

## HUBRIS ROUND 6

Team 1: Pepe Silvia

Title: Cat's Cradle

Summary:

3032, Earth. Dane 'Smiley' Valencia is coming back to his hometown in the desert of Alcoria, the almost abandoned Tabernas, to settle some inheritance deals with his cousin Harper, just in time to learn that his childhood best friend and town revolutionary, Rider, has been murdered. After fifteen years and a reputation as a private detective, Dane has to doubt everyone he used to know and work under the threat of a cult that destroys towns in the name of a murderous god. Following the threads and what Rider left, Dane will find answers —who to trust, who has changed, and how life has changed them is all that matters now. And yet, some questions, when answered, lead to difficult choices. Anything can happen in a little town in the middle of the desert.

## Characters:

Dane '**Smiley**' Valencia, he/his. 30s, snarky, charismatic in presence but sometimes too full of himself. Left Tabernas when he was 15 after an incident, has been surviving as PE and gunslinger up North. A little tired of the rush of the cities and being on survival mode.

Anika '**Rider**' Gaur, she/they. Mid-20s, natural leader, rebellious. Tired of the greed in Tabernas and the South, joins The Redders (socialists that want resources to be managed differently and are against The Disciples).

Harper '**Jester**' de la Cruz she/they. Owner of the Saloon, married. Tired and in mourning, first because of her father, and now Rider. Survived as she can and just wants the town to be chill and alright, as they have a lot on their plate.

Sawyer '**Mercy/The Infamous**' Kanagawa, he/they. Now calm and collected, has a past filled with wraith and blood. He repented some years ago and joined the Church, and serves as priest in their hometown, Tabernas. Believer of putting violence aside and looking for compassion, yet can be passive in doing so.

Riley '**Hollow**' Lee, she/they. Diplomatic and collected, a true scholar that went to university in the West in order to come back to Tabernas and rejuvenate the town. She is the Mayor and has been for a while. Hard to shake.

Sam '**Dawn**' Douglas, she/they. Heiress to the Douglas family, owner in the Desert Area of all transportation and energy charges. Used to be nicer when young but once she was in charge, the pressure got to her and made her tighter on money and friendship.

Mikhail '**The Kid**' Gray, they/them. Last addition to the town, arrived 3 years ago, bit of a loner and a gunslinger with a heart of gold. Friend of Rider.

INTRODUCTION: Hubris: Round 6, Group 1. This piece is titled: Cat's Cradle. Content warnings include murder, mentions of violence related to the murder, mentions of death, cults, mentions of alcohol, guns, threats, mentions of bombs.

## SCENE ZERO

[Stillness before the day breaks. Sand and wind, the distant sound of a pod.]

RIDER:

*(To the wire) We have less than 24 hours, Mikhail. We have to do this now, and once Smiley is back in town, I know he'll help...*

KID:

*(A little distorted) You trust him? From what I've heard of him up North, he's a weird one.*

RIDER:

*So are you. You'll like him.*

[Someone knocks at the door.]

RIDER:

*(To the wire) Alright. Gotta go, stay safe. If only Sam would listen... [Distant, opens the door] Hey, morning, Dawn. You can take off the mask inside, I cleaned the air just now- [Laser sounds] Wait, what are you doing-*

[Wire falls to the floor, blood drips.]

KID:

*(Shouting) Rider? RIDER? RIDER, ARE YOU THERE?*

RIDER:

*(Labored) [It] Was... not [Dawn. We have less than 24]... hours... Dane [is coming, ask him for]... help...*

*(pause) I'm sorry, Misha.*

[A final slicing noise.]

## SCENE ONE

[Tabernas saloon. The sound of the wind between the sand dunes gets inside the place.

Inside are DANE 'SMILEY' VALENCIA, he/they. HARPER 'JESTER' DE LA CRUZ, she/they, DANE's cousin. SAWYER 'MERCY' KANAGAWA, they/them. RILEY 'HOLLOW' LEE, she/they. SAM 'DAWN' DOUGLAS, she/they. MIKHAIL 'THE KID' GRAY, they/them.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

*(Sighs, tired)* One might think that coming back home after fifteen years will be easy. *Should* be easy. Even if the reason why I left wasn't, as far as I knew, time healed all wounds.

JESTER:

*(Pointed)* Look, Hollow, I can't close the whole saloon for the day just so you can make up your mind about what to do. Let Smiley here look into it.

SMILEY (NARRATION):

It had been a while since anyone called me Smiley, and it made my stomach turn. It also has been a while since I've seen all these faces, and we all had more wrinkles, our skin telling what we have not said to each other. I arrived at a difficult time. A violent time. Maybe it was meant to be, considering how I left.

DAWN:

*(Strained polite)* No offense, Jester, but Smiley just arrived here, and the Gods know what he's been doing for the last fifteen years. The town has to respect the fact that there is paperwork to be done when someone dies. There is a protocol, and it is there for a reason.

MERCY:

*(Composed)* Dawn, it should be noted that this death was not accidental. If it were, we wouldn't be hiding in Jester's saloon.

*(To themselves)* May the Gods take you in calmly, dear Rider.

SMILEY (NARRATION):

What they don't tell you is that sometimes you will come back home expecting a decent welcome, only to find the cold body of your best friend, or your cousin drowned in tears as she greets you.

SMILEY:

Dawn, Infam- *Mercy's* right. This wasn't a natural death. I've seen this sort of stuff in the cities, it

ain't an accident. This was premeditated. Or are you gonna tell me that Rider, the same Rider who spent ten days in the West Desert alone on a bet, would die by her own hand?

HOLLOW:

*(Clears throat)* As Tabernas' Mayor, I believe it's too soon to say this was a murder case, but I agree with Smiley. Rider had too much on her hands. Protocols exist, but we have been blessed by Smiley's presence this day, ain't that so, Mercy? Word travels even to the deepest towns of the desert, and we've heard of the reputation you've built up North. If someone can find out what happened to Rider, it might be you.

KID:

*(Unamused)* And that reputation is, exactly? He looks more like a rugged gunslinger than a sheriff or an investigator. No offense, Smiley.

SMILEY:

*(Fake, breathless laugh)* None taken, Kid, but the only one looking like a rugged gunslinger in this here saloon is yourself.

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Kid was new in town. Meanin' they weren't from here, no matter if they've arrived one, five or ten years ago. The town may have given them a name, but I wasn't ready to take them in just yet.

JESTER: Smiley's been solving murder cases up North.

SMILEY: Look, y'all, if you let me, I'll find out what happened. Rider was one of the reasons I came back, and to learn she's...

MERCY: With the gods.

SMILEY:

Thanks, Mercy. To learn that she's with the gods now, probably already bossin' 'em around to make our lives in the sand a little less rough.

*(Pauses, considering)* Who found her?

DAWN:

Myself. We had a meeting down at her place. Big ol' mess.

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Dawn, or Sam Douglas. The heir to the Douglas' fortune. Owners of all pod transports for five towns every direction. Dawn seems to have grown as cold as her mother, and that's never good news.

SMILEY:

When was this?

DAWN:

Just as the sun was rising, little after eight in the morning.

(Sighs) Looks like you're doing this, ain't it? This is why we have been needin' a proper sheriff, Hollow. Not like Smiley should be our first option, considering.

HOLLOW:

(*Still diplomatic*) If we all agree, yes. Anyone disagree?

(*Pauses, no one speaks*) Rider's all yours then, Smiley.

SMILEY:

(*Low*) It's ten past five, and I arrived in town less than an hour ago. You left it for a while.

HOLLOW:

We haven't— Doc's not in town and won't be coming back for three days. I'll wire her the updates, but there ain't much we can do.

JESTER:

(*Calmer, supporting*) What do you need now, Smiley?

SMILEY (NARRATION):

A drink to mourn my friend before she gets cold.

SMILEY:

To see her. And a bottle of peppermint.

## SCENE TWO

[RIDER's house, feeling empty, eerie. A door creaks as SMILEY enters.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

I'm granted some time alone with her before they break the news to the rest of the town, and what I find as I enter her home is... disturbing.

[Blood dripping, wind howling in the back.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Definitely a laser blade, again and again and... considering the angles, they were taller than her. Why use a blade and not a gun? That screams personal business. The height leaves Jester out of the equation, right along with half the town... But I noticed something in the saloon earlier.

Something was off. They all have their own past, as do I... To think Infamous is now Mercy and the town priest... Dawn is bathed in gold as we expected, Hollow studied out West and came back to become Mayor- straight running the past six years, Jester's taken over her Pop's Saloon like we all knew she would, but Kid... Kid is a question mark.

[Steps around the place, SMILEY goes through papers and opens the main computer's system.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Jester was right, Rider has joined the Redders...

[Clicking noises]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

(Sighs) Oh, Rider. Your security isn't bad but... you wouldn't last a day in the cities.

[Opens folder] Huh. Her last wire was logged... Paranoid enough to record everything. Thank you, Redders.

RIDER:

[Through the computer's speakers] *I have the plan, Misha, I know who they are... Damn it. They got in. It's bad. And if what headquarters said is right, they're going to strike tonight...*

[Other side is distorted, cannot know what's being said or by whom.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Oh, sure, yes, because listening to the other side would have been too easy... of course it malfunctioned. Great. But Misha... She isn't using town names. That's... really close, Rider. Who was it you trusted so much?

RIDER:

*I can't tell you, it isn't safe for you. I know, you have to trust me on this, I'll tell you when we meet with Mercy. Could use another couple of hands, huh? Smiley, too, when he comes back... He'll know about the Disciples.*

[Recording ends, a few moments of static. Then SCENE ZERO plays with KID's voice inaudible from distortion.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Fuck. Mercy's in, somehow, and they know more than they let on back at the saloon, and the other voice... Misha. If we weren't still using the old naming system, I swear...

KID:

(*Sudden, from behind*) Dane?

[SMILEY and KID draw out their guns.]

SMILEY:

It ain't polite to enter a crime scene without knocking first, or to go around calling people you don't know by their first name, Misha.

KID:

(*A little annoyed*) Mikhael, to you.

[Gun powers down]

Sorry about the gun, 's reflex. I wanted to talk to you.

SMILEY:

She asked you to trust me. You a Redder, too? Well, at least I can safely take you off the suspect board.

KID:

Got yourself a wall with red string and pictures of everyone already, *Smiley*?

SMILEY:

Something like that, yeah.

(*Pauses*) They're in town. The Disciples.

KID:

Just one, at least one that Rider found. But yes. Bad news, they're a spreading virus. You heard of The Projects, down Southwest?

SMILEY:

The town was wiped out in a night, wasn't it?

KID:

Their work. And now they're here in Tabernas. I've been helping Rider take some of the Douglas' tech and energy when Dawn isn't looking, but two weeks ago she caught wind of it and almost fired me. Rider took the blow for me. Dawn believed her and let me be. Problem is, Rider needed money and Dawn is...

SMILEY:

Doing fine, to put it kindly. How long have you known there is a Disciple in town?

KID:

Think Rider was told a, a month ago, and she started investigating and trying to get help.

SMILEY:

Talking to Mercy, that makes sense.

KID:

Yes, but I don't trust them, there is something underneath their skin that just...

SMILEY:

Yeah, I've grown up with them. Their... Their hands aren't clean but... The Church seems to suit them. Did you and Rider have a suspect wall?

KID:

We could narrow it down a little.

SMILEY:

And?

KID:

*(smiles a bit)* Everyone who was in the saloon. Everyone who knows she's dead. Jester, Hollow, Dawn, and Mercy.

SMILEY:

We can take Jester out of the equation, the angle of the blades—

KID:

I wouldn't jump that far, *Smiley*. They had a *bad* argument yesterday. Real bad. Guns out bad.

SMILEY:

And to think I just wanted to come visit, take whatever my uncle left to me, and be on my way...  
*(sighs)* Alright, we can entertain the thought, but first, Dawn was meeting Rider this morning?  
When she found her?

KID: Yep.

SMILEY:

The recording is time-stamped at almost seven o'clock, and you were in the wire with her, but Dawn was supposed to meet her at eight.

KID:

She could have done it and come back, pretending to be all shocked, y'know...

SMILEY:

I know, Kid, this is what I do.

KID:

Among other things.

SMILEY:

You're nosy. I like that. I'm guessing you and Rider were close?

KID:

Yes.

SMILEY:

Rider asked you to trust me, so I'll pay you the same courtesy. I think I need to talk to Jester and Mercy, but Hollow and Dawn are going to be... a challenge.

KID:

I can check Hollow and Dawn's alibi for the time of the murder.

SMILEY:

Then I'll find Jester and Mercy.

[Ping noise]

SMILEY:

Here, I opened us a secure wire, write to me through there with anything you find. Anything you sense, any weird symbol you see? Run. Wire me back. Don't risk it, Mikhael.

KID:

*(Honest)* Same to you, Dane.

**SCENE THREE**

[JESTER, MERCY and SMILEY, gathered in the church.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

The air of Church was... something. Mercy changed the altars quite a bit, but old beliefs don't die in towns like ours. The ones with the most offers were always Our Sister of the Dunes and The Electric Pulse. To wish away the sandstorms and maintain our energy, always the priority around here above anything else. The Disciples, on the other hand, have *no* respect for Nature and Tech, just for that old god of theirs, a monstrosity from beyond space said to come and slay us, to free us from these *flesh cages* and doomed existence since The Long Dry. Divine punishment. Masochists, the lot of them.

JESTER:

(*tired*) This is ridiculous, cousin. Rider is still rotting, and you're here asking us where we were this morning?

MERCY:

It's what we asked him to do, Jester, isn't it?

(*to Smiley*) I'm afraid that no one was a witness to myself at the time you ask. I wake up at five for the first prayers and to light the candles.

SMILEY:

That is... incredibly early. Who'd have thought, huh?

MERCY:

I am sure you are curious of what happened since you went away, old friend.

SMILEY:

I'm afraid that, to my awareness, you are the only one in town— Kid excepted-- that knows the warmth of blood on your hands.

JESTER:

And you go after Mercy, and not Kid?

SMILEY:

Who's to say I haven't talked to Kid already?

MERCY:

I know my past. I joined the church not long after you left, having myself been to the desert on my own, wandering...

(*Pointed*) Working distasteful jobs.

SMILEY:

C'mon, Infamous, you were a gun for hire in the South.

MERCY:

So you knew.

SMILEY:

You have a distinct way of working. The winds carried word all the way up North. I thought you'd died when the news stopped coming.

MERCY:

*Infamous* died. I'm Mercy now.

JESTER:

Cut to the chase, Smiley.

SMILEY:

A'right cousin. Why did you draw your gun at Rider yesterday?

[Silence.]

Jester sighs.

JESTER:

She broke into the saloon before I opened for the night and stole from me. She'd been asking for money, and I... Steel is pregnant, Smiley. The saloon is not doing well, I don't care if it's a friend and a neighbor, I couldn't let her take what was mine.

SMILEY:

Was she after something other than money?

JESTER:

She was going to steal an old industrial hammer from the water mines and several charges I had saved for the saloon.

SMILEY:

Did Rider say why she needed all that?

JESTER:

No. I let her take one charge, but when I came back this morning the hammer was not there. I didn't have time to do anything, and then Dawn wired us all to tell us about her-

MERCY:

I know what happened to that hammer.

SMILEY:

Please, do share with the class.

MERCY:

As I said, I wake up at five in the morning. At six I usually walk around town to collect the offerings made during the night, and I saw Rider from afar, carrying the hammer on a small platform, on foot.

SMILEY:

Well, it wasn't in her house.

SMILEY (NARRATION):

I know that face, and that face isn't Mercy's. Infamous knows something that Jester doesn't. She needs to get out.

SMILEY:

Jester, close the saloon for the day. Take Steel and anything you can throw into your pods. Go north. Grellos is two hours away, ask for Irene at the hostel and say you're family of mine. I'll wire you tomorrow.

JESTER:

I don't like being in the dark, cousin.

SMILEY:

Mercy here knows something, and if we're not careful Rider won't be the only one to die in Tabernas today. Please.

JESTER:

Fuck, Dane. A'right.

[Winds sweep in over Jester's footsteps as they walk out and through the door. It rattles as it closes]

SMILEY:

Now that's taken care of, would you care to tell me what's on your mind?

MERCY:

I always enjoyed that bluntness of yours.

(pause) I guess I didn't wanna believe her.

(sighs) Rider confessed to me that there is someone from The Disciples in town. She asked me to help her and Kid.

SMILEY:

And you did...?

MERCY:

Nothing. I... I didn't believe her. Didn't want to. Because both you and I know there are only two people in Tabernas who could be sucked into that awful cult, and I can't... I can't open that door again, Dane. I had to bury Infamous to *survive*. I made a promise.

SMILEY:

That promise might yet destroy our town and everyone in it.

[Pause.]

MERCY:

I'll help. But I won't kill no one. No bloodshed. Please.

SMILEY:

I'll do my best.

MERCY:

Rider wanted to get into Town Hall. There are—

SMILEY:

Underground corridors connecting places around town, and the only one that has access to Town Hall is the Church's. I know. Why Town Hall?

MERCY:

About a week ago, Rider found one of The Disciples' sigils there, just after Dawn and Hollow held a meeting there. Dawn had given her an ultimatum about abusing their friendship and robbing their tech. Hollow *has* been silent on this, I suspect she knows Rider has been stealing, but as diplomatic as she is, Hollow has just been paying out of her own pocket to cover what Rider was doing.

SMILEY:

Something's off. Rider found out The Disciples are going to destroy Tabernas before midnight and... Of course! Town Hall. Middle of the town. The best place to put an energy bomb.

[We hear the trademark ding of the wire—Dane's got a message.]

SMILEY:

Kid just wired me— HELP. TOWN HALL. NOW. Mercy, do you still have your guns?

MERCY:

I won't use them.

(pause) But yes.

## SCENE FOUR

[We hear the footsteps of DANE and MERCY running towards Town Hall.]

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Come back, I told myself. Come back to Tabernas, say hi to old friends, pay respect to your Uncle. It was *supposed* to be nice.

Up North it's all chaos, everyone for themselves, jobs that pay less than they should, old folks sitting on money made by charging folks just to breathe. And once you get in debt with them, any money you can find is a way out. Come back home, where everything was dull and full of sand, and life was quieter. But not even home is safe. From cults, from harm, from hopeful Redders that want to change this wasteland. Better than the suicidal cult that says we deserve to be wiped out because of the sins of our ancestors.

As soon as we entered Town Hall, Mercy knew where to go.

[They run down and down, an audible hum permeating the air as they make their way to the main energy vault. A click, something powering on, juicy. A ticking.]

SMILEY (NARRATION CONTD.):

It was Hollow.

It was Hollow, knowing Rider had too much on her hands, covering her costs to distract her, making her think Dawn was the Disciple even if Kid couldn't prove it. It was Hollow, calmly planning it all from their white terrace at Town Hall. What happened to the bright kid who wanted to study and explain the vastness of the universe in numbers, to save her hometown from being abandoned, who had all these dreams of traveling and creating and thriving? Of being filled with all the knowledge in the universe?

She is now holding that damned laser blade, Kid on the ground missing an arm at the shoulder and Dawn scared to her bones, hair slick with fresh blood and eyes clouded over.

HOLLOW:

I must say, Smiley, I didn't know you had it in you. You picked a heck of a time to come back and go knocking on old doors. You have this little reputation of getting your hands as dirty as our dear Infamous here, you know?

SMILEY:

I could say the same, Hollow. Killing Rider in cold blood? the girl who held your hair as you were puking your guts out the first time we stole Peppermint Whiskey from the Saloon?

HOLLOW:

(spitting) Shut up. You don't understand how *holy* my work is. How *sinful* and *dirty* we all are—aren't we Dawn? That bright, shiny money you make through trade, legal and illegal, from our town through the desert? You think I don't know how you trade illegal drugs and faulty energy charges that should have long been discarded? Oh, (*she laughs, humorless*) interestingly enough, energy charges that are so volatile I needed just a few of them, connected to Tabernas' main energy vault, to blow up the whole town whenever I choose to!

MERCY:

If we are, as you say, so sinful and dirty, why is this the only option? I know a thing or two about forgiveness, Riley and—

HOLLOW:

Don't. You. *DARE USE MY FIRST NAME, YOU MURDERING-*

SMILEY:

We know you, Riley. Dawn, Mercy, and I, Jester, and Rider... We *know* you. You had such thirst for knowledge; you wanted to change this town, to not let it die, and now you will destroy it?

HOLLOW:

Oh, Dane. Dane, Dane, Dane. You think you know? You think you can just show up like a little angel and ask what went wrong? You left us. You left us for good when you and Infamous killed my sister, and you ask what went wrong?

SMILEY (NARRATION):

And there it is. The reason why I left. Our namesakes. Because when Becka died, all I could do was- smile. Something broke inside us when she died out in the desert, after even Rider went and searched for ten days, looking for a body no one could find. Why I couldn't bear to come back and be called *Smiley* again, why Mercy had to atoned for both of us while I played detective up north.

HOLLOW:

YOU DON'T DESERVE TO LIVE! NO ONE HERE DOES. SHE WAS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, AND YOU LET HER DIE. EVERYONE HERE IS A SINNER- EVERYONE IN THIS WORLD, THEY ALL HAVE TO DISAPPEAR. IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO. WE HAVE TO PAY FOR OUR SINS.

SMILEY (NARRATION):

Mercy puts a hand on my shoulder and lowers their gun. Without thinking, trusting them as I have so many years ago, as we cried in the sand when we saw how, because of us, Becka had fallen, her head against a rock, red, shiny, her hair wet... I trust them. I lower my gun. And we walk up to Hollow.

We kneel in front of Hollow, in front of Riley, and I realize then I have been crying.

MERCY:

We have sinned against you. We ran back home without her, and because of that, our hands are bloodied. But you can close this circle, Riley. Even if you hurt Rider, even if you hurt Kid and Dawn. We can stop it here. You can shoot us, you can destroy our home, wipe us out. Or you can think of Becka. We can mourn her, and Rider, properly. Not give into despair. You can hold dear the place that she also called home, and we can carry this pain together. You don't even have to forgive us, not really. But we are *here* for you. Dane will stay, won't you Dane?

SMILEY (NARRATION):

I say it before I even process what she asked.

SMILEY:

I will. I won't run anymore. No one has to go away. Not even you, Riley.

[Pause.]

HOLLOW:

(voice breaking) Can you? Can you forgive me for this? Even for Rider?

MERCY:

I.. forgive you. I see you and your pain, Riley. Please.

[Hollow throws a switch. The bomb powers down. There's a quick electric hum that blinks into nothing– the vault shuts down, for a moment.]

HOLLOW:

(crying) I'm sorry. I'm sorry. They just... they knew, they, they gave me– I just– I just *miss her!*

DAWN:

She just disconnected the charges. We're safe.

KID:

This town is fucking insane.

[They laugh, a bit hazy, still in pain.]

KID (CONT'D):

I'm never leaving.

SMILEY:

*(to Mercy) We'll be okay?*

MERCY:

I think we will. Yeah.

OUTRO/CREDITS:

This episode was written by David Orión Pena and edited by Nikko Goldstein. It was directed by John Glasfeld, with dialogue editing and sound design by Kathryn Stanley and music composition by Ras. The transcript was arranged by Charlie Caruso-Neal. The production of this episode was coordinated by Molly Alexander. Dane "Smiley" Valencia was voiced by JJ Jensen. Anika "Rider" Gaur was voiced by Ras. Harper "Jester" de la Cruz was voiced by Maddie Girouard. Sawyer "Mercy/The Infamous" Kanagawa was voiced by Charlie Caruso-Neal. Riley "Hollow" Lee was voiced by Marnie Warner. Sam "Dawn" Douglas was voiced by Ari Delyne. Mikhail "The Kid" Gray was voiced by Sivan Raz.