

The background of the entire image is a stylized tropical landscape. It features rolling green hills and mountains. The foreground and middle ground are filled with silhouettes of various tropical plants, including palm trees, ferns, and other foliage. The color palette is primarily shades of green, from light lime to dark forest green, with black silhouettes for the plants. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century graphic design.

THE BATTLE OF TROPICALIA

EPISODE 16 OF:

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

The Battle of Tropicalia

Ambrose emerged from the gondola at its station on the mainland. The skin below his right eye was beginning to swell and there was a cut across the bridge of his nose. He clutched the handles of a small plastic bag. He pushed past the small crowd hanging around the hut, ignoring their frantic questions. He pulled a small key from his pocket, climbed into the golf cart parked on the south side of the station, turned the key in the ignition, and headed toward town. Behind him, the gondola car was empty.

The General and the Colonel stood side by side in the road at the far north end of town, behind two jeeps which had been positioned horizontally, bumper-to-bumper, to block the road. Two soldiers stood in front of the jeep barricade, closely watching the activity outside the InterWorld power station three buildings south of them. The station was a small, windowless, square structure with a raft of solar panels across its flat roof and a metal IW logo fastened above the steel door.

Five IW security men clustered together in front of the building. They cast alternating nervous and aggressive glances at the Tropicalian soldiers and whispered harshly to each other. A beefy man with a shaved head and a thin goatee, who appeared to be their leader, switched on his radio a third time to request further orders.

Behind the pair of officers, three more Tropicalian soldiers faced north. They guarded a group of about thirty-five drunk, confused InterWorlders—preventing them from entering the town. Some of the InterWorlders stood in the road; others had collapsed onto the tall grass. Every ten minutes or so, the group increased in size as more people streamed in via the boats and the gondola from Alan's island.

Three hundred yards across town, another pair of jeeps and four soldiers blocked the south road. An armored Humvee guarded the other road up into the jungle. Several Montezuma residents lined the town street, along with a few random tourists, eight InterWorlders, and four Press Agents who had slipped into town before the barricades were set. Two of the Press Agents aimed cameras at the Tropicalian soldiers, while their associates shadowed them, hands on their black utility belts.

Fifteen minutes earlier, the old woman who owned the grocery boldly strode up to the soldiers. She asked what was going on. General Paramo apologized for the inconvenience and promised they would be gone before nightfall. Gabby asked her if she'd seen her husband. The woman indicated that a man who might fit the description had rented one of the cabins behind her store. Despite Paramo's warnings, Gabby followed her back to town to investigate.

Now General Paramo raised his bullhorn and addressed the townspeople in Spanish.

“Please leave the street, for your own safety. Go inside your homes and stores. I apologize for this trouble. We will be gone soon. Please.”

A few of the residents obeyed, but most grumbled to each other and stayed put. The Press Agents advanced a few steps closer to the northern barricade.

Kept at bay until now by the sea breeze, the acrid smell of burning wires, plastic, metal, and wood above

town finally reached the Colonel's nose. He pulled his shirt up to his nose.

General Paramo turned around 180 degrees to face the InterWorlders trapped outside of town. He spoke in English.

“When it's safe to return, we will allow you to return to town to gather your belongings. Transportation back to Tropicalia City will be arranged.”

As soon as he finished speaking he turned his back to them, ignoring the cacophony of protests and questions.

“What the hell is going on?”

“What's burning?”

“Why are we being held here?”

“Please explain what's happening!”

“Have the towers fallen?”

“Who sent you here?”

The bald leader of the IW Security team spoke to a tall, lanky kid whose face was covered in acne scars. Baldy pointed at the police station, two buildings away—nearest the barricade. The kid nodded and turned toward the soldiers. He looked nervous.

Private Urriola glanced over his shoulder at Paramo for directions. Paramo nodded slightly and pointed forward. Urriola took three steps toward the approaching kid. Urriola kept his rifle against his chest, but he moved his fingers near the trigger. The kid stopped in his tracks, swallowing hard. He looked back at his own commander. Baldy glared at Paramo before motioning for the kid to return.

“Where's Regina?” the Colonel asked.

“She's safe,” Paramo said. “She's on the island, doing her part.”

“Where those assholes came from?” the Colonel asked, jamming his thumb in the direction of the recently returned InterWorlders. “Fuck it, I'll go find her.”

Paramo shook his head.

“I'm sorry, you'll have to wait,” he said. “I've sent a squad to stop the gondola and the boats. I need everyone to stay where they are for the time being. I promise you she's safe.”

“What are you waiting for?”

Paramo cocked his head. There was a disturbance by the jungle road blockade.

“Them,” he said.

Merard's battered Blazer navigated around the roadblock and turned onto the main road. It rolled to a stop forty feet from the IW Security men. The doors opened, and Merard and Julian stepped out into the

street. Merard held a machete in his right hand and Julian carried a gallon can of gasoline. They began walking toward the Security men.

“Why aren’t you intervening?” the Colonel asked Paramo.

The General pointed at the Press Agents and their cameras.

“We’d prefer this to be seen as a dispute between the Americans. It’s smoother that way. We’ll clean up what we need to.”

There was movement from the west side of the road near the Blazer. Budreau and Radley emerged from a bar patio. They had shed their ridiculous stoner disguises. They wore dark cargo pants over black boots, and flak jackets over white t-shirts. Their big round aviators were the last remaining vestiges of their previous costumes. They held un-holstered handguns at their sides.

Upon spotting the drawn weapons, half of the onlookers on the street finally ducked inside the nearest buildings. The Press Agents trailed twenty paces behind Merard and Julian.

“Sam Merard! Julian Carter!” Budreau shouted. “Stop! Drop your weapons!”

Budreau’s arm, holding the gun, began to quiver at his side. He prepared to draw. If the announcement of Merard and Julian’s names was designed to make them pause, it didn’t work.

“Don’t be rude,” Julian said over his shoulder, without breaking stride. “We’re just going to have a word with our friends.”

Three sweaty, very drunk InterWorlders stepped into the street, too. Two of them were young—one tall and thin, the other short and fat. The third man was older, about fifty years old, with white streaks in his hair and white socks pulled up to his shins. He carried a piece of wood he’d pried loose from a fence.

Radley spun around to face the new players.

“Get off the street!” he barked.

“We’re here to help you arrest these men,” the tall one said. “They’re stealing our profits, slowing our productivity, and lowering our morale. They deserve to be punished.”

“Go inside,” Radley repeated.

He and Budreau tried to refocus their attention on Julian and Merard, but the Press Agents, continuing their own advance, distracted them again. One of the Agents, with a half-healed split lip and a bruise on his temple, stared hard at Budreau. He had a week-old grudge to settle.

Baldy pushed to the front of his men. Merard and Julian stopped five feet away. Baldy drew his own gun. Storm clouds moved in above them. The sky darkened melodramatically, at near-Biblical speed.

“We’d like to go inside the power station,” Merard said.

“Just for a minute,” Julian added, raising the can of gasoline slightly.

“Eat shit,” Baldy said.

“Espere,” General Paramo whispered to his men. “Estable. Espere.”

Radley raised his gun high to the dark sky and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He squeezed again. Nothing. Budreau tried the same. Nothing. Radley released the clip and examined it. *Empty.*

Baldy’s eyes flickered back and forth from the Hunters to Merard and Julian. He raised his own gun a few inches toward the ground in front of Merard or Merard’s foot. It didn’t matter. He squeezed his trigger.

Click.

Nothing.

Click. Click. Click.

“Hmm,” Julian said to Baldy. “Whaddya think we should do now?”

The security guy to Baldy’s left looked like a bulldog—short, compact, bulging veins along his muscles, and a bit of drool in the corner of his mouth. He took initiative by cracking his knuckles.

“Well let’s get on with it then,” Merard said.

Everyone charged.

Baldy lunged, swinging his gun at Merard’s head. Merard ducked out of the way and slammed into Baldy’s shoulder. Budreau leapt toward Julian, and one of the Press Agents set upon Budreau.

“Ahora!” Paramo shouted to Privates Urriola and Rios.

They rushed into the brawl.

“Ahora!” he shouted through the bullhorn.

The Humvee by the jungle road rumbled to life and headed toward the scene. Paramo turned to the Colonel.

“What do you say, old man? What’s the saying? Once more into the breach?”

He smacked the Colonel on the shoulder, and then headed into the fray himself.

The Colonel hesitated for a moment. His thumb rested on his Taser. His knives pressed against his hips. Thunder rumbled. The street scene broke down into tiny, familiar video game pixels before his eyes.

Game on.

The walls gave up the ghost, completely abandoning the pretense of being made of stone. A dim but continuous green glow emanated from them that allowed Regina to proceed without her headlamp. She followed the passageway for five hundred feet or so, at a slight decline.

The tunnel terminated beneath a perfect arch. She stepped into an immense, cavernous, domed chamber at least two hundred feet in diameter. The borders at its base appeared to be a perfect circle, broken only by the doorway to the passage from which she'd emerged, and two others on the opposite side—one descended like her own, and the other ascended via a flight of stairs carved into the not-stone.

The green glow split, sharpened, and multiplied. The floor and walls—which seamlessly became the ceiling as well—were wrapped in a bright green grid. Regina reached out to touch one of the thin green lines. For some reason, she expected it to be hot, but it was as cool as ordinary stone. She felt no ridges or indentations. The grid was part of the wall. At the dome's apex, the grid coiled into a tight spiral, brighter and lighter than the rest.

A large black object shaped somewhere between a rectangle and an ellipse was mounted in the very center of the room atop a short podium. She approached the shape. It was about the size of a coffin. As she neared it, she heard a soft whirring, humming sound emanating from within. She touched its surface. It looked and felt like obsidian, but it also felt alive.

This room and the object in the middle had been sketched out in Charles's notebook, but now it was real and unreal at the same time.

This is happening, she thought, almost giddily. *This is why I'm here.*

She turned her head to the right and spotted what she had been sent here to do.

Several pieces of electronic equipment were piled against the wall. A square aluminum and plastic box adorned with an InterWorld logo was fastened directly to the wall. Two wires trailed from it to a laptop on top of a wheeled, plastic cart. An even more obscene power cord snaked out from the computer all the way up the stairs. A small backup generator sat next to the cart, also plugged into the laptop.

All Ethan's work—the hostile land grabs, the years of research and espionage, and the rapes and murders—rested upon this shoddy setup. Charles might even appreciate Ethan's spit and baling wire approach.

She found the tools she needed to begin dismantling the InterWorld gear on the cart. She unscrewed the box from its mounts and disconnected it from the laptop.

As soon as its connection was cut, the entire room brightened. The whirring noise increased. Pulses of light shot around the grid. She looked back at the black shape in the center of the room. It had begun to vibrate and glow blue amidst all the green.

So did her phone, tucked into her waistband. She pulled it out. An unknown number was calling.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hey Regina,” I said.

I couldn't resist.

The battle was fierce and dirty and quick. Blood was spilled, but no one died. I suppose that's worth saying upfront.

The InterWorlders were the first to go down. The tall young one whimpered and fell to the ground immediately, without being hit at all—surrendering either to cowardice or an insurmountable surge of drunkenness. The fat one flailed his arms pathetically and was brought down by a Tropicalian baton to the back of his neck. The older guy swung his piece of wood at the Colonel, who managed to knock him out flat with a single punch to the face. No need for the Taser or knives or video game controllers.

Blades clashed against gun barrels, fists met flesh, and ash cracked oak and bones. Grunts and shouts and strangled cries temporarily drowned out the jungle noises. Merard took two knives to his flak jacket and an IW Security baton to the side of his head. He shook it off.

Julian jumped one of the camera-wielding Press Agents, a man Eva had pointed out two days ago in a fit of what he believed was paranoia. The rush of regret for doubting her and making her feel crazy was cut short by a heavy camera swung at his head. Julian dodged and tried to snatch the camera from his hands, but the cameraman snarled and tugged it free. He shoved the palm of his hand into Julian's nose, a Kung Fu movie move. Julian's cartilage wasn't shoved up into his brainpan like the cameraman expected, but he felt a snap and a crunch. Julian screamed, grabbed the gas can, and smacked it into the side of the guy's face.

He heard war cries behind him. He turned just in time to see two more Press Agents rush him. One of them stuck a switchblade into Radley's thigh as he passed. The media was finally fair and balanced, indiscriminate in their violent fury. They whooped in unison. One of them leaped off the ground and actually dropkicked Julian square in the chest. His breath gone, but his appreciation of the absurd still intact, Julian fell on his ass. Two of Paramo's soldiers came to his aid

“Stop!” someone bellowed above the ruckus.

The voice was so improbably loud that most of the fighters inadvertently obeyed merely by pausing to see where it came from.

“Please, stop!” the voice repeated.

Ambrose weaved past the jeep barricades. He held his hands out in front of him, offering temporary supplication.

Two InterWorlders and two IW Security men lay on the ground in varying degrees of unconsciousness. None of them moved save for the intake and exhalation of ragged breaths. Radley sat on the ground, tying a piece of cloth around the stab wound in his leg, his eyes darting back and forth watching for the next attacker. A Press Agent howled in pain and held his twisted knee, having been rammed by the Humvee a few minutes earlier.

The Tropicalian soldiers and the IW Security team immediately stopped fighting upon Ambrose's approach. Two Press Agents landed a flurry of punches on Budreau's swollen, blood-streaked face and a kick to his ribs before finally pausing. The kicker continued filming the whole time. He grinded his teeth in happy anticipation of the ratings this footage would get.

Merard straddled Baldy's laid-out body. Baldy was still flailing around, trying to fling dirt and scratch Merard's face. Merard managed to grab him by the collar. He drove his fist into Baldy's nose. He collapsed into the dirt.

Merard picked his machete up off the ground and stood up. He faced Ambrose.

“What,” he snarled.

Ambrose tried his best to make eye contact with every conscious fighter.

“I’m very sorry,” he said.

General Paramo nudged aside the soldier trying to protect him. Paramo had a split lip.

“Para qué?” he asked flatly.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake,” Ambrose said.

He kept glancing from person to person, afraid to maintain eye contact for too long.

“Many mistakes, actually.”

The two Press Agents’ cameras focused on him.

“I was arrogant. I over-reached. Over-promised. This project was a failure. I thought we were able to cut through the interference, tame it, and harness the geologic anomaly for a new power source. I was over-eager; I was wrong. It didn’t work. It was never stable. It never will be.”

He pointed at Merard and Julian.

“I hired these men to sabotage the towers, so that no one would know the true extent of this fiasco. So I could blame it on protesters. Terrorists.”

Neither Merard nor Julian said anything. Merard dropped his machete in the dirt.

Ambrose looked directly into one of the camera lenses.

“I never wanted it to get this out of hand. I didn’t think there’d be so much violence. I didn’t think the military would intervene. But I don’t blame them. They are protecting their people. I’m sorry. I’m very tired. I want to quit, but I won’t be able to unless you stop me.”

He looked back and forth between the Press Agents and General Paramo.

He said, “Whoever has jurisdiction here, please take me into custody.”

Before either party could answer, Ambrose added, “Oh, I almost forgot. I also murdered the previous owner of my house in order to take possession of it. And I often force myself on my servants on a regular basis. I don’t think of it as rape, but I would imagine they do.”

The Press Agent with the busted leg stopped moaning long enough to smile widely and nod at his colleague. This was the biggest scoop of their careers. The other armed Agent pulled his handcuffs from his utility belt and stepped forward.

Paramo cut him off. He shook his head slowly and stared the Press Agent down.

“This man murdered a Tropicalian citizen,” he said, “raped others, and swindled many more. He goes

with us.”

The Agent considered the situation for a moment. He didn't want to lose this collar, but there weren't any ISPs to call in for backup. Who knows how many more men this General had hiding in the jungle. He gritted his teeth and stepped back.

“I'll use those cuffs of yours though, if you don't mind,” Paramo said.

He held out his hand. The Press Agent spat on the dirt and then handed them over. Ambrose already stood with his hands clasped behind his back. He stared at the ground. Paramo clicked the cuffs in place. He noticed a dab of shaving cream below Ambrose's left ear.

Litter blew across the nearly-deserted party grounds. Storm clouds had moved in as the revelers moved out. The wind had been howling for some time now. Most of the InterWorlders were back on the mainland. A couple dozen remained at the beach far below waiting for the boats to return, having abandoned the gondola when it never returned after Ambrose left. Five or six of the contracted party workers lingered, camped out and drinking under the tents.

Tyler approached the eastern edge of the cliff. He popped open a can of TropicAle beer he'd grabbed from a metal tub by one of the tents. He took a long swig. He wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth and sat down. His legs dangled in the air.

Both towers were gone. Much of InterWorld Row above town appeared to be burning, judging by the amount of smoke billowing up over the hills. So this was what Merard and Julian had been planning. Tyler couldn't see what was happening in Montezuma, but he thought he heard faint shouts carried across the water. The sirens had shut off twenty minutes ago.

“Be careful,” a voice behind him said. “Don't turn to ash this time. I'm afraid I won't be there to put you back together again this time.”

He craned his neck around. Liz walked toward him. She placed her hand on his shoulder. Tyler raised his beer in the direction of the mainland.

“Seems like your ex is a real asshole,” he said. “A pyro.”

“I don't know what he is,” Liz said.

“We got left out of the fun.”

“Well...” she began.

“He asked me to keep you out of this,” Tyler said. “I didn't take him seriously. I failed at that, too. Why am I here? I feel like I was brought here for nothing. I'm sitting on the sidelines.”

A gust of wind picked up behind them. Liz dug her fingers into his shoulder so she wouldn't blow away. She was almost as light as before. The wind died down. She sat down beside him. Safer this way. She reached for his beer. He handed it over.

“You weren't brought here,” she said after taking a drink. “You came here on your own.”

Tyler shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I came here with you. I’m leaving on my own.”

“Tyler...”

“I’m sorry. I think you know what I mean, though. ‘There’s something happening here,’ the song says. ‘What it is ain’t exactly clear.’ But it doesn’t seem like any of us are here accidentally. Well, no one but me. I think I was an accident. An afterthought. I don’t belong here. Everything fell apart for me here.”

Liz said, “I read a story once, about a time traveler sent back to the past to kill the most important man in the world—”

“I thought you hated sci-fi.”

“Shh,” she said. “I know a bit about time travel. At least I think that’s what it was. Anyway, the assassin finds his mark and corners him. The guy who’s supposed to be the most important man in the world—the one who changes the course of history—can’t fathom that he’s who this assassin says he is. He’s kind of dim, and an early alcoholic. He never went to college, never fought in an army. He walks with a limp as a result of a childhood injury. He keeps to himself except for when he ventures out to the bar. He has little ambition. He watches a lot of TV. He has trouble keeping a job. When the assassin finds him, he’s working at the customer service counter at a department store.

“Before he kills him, the assassin apologizes. He says it’s not about him. The mark is confused. How can this not be about him if he’s supposed to be the man who changed the world? The assassin explains that it’s not about him, but about the people who he will come into contact with.

“One day next week he’ll take too long processing a customer’s exchange. If the customer hadn’t been delayed an extra minute, he wouldn’t have run a red light and slammed into a car carrying the parents of a young boy. The death of his parents would set the boy on a path to the military and he would become a famous soldier. A year from now, the mark will start aggressively flirting with a young woman in a bar. A man will step in to interfere. The man and woman will eventually get married and their daughter will become President.

“There are many other similar examples. The most important man in the world isn’t really all that important at all—but he just happened to have a series of seemingly innocuous brushes with the real world-changers. If the mark is killed, then the fates of everyone else will change.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Tyler asked. “Are you comparing me to an oblivious drunken dolt?”

He chugged the beer to hammer the point home.

“No,” Liz said. She paused. “I’m—It’s just that maybe you seem like a common connection between many of us. Maybe you’re the thread. Maybe not. I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

They stared out across the narrow sea for a while.

“Are you gonna go back to him? Merard?” Tyler asked.

She laughed. “No. That’s not what this is about.”

“What *is* it about?”

She inhaled through her nose, breathed in the sea air.

“I’ll tell you a story,” she said. “A real one this time. It won’t sound real at all. But I promise you, it’s true. I think it’s time you know. I think I’m supposed to tell you, finally. It can’t hurt anything anymore.”

She told him about the night before The Disappearance and the weird months leading up to it. About Sam and Dyatlov and the scientists and her hollowed bones and the unknown compelling force.

When she finished, he resisted the temptation to complain that she’d never confided in him before. He knew he wouldn’t have believed her. The story was insane. He believed it now. The alternatives were less preferable; more mundane and tragic.

He said, “You’re not coming home, are you? I mean like even back to the States.”

“No,” she said, pinching his thigh. “I’m far too light for that now. I need to be filled up.”

Paramo and two of his soldiers ushered Ambrose not into one of the military vehicles, but southward down the street and through the alley between *Tropicalia Adventures* and one of the surf shops. Onlookers gave them a wide berth as they passed. The Colonel stayed behind to question Merard about Regina.

The beat-up Volkswagen van that the Electric Blue Monkey Circus rarely used as more than a place to sleep and have sex at their camp was parked on the narrow dirt strip running behind the stores.

“Wait here,” Paramo told his men as they reached the back end of the stores. “Make sure no one comes down the alley.”

Paramo turned to Ambrose.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I forgot to ask for the keys to the handcuffs.”

“No worries,” Ambrose said.

He unconnected his wrists and handed the unlocked cuffs to the General.

The passenger door to the van opened. One of the EBMC hippies, a pretty girl in a filthy homemade dress, stepped out. She held a small plastic bucket. It rattled as she offered it to Ambrose.

He didn’t take it, but he peered inside. It was one-third full of over a hundred bullets from various types of guns.

He pressed three of his fingers to her forearm.

“You did well,” he said. “Tell the others I said so. Thank you. Is he in there?”

She bit her lip, pleased to receive the praise, and nodded.

He squeezed the handle of the back door of the van. It slid open under protest along rusty rails. He peered inside.

Alan Ambrose sat against the rear left wall of the van, his feet tied with rope and his hands bound behind his back. His mouth was gagged by one of the hippies' bandanas. Who knows where that thing had been. Alan's eyes grew wide, his face red. Muffled curses tried to pass through the gag.

The freshly shaved Charles Arbuthnot Reilly—formerly Charles Ambrose until he reclaimed his mother's maiden name upon quitting his day-to-day work at InterWorld—closed the van door.

The techniques of stage and street magic remain remarkably old-fashioned. 80% is still done with mirrors and audience plants. Another 10% is doubles and twins—occasionally unbeknownst to the duplicate. The other 10% is comprised of the personal twists and innovations of the individual conjurer.

Merard, Julian, and the Colonel walked toward the van down the dirt strip behind the stores.

When they arrived, the Colonel said, "You're an asshole, Charles. I thought I recognized you, but I wasn't sure. Fuck you for involving my daughter in this."

"Good to see you, too," Charles said.

"And *this* asshole," the Colonel said, jabbing his thumb at Merard, "says you're going out to the island where Regina is. You're gonna take me there."

Charles nodded.

"Maybe we'll take a drive," he said. "Like old times."

He turned to Merard.

"Did you find the rest of what I need?" Charles asked.

"Yeah, it's all in the back of the Blazer. Well...almost everything. I forgot the fucking guitar pedal. I can't find it."

Charles whistled.

"Shit," Charles said. "Okay. I guess I'll figure something out."

"Sorry," Merard said genuinely.

The need for distance between them erased, Merard reached out and squeezed Charles's shoulder, just below his neck. Charles tensed, unaccustomed to signs of affection from anyone, least of all Merard.

"You've done great," Merard said. "We're almost finished. Are you okay?"

Charles nodded. "Better now," he said.

"I can't say I'm a fan of the new look. I never thought I'd miss that ratty beard of yours."

"That's great," the Colonel cut in. "Me either. But let's go to the island."

“Okay. Give me a minute,” Charles said. “First I have to talk to my brother.”

“Don’t worry,” the Colonel said as Charles re-opened the van door. “I have to have a quick word with someone, too.”

The closest remaining approximation of my physical self surged through the chamber. Parts of me swirled giddily around and around the perimeter. I had spread myself all over the world in order to bring these people to me. Alan and his InterWorld equipment had blocked my return. Regina allowed me to finally come back to the dark room I’d called home for the past few millennia.

Millions of my tiny pieces streamed through Regina’s body. She felt an odd yet pleasant electrical buzz. I urged her to touch the vault.

Too curious to refuse, she walked to the center of the room. She placed her right hand against the surface of the black object. Initially cool to the touch, it warmed within three seconds. She felt a surge of electricity again.

I showed her the silver city of which her father spoke. My city. Described to her father by General Paramo so many years ago, passed down through seventy generations of guards and secret-keepers.

I showed her why we had to flee.

I showed her where we went.

I showed her why I had to stay behind.

I showed her what was coming.

Her body trembling, but her mind resolute and strong, Regina removed her hand from the vault. Its surface retracted, revealing a green, translucent, pulsing interior and a hollowed-out, human-sized cradle.

She raised the phone to her ear.

“It’s safe now,” I said. “The coast is clear. You can go upstairs and open the main door. They’ll be here soon. Let them inside. Thank you for everything you’ve done. Thank you so much.”

“Fuck you, Chip, let me go,” Alan snarled, as soon as Charles pulled the gag away from his twin brother’s mouth.

“I can’t let you go, Alan. You’re a murderer, and a rapist. Just like John.”

“And you’re a fucking geek. Untie me.”

“Your towers are gone. Your infant city is burned. You’ve confessed your crimes to the world through the Press cameras.”

“I did no such goddamn thing.”

“I took the initiative. I went ahead and confessed for you.”

Alan laughed. “It’s been a long time since you were anything close to relevant in the real world, Chip, but people will eventually remember that two of the Ambrose brothers are twins. Especially when I remind them. When I tell them what you did. The lies you spewed.”

Charles smiled weakly.

“I’ll be home in Washington later this evening. I’ll make sure people see me. There will be no conceivable way that I was ever down here in Tropicalia today.”

His body trembled at the thought of home. He was so close. He would see Gabby soon.

“Impossible,” Alan spat. “You’re nothing more than my echo. A useless vestige. I should have eaten you when we were still in the womb.”

Charles shrugged. “You have two options. General Paramo can drag you back to Tropicalia City. They’ll put you on trial for murder and for rape and probably for fraud. You can deny it all you want. You can blame me but—”

“They won’t find the body,” Alan said.

“I’m sure you’re right. But they’ll question your servants. I’m sure they’re not your biggest fans. No one here is. You’re done. You can face a long, embarrassing trial in Tropicalia City. But Paramo would rather not be bothered. So...you have another option. I can send you somewhere far away, where you’ll never be able to hurt anyone in this country again. You can even help pick where you want to go.”

Alan glared at his brother. He studied his face, wondering how it could be that similar to his own.

“You’ve always been a coward. A betrayer. You abandoned Mom. You’re weak. A nerd.”

“Choose,” Charles said.

“I know where I want to go,” Alan said.

“Then close your eyes,” Charles said.

He pulled the black box and a bag of blue powder from behind his back.

“And tell me where.”

The best conjurers are the loneliest people in the world. They must conceal their true selves from strangers and loved ones alike. They often become strangers to themselves and to those who think they’ve gotten close to them. They guard their secrets and keep their pasts hidden. They’re mirrors. Simulacrum of actual human beings. Tragedies. Most of them do this in order to trick audiences for profit. Charles did this to help me—and to help save the world. He betrayed his brother to do it. I will always love him for that. You should, too.

A minute later the van door slid back open. Charles stepped out, leaving the conveyance behind him empty for the second time today.

Big fat drops of rain had begun to fall.

“Where’s the Colonel?” Charles asked.

The General pointed down the alley. The Colonel walked toward them. He wasn’t alone.

Gabby.

The laws of conservation apply to magic as well as science. When one thing disappears, something else must take its place. When one thing is lost, something else is found. When a loved one is banished, another returns.

Charles stood completely still. Gabby continued walking toward him, neither slowing nor accelerating. Steady.

Charles opened his mouth.

“I’m sor—” he began.

“Don’t you dare say it,” she said. “Not one more time.”

She stood before him. Her belly was round. She looked ready to burst. She looked radiant. Like an angel.

“It’s time to come home,” she said.

Merard had never seen Charles cry. He had seen the after-effects—the red-rimmed eyes and the silence. Like any good conjurer, Charles kept the actual act well hidden. Not anymore. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Yes,” he said.

Gabby leaned in. He wrapped his arms around his wife and daughter. His body trembled. He buried his face in her neck.

Paramo and Merard exchanged an awkward glance. Paramo checked on his men, still guarding the alley. Merard picked at a loose strip of rust on the side of the van. Before the unease reached a peak, the phone in Paramo’s pocket rang.

Charles loosened his grip. He and Gabby smiled at each other. She dabbed at his tears.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for coming to find me. I didn’t mean to Disappear for so long.”

He grazed his hand across her belly. She grabbed his hand.

“I have to do one more thing,” he said, resisting every impulse to utter another apology. “You can come with me.”

Paramo removed the phone from his ear.

“She’s ready for us,” he said.

“Good,” Gabby said. “I’ve got a few choice words for her.”

Alan opened his eyes. A hot sun beat down upon him. His body rocked gently. He was lying on the long, narrow piece of fiberglass that had covered the floor of the van. He was floating on the ocean.

He sat up. The fiberglass bobbed in the water. He steadied himself. He saw endless seas in all directions but one. Off in the distance, he spotted the faint outline of mountains.

A fin broke the surface to his left. And then another to his right. He peered into the water. He counted at least five dark shapes, circling.

For the first time in either of their lives, Charles had done exactly as Alan asked.

Alan smiled at the shapes below.

Fuck you, he thought. I'm meaner than you.

He pulled off his shirt, slipped into the water, and began swimming.