

*A sword & sorcery fantasy/
science fiction novel based
in the modern present and a
mythic feudal past inhabited
by samurai, immortal
beings, dragons, and world
altering prophecies.*

Kojiro

By Khalil Barnett

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12589.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



KOJIRO

Reconcile the past
to take charge of the future.

KHALIL A. BARNETT

For two men taken far too soon.
Kesler Casimir, my best friend,
And one of the greatest influences and role models I
have ever known. He always believed in Kojiro,
and in me.
Madison Meyer, the incredible artist who penned
the image on the following page, who always
challenged me intellectually, pushed me to
do and be better, and never shied from rebuking me
when I deserved it,
as a friend should.

This one, gentlemen, is for you.



Copyright © 2022 Khalil Barnett

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-958878-09-5

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-958878-10-1

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-373-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Barnett, Khalil

Kojiro by Khalil Barnett

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022920498

*"Your thoughts are the voice of God. But which God,
how many, and to what end?"*

-Xiao Xiao Chen, from *The Bodhisattvas*
of a world reality adjacent.



THE MARX FAMILY CAME FROM OLD MONEY, but their stately, 10,676 square foot Mediterranean-style mega mansion was built the same year their only son Coletrane was born. **Coletrane Thelonious Marx**, his name was the result of a disagreement between mother and father. Both huge fans of the revolutionary jazz movement of the '60s, they wanted to name their only son after one of the pioneers at the front of that renaissance. Adaeze, his mother, wanted to name him after the saxophonist John William Coletrane. And Vincent, his father, wanted to name him after Thelonious Monk, the improvisational pianist who was the second most recorded jazz composer after Duke Ellington. In the end, they settled on both.

Vincent was an architect by trade, so he designed it himself. It was one of the luxurious Isles of Osprey homes in Dr. Phillips, Florida.

The towering masterpiece was situated on a .94 acre lot with 145' waterfrontage, lush landscapes, custom siren fountains made of marble and granite. There was a circular stone paved driveway that wrapped around to a courtyard parking pad with two garages that connected to an enormous botanical garden engirdled in a thicket of looming poinciana trees.

On the other side of the property was an oak canopy herald to a labyrinth hedge maze where in the center of which stood a twelve foot jadeite statue of a horse-bound feudal warrior with

his unsheathed sword pointed up at the sky, the horse balanced upright on its hind legs.

All of this, it was just the iceberg tip of grandeur that made up the lives of Vincent and Adaeze, a life that Coletrane would inherit as a birthright but never enjoy as a man. For the kind of reasons that inundate a life in chronic stupefaction, irreparable.

Vincent's grandfather, Ndulue Obasi Marx, was owner of one of the first small oil exploration companies in Nigeria in the 1920s. Being almost clairvoyant when it came to business, he made non-commercial findings in Akata before selling his company to a consortium of Shell in '37 at the start of the big petroleum boom when it was still possible for a small oil man to make a huge bid on profits before the larger oil companies swallowed up everyone. He took his money and got into the shipping and railroad business where he amassed enough wealth to create a legacy to span generations, enabling his grandson Vincent to attend the best schools, get the right prestigious degrees, and know all the right families to make forging a career in architecture a relatively easy trajectory. This also enabled Vincent to only work as an architect part-time and devote most of his energy and resources to his true passions; archeology and history.

The resplendent garden belonged to Adaeze, and was not an ostentatious addition to the property but a vocational passion of her own. She employed a team of botanists who developed herbal medicinals and restoratives that were distributed to dispensaries in poor communities and allotted for free to people who could not afford fancy drugs through the cold, corporate pharmaceutical system.

This was a philanthropic effort that spanned across the entire state of Florida. Because unlike Vincent, Adaeze did not come from money. She was Afro-Caribbean from the Windrush generation, and her family migrated to the United Kingdom some-time after World War II, around the same time that Adebowale was making his millions in the 40s. Adaeze's grandparents gained citizenship in the UK under the British Nationality Act of 1948 during the time that the British government was in a state of recovery from the great losses of the war and encouraging immigration from the former countries of the Commonwealth of Nations. Her mother Vea met and married Emilio De Silva, a white European toy maker who had his own modest shop, but the family barely made ends meet and so Adaeze, her brothers and sisters, all grew up poor. She married into wealth shortly after meeting Vincent, but the knowledge of seeing friends and family suffer and die for lack of access to proper medicines when needed was written into her DNA. As a child she had both Vea and Emilio, as well as three brothers and two sisters. But by the time she was an adult, her nuclear family had dwindled to just her and her father.

By the time that Coletrane was eleven years old, in 1986, Adaeze's botanical company, **Anexity Works**, had spanned beyond the state of Florida and had franchises in Louisiana, Georgia, Arkansas, Virginia, New York, and Maine -so far. Vincent on the public stage became world renowned in the field of architecture, but was considered an eccentric Indiana Jones type collector for his work in archeology. He was also a tenured professor of history at the University of Central Florida.

So, Central Florida, though a very red and very racist area, had gotten used to (or at least tolerated) the idea of Black Wealth and Excellence being deep-rooted in the polestar of the community.

Coletrane always had a front row seat to this, especially during the fundraiser parties that his parents would throw right there on the property. People from all over the world would attend; doctors, lawyers, senators, big business tycoons, etc. People would come to watch Cirque du Soleil-like performances on the open lakeview acres of grass, they'd eat at the outdoor kitchen where famous chefs would prepare lavish dishes, and under the towering hand-painted ceiling and beyond the grand foyer, so many important bourgeois people would mingle on the imported Italian marble floors of the seemingly endless lower layer of the Marx's colossal home.

On the night of one such party, during, in fact, Coletrane's eleventh birthday weekend, the boy was upstairs in his bedroom and hanging out with his best friend Marcus.

Vincent, like son like father, was also removed from the party while Adaeze carried the task on her own of entertaining guests. He was down in the gallery and past a private entrance, hidden away with *his* friend, Jeremiah Cross, in a wing of the house that was used as an archeological trophy room and library that boasted custom wood cabinetry from floor to ceiling and a liquor cabinet made of Mozambique ebony that, on its top surface, held an agate bust of Ibrahim Frantz Fanon.

Coletrane and Marcus, they were working on a school homework assignment together. Vincent and Jeremiah, they were checking out one of Vincent's most recent archeological

finds: an eight foot tall statue of a man with African features, standing in *contrapposto*, in a hooded robe with his empty arms open as if they were holding something of considerable size and weight. Only, whatever those stone hands were holding was not present.

“Not quite up to the Polykleitos cannon, this one,” Cross said, playing unimpressed. But Vincent was used to this little ruse. This was their game, after all. Cross was one of the upper 1% industrialists exploring the big business and innovation opportunities of Silicon Valley. He was a media proprietor and entrepreneur that would eventually become the founder and CEO of a multi-national technology company called **Rain Forest**. He had only a passing interest in archeology, beyond, that is, his investments in Vincent’s *hobby*.

“Perhaps,” Vincent walked around the statue, talking to Cross over his shoulder, who sort of loitered like a semi-curious sloth. “But the discipline is fully *disengo*, as were all of his works.”

Vincent was a tall man, naturally strong in musculature and bearing the athleticism of his Nigerian genes. But Cross, with his bald head and perpetual three day shadow beard, was of average height and had never been much of an athlete. He grew up rich and pampered in Toronto and came to the states to begin venturing in business on a ten million dollar “loan” from his father Galen. But, after being awakened to the importance of health when Galen dropped dead suddenly from a heart attack the previous year, Cross took up jogging though and yoga, not to mention was fast developing a passion of his own for archery.

Still, he had something of a *small man complex* when in the presence of Vincent, who, nonetheless, was older than him by at least a decade. This subconscious complex of his, it made Cross always bring a subtle air of competitiveness to their somewhat tenuous though oddly firm camaraderie. They were the contradiction of a ship at sea being tossed in the waves of a storm.

So, Cross sighed when Vincent mentioned that, *disengo*.

"Judas Ulehla," he said knowingly, a statement shaped like a question.

"Yep. Correct," Vincent didn't bother trying to hide his enthusiasm.

Cross took a sip of the scotch in the highball he was holding.

"Your Ulehla supposedly precedes Michelangelo by at least 700 years, yet somehow he is aware of the *disengo* discipline?"

Vincent smiled,

"My friend, it isn't academia. Not in essence, really. Still, if you'll humor me, it remains uncertain when or even how long ago Ulehla lived. Of the two other statues of his that I've found, what is different about this one?"

"A pop-quiz? After I've been drinking?"

"This one is easy."

At the same time, in a bedroom on the other side of the estate, Coletrane was similarly regaling his friend Marcus with charismatic musings.

"It came to me in a dream," he said, looking up and remembering, "There were lights coming out of darkness. Like completely pitch black, except for the lights. Twentysomething..

Twenty-seven of them, I think... Yeah! Twenty-seven! Telling me a story. And also, I think, a warning. I woke up real fast because I couldn't breathe!"

Marcus looked at him quizzically, tilting his head.

"What? How does that help us with our project, man? It's due Monday and tonight is Saturday?"

"It's called inspiration."

"But why twenty-seven?"

"Huh?"

"Twenty-seven. Why twenty-seven lights?"

"I don't know."

"What? Come on, man!"

"Look. It'll be a piece of cake,' Coletrane told his protesting friend, who hated school work on the weekends and, in general, math. 'We can act like we're making our own *Dungeons & Dragons* game."

"You said the same thing last week, Train," Marcus countered, pouting.

The boys were in pajamas. It was a sleepover, a rare thing. But exceptions are made during Coletrane's birthday weekends, and already at eleven he'd gotten pretty good at the art of manipulation. For instance, he was allowed to exploit the influence his parents had on the private school he attended and wear his hair long and wild. His mixed heritage made it billowy when worn in the style of an afro, but for school his mother would usually braid it. Today however, this weekend, it was as wild and loose as ever. Tossing about his head like a chrysanthemum or a bushel of coffee brown cotton.

Marcus' American Black family was originally from Georgia. His father, Leonard Green, boxed when he was young, founded three record labels and made a fortune in investments. But Leonard's brother, Jackson, owned a barbershop chain in Florida. So, the boy was always clean cut. He'd taken after his father by forming an interest in boxing already at the young age of twelve, so he was already tired of school.

This is where, once again, Coletrane's powers of manipulation would kick in.

"The report has to be on the power of mythologies and how they influence the world," Coletrane reasoned, his excitement and imagination growing. "We can make it about a warrior that faces the warning from the dream!"

"But what's the warning?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know that either?!"

"Hey," Coletrane argued, "Inspiration doesn't have to make sense. My dad says that all the time. It don't gotta make sense. All it's gotta do is push you forward."

"We're gonna get an F, man," Marcus groaned.

"We are not getting an F."

Coletrane got up and walked to the window, pacing with the bearing and confidence of a general. His bedroom window was facing the estate's boat dock out on the lake behind the house, so he looked out beyond the water and at the trees made black in the night time light. This is how he formed the idea.

"Let's do this. **Let's create a samurai.** Let's give him a history, a legend, everything."

And then he turned to face Marcus, to put a point on his seriousness, his enthusiasm,

“Let’s make it as though he really lived.”

Vincent’s trophy room was a sight to behold. It was an enormous depository of collected munitions from every era of war, paintings and murals bearing imagery of fire breathing leviathans, Cain and Abel at each other’s throats, Krishna from the Hindu faith, Jesus with bleeding holes in his hands, etc. There were, besides the new one that Vincent and Cross were examining, two other deific statues (one a woman, the other a man) by the sculptor Ulehla -ancient, ascetic, each bearing aesthetics seemingly representative of a different sculpting epoch.

Cross sighed.

“You are determined, it would seem, to piss off your investors. Namely, me. What have the grants been for? To study this... mysterious Judas Ulehla, or to solve the riddle of Abraham’s cube of 3?”

“We already know the cube of three, Jeremiah,” Vincent paced while pontificating. “The number of New Testament books. King Ben-hadad’s betrayal of Ahab. The fall of 27,000 Aphek footmen. King Azariah’s governance of God’s people in the 27th year of Jeroboam II!”

“You are being coy, old friend. You claimed to, specifically, be able to locate the true location of the fabled cave of Hebron. And that in the place of Abraham’s Sarah was instead an

element more valuable than gold and all the world's oil combined."

"We are on the cusp of it all, if only you would entertain my theories of Ulehla! The so-called *cave of Hebron* is hidden and misnamed on purpose, by Ulehla's design. Consider how he got his own name! He was a descendent of King Zimri, ruler with the shortest recorded reign of Judah. And these three statues, the only ones attributed to Ulehla.."

"Attributed by you," Cross countered, slyly.

"Combined," Vincent pronounced, segueing on Cross' interruption, "they are a clue. We're not looking for a mystery behind the cube of three at all. We're looking for three itself, these three. Look at them, Jerry!"

"Don't call me Jerry, damnit!" Cross winced, shaking his head, "I told you how much I hate that!"

"Look - at - them! And drink your drink."

Cross sighed again, walked over by the statues to give them a look up close. Still nursing the highball in his right hand, he took spectacles from his shirt pocket with his left and put them on. Vincent, he went over to the Mozambique liquor cabinet to fix a drink of his own, three fingers of scotch whiskey. Cross scanned each one of the Ulehla statues through squinting eyes despite the lenses making the gesture unnecessary. Then he looked back at the new statue. Vincent was next to it with his arms folded, a smug grin on his face. He was wrist rotating the highball to slightly slosh around its mahogany contents. Cross rolled his eyes.

"Vincent, must you stand there looking so self-satisfied?"

"It's part of the fun," Vincent took a sip of his drink.

“Out with it, man. What is different about this one? What is the big revelation?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Vincent asked, turning to face the statue and gesturing in emphasis to the statue’s arms. “He’s holding something. Or at least, was.”

At this point Vincent strolled over to Cross and tapped glasses with him.

“Perhaps he is praying that you don’t get sued.”

“Haha,’ Vincent exclaimed, springing to buoyancy, “It is not debatable. Let me show you.”

There was a bronze Egyptian-style etagere bookcase set against a wall between two standing, gold-plated Iron Maidens. Three glass shelves connected the etagere pillars, but the only thing on them, at the top and centered, was a large leather-bound book with an onyx, oval-shaped stone on its center and a golden buckle latch closure over its dense stack of no less than 700 wood-pulp pages. The book had a medieval appearance and was heavy, but Vincent, after putting down his drink, lifted it with ease and brought it over to a Babylon round table made of gray and white marble, setting the heavy book down and blowing on it lightly to lift a coat of dust off its surface.

Cross joined him at the table.

“Another find?” Cross asked.

“My divers found the Ulehla sculpture coordinates northeast of Bermuda, 350 miles below the middle of the Atlantic. It was cargo in the ruins of a sunken Azores ship, circa 1427. This book is what the statue was holding.”

“What?” Cross near chuckled, expecting the punchline to a joke that he knew by Vincent’s tone would never arrive. “How

is that even possible?" he continued. "Either I've had too much to drink this evening, or you have."

"Neither. The book was stone upon delivery, and part of the statue. Only when I set up the statue in here did the book become, well, this. A live book resting in stone arms as if on fancy shrine. You're the first I've shown it."

Cross gave Vincent a quizzing look. But before he could voice another retort, Vincent said, "I have proof."

That's when Jeramiah sighed, saying, "Vincent, one could describe your obsession as a form of anthropological violence."

"Nothing so violent as robbing graves to lard the exhibits of colonial museums."

Before Cross could respond with the obligatory *touché*, Vincent turned and walked back over to the etagere to retrieve a manila folder.

Walking the envelope back over to Cross, he said, "My manservant Poole was with them on the trip. He took photos from the harbor and faxed them in."

Vincent pulled six photos from the envelop, all different angles of the statue taken from the dock and up on the ship bay. The book in hand, solid stone.

"It happened overnight, Jeremiah," Vincent whispered, saying Cross' first name as he only did when imparting something of considerable gravity, "I've shown you this because it confirms what I've been saying for years, and helps piece together the mystery of Ulehla. How does a statue sculpted no sooner than 1621 finds its way into the cargo of a sunken 1427 ship captained by Goncalo Velho?! It corresponds

to the Theosophy texts that I studied in Tibet. It confirms the Visuddhimagga, the Patisambhidamagga, the-

"Don't say it out loud," Cross cut him off, shaking his head. But Vincent was already too deep into the moment.

"It confirms, or at least implies, the existence of manomāyakāya."

Cross sighed and shut his eyes, moved away from Vincent who was so into his reverie that he didn't notice how much he'd invaded Cross' personal space by moving closer and closer on each word.

Cross gulped downed the last of his scotch.

"Tulpas, Vincent? I picked the wrong night to drink with you."

"A refill?"

"Of course."

What Cross didn't notice while thoroughly flabbergasted by the implications of the book magically turning real from stone, is that on the left arm of the Ulehla statue was a **glyph-like carving** embedded in the forearm. Vincent was aware of it however, and quite familiar with it -in fact. His son Coletrane had the exact image as a **birthmark in the same place on his arm.**

Across the water to the back of the house, far beyond the dock visible from Coletrane's bedroom window, were the blackened thicket of trees. Those trees, they were a coppice of bald cypress reaching out for miles. So dense that they appeared

as one continuous body to the naked eye. They were especially ominous in the midnight lighting, under calm black skies that seemed to carry a warning on the air -a grievous admonition. This was long after the party had ended. All the guests had gone home, the boys were asleep in Coletrane's room. The manservant Poole had tended to all the evening affairs, Vincent and Adaeze were in the master wing amid the comfort of dreams that affluent people have cradled by the quiet lullaby of tranquil rest.

So, no one was consciously aware of the onyx crystal on the mysterious book housed in the trophy beginning to swirl with vibrancy, no one knew the coming consequences of Coletrane's earlier musings echoing in the universe.

"Imagine the greatest warrior to even fight with a katana, our man is much better than him. Better than any katana fighter that ever walked the earth, and burdened because of it."

"Burdened?" Marcus asked when they had this conversation much earlier that evening.

"Yes," Coletrane replied. "He'd have to be. For balance. My father told me, that is what makes us able to walk without falling over. The burden that balances our talent."

"Ok. Sure. Sounds cool."

"You bet!"

Over the wall of bald cypress hung a black and purple sky daubed with dim striates of gray clouds. Amidst them was the moon, full and bright. No one could see this if they'd been

watching, but that moon's light began to blanch as it split in two -like a figure eight.

"He will be unstoppable, but troubled even beyond death. His weakness can be his emotions, and it will be his strength too. His passion. His love."

"That's corny."

"Shut up. It isn't."

"I'm kidding."

"No, you're not! Close your eyes and imagine it."

"Come on, man.."

"Do it! He is strong in a way that frightens him, but his great sword feeds him courage with its every kill. Peace only comes from his love, but that is taken from him."

Beyond the figure eight moon, beyond the trees, beyond Florida and the modern world itself, an impossible, forgotten history spans over three thousand miles of mountainous peaks, alpine foliage and cedar. There are beautiful rivers and snowcapped mountains in the distance. These sprout from nothingness, growing into existence under the watch of a midnight sky in feudal Japan.

Coletrane's voice, it doesn't follow; it **devises**. The purple heron, the dark and light morphs, the great egrets becoming physical and given life by a child's imagination stretched out across worlds. They come to life and coast on the winds, swooping here and there, as craters spanning miles and miles fill with sea water, as the mountains erect and reach into the sky, an august archipelago of deciduous broad-leaved forests, aerial

grasslands of high ranging flora, Yabutsubaki and Shii trees further than the eye could see. Entire ecosystems of marine and land-bound wildlife fill the forests and rivers; a rich biodiversity of species coming to life in open and isolated habitats; terrestrial mammals, vascular plants, there were giant flying squirrels, macaque, red-backed vole, other heron of all types and colors, serow running in the fields, black woodpeckers excavating the bases of trees for dinner, and men and women building villages and families while never aware that they were less part of the natural world than from myth created by the imagination of a boy from the future.

“What about his final resting place?” Marcus asked, as those ecosystems of myth aged and coalesced not only with the past but, finally, the present.

And as Coletrane thought of his reply to Marcus’ question, already the universe acquiesced. Coletrane’s enthusiasm was thus that he didn’t even feel, or at least was so engrossed that his conscious mind ignored it, **that the birthmark on his arm was slightly producing a burning sensation just below the surface of his skin.**

“You’re right,” he replied, *“at some point he has to have died. His legend lives on, in the minds and hearts of the people around the world inspired by his stories.”*

“Like an archetype,” Marcus’ enthusiasm was growing.

“Yep. Just like that.”

“And that word has to be in the paper, man. We won’t get an F using words like that.”

“Dude, focus!”

And so, the universe did exactly that. In modern day Honshu, deep in the mountains of Takayama at a latitude of about 2,400 meters, in the icy hemisphere that was home to the ptarmigan, or “messengers of God”, a bamboo bridge manifested out of this air, stretching out miles above a ferocious river and connecting to a narrow road cut into the side of a mountain and wrapping all the way around past several dangerous breaks in a deadly passageway that was herald to the black entrance of a cave barely visible beyond dense squalls of snow.

—

AT THREE OTHER POINTS IN THE WORLD, at the exactly the same time that the universe was creating an alternate past and an amalgamated present on the whim of Coletrane’s potentially disastrous imagination, and at the exact same time that everyone in the Marx home was sleeping, there was an awakening -of The Immortal Watchers, or **Three Interstices** between Fact, Fiction, and Myth.

In Mahālangūr Himāl, at 8,848 meters, the earth’s highest peak, she rose and was made entirely of golden red dust collected in human form. Her body was clothed in a hooded robe that looked exactly like the ones carved in the statues of Judas Ulehla. Her long hair never stayed the same texture or color, instead ever-flowing like a restless sea, and her skin under the robe was made bronze but her eyes took on the shape of crystals full of the golden red dust that was the stuff of her physical composition, the dust within those crystals ever swirling like monsoons -*storms that would swallow the memories*

of any who looked into them. On her forehead manifest the Ulehla Glyph that Coletrane has as a birthmark, and through her mystic eyes she could see all the way to the terrible thing that would happen to Coletrane that night. **This was Zhrontese.** She would and could prevent it, but knew she should not yet intervene.

In Antarctica, a frozen point between the Dome Argus and the Dome Fuji, at 13,000 feet above sea level, microscopic particles of rhodium rise up from the land, enough of it to form the soul and solid casing of a human man. His skin takes on a graying color, but the rhodium solidifies into ebony crystals for his eyes. They swirl with the mysteries of the macrocosm, as his tall muscular body becomes covered in a hooded Ulehla cloak much like Zhrontese's. His head is bald and he bears the features of a man of African descent, and like the statue representing him in Vincent's trophy room, the man bore the Ulehla Glyph on his left forearm. **This one is Manthis,** and he can see all the way to Coletrane. He could prevent the regrettable thing that is going to happen, but knows to not intervene.

On the edge of the Tian Shan range and the Taklimakan Desert, there is a place called the Flaming Mountain. The hottest place on earth. From the surface at a temperature of 175 degrees Fahrenheit, brown dust rose up to form the pale white body of another man, lanky and menacing, his head as bald as Manthis' but with a much leaner, chiseled face. On it was a braided seventeen inch beard that was brown as his eyes, eyes that

became andradite crystals holding the answers to all questions that could ever be asked by a sentient mind. Except for one, the question of why he didn't intervene against the frightful thing about to happen to Coletrane from the far distance of his perch. He too was clothed in a hooded robe, and the top part of his robe was open enough to reveal a large Ulehla Glyph at the center-most point of his sternum. **His name was Clymene.**

The Three Interstices, all aware of each other, watched from the great distance at the Marx home in Orlando, Florida.

It was just after 2am. There was a stillness that matched the calm of the lake, a misleading aura of a peace, safety. Young Coletrane would be the only one awakened by a sound that he didn't actually hear. Marcus was on the guest air-bed, lost in a dream. Down on the first level, tucked beneath the stairs, was the room where Poole slept. This was adjacent the wine cellar, the butler's pantry, and not far from the formal living room that held a two-sided gas fireplace that precipitously came alive with embers of blue fire that were cold instead of hot. This cold, it spread throughout the entire house.

Coletrane's mind was restless, now that he'd awakened. And he realized that he was a little hungry too. So, he got out of bed.

As soon as his bare feet touched the agar surface of the floor, he felt the unusual coolness and even made a mental note of how weird it was to be so cold on a night in May. He put on socks and walked carefully so as not to wake up Marcus as he

went to his closet for a robe. Then he quietly opened his bedroom door and went out into the hall.

There, it was much colder and he could see his breath. Down the hall to the right was the master wing where his parents slept. The breath that he could see, it formed thin, translucent filaments that wafted in the direction of the master wing and caused a somewhat psychedelic reaction in Coletrane who could see what appeared to be a burrow of fog coaxing him to go towards it instead of downstairs to the kitchen.

For the rest of his life, he will regret having done so.

Each footfall towards his parents' bedroom, the fear in him grew simultaneous to the urge to take yet another step. When he finally made it to the door, after what seemed like hours crossing the short distance, his hand was almost ice when he reached for the doorknob. The door opened, however, on his own.

At that moment, as the door opened, the ancient book on the shelf inside the trophy room, its golden buckle latch unlocked and the onyx crystal on the front began to beat like a heart with a faint blue color emanating from its center. Then the cover flipped open, revealing to no eyes present that there was nothing written on the wood-pulp pages. Until now, as passages began to manifest on the first page and beyond -passages written in blood red, their meaning hidden behind the wall of an extinct language.

Many years later, Coletrane would realize that it wasn't external cold that he was feeling as he was entering his parents' bedroom, but, just like the moon reflects light from the sun

rather than producing light itself, the cold was a chill happening inside of him. The icing over of his spirit, his hopes and dreams, every possibility of a normal life going frigid as herald to what he would never be able to unsee beyond that door.

He stepped inside, and the first thing he noticed was the blood. It looked black in the night, and it was everywhere. On the walls, the furniture, the ceiling fan. There were blood patterns on the panoramic windows that cast shadows into the room, creating the appearance of him stepping into an enormous, murder of blood-born Rorschach mosaics. That's when he saw his mother, *Adaeze. Plural.*

Her facedown upper torso was on the floor next to the left side of the bed, her lifeless arms reached out as if their last effort was an attempt to flee. The lower part of her body was still on the bed, entrails clearly exposed in a way that looked less human and more like gutted cattle. Coletrane's eyes didn't believe it, his voice was stuck in his throat, his body and mind were yet to catch up with what they were seeing. And before they did, a shadow moving at the right of his peripheral drew his attention away from one horror and onto the next.

It was his father Vincent exiting the lounge room. The man staggered backwards, alive -but his left arm was gone.

Vincent fell against the doorjamb on his right shoulder, the other half of his body covered in the tar-looking blood.

"Son," was the only word he could get out before the blade of a sword burst through his chest. This chucked him forward, all the way out of the lounge room with the sword still inside of him and its wielder, a black, almost seven foot tall specter, following. This specter moved incredibly fast, drawing the

sword from Vincent's body and then slashing crosswise in a *yoko giri* cut that separated Vincent's head from the neck. The body fell forward and the head was tossed by the force over to where Coletrane was standing, some of the blood splattering onto the poor boy's face and robe.

This is when he could finally get out a word of his own,

"Dad?!" But though it felt inside like a scream, it came out as barely a whisper. His knees hitting the floor as he fell before his father's head made more noise than his voice. And even though his eyes were filling with tears and confusions, he could see when he looked up what was now calmly walking towards him.

The specter, like the way it got colder with Coletrane's every step towards his parents' door, the specter's every step towards him revealed more of what he was. It was like a translucent pneuma of dew solidifying as it got closer. The stepping parts became feet wearing rosewood geta elevated on two prongs. Above this were the drapes of black hakama, and above that were a red and gold kamishimo and over it a black sleeveless kataginu jacket.

Still a man of near seven feet in height, with broad shoulders and big hands, a belt around his waist carrying an onyx short sword and the empty scabbard to the blade he still held in his hand. By osmosis, Coletrane already knew that the shiny unsheathed sword was named **Hatsukoi**. And when the man was finally standing in front of him, not five feet away, he looked up into his bearded face. The long jet black hair on his head was not tied, and the eyes, Coletrane would never forget, the pupils each split and formed into figure-eights like the

impossible moon did outside earlier at the outset of this brutal event.

That is when Coletrane gave him a name and said it out loud for the first time,

“Kojiro?”

The sound of it either hurt or offended the samurai, and so immediately upon hearing it -he raised the sword overhead in a blink and brought it down with a sideways slash across the boy's chest, a slash punctuated by a deafening scream!



COLETRANE THELONIOUS MARX, THE MAN, woke up with a start. The nightmare was a familiar one, but no matter how many times he would experience the memory, it would always be as if it were happening in real-time; it would hit him like a lightning strike.

His bare chest was drenched in sweat, and on the ace size bed with him were five sleeping women -all aspiring lingerie models, visiting from Brazil for an opportunity that only led to a rich man's bedroom. They were all naked, including Coletrane. The women were still experiencing exhaustion and mild nausea from the ayahuasca consumed during the previous night's sex session, so none of them were startled by Coletrane's violent awakening. There were still some traces of psychedelic color patterns as his eyes adjusted to the light, that and afterimages of furniture and the surrounding environment when he moved. But this was gone after just a few moments, kind of like the effects of the ayahuasca itself as well the sex from Coletrane's perspective. Both were addictions for him, not for pleasure but for reprieve, however brief, from the enduring consequences of his trauma.

Thirty-three years old, physically strong as if he hadn't aged a day beyond twenty-one, and built like an Olympian from a lifetime of martial arts and body building, he felt inside as if he were as brittle as a twig. When Coletrane stood, he was six foot two from the floor. His hair was still as bushy as it was when he was a child, but he wore it in a bun on the back of his head that

was reminiscent of a sangtu top-knot. On his face he wore a wide though thin-cut beard. There were several tribal, dragon, wolf, and lion tattoos along his musculature, on his arms, back, and legs, but none covering the long scar across his chest from the night that he was almost killed by a demon.

Coletrane walked over by the windows, where his body was swathed in sunlight. That light was far warmer and welcome than the Rorschach patterns of blood in the cold setting of that fateful night which haunted him. He looked down and saw Poole in the grass by the doc, right at the crust of land before the calm seams of lake water.

Jonas Poole, the man was sixty-two years old and still lithe as a boy. He was doing a complicated series of tai chi forms, swaying between slow and fast depending on the demands of each transition. And he did this every morning, without fail. Coletrane (Poole agreed with Vincent and preferred to call him Thelonious), he used to practice every morning with Poole. Especially after the death of his parents. But despite how much he practiced or how adept he became, spiritual aspects of the discipline were never enough to quell the darkness inside of him. He preferred the violent martial arts for that purpose, though they still barely helped; Krav Maga, Escrima, Muay Thai, Bacom, Vale Tudo, Silat, and of course the way of the Japanese Sword. He was adept in each one of these; he was, for loss of a better description, a **prodigy of violence**.

Every one of Coletrane's teachers marveled at how quickly he picked up the techniques, as if possessed by a demon himself. As if supernatural! Some even encouraged Poole, who raised him after the brutal death of his parents, to try steering

his focus away from the fighting arts entirely. But the wise man knew that Coletrane would hear nothing of it. This strengthened their relationship in ways that went far beyond friendship, far beyond the dynamics of mentor/student, and further, even, beyond the filial.

So, Coletrane watched his surrogate father performing kata -quietly envying the peace of it.

The large tattoo on Coletrane's back was of a Yamata no Orochi dragon in an epic battle with a powerfully built Anubis wielding a khopesh and kukri. This is the first thing one of the girl's focused on upon waking up, seeing Coletrane standing over by the panoramic windows.

He turned to her when he heard her sit up and stretch, and she smiled at his considerable girth before looking up at his face and saying,

"Good morning."

The word *morning* barely escaped her lips however before he replied,

"Why are you still here? Any of you, for that matter?"

AFTER THE GIRLS WERE GONE, Coletrane showered and got dressed. He was partial to tapered thin-knit turtleneck sweaters, and his favorite color was black. So, he wore one of those turtlenecks over black slacks and shoes.

The house was as quiet as a tomb as he walked through it, as it always was. Only he and Poole resided in it, and there were rarely any guests besides the brief visits from the many women who enabled Coletrane's addiction.

He made his way to the trophy room and went straight to where the book still was, rested on the etagere between the Iron Maidens. Opening the book, Coletrane felt the pages as if they were alive. Caressing each one and carefully flipping them over. What he saw was more confirmation than surprise; new chapters of the lost language in blood ink filling two dozen of the erstwhile blank pages, both sides.

This is when Poole walked up behind him carrying two warm coffee mugs, fresh steam rising from the rim.

“Happy birthday, Thelonious,” he said, bringing Coletrane the coffee.

Poole was relatively short at 5’9, but appeared taller for his posture. He was bronze in skin, had friendly features on a pear shaped face, and always had a calm and patient way about himself. He was German by his father but Afro-Eurasian by his mother, who was a migrant from Jordan that met his father while he was in exile from the Luftwaffe. Poole spent much of his childhood on boats and at sea. So, Coletrane taking his time to turn away from the book to address him wasn’t something that could ruffle his feathers.

“Thank you, Jonas,” Coletrane finally said, turning from the book and taking the coffee that Poole handed him.

“You’re troubled today. Not the demeanor I’d expect on the morning of your thirty-third.”

Coletrane shrugged, walked over to the gallery of ancient weapons. Three full walls of them; blades, armor, shields, from many eras of war. Each piece had to be worth a fortune, belonging in museums, but instead were the showcase of an eccentric’s collection.

To his back, Poole said,

“I’ve suggested it before but, perhaps it is time to stop using your parents’ old room as your own. It isn’t healthy.”

“We are all dying a little bit each day. There is no such thing as healthy. Besides, look in the book.”

Poole being every bit aware of the phenomenon of the book as well as the mysterious prophesies associated with it, was reluctant to do so. But did anyway.

“I see. So, you’re having the nightmare again.”

“Yes. Right on schedule. You know what that means.”

“I do, indeed.”

Coletrane then turned away from the weapons collection to face Poole, the gravity of the moment in his gaze and voice.

“The story is alive,’ he rubbed the birthmark on his forearm, feeling this time the subtle burning sensation that was just underneath the surface. “Alive,’ he repeated, ‘but not well.”



SUNRISE, HOUR OF THE HARE. DECEMBER 25TH IN A portion and time of feudal Japan that exists beyond the shadow of recorded history, this morning marking the death of one heartbroken warrior's soul.

Kojiro ko-Mitsu walks the murky halls of the catacomb leading into the Testing Dungeons of Lord Zsu Ch'an's Northern Province. His great sword, Hatsukoi, is already unsheathed and at his side, seething with the same rage that he felt.

Each of Kojiro's steps, heavy. And each carried him closer towards his dark destiny.

He was a man apart with the taste of death on his tongue.

Reaching the end of the hall, Kojiro came out into the open room putting his feet in blood dampened earth; where men's bodies were torn apart for the purposes of testing the quality of swords, punishing criminals, and hardening young boys that would rise to become Samurai.

There were sword racks and smiths. There were men cleaning up several bodies of the dead, collecting entrails, torsos, heads, limbs...

There were children carrying old, rusty blades that were too heavy for them. But these boys were burgeoning samurai, set to cut down criminals and vagrants being led on a chain-line entering through another of the chasm halls.

The undertaker, Izanagi, was exceptionally tall and large. A hardened giant at 6'4 carrying 240 pounds of solid muscle, and

still there was fear in his eyes upon seeing Kojiro standing before him with so much rage in his face and posture.

“Izanagi,” Kojiro called, surprisingly very quietly, ‘a word with you, man.”

Izanagi walked over, careful not to take his time with an angry samurai warrior of the pedigree of Kojiro ko-Mitsu, and yet he was tentative still. He was afraid that the warrior might cut him down with Hatsukoi.

“My lord,” Izanagi answered with a grunt and bow.

Kojiro himself was tall at 6’1, but still he disappeared in the space of Izanagi. All Kojiro wore were black joba hakama pants, every solid muscle in his exposed upper body making him look a product of feral energy only half from the civilized world. He looked up at the towering giant and said,

“Tell me of the Nichiren sword, Hatsukoi, forged by the priest Nichi-O and wielded by the hand of Kojiro. What kind of blade is she known as?”

“A six body blade, my lord.”

The tempered rage broke forth like a shattering mirror in his voice, Kojiro saying, “Then line me up seven condemned men!”

—

At the flooded meadows flanking the river Masaaki there were the great purple-gray herons that wade for shrimp and aquatic insects, showing off their morphing plumes and graceful balance on the water. Ittei was there, enjoying their presence. This humble warrior who dreamt of putting down the naginata of his family’s honor in exchange for the less hostile arts of music and painting, played Shizu no Kyoku on his

shakuhachi flute as an offering to nature. This while, not a mile east, his liege Kojiro ko-Mitsu was playing a far different song.

And somehow Ittei could sense it all, feeling, while he played, a conflict in the Universe telling him that this song would be the last happy song he'd play for at least some time.

Still he played on, sure it was important that he do so.

His mind stretched out in a way that made him feel like he was hovering above the atmosphere, looking down on and seeing all at once the majestic beauty of the surrounding vistas. The sprawling volcanic mountains over the horizon cast in the backdrop of the Masaaki. There was a bamboo thicket leading down an osculating path into the Zsu Ch'an palace, enveloped in an orchid marsh teeming with the twitters of insects attuning to Ittei's flute -a sound almost supernatural.

He was only somewhat aware of the presence invading his mind, or, rather, supplying his mind with its thoughts -a presence that very well could have been the source of his talents and the spirit in his chest...

He was only vaguely aware of it, but Ittei's mind was being invaded by the influence of an unknown and incredible being.

A goddess. The "supreme being", a spiritually inclined person would call her, drifting down into the atmosphere in the guise of invisible dew. He could not see her, but she could see him. And few would ever know, if any would ever discover, that **Astrid was no goddess at all**. Not in the traditional sense of the word. But, rather, an amnesiac visitor from another planet that, looking upon this world with... curiosity.

She watched Ittei sitting in a meditative posture, his legs folded, back upright, and arms balanced horizontal as he

played his song. A strange thing to notice, but she liked the fitted groom of his Sangtu topknot hairstyle and could smell that it was dressed in cedar oil. His kimono was red silk and his oak wood naginata had a sheathed blade that reached out fourteen inches in a katana curve.

She wanted to touch the married warrior –his marital status obvious by the Sangtu- as her body began to solidify just over the trees to his left, but that wouldn't have been a good idea. Her pale blue skin would be far too hot to the touch, and would burn him to death before he even realized he was being touched. And if he saw her, her bright orange eyes, her blonde, brown, black hair, the golden glow of her body and skintight earth suit that were far too mythic and beautiful for his human mind to interpret, his vision would be inverted within moments –causing his mind to behold a flipside view of himself the extent of reveal powerful enough that his cerebral cortex would explode out of his head.

Such, apparently, is the nature of things. Creator and created are not supposed to meet on the surface of a living sphere.

So, she just watched him play, transmitting intuitively the instinct to sense the distress of Kojiro from a distance.

But Astrid kept her distance. And while still unaware of her, Ittei thought that the sensation he was feeling was the trees carrying a message over to him from the Province.

For some reason, he knew it was time to put away the flute and return home. It was upon Ittei's departure that Astrid would experience something quite new and peculiar.

Hovering in the sky, this place of her creation and invisible to her every subject, Astrid's mind was invaded by a splinter of

thought that not only made her visible and tangible, but also robbed her of the focus necessary to maintain flight. She came crashing down fast and violently to the earth, her fall broken only by the many tree branches she hit on her way down.

When she finally hit the tussocky ground, Astrid was less in pain than she was subdued by a state of awe; on her skin were cuts and bruises from the fall, neither of which she'd ever experiences.

"How silly of me," she said to herself. "But... how?"

This question was answered by her recollection of that which robbed her of focus, the image that made her fall:

In her mind she saw it, herself coming face to face with a spectral silhouette version of herself. A diaphanous outline of her contours, her eyes bright and golden, and in the space of her curves a cosmos; an air-siphoning space of blackness, and all light coming from a scatter of orbs. Three of those orbs were mini moons, two covering the space where her breasts would be and the third taking the place of her womb.

"Interesting," she whispered.

—

A resplendent two mile imperial bridge leads into Lord Tzu Ch'an's Northern Province, where lies the entrance to his fortified Orchid Castle of exceptional beauty and architecture. The wooden and marble design, stone and white plastered walls were laced in the ancient Confucian gold of the Jesuit voyages.

It was a gold known for having been so entrenched in history that many thought its back-story just a myth to exaggerate the value of the gold that took on a strange luster, always shining impossibly. The Cosmetic Tower and the seventeen parapet Gates spanned their distance more than 2,000 meters around the inner moat, stood an incredible 100 yards tall –higher than the highest peak of the towering seven story castle.

The servant Dōken Yoshisada hurried on his way, tripping over himself and his bad leg as he went through the many corridors and up the winding staircase leading to the Cynosure Temple where he'd find Lord Tzu Ch'an doing his daily ritual; reading the classics.

This time, the Spring and Autumn Annals.

Tzu Ch'an's armed female guards, Yoko and Akiyama, were dressed like geisha and flanking either side of Lord Tzu Ch'an's Lotus Reading Bench that sat in the center of a solarium tier above which was a wide circular opening in the ceiling. A fall of cherry blossom petals danced down on him as he read, his attention suddenly averted by a commotion outside the room.

Yoko and Akiyama didn't move, but their five like-dressed sisters who were sitting on their knees along the back wall, their hands all at once gripped the shōtō blades in their laps.

The monks outside the hall tried to calm Yoshisada and keep him from entering the Temple, but Lord Tzu Ch'an beckoned them to let Yoshisada pass.

"Dōken, is it? The swordsmith Soden's son. Are you this eager to read?"

The Lord had a very amicable way of speaking, as if his life had washed away the instinct to urgency. He was a student of the earliest Shinto practices, even wrote extensively on the existence and influence of Kami, the deific spirit manifestations of our hidden selves, the anthropomorphic essences that play mythic roles in people's lives. Some of his writings have even made it into the bodhisattvas. And being a front-runner on the literature, art, and philosophies behind the **Dragon Kings legends**, he knew the importance of maintaining good chi when faced with the threat of bad news.

"My Lord," Dōken blurted out, falling to his knees. "Izanagi sends news. With your permission, Lord Tzu Ch'an..."

"Proceed."

"It is Kojiro. He has left the province! He is going-."

"I know where he is going," Tzu Ch'an said, with grave acuity.

Dōken lead Lord Ch'an and his Geisha Guards into the Testing Dungeon where young boys were cleaning up the mess of seven men sliced in half at the torso. The red vexing charcoal mist that Hatsukoi emitted when in use was still clearing in the air, causing Dōken to cough and gag while Tzu Ch'an knew better to narrow his eyes and mind his breathing. He knew that the poisonous dust could become psychedelic to an untrained mind.

So, while careful with himself, the Lord took in the surroundings.

Izanagi bowed.

“This news, Lord Ch’an,’ Dōken began, ‘Does it not trouble you? Kojiro is gaikoku-jin, a fugitive! Outside the protection of your domain, he will be approached by the Bafuku Ashigaru for his past indiscretions.”

“Calm yourself, Yoshisada. Kojiro can handle the feeble Ashigaru.”

And then Tzu Ch’an considered, keeping his thoughts to himself. *What, he wondered, if he makes it to his destination? What consequences perhaps greater than those he seeks to avenge will befall him?*”

—

BY THE STABLES AT THE EAST GATE, KOJIRO was dressing his horse, Ayame, with the tools he’ll need for the journey. Rouge, for one, in case he is slain. Apricots and peaches to eat, chestnuts, persimmons. Moshi, dried sardines, koi.

All would fit in a small enough tote bag he’d throw over the satchel for Hatsukoi and Jun, his onyx Lionbear short sword. He packed two kama and iron fans, kozuka blades, shuriken, and a golden Tzu Ch’an jutte, for good measure.

“I’m guessing my advice right now will fall on deaf ears,” the familiar voice called to Kojiro’s back. But the warrior wasn’t in the mood for the wisdom of his friend.

“You’re gonna give it anyway, Jubei,” Kojiro said, not bothering to turn away from his personal ritual of cleaning Hatsukoi before mounting Ayame.

Jubei approached with that swagger of his, all 240 pounds of him coasting on air, it seemed, like a heron in flight.

He wore white hakama pants, wooden waraji sandals and leather chords cross-wrapping round his wheelbarrow arms until they collected as pugilist fist wraps. He was another tall man at 6'6, had a chonmage with the ponytail reaching out the top of his head like a black jade fountain. His splitting thirty pound broadsword was strapped to his back –heavy, for sure, to an ordinary man, but it might as well had been a small bag of rice to the powerful hero.

He had to look down to find his best friend's gaze.

"Kojiro, listen," he began, the genuine sorrow in his voice, 'about Taya... I heard..."

"No," Kojiro cut him off, stern, quick, 'don't speak of it..."

A moment passed between them.

Hatsukoi, clean to a perfect luster, was now again sheathed and packed on Ayame. Three snowy egrets flew by going west. Probably heading towards the Great Willow Lake, Jubei thought, just catching them in his peripheral. Kojiro on the other hand couldn't help but notice the purple and white Sakura petals being carried over by the wind and scattering all around.

Beauty, in this moment, like an assault of knives.

"I am sorry, yuujin..." Jubei put a hand on Kojiro's shoulder. "Well... somehow I don't feel the new strength in this shoulder. I'm told Hatsukoi is now a six body blade."

"Seven."

"Impressive... What do you plan to do, man? You leave Tzu Ch'an's protection and you'll have to deal with Takauji and his Ashigaru at some point. That's a given. And I'm also told that ah... well, your old friend, Katsurou? The son of a bitch has been seen in these parts recently."

“Good then. Maybe we’ll have fellowship on the way,” the cool bitterness simmered under Kojiro’s voice. He clenched Ayame’s woolen reins, saying without turning to his friend,

“I will find it, Jubei... The answer to the one question that a man should never ask, but must ask still; by what means can I kill a God?”

Jubei narrowed his eyes. He understood that his friend was in pain, but had he gone mad too?

“Where?” he asked. “Where will you go?”

“Far West of here. Northwest, in fact. Deep in the mainland of Honshu. There is a temple hidden beyond the Valley of Swords called **The Tabernacle of the Thalatha.**”

“The Thalatha?” Jubei was incredulous, for he knew the word. “Moths.. You would risk your life on a quest for moths?”

“It is not a quest for moths,” Kojiro was annoyed.

“And the Valley of Swords, I’ve heard, is a myth. Or a metaphor for tall grass.”

“Nothing written in the Bodhisattvas is myth or metaphor. Besides, my father saw it. He told me stories about both the Tabernacle and the Valley as a child. This is where I will find my answer.”

Jubei sighed and shook his head. “You mean *we.*”

Kojiro gave him a look.

“Of course, I am alerting the men and of course we are coming with you.

“Don’t let me twist your arm about it,” Kojiro said, flashing a rictus grin.

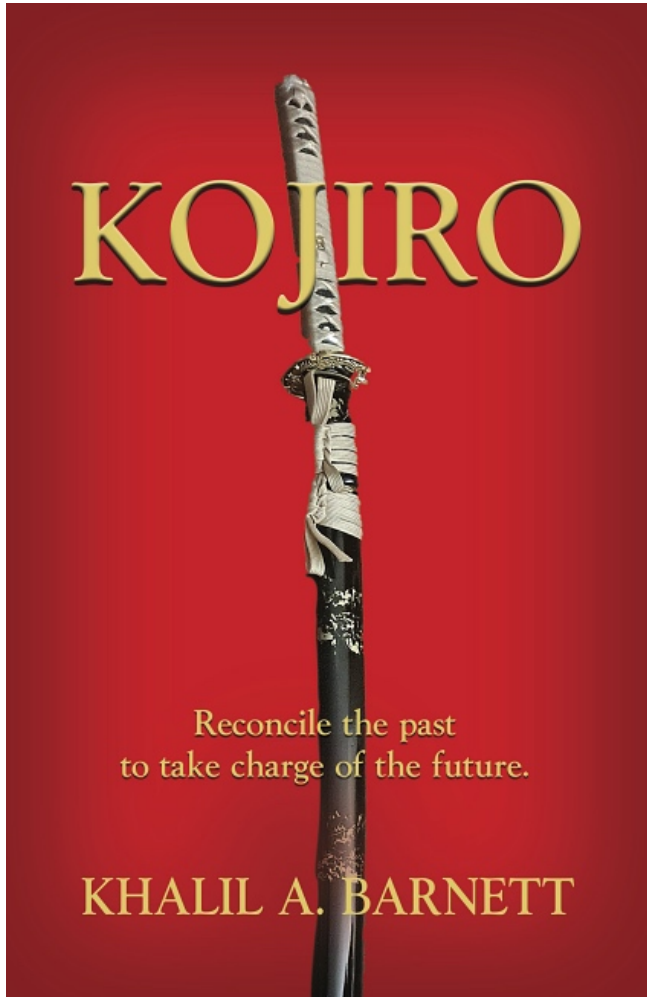
“Hahaha! How about this for an idea?! Let’s each of us man this trip on our own two feet. Let Ayame stay and rest in safety. This isn’t her fight, after all.”

“Hmm. I wonder if she likes the sound of that.”

They both observed Ayame. Of course, she’d rather stay and rest. It was clear as much by her eyes.

Kojiro sighed, a moment of playfulness between friends.

“It’s settled then, fool.”



*A sword & sorcery fantasy/
science fiction novel based
in the modern present and a
mythic feudal past inhabited
by samurai, immortal
beings, dragons, and world
altering prophecies.*

Kojiro

By Khalil Barnett

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12589.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**