till the morning, apparently there is a cafe round here somewhere so I'll get a hot drink and then crash on a sofa.

Good night diary!

19<sup>th</sup> day of the walking moon, division year.

Today didn't start great diary, I woke up too early and decided to kill time browsing the library, but I got really lost. This place is like a hundred story labyrinth diary! I was lost for hours, I wanted to just levitate over the shelves and spot the exit but I didn't know if it would freak people out. So I just wandered until I bumped into someone who lent me a map. And even then it took me a half hour to find the entrance again.

And the day didn't improve then, I asked at the reception who I could talk to about white event research and they told me that The Irfan team was away studying some arena on a fifteen month expedition. I almost collapsed but it turns out I was lucky, they had already completed the expedition and were expected back within the week.

So with a week to kill in Koob, I figured I'd get some exploring done, I went all over town to see them making new buildings, which was brilliant to look at, the buildings are going to be huuuge!

My favourite place so far is a little cafe I found a few blocks from the library, it's run by a really sweet guy who has a passion for making cakes, and he's really good at it too, we got to talking and I promised each day I would try a new cake until I had tasted them all, and then I would tell him my favourite.

Anyway, for the time being I'm sleeping at the library again, it's good that they don't mind that kind of thing here, such openness is really refreshing!

Speaking of refreshing though it's been days since I had a shower, I became very aware of this



when I was in Terry's cafe (oh, his name's Terry by the way diary!) which smelt so nice. I wondered what I must have smelt like... ugh I'm too gross diary, no 1 on tomorrows todo list is find a bath house!.

Night diary!

Aella closed the diary and lay back into the grass, looking at it reach up into the stars, she wished she could live a life as carefree as her mother had done, Koob seemed to be the perfect place to make a home. But the bracelet kept her from that.

Aella turned on her side, her mother had the bracelet too she thought, she must have realised she had the same burden too and that's maybe why she left Koob.

The crackling of the fire played out as Aella's thoughts gradually turned to dreams.

Chapter 37: The Puppeteer.

Doll waited on the hill, dawn was but minutes away and her opponent wouldn't be far behind.

She had gone two hills past the village, so she would spot her opponent before either had the chance to attack, Doll felt this gave her an advantage as her appearance would not give away her fighting style, but her opponent may have some kind of tell.

Dawn broke into sunrise, and as light started to fall across the hill across from Doll she saw a woman appear above it, what Doll wasn't expecting was for her to keep rising above it. Doll's opponent seemed to be standing atop a giant animal of some kind, four times the size of Doll.

What was the tactics here, could her opponent command mysterious animals? Was it just for show? Or some kind of hypnotic distraction.

The woman and animal stopped atop the opposite hill, surveying Doll.

Closing her eyes, Doll attempted to sense the Qi of whatever it was approaching her, but saw what appeared to be the Qi of some kind of spider, one ball with many many thin strands coming from it. The person above was real, and they had tied their Qi to some kind of giant puppet.

Doll could tell this was the limit to her opponent's Qi manipulation, it would only become a problem if the puppet was destroyed and she was left to fight the woman with her loose Qi.

A cutting Qi type attack would sever connections to the Doll and result in her opponent having uncontrolled whip like Qi where the strings were.

Doll would have to win this fight physically, which was going to be tricky, as this opponent seemed to have her Qi set up for maximum physical attacks anyway.

"Presumably you have decided your tactics now?" Doll's opponent's voice carried well without any breeze.

"And you?"

"My tactics are always the same."

"I am ready when you are then."

Doll's opponent dropped to a ready stance atop her puppet, and which after a slight pause

dashed full speed towards Doll.

Doll began an arcing charge toward her opponent down the side of the hill, and leaped towards her opponent above the puppet, but the beast reared up and Doll hit the base of the doll instead, it was solid and she did no damage to it.

Standing sideways on the puppet, Doll realised it was about to fall forward to crush her, she leaped back and skidded through the grass facing her opponent.

"It looks like you are going to be a fun one, I heard warriors could be strong and I was looking forward to killing others like me." the puppeteer smiled down at Doll.

"So I'm your first battle against a banded warrior?"

"To tell the truth yes, but I've killed plenty before, back in my homeland I beat armies, I was feared all over, it's refreshing to be able to remake my reputation here also." The woman bent over and studied Doll. "You seem disappointed."

Doll stood upright again and brushed her fringe from her face.

"To tell the truth I am, I was hoping I could get extra points for the one battle. But it doesn't matter, I plan on getting all the points anyway."

"Well of course, we all want to be the one left alive, but I don't think this discussion is going to get us anywhere. Tell you what, I'll let you make the next attack, to make this interesting."

"Ok" came Doll's voice from behind her opponent, Doll had long since mastered using Qi to form a clone of herself and shifting into a form to move about undiscovered. The real Doll ran up behind the puppeteer and kicked her from her perch. The puppeteer flew through the air, through Doll's clone (which vanished) and hit the ground hard.

Doll stood atop the puppet. "I don't think your reputation is deserved."

The woman spat out the dirt from her mouth and stood up to face Doll, after wiping her face she said back, rather pissed; "It seems I've underestimated you. My name is Riopene, so just who are you?"

"My name is Doll."

"Ha, that's amusing, so this is a battle of one doll against another." Riopene raised her hands (and as Doll saw it, several Qi type hands as well) "too bad my doll can't get hurt, I don't think we can say the same of you."

Riopene pulled all her arms down hard and her doll leaped full speed toward a nearby tree, trying to crush Doll into it.

The trees split through the middle, the puppet landed on its feet and Doll was still standing on top unshaken, she had long since been able to kick through solid trees, her opponent was still underestimating her.

Doll knew that wouldn't last forever though, she would have to make her move soon.

Chapter 38: the road again.

The trio continued on their way towards the cinnamon hills, Aella thought about the man in the

cafe her mother met, she had clearly taken a shine to him. Aella realised there had never been anyone she even felt remotely like that about.

Aella looked over to Timon and tried to imagine him naked. Timon saw her looking over.

“What?”

Aella didnt get anything from him, maybe things have to start out romantically, maybe not she thought, either way he wasnt for her. Aella looked forward again.

“Nothing.”

Chapter 39: The puppeteer, part 2.

Doll tried to hold on to the puppet for as long as she could whilst Riopene did her best to shake her. 'Sooner or later' doll thought 'she's going to pull towards herself, and I can kick the puppet full force and stun her to get my chance'

Riopene raised her arms towards doll and the puppet, 'this is it' Doll thought, but when Riopene pulled towards herself the puppet stayed rooted, and Riopene launched at doll herself, full speed.

Doll was unprepared and was sent flying.

Before she realised what was happening riopene's puppet was above her and stomping its foot down, it was all doll could do to grab the foot and try to keep it from crushing her.

“I underestimated you before, Doll, but I'm going to end this before I make the same mistake again.”

Doll, worn out and becoming desperate looked for any way of breaking free and she saw a chance she would not like to take, a cutting type Qi attack was her only option, but if it didn't kill Riopene right away it would be too dangerous for her.

Doll focussed almost all her Qi into a single burst, and released it, the leg pushing down on her split in two, as did the body of the puppet, and Riopene.

Covered in blood, The image of Riopene struggled to stand up in the wreckage and held up her bracelet, one glow moved into it making four lit beads.

She tensed up, and screaming, fought to get her form to return to normal.

Doll passed out, she pushed too hard to win this time.

Chapter 40: Claire's Guilt.

The trio continued on their journey, Claire thought to himself 'should I tell them it's my fault?'

He decided against it, he just wasnt strong enough to take responsibility yet.

Chapter 41: Polot's wheels, set in motion.

“See to it that the information is made available across the country, starting at Koob and work it out from there. There is to be a bonus if they are killed and not captured.”

“Certainly President sir.”

The official made his way from the palace towards his helicopter, and Polot drummed on his arm rests, he knew his subordinate would not take well to this move but time was running short, with warriors battling every other day it was only a matter of time before he was the only one left to kill, he needed his ace in the hole and this move was the only one left him to play. It was much more uncertain than he preferred.

Chapter 42: Madness.

Cadence floated in the darkness, stars danced wildly around her for a time, but then faded.

Drifting, Cadence felt so alone.

her mirror image appeared before her, “Ignus was right you know.”

“About what?”

“for us to become a monster, it's inevitable.”

“It doesn't have to be, I still believe that, I'll never turn into what he did.”

“that's true...” her mirror disappeared and spoke from behind her “you became something much worse.”

Cadence turned round in shock, “what do you mean?”

“Ignus went mad sure, he longed for destruction and killed many, even causing suffering. But you, you are the one who turned your own friend into that, your not only mad, you are spreading it.”

Cadence didn't know how to respond, “when did I become this way...”

“you were always this way Cadence, you just used to be better at hiding it.”

–

Cadence drifted alone in the void for some time, struggling to come to terms with the monster she seemed to have become.

“It's not your fault you know.” her reflection said from below, as if rippling across the surface of a black sea. “you might have stood a chance if she hadn't abandoned you.”

“...Doll.”

“It was bad enough for her to have died, but if she didn't it's a cut much worse. You had no choice but to hide in the madness, to wrap its blanket tighter around you to shield from the world, and now she is going to kill you.”

“She wouldn't!”

“and you know that how? You don't even know her anymore Cadence, are you sure you even did

before? She was always so quiet. And all those times she ran away, trying on different personalities like they were clothes... did she ever take you with her?"

"She never did actually open up to me..."

"she is a stranger Cadence, deal with her as such!" the mirror faded.

"I guess I will, my heart is already too broken, and I think my mind will go the same way," Cadence drifted higher, "after all, it's inevitable."

Chapter 43: Wanted.

In the village with the green rooves, Aella outside the weapon shop while Timon went in to buy more knives and Claire went to get some food.

'20<sup>th</sup> day of the walking moon, division year.

So I found the bathhouse today diary, and like everything else in Koob it was really impressive. I'm used to a stream and a rag but this was complete luxury. Heated water, steam rooms and even pools made specifically for the children to have fun in so the parents dont have to fight to get them clean. This place may actually be paradise.

Anyway, I spent the whole day with Terry (the guy who runs the cafe and makes cakes) I went to his shop early today and we got to chatting the whole day, and when it came time for him to close he took me for a walk around his favourite park and we watched the sun set. I think this might be what love feels like diary!

Goodnight diary!

1<sup>st</sup> day of the sleeping sun, division year.

Well diary, this is an interesting position I find myself in, I'm not writing this at the library tonight, Terry has offered to let me stay at his house above the cafe. He is such a gentleman I feel totally swept off my feet, and I never thought that could be a good feeling until now.

First thing I did yesterday was check up at the reception to find out when the researchers would get back, apparently sometime tommorow so I had another day to spend. And I spent it all with Terry. We pretty much did the exact same things we did yesterday, but I'm starting to feel that if I repeated days like this for the rest of my life I could die happy.

Night diary!

Aella put the diary away and waited for Timon. Looking around this place was a far cry from the ultra magnificence of Koob, but it had a sort of homely charm that she found very pleasant and calming.

"Ok, I'm done, lets go meet up with Claire."

Aella looked up to see Timon, his clothes once again fully stocked with deadly weapons.

-

Aella and timon walked down the streets towards the market when Claire came running full

speed round the corner and when he spotted them said;

“We have to leave NOW!”

“what is it?” Aella asked, “Did you see a warrior?”

“not yet” Claire replied, and held up a poster she had just torn down, “but it's only a matter of time”

Aella and Timon looked at the poster, and their faces looked back at them from it.

'WANTED DEAD! Two banded warriors responsible for massive destruction to the peaceful city of Koob. Last sighted heading east from Koob.

Beware! Whilst they appear to be young these warriors are exceptionally deadly even compared to other banded warriors, do not try to capture alive.

Large monetary reward for the heads of both warriors.

This notice printed on behalf of President Polot'

“Oh shit.” Timon knew every banded warrior within a few hundred miles would be onto them now.

“We should make a move.” Aella said nervously looking around.

The trio made their exit from the village, trying to go the least crowded route.

“we need to stay totally clear of paths and settlements from now on. We'll get our food from the wildlife.” Timon knew they couldn't avoid warriors pulled by the bracelets, but they could at least avoid people seeing them and word getting out about their location.

#### Chapter 44: Infirmary.

Doll came to in the infirmary, a nurse was sat beside her reading.

“Oh? Looks like you're finally up.”

Doll looked around, the room was all white, and pretty clean for a village hospital. Sitting up in her bed, Doll asked “How long was I out for?”

“Oh just a day, which is lucky on your part, the farmer who's animals graze the field you fought in, he was pretty pissed about the mess you made.”

“I'm sorry about that, I did my best to choose a place that would be the least bother.”

“Well I'm glad to hear some of you banded types are considerate, not like that couple that trashed Koob. They are like killer vandals with unlimited power.”

“Trashed Koob?”

“yeah, check this.” The nurse stood up and pulled a poster from the noticeboard, handing it to Doll. “You should consider going after them, theres big cash for the vigilante that takes care of them.”

Doll looked over the poster, and was reminded strongly of the samurai's master, it couldn't be that the president and the coward were one and the same could it?

"The poster says they are heading east from Koob, they could be heading towards this village as we speak, I'd hate to think what they'd do to a place like this if they could just crumple parts of Koob."

Doll felt her bracelet pulling east, towards the cinnamon hills.

"They have already passed through here."

"Really? Are you going to go after them?"

Doll looked out the window, then stood up from her bed.

"yes."

Chapter 45: Walking and Reading.

As the three crossed fields, Claire and Timon keeping an eye out for anyone else, Aella continued to read her mother's diary.

'2<sup>nd</sup> day of the sleeping sun, division year.

It started snowing last night diary, when I headed to the library this morning I had to wade through snow a foot deep!

I think it's halted most of the construction but some teams are still building, the will of the Koob citizens is very impressive, they should be really proud of what they are doing here.

However its not all good news diary, after speaking to the receptionist again I was told I could wait on the researchers floor for them to arrive, so I took my first trip ever in an 'elevator' and its an experience I dont think I'll get used to, you stand in a glass box which shoots up all the way to near the top of the library and spins around the building as it does it. I was never so scared in my whole life.

Anyway, I didnt have to wait to long until the 'Irfan team' showed up, it was really just the three researchers, Mr Irfan and his wife and another man called Brook. Apparently their expedition had taken them to the very source of the white event itself and they had collected a load of artifacts to study. The place they went to sounded wonderful and awful at the same time. But they were very excited about it, and it was kind of infectious.

I listened to all their stories and theories about what had triggered the event, and there was some philosophical discussion on wether it had some purpose, it was a good hour or so before I remembered why I came, when I showed my bracelet the team was almost overjoyed with excitement. They had heard of banded people with extraordinary abilities and had theorised it too, but I was the first they had ever seen...

which is understandable, by their reckoning there were at most 26 of us at any given time, and it had something to do with how the bracelet itself had 26 glass beads embedded in it.

Anyway, I've offered to help out with the research in exchange for demonstrating my abilities and trying to explain them as best I can, Mr and Mrs Irfan agreed even though Brook was initially against it. He had concerns I wasnt 'properly trained' though I'm smart enough to know thats his way of calling me stupid. But anyway, I'll study as hard as I can so his criticism will be unfounded... thats what I came here to do anyway after all.

Anyway, when we finished the day at the library I came back to Terry's and we had hot drinks and talked. It was a pretty good day I think.

Anyway, night diary!

the breeze blew a couple of pages over in the diary and Aella put it away, she'd done enough reading for today.

“Are those the cinnamon hills there then?”

“Yep” Claire was pretty confident.

“How do you know, we dont actually have a map.” Timon said

“Course we do idiot, I'm all the map you'll ever need, got all the cartography from the library up here.” Clair pointed at his head.

Aella sighed 'it might be nice to have a map that wasnt so cocky.'

Chapter 46: Cadence in the desert.

Cadence fumed across the desert bridge toward the arena.

“It's been some time Cadence.” Udo stood up, he wasnt expecting to have to fight Cadence so soon. “Are you here to battle?”

“Did you know!?”

“Know what dear?”

“Doll, she was alive the whole time, did you know?”

Udo looked into Cadence eyes, into her mind. She was beyond help now and it saddened him greatly.

“If I had known that I would have done something, I might have been able to keep you from becoming this.”

Cadence turned her back to Udo

“Cadence...” Udo could see an event in her, “you did that? To someone who trusted you? What did Mavis do to deserve it?”

Cadence stared out through the arena gates and down the bridge, “She did nothing, but it doesnt matter.” Cadence faced udo again, “I dont care about anything anymore!”

Udo looked down, saddened, “not even finding your sister?”

“My sister...” Cadence stepped up to Udo, “I'm going to kill her. And I'll enjoy doing it.”

and with a high pitched noise, Cadence vanished.

Chapter 48: You did what!?



“You want me to repeat myself? I sent out a death warrant for your two little kiddies. You are taking too long getting rid of them, and I don't have patience for your games, you have toyed with them too long and I'm a busy man.”

Cadence grabbed Polot by the shirt and pushed him hard into the back of the chair.

“You realise our agreement was only going to last as long as it was mutually beneficial! It's no longer in my favour, what's to stop me killing you now!”

Polot smiled “Because my sources tell me your sister is almost on top of your kiddy pets, if you don't go now she'll be the one to claim the prize if you don't hurry up.”

“Ksch!” Cadence threw Polot to the floor “Asshole, you don't think I'll be coming back for you?”

“Honestly cadence, I don't care if you do anymore.”

Chapter 49: Echoes in the dojo.

Doll took in her old home, the only place she truly felt happy and safe, the dojo was empty now but for every nook and cranny there was a memory lurking, echoes of children playing and shouting only she could hear.

Doll sat on the steps leading into the dojo, she had made it here ahead of this Aella and Timon pair. Doll believed this dojo to be their destination, but why?

If these really were two savage warriors who went around destroying cities, why go to an abandoned dojo in the middle of nowhere? 'perhaps,' doll thought 'it's the obvious answer... they are coming here for training?'

–

Almost out of breath the trio climbed the steps into the cinnamon hills towards the dojo, trying to get to the dojo before the sunset would.

“I thought dojos were just at the top of loads of steps in stories.” Aella was getting worn out.

“It makes sense though, it keeps you fit.” if Timon was physically drained, he wasn't showing it.

“I don't know what you are complaining about, this is the perfect physical difficulty for me” Claire boasted.

“Yeah, but as soon as you get to the top you are going to pass out from pushing yourself too hard.” Timon responded

Claire shot him a dirty look “you're just jealous I can push myself like this, when we get to the top it won't matter how tired I am anyway. Speaking of which, I can see the top from here.”

–

“It's not much to look at is it? You sure there's anyone to train you here?”

The trio stood before the dojo, and Claire clearly didn't think much of it.

“I don't know, thinking about it it's been almost 20 years since my mother came here... maybe

coming here wasn't such a good idea." Aella suddenly felt very foolish having suggested they come here.

"You are a little late I'm afraid, Old Udo hasn't given anyone lessons here for a long time."

The three turned quickly to see Doll sat at the top of the steps looking down across the hills.

"Who're you!?" Timon demanded.

"I'm one of Udo's last students of course," Doll stood up and faced them, "And I presume you are Timon and Aella. I'm sorry I haven't heard of you short one."

"Are you here to kill us and collect your ransom?" Aella asked defiantly

"well," Doll put her hands on her hips and looked at the ground thinking, "my plan was to kill all the other warriors, and I thought I was justified to do it too, but seeing you guys I see that's not entirely the case."

"what are you talking about lady?" Claire was not in a mood for someone to just unload like this.

"Well, to put it simply, I don't think it's your fault what happened in Koob, I think Polot has some kind of agenda in wanting you dead. Plus it's not my style to fight someone who is untrained... I tried to play the part of merciless warrior but it doesn't fit quite right. So in short, I'm not going to fight you... assuming of course you won't fight me."

"for real?" Timon was unsure.

"For real." Doll nodded

all four eased up a bit, but then a fifth voice spoke

"But will you fight me Doll?"

Doll looked across the clearing to a woman standing against the side of the dojo.

"...Cadence?"

Chapter 50: Polot's plan.

The official stood across from Polot after Cadence vanished

"Are you sure that was wise sir, when she is done she will come back for you."

"That's if she survives, and either way it doesn't matter, she is only a distraction, a decoy."

"you can deal with her sir?"

"I'm about to have the key, with that my biggest problems will fade."

Chapter 51: Echoes in the dojo (of a different kind).

"... Cadence?"

“Dont act so suprised 'sister', it's not like I let you think I was dead for years on end or anything.” Cadence was clearly filled with rage, it was all she could do to hold back and appear calm.

“I know cadence... I did something stupid. I had gotten to thinking whatever I did I could only harm the people around me so I ran, and I stayed hidden until recently. I found out even in hiding I was doomed to harm again.”

“Save it Doll, I dont want to hear how you justified it. What you did I cant forgive.” Cadence stood upright and faced Doll. “Fight me.”

Doll looked at cadence and sighed.

“I wont.”

“LIER! You knew I was on the list when you decided to clean up the banded warriors.”

“I kept myself from thinking that far ahead—”

“FIGHT. ME!”

“I wont, even if I meant to before, standing here now I've already done too much harm to you Cadence.”

Cadence pulled out her flute and swung it sharply, the shrill sound cut the air, and Timon fell to the floor, his throat cut.

“TIMON!” Aella screamed and rushed over too him, but he had already passed away.

“Doll, fight. me. Now!” Cadence walked slowly towards doll.

“What have you become Cadence? You gave him no warning!”

“I'll do it again if you dont fight me Doll!”

“Cadence, dont make me—” Doll was in tears now, but there was something that took the attention of both Doll and Cadence, beside Timon's body Aella stood up, her whole body appeared to have a strong blue halo whilst she herself turned darker, eyes glowing and spark flying from her like lightning, Doll was more charged than she had ever been.

Cadence swung her flute but it had no effect. “Ha! Finally the bitch is ready to fight!”

Doll spoke almost in a whisper, but it was deafening to those that heard what she said, “I'm not going to fight cadence, you dont deserve it.” Doll rose up and started to hover towards Cadence. “I'm just going to kill you. There wont be chance for you to fight.”

Cadence was really pissed now and turned away from doll to Aella, “dont underestimate me bitc—”

The air was on fire, the dusk became a bright blue fire. It was impossible to see a thing from the glare, and when it faded, what was left of Cadence's drifted away in the breeze.

Aella fell to her knees exhausted and still in shock, but a loud roar behind her got both her and Doll's attention, a helicopter flew away to the north west. Aella quickly looked around and then got to her feet to chase after the helicopter.

“Claire!” but Aella was too weary, she fell again, and this time everything went dark.

--- INTERMISSION ---

“Why is the story called 'Fair' anyway? It seems most of the stuff that happens is pretty much the opposite of fair.”

“Why dont you keep reading, perhaps you'll find out?”

--- ACT TWO ---

Chapter 52: Nineteen years ago, Part 2, Camera B.

Mr Zee, his wife and son made it to the top of the steps and faced the dojo.

“Goodness, thats a tiring climb” Mrs Zee was clearly worn out.

Mr Zee looked brushed down his suit a little and looked at his watch, “We wont be staying for long, going downhill will be easier, gravity will do the work for you.” Mr Zee looked to his son “Zephyr, go play someplace, your mother and I have matters to attend to in the dojo.”

“Yes father.” Zephyr walked off to see if there was anything interesting, he hated being dragged around on his father's trips but he did his best to find something entertaining. Mr and Mrs Zee stepped into the dojo, looking for it's master.

-

inside the dojo it was cooler than outside, the shadows providing Mr and Mrs Zee refuge from the strong summer sun.

“Welcome to my Dojo, my name is Udo how can I help you.” Udo walked over to the couple and shook their hands.

Mr Zee saw shaking Udo's hand he had a bracelet similar to his son's.

“Well Mr Udo... my son has a bracelet just like that. His grandfather left it to him when he passed on.” Mr Zee's expression was unchanging, and Udo knew this was a man only of business.

“I see, and you heard I train people who have bracelets like that from a rumour.”

“That is correct.”

“well the rumour is true, If your son is willing I can help him master his abilites,” Mr Zee gave the slightest of changes to his facial expression at the word 'abilities' Udo saw it but didn't let on, “The training usually takes one to two years, so it's a big commitment on his part, and no doubt you would miss your son.”

“Not at all.” Mr Zee said blankly “But our son already has commitments and we have expectations of him, the time you need to train him is too much, is there nothing to be done to shorten it?”

“I'm afraid not, to be truthful he would have to be prepared to train indefinately if that is what he needed to master his abilities.”

“Unacceptable.” Mr Zee turned and headed for the exit of the dojo, his wife following close behind. “I apologise for wasting your time Mr Udo.”

“Theres no need to apologise to me Mr Zee.” Udo knew the person who was losing out in this situation. And Mr Zee was clearly oblivious or ignorant of anything that didnt suit him, he didnt even consider it odd Udo knew his name without having introduced himself.

“Call our son dear, we're leaving.” Mr Zee headed to the top of the steps that led down the hill, he hated wasted trips like this.

## Chapter 53: Rain.

Grey, dreary and heavy, the sky let go of everything it had been holding for days, visibility was low and it seemed to Doll that only the small area around the dojo was left in existence, beyond was just a constant void of grey and rain.

Doll dug deeper, she could have used her Qi to dig faster, cleaner, but Doll realised that for all the people she had killed, she had never dug a single grave, so she dug for herself, fighting desperately to keep the mud from falling back in, and struggling against the weight the sky was giving it.

She did not complain, she deserved this punishment hundreds of times over, Doll savoured the sweat and stinging across her body, it helped cleanse her... if only a little.

-

Doll finished filling in the grave and the rain started to thin and stopped roaring, seemingly in respect to Timon.

Doll looked across the grave and down the cinnamon hills into the grey, how she longed to just fall into the grey, as though her sister was waiting for her there, a place where neither had any memory of this world and they could just be together.

Doll took some time to think, but nothing came to mind. Eventually she went back to the dojo's old lodge to check up on Aella.