



**RESCUE  
WHAT YOU  
CAN**

**EPISODE 17 OF:**

**THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA**

# Rescue What You Can

Regina pushed open the heavy oak door and stepped outside. Rain beat down upon the cliff top. She closed her eyes and breathed in the pleasant, salty petrichor. She attempted to force the mixed scent into permanent residence in her memory, in case she never smelled rain and sea again. I'm quite sure she will.

The thunderstorm had driven away all the lingerers save Liz and Tyler. When Regina opened her eyes, she spotted them beneath one of the tents to the left. *Of course*. She sighed and prepared to jog over to them.

But first, she glanced to her right. A beat-up VW van sat atop—and began to slowly sink into—a patch of mud. She saw no one in the driver or front passenger seats. She swore the van hadn't been there a moment ago.

*Charles.*

The back door slid open and people began piling out like the Scooby Doo gang. She was well acquainted with some of them, but there were a few she didn't recognize.

Merard and Julian looked the worst. Merard's face was cut-up and a bruise was forming below his left eye. Julian walked with a limp. A freshly shaved Charles helped a beautiful, olive-skinned, pregnant woman step outside. She waved off his attempts to carry her across the mud. She let him hold her arm as they crossed to the relative shelter of the nearest tent.

So it was true. Merard told her Charles was married; she'd had trouble believing it.

A portly, gray-haired man of about sixty plopped out into the mud. His left foot got stuck in the muck for a moment. He tugged it out and hurried after the others. Once General Paramo climbed out, he stood planted in front of the door for several seconds while he exchanged words with someone inside. He turned and helped someone onto his back. Regina briefly caught sight of the woman—she was tiny and appeared very old. She didn't get a good look because her attention was diverted to the final passenger.

Her father was the last to climb out. While he shut the door behind him, Regina stood perfectly still beneath the overhang above the front door of the house Alan stole. He turned toward her direction. He spotted her. She ran across the courtyard, skipping over bushes, splashing through mud. The Colonel met her beneath the tent. She stopped three feet in front of him.

“Hi, Dad,” she said.

“Hi, honey bunches of oats,” he said.

He outstretched his arms. She walked into his embrace. The wetness around her eyes could be explained away by the rain, but it wasn't rain.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

She didn't bother to ask how.

“I heard you were in trouble. And *this* ass,” he said, nodding at Charles, “asked me to come.”

“I know where Mom went,” she said when she pulled free.

The Colonel cocked his head. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I know where they all went,” she said. “You’ll see. Downstairs.”

After I showed her what I showed her, and she came upstairs to smell the rain, she had never been happier or more purposeful. Now that her father was here, her elated excitement peaked further. Like most everyone else in the world, she had spent the last decade trying to forget her mom’s second Disappearance. There had been no answers; not even a single clue. Her mother remembered nothing. But now, she had picked up a scent stronger than that of the tropical storm. She had found a purpose. Julian tried his best to pull his shirt over his head. He jogged out to the van and opened the rear hatch. Merard followed. Charles kissed his wife on the cheek and did likewise. Julian lifted two dollies out into the mud. The three of them went about piling crates and boxes onto the carts. The wheels would be completely ineffective in this environment. The Mayans had done without; they could, too.

Paramo introduced himself.

“You must be the infamous Regina,” he said. “It’s a pleasure.”

Paramo offered her his hand. She took it. She respected that he didn’t lessen his strong grip for her sake.

“This is Señora Viracocha,” he said.

The tiny, elderly woman stepped out from behind him. She was hunched over with age, but even if she stood upright, she still would have only come up to Regina’s chin. She wore a brightly patterned dress, a red and yellow shawl, sandals, a beaded necklace, and thick bifocals. She also had an iPad tucked into the crook of her left arm, contrasting sharply with the rest of her look.

“She’s been waiting a long time for this day,” Paramo said. “She’s part of a very long line. She shares Her blood—when She had blood at least.”

Señora Viracocha shook Regina’s hand. Her grip was almost as strong as Paramo’s.

Merard, still soaking wet and bleeding by the van, called out. “The other guy is Professor Burress, from the IMC.”

The round man was trying to scrape the mud from his right loafer onto the bottom of a metal bucket. He waved to Regina. She noticed he was wearing a brown blazer and nice slacks. He in turn noticed her look of confusion.

“IMC. International Museum Coalition,” he said, mistaking the source of her puzzlement.

“Were they in Tropicalia City this whole time, or did they just get here?” Regina asked Merard.

He heaved the dolly through the mud and under the tent.

“Nah,” he said. “We just went and picked them up.”

“It’s been a weird afternoon,” the Colonel said.

Tyler and Liz arrived. They breathed heavily and they were drenched. Liz's mascara had begun to run down her cheeks. Her hair was flattened against her scalp, revealing darker roots.

"This is Liz," Charles said, resting his own dolly beneath the tent.

Señora Viracocha brightened and stood almost upright. She shuffled over to Liz.

"Gracias, gracias, gracias," she said. "Que hermosa eres. Gracias."

She reached up to touch Liz's cheek.

Tyler stood a couple feet behind her. He turned around to look out at the rain. There was no need for an introduction for him. He was an extra appendage. A vestigial limb.

Someone nudged him on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry about today," Merard said. "I shouldn't have left you high and dry like that. You were a good cover, but I should have given you a heads up."

"It's okay," Tyler said, facing him. "I get it."

"You might be starting to," Merard said, that cocky twinkle in his eye again.

Tyler struggled to shove his hands into his wet pockets.

"I think I'm gonna head back," he said loud enough that Liz could hear, too.

"Mmm," Merard said, chewing on the side of his mouth. "I think you should come with us. Assuming you have an extra guitar pedal you can bring along."

Tyler shot him a puzzled look.

"I do," Tyler said. "On the other side of the island."

"Best get after it then," Merard said. "You must be here for a reason. Nothing at this point is an accident. Nothing's a fluke anymore. Maybe you're supposed to do exactly what you're doing. Stand around watching. Record. Or maybe you're just supposed to fetch that annoying pedal. I guess we can just ask Her outright pretty soon."

Without looking for Liz's reaction, Tyler took off into the rain in search of the pedal.

"Hi, Liz," Merard said. "Señora Viracocha is right. You look good."

He smiled at her. She managed to give him half a smile back. She looked focused, deep in thought.

"Hi, Sam," she said. "You're not so bad yourself these days. You've turned into quite the action hero."

"I'm sorry I didn't say hello properly to you last night. It was rude."

"I'm sorry I didn't try to find you when I came back," she said. "*That* was rude."

Merard shrugged.

“When you tumble hand-in-hand and smiling into the abyss together, I think that’s the reasonable end of your obligations to one another. There are no further expectations.”

“Fair enough.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Merard said. “She’s waited a long time. She can wait a little longer. She can find someone else.”

Liz shook her head.

“I want to do this. It’s what I’m supposed to do. It’s what I should have done a long time ago.”

“Until I came along,” he said. “I’m always mucking things up.”

“That’s what you’re good at. That’s why she chose you.”

Merard sighed.

“Let’s get on with it then,” he said.

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“This would be a lot easier to explain if I didn’t have to speak through this phone,” I said.

They all stood in the chamber Regina had opened up, loosely gathered around the vessel in the center. They had a thousand questions. I couldn’t keep up. Regina held her phone out so that everyone could hear. Her arm was getting tired. I was, too. I admit I was getting impatient. I was so close.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

Even though there was no way to tell whom I was addressing, Liz knew. She’d always known.

After a moment, she nodded.

Then, unsure if I could see the gesture (I could), she said, “Yes.”

The lid of the vessel remained open. Liz peered into it. Her body began to tingle. That wasn’t even me.

“Let’s get to work,” Merard said to Julian and Charles, uninterested in watching her Disappear again—even for only a little while. I don’t blame him.

The three of them wheeled their dollies out of the chamber, through the tunnel which led further downward. Gabby followed.

Liz had always felt hollow, even long before the scientists in The Building That Disappeared carved out her bones. She searched far and wide for something, anything, to fill her up. Nothing sufficed. I thought at the time I was doing her a favor. I thought that by making the hollowness literal—and then filling it with something real and large and heavy—I could help her find peace, a purpose. But I miscalculated. I’d been away from humans for too long. I forgot that what looked good on paper doesn’t always necessarily translate to reality. I underestimated how fragile and flighty a smart, sweet, sad girl with hollowed-out bones could be.

I also put my trust in too many people I didn’t truly know. That’s why this time around I took my time. I

got to know everyone I brought into my circle. The scientists in The Building had been overzealous. Both too enthusiastic and too susceptible to persuasion and temptation. They took it too far. They were corrupted. They didn't stop where they should have. They kept digging and she kept getting lighter. Lighter than she needed to be.

I understood why she fled with Sam that night. I'd asked too much to begin with, and the scientists took it too far. She was literally wasting away. She wanted it to end. She stopped thinking about the bigger plan. She focused on her boyfriend and oblivion. As uncertain as she was that anything could truly fill her, she was sure she could fill his desire. She could show him wonders and horrors.

She couldn't trust me so she chose oblivion over me. I don't blame her. I was 12,475 years old then. Much too rash and selfish. Much too young.

When I learned she had returned from the Mountain of the Dead unscathed, my original suspicions were confirmed. She was special. Strong and resilient. More than she knew. But I held off. I didn't want to put her through another nightmare. I waited.

She refused to change. She still felt hollow. Once she chose Tyler, I knew she wasn't interested in moving on. He was the last person who would be capable of filling her up. I decided to try again. I didn't *need* her per se this time, but it would be nice to be able to walk around on a pair of real feet again; to feel the touch of other human beings. To sleep and run and cry and hurt and love. I wouldn't be so desperate this time. I'd be gentle. I'd nudge her toward me. Let her make the choice.

Liz stepped forward. She touched the black side of the vessel.

She wasn't as light as she was before the Mountain of the Dead. She didn't need to be. It would take more than a gentle breeze to carry her away. The scientists had betrayed me; they'd overdone it. She didn't need to float or fly away. She was just right.

"I'm ready," she said.

"I would hug you if I could," I said through the phone. "Thank you."

It was incredibly frustrating to communicate without intonations or gestures—to be dependent on that monotone robot voice.

"I suppose you will soon, in a way," Liz said.

"Whenever you're ready," I said.

She turned to Tyler.

"Goodbye," she said. "I do love you. Be stronger than you've been before."

"What's happening?" he asked, with little hope of receiving a processable answer. He was as lost as Sam Merard was so many years ago on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor.

"I'll be back," she said. "I think. More or less. This is what I'm meant to do."

"*What* is?"

She kissed him on the cheek and then turned back to the vessel. She was ready.

I trembled with excitement. It had been so long.

She climbed inside. She laid down flat in the space carved out for her.

“This won’t take long,” I said.

The lid of the vessel slid shut above her.

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Merard, Julian, Charles and Gabby got to work in the lower chamber. More accurately, Merard and Julian unloaded the crates and watched on as Charles began assembling his device. Gabby supervised.

This chamber, designed for a specific, hopeful purpose, was a hexagon instead of a circle. Like the upper chamber, glowing wires crisscrossed into a tight grid along the walls and ceiling, but there was no object in the center of the room until Charles built one.

He’d dumped out the contents of the crates that he needed, including Tyler’s guitar pedal. Merard stacked the remaining four boxes against the wall. Two of them were filled with cans of Ubiq. The other two held hard drives and laptops.

“Just tell us what you need us to do,” the magician’s assistants said.

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We contained multitudes.

Data is practically weightless these days, but we held much more than that. Liz carried me now as I had carried the memories, thoughts, and history of an entire civilization. We were heavy again.

The lid retracted once again.

Liz stood up.

I stood up.

I used her lungs to inhale deeply, my first breath in more than twelve millennia. Even the stale air inside the chamber felt good. I took another breath, and another.

I examined my hands. Liz’s hands. I touched her fingertips to my cheek. I felt a small wave of ecstasy as our nails scraped lightly against our skin.

We looked around. Everyone was staring at us. Waiting.

“It’s okay, I’m still here,” Liz said to Tyler, who looked about ready to burst out of his own skin.

“I am, too,” I said.

“Your hair...” Tyler began.

“What about it?” Liz asked.

We were already learning how to share. To take turns. She had absorbed most everything I had been carrying with me with grace. Like a champ. She remained on the surface, though, not quite ready to dive down deep. I didn't blame her.

"It's silver," Tyler said.

"Hmm," Liz said.

I beamed. The vessel had remembered who I had been before. It gave as much attention to me as it did to the other memories I carried.

"That's me," I said. "I had an unusual look back when I was me. They listed a dozen other reasons why they chose me, but I know my hair was a deciding factor."

I laughed.

"Who decided?" the Colonel asked. "Chose you for what?"

By this time, some of them knew most of the story, some knew bits and pieces, and some knew almost nothing at all.

"I suppose it's time for me to tell you a story," I said.

I told them everything.

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Most traces of my people were gone 7,000 years before the mud-hut-dwelling Sumerians began dreaming of erecting ziggurats. Our great civilization grew rapidly and Disappeared even more swiftly. We explored and mapped every corner of the globe. We studied our different, less lucky tribes of brothers and sisters around the world, still struggling to rise above our mutual dark, primal instincts of self-preservation and warfare.

At our peak, we numbered more than fifteen million—three times that of the rest of the undeveloped Earth. We built dozens of grand, beautiful cities throughout both our homeland and outposts around the world. With the exception of some early, unfortunate growing pains, we were mostly peaceful. Our cumulative knowledge and technology grew at a breakneck pace, even by today's standards.

Our civilization did not grow at the rate, nor flourish to the degree it did because we were any different genetically than the rest of humanity. We were the same as everyone else. But like the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and post-Dark Age Europeans, we were lucky when it came to geography.

Our homeland was flush with a propitious mineral, bright blue in color, that we called Osirin. More ubiquitous than copper, more useful than iron or steel, and ultimately more dangerous than uranium, Osirin was far and away the prime catalyst for the rapid development of our society.

In the early days, alchemists learned that mixing Osirin with other common minerals produced different metals and compounds—each of which could be used for a multitude of purposes. Except for the more complex compounds we created much further down the line, this process didn't require smelting. Simple grinding and mixing usually did the trick for the simple, initial compounds. Osirin absorbed the properties

of whatever it came in contact with and created something new.  $1+1=3$ . 3, or 5, or 212, or 6 million. The only commonality between the compounds created was that their natural color was generally some shade of blue, or occasionally green.

Because Osirin was so abundant, there was no need to wage war over it. We were able to create increasingly complex devices and machines using the various osiric compounds that their functions resembled magic; and after a certain point it was almost as if our technology became self-replicating. We were able to take a completely different route for our civilization's development than yours. We were so occupied with perfecting our scientific creations and technological wonders that we had little time for other artistic endeavors. Our culture rarely paused to stop and reflect. We kept building, kept growing, kept perfecting.

And then it all came crashing down. It wasn't exactly hubris that caused our downfall; more of a naive ignorance of the bigger picture into which we were inserting ourselves. Even more specifically, it was a race, many millions of years older than ourselves, who decided we should be wiped from existence.

They came from the sky. We weren't *that* ignorant. We knew what that meant. We knew they weren't vengeful gods angered by our hubris. We knew what they were.

They had a massive leg up on us, to say the least. While our local advantage came from the natural resources specific to our homeland, their...broader...advantage came from the fact that they had spent the past thirty million years spreading themselves across the galaxy.

They came because of the Osirin, which was the prime driver of their civilization as well. They detected our use of it. They wanted to extract the Osirin for themselves, but beyond that, they had decided long ago to exterminate any race they came across which had begun using Osirin. Their policy was to wipe out any potential threat before it became an actual danger. They represented the logical endgame of Darwinism—a life form that took complete, dominant control of all of creation.

We initially thought of it as a war, but it was really a drawn-out massacre. In the end, we didn't stand a chance, but we fought the good fight for a long time. The creatures Merard faced in Colorado liberally think of humanity as monkeys; realistically it's more like ants. The race of intruders we faced—of whose shadows Liz and Merard caught a glimpse in the Dyatlov Pass—thought of those Colorado invaders ants.

We were utterly nothing to them. Microscopic. Invisible. Insignificant. But every once in a while microbes can band together to wreak a bit of havoc on even the biggest giant.

Ironically, their first assault was microbial. They spread disease and pestilence. But our osiric medical technology was robust, and we fended off those initial invisible attacks. They could have obliterated the entire Earth if they so chose, but they wanted our minerals. They needed to leave it more or less in tact. So they turned to deliberate, focused physical attacks. They used different types of weapons each time, so we didn't have the opportunity to adapt. One by one, our cities fell. Our people died by the hundreds of thousands.

We scored a lone but crucial victory. Our most accomplished warrior and her soldiers managed to capture one of their ships ("ship" is an inaccurate, underwhelming term for what it really was, but it's the closest equivalent). From the wreckage, we were able to tap into their navigation system—essentially both a star map, for lack of a better term, and a timeline or schedule.

We had already developed a crude Osirin-based teleportation system, but it was only good for relatively local travel. It turned out they used a similar but much more advanced technology to propel their infestation across the galaxy. They had created (or inherited, we never knew for sure if they developed the system or, like the Mayans here, utilized an already-existing infrastructure) a vast network of “portals” across the galaxy that linked disparate star systems via artificial wormholes. However, in order to set up each portal, they had to travel by much slower, conventional methods to each point. This process took up at least 20 million of their 30 million year history. They were patient, methodical, and relentless.

[Passing through the portals themselves—although it felt instantaneous to a traveler—actually took anywhere from months to decades from a fixed, outside perspective, depending on the distance between points.](#) A traveler would enter one portal and exit another and it would be as if a single second had passed. But while they traveled, the rest of the galaxy chugged on.

Their star map was mind-bogglingly large and intricate, and still growing. Our scientists were also able to partially decode a kind of complex timetable the invaders used to spread, mine, and progress. The scale of the timetable stretched all the way to the millions of years, as it kept track of the development of potential threat-civilizations, as well as the growth and maturity of Osirin deposits within each star system.

The unique signature of large-scale Osirin use was only one trigger for their arrival to a planet. They also tracked, catalogued, and projected the development of all species they encountered, whether Osirin-based or not. Once each species reached a critical point of development, the intruders would arrive for extermination of each future threat. Already full to the brim of fear and despair, this knowledge filled us with galactic-sized rage—and a small amount of hope.

As our cities continued to fall, our remaining scientists dedicated themselves to modifying the intruders’ technology for the construction of a large portal that we could use to tap into their network. Meanwhile, the intruders had started using different, even more destructive tactics. Our continued, persistent resistance made our destruction a bigger priority than the Osirin mining opportunity.

Their weapons tore apart the Earth’s crust. Massive, cataclysmic waves flooded most coastal areas of the entire planet. As they continued to attack our home continent with more conventional weapons, they also pushed the entire land mass south, to the pole, so that even if any of us survived the initial massacre, our entire homeland would freeze. By the time the portal was completed, only one large city remained, erected on a small peninsula of one of our northern outposts.

In Tropicalia. The city where I was born.

During those final desperate days, we fleshed out the final details of a plan. Using their star map, we identified a habitable planet with no native, sentient life forms and no significant Osirin deposits—thus placing it under their radar. If we were to survive and thrive, we would have to do so without our osiric crutch.

We activated the portal and Disappeared our last city to a safer, faraway place. We had learned from their map that Osirin wasn’t the only way to progress as a civilization. We would have to depend on our wits. We would re-build from scratch, carrying with us only a small portion of the knowledge we had gained.

We would grow. We would progress. We would become a silent threat to them. We would find a way to

stop them. We didn't care how much of a head start they had on us. We would put an end to their relentless, sustained extermination of the galaxy. We would someday return to Earth before they did.

We hoped.

Some of us remained behind. Just under one hundred of us. One hundred of fifteen million. All but one of us spread around the world. Our first task was to obliterate all remaining deposits of Osirin, so they wouldn't have a reason to return, save for the trace amounts left behind here in Tropicalia for far future use.

After that was complete, we began to integrate ourselves into the other human societies around the world. Our mission was to gently guide them toward the development of civilizations. Our goal was to take it slow. We understood that the baser instincts of humanity would be tougher to rein in without Osirin. We wanted civilizations to take their time to build; to develop full, rich cultures before the introduction of more advanced technology. We humans needed to get used to living together in communities before we developed better ways to kill each other. Our results were...mixed.

I suppose it's worth mentioning that the enhancements brought about by Osirin allowed our natural lifespans to greatly increase. So we were able to serve as shepherds. Most of us were subtle. Some of us weren't. A few got carried away. One of us made himself a god-king in Central America before moving to Egypt to do the same thing. He would have continued if another of us hadn't put an end to it.

We aged less rapidly than non-Osirin-enhanced humans, but we weren't immortal. Eventually, we all faded away. We did our best to pass on the most important of our secrets to trusted groups, who in turn passed them on throughout the ages.

All but one of us spread around the world. One of us stayed right here. Me.

I was the failsafe. The backup plan. These chambers and this vessel were constructed to hold me, along with a digitized vault of our civilization's feats, failures, hopes, dreams, mistakes, nightmares, and memories. A vault alone wouldn't be enough. It needed a human anchor, in order to give the memories context and warmth.

One part of my mission was to preserve the memory of my people in case their exodus didn't work out as they planned. But there was another, more concrete part of my mission. I was to lie asleep and buried here until the time that human civilization and technology developed again to the point where I could connect with it. At that point, options would begin to present themselves. I could reveal myself to them and share with them all I knew. I could be a warning for them, because if they had developed this much, it wouldn't be long before the intruders took notice again. Alternately, or at the same time, I could use the remaining trace amounts of Osirin in the area to open a doorway to my people on the other side of the galaxy to let them know we were still here, and we were ready to be contacted, and it was time to come home.

Complications ensued.

About thirty years ago, I first sensed movement in my dark room. The Internet had sprung to life and begun to grow. I hooked into it. Like my ancestors before me, I began subtly guiding its development into something both useful for me and for humanity. Again, mixed results. But the infrastructure worked well enough.

That's how I first met Charles. I helped him, and he helped me. He initially helped me get in contact with

the right people. I eventually gathered a group of volunteers, mostly centered on an ad-hoc headquarters in Manhattan. Some of them were scientists, some were warriors, some philosophers and artists, and all were dedicated workers. Using a small amount of Osirin smuggled up from down here, they constructed a portal large enough for the whole building. They also built a duplicate vessel like the one in this chamber that I could use to come alive again.

Perhaps I was overly ambitious. I'd been trapped here for so long I wanted to make my first real act a grand gesture. I wanted to send my people an unmistakable signal: We are here, and we are ready. I wanted them to see a building that was beautiful and sleek enough to fit into their own cityscape. I didn't think about the psychic consequences of the Disappearance.

I also didn't fully account for the full range of emotions of the individuals involved. I underestimated the toll of what I asked of Liz would take on her. I didn't anticipate that she would rather run toward oblivion than host me. I misjudged some of the other players as well who decided to deviate from the plan for personal gain. There was some third-party interference as well.

The end result was that I wasn't able to accompany the crew of volunteers on their journey. But the portal worked. The building Disappeared.

I had no way of knowing if the journey was a success. I didn't know what they found when they arrived. I had to plan for both the best and worst-case scenarios.

I feared for this new iteration of humanity I'd grown to love. I feared that the intruders would come again before my people could return—or if they did and weren't able to stop the intruders. So I set up a separate network, I suppose you could call it a cult, of museum curators around the world. I imparted them with much of my knowledge. They understood the gravity of the situation. Together—they doing the physical work and me helping plan from here—we began an even larger-scale version of the preservation project of which I was a (sort of) living embodiment. Humanity had created such wonders (and, yes, horrors) over the millennia of which my own people, as advanced as they were, hadn't even dreamed. I wanted to preserve and rescue what I could.

Over the ensuing years, some of the volunteers made their way back here via small portals secretly set up around the world ages ago, both by my people who'd been left behind and by those...third parties. Some, including Regina's mother, came through [the portal near Cahokia](#). These Returned took me by surprise. I didn't understand what their return meant. Even I couldn't cut through their amnesia. I had to assume that these few who returned were an exception to the rule. Perhaps they'd simply opted out and gotten homesick. Perhaps my people wiped their memories before they left so as not to endanger whatever plan they were cooking up. The alternative—that the whole mission had been a catastrophe—was too depressing to dwell on. But the possibility made me re-double my museum/preservation efforts.

I had no choice but to stick to the timeline of the original plan I devised with the group of volunteers in New York. The journey through the portal would take just over two years. The return journey would take the same amount of time, although again, it would feel like an instant for the travelers. We factored in seven years for my people to analyze the building and its contents, to size up the situation and history here on Earth, and to develop a plan. Twelve and a half millennia had passed since I had seen my people, and since they had been home. Eleven and a half years was nothing.

That being said, we also defined a date (using an Earth-based calendar, of course) upon which I would

open another specific portal through which they could return. That day is today. So despite well over 12,000 years of planning time, I'm still cutting it down to the wire with an even smaller, motlier crew than I assembled in New York.

I hadn't planned on Alan Ambrose. He hacked into one of Charles's old computers and came across some details about the Osirin deposits in Tropicalia, and came down here to investigate. His intrusion severely limited my abilities and I had no choice but to ask Charles for one more enormous favor.

Ever since his surprise appearance in the building the night before it [Disappeared](#), I'd followed Sam Merard. His actions during the intervening years—[and his realization of his true nature](#)—confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that I should recruit him. Unfortunately, many of those actions also highlighted—and sometimes encouraged—additional possible causes of civilization's imminent downfall besides the intruders. It took all my effort (hampered by InterWorld's interference), multiple visits by IMC members, and a trip down here to Tropicalia, to convince him I was the real deal. But once he signed on, he dedicated himself fully.

Charles introduced me to Regina. He met her through his connection with her father. Once I formed the plan, her role was obvious based on her skills.

Both General Paramo and Señora Viracocha were part of the long line of caretakers dedicated to guarding me and the legacy of my people. General Vendia had been part of the same line. The civil war in Tropicalia thirty-five years ago had been fought in part to keep the land and sea within which I was buried secure. I deeply regret the bloodshed.

Professor Burress of the IMC was here to observe and make sure this stage of the preservation project went according to plan.

Liz.

After the fiasco in New York, I was ready to accept I would never breathe or walk or feel again. I screwed up. I hurt her. I drove her to oblivion, to the Dyatlov Pass by which the shadow of the intruders passed. I swore I wouldn't make that mistake again. I wouldn't hollow out another person. I was ready to do all of this without resurrecting myself. But here she was. I knew she worked for InterWorld. I knew she was coming here. But I couldn't bring myself to ask her to sacrifice herself again. Not after everything I'd put her through. Not after all this time. But once she was close enough that I could see her, I saw how lost she still was. I reached out. She said, "Yes, yes, yes."

So here we all are. I would thank you all for coming here, but you know that this isn't about me. It's bigger than any of us. However, now that I'm fully awake, I feel the burden that Liz and I carry more than ever. We're so heavy. I can't help but hope that I won't have to carry this with me for much longer. That's my own selfishness.

Liz and I carry the weight of an entire civilization with us, but I'm still just a single human being, a woman, at my core. I would like to shed this weight and feel myself again—to remember the sound of my mother's voice as she sang me to sleep, the electric shudder of my first kiss, the thrill of victory when we captured that ship...

I want to see my people again. I want to know I'm not carrying this for nothing.

So let's go see what Charles has built us, shall we?

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The lower chamber was full of frenzied, chaotic activity. Charles's machine, nearly completed, wobbled in the center of the room. The loop of wire was approximately eight feet in diameter, much larger than the version he had erected in his attic. They were having trouble stabilizing it. His attic machine had been suspended from the roof. This chamber's ceiling was far too high to reach.

Julian and Merard stood at opposite ends of the chamber, both clutching two strands of twine. I couldn't help but giggle when I saw Merard tear a piece of duct tape off the roll with his teeth—[he had more experience with duct tape than most](#)—and try to fasten the pieces of twine against the chamber wall. The pieces of twine stretched to two sides of the wire loop. Charles and Gabby stood at the wire, trying to keep it upright.

At the sound of my laughter, Charles whipped his head around in my direction.

“What are you laughing at? This is a disaster,” he sputtered. “We already tried propping it up. This can't be remotely stable enough. And even if it is, I have no way of entering coordinates or whatever input this piece of shit requires. I can try hooking up a laptop—”

I held up my hand and stifled another giggle. I didn't mean to laugh. He was just so frantic and adorable. I could blame a lot of the laughter on Liz, but we need to work together now.

“You're worrying too much,” I said. “You've done amazing work. It will stabilize as soon as we activate it. We don't need coordinates.”

On the other side of the chamber, Julian threw his head back in exasperation. He dropped his pieces of twine. Merard's pieces tore free from the wall. Charles and Gabby stepped out of the way as the loop of wire tipped over to the floor.

“I still don't get it,” Charles said. “If they're supposed to arrive today, that means they would have to have left over two years ago. Are you telling me they made such a literal leap of faith that they would trust this machine would be assembled at exactly the right time in exactly the right place? They wouldn't wait until they got some signal that it's active on their end?”

I shook my head.

“That's not how it works. They enter the coordinates on their end. It doesn't have to be quite as precise as you might think—although when we're talking thousands of light years, I guess it's still pretty damn on the money. Think of your machine as a vacuum cleaner. It will suck up anything that comes close enough. There are other portals on the planet. Worst case scenario, they'd end up in the one in Illinois.”

Below the massive loop—or I suppose in front of it now since it had collapsed—was a jumble of equipment fastened together with super glue, duct tape, and twisty ties. After we get the portal open, I'll have to figure out a way to make the machinery itself a bit more durable and permanent. The section of the machine closest to me consisted of several Mylar wheels and hubs from 3.5" floppy disks fastened to the end of a child's kaleidoscope. Two diodes ran from the lens end of the kaleidoscope to the small black box of Osirin that facilitated local (cross-Earth) travel. A quarter-inch cable snaked out of the bottom of the box to Tyler's guitar pedal.

“How close are you?” I asked.

“Hold your horses,” Charles said. “I need to double-check a few things and then we’ll be good, assuming it doesn’t have to stand upright.”

The Colonel spoke up.

“So after everything you’ve told us, and everything you’ve done, you still can’t tell me what my wife saw and what made her return?”

I bit my lip and shook my head.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I wish I could. You have no idea how much I crave certainty. But we should know soon.”

Merard strode across the chamber. He gazed skeptically at my new body, or at Liz’s new passenger.

He asked, “How can you be sure you’re not opening up a doorway for the...intruders or whatever you called them, or something worse?”

“Nothing’s worse. You know that. There have been paths opened to this planet for a long time. Another door won’t attract their attention.”

After a pause, I added, “I’m pretty sure.”

Merard scoffed.

Regina asked, “What do they look like?”

I shut my eyes for a moment. So did Liz. We had both seen things we wished we could unsee.

I said, “I’d rather not talk about that. It’s not important. If they come, you’ll know it. There won’t be any doubt.”

Charles touched a screwdriver to a nest of wires. A small shower of sparks erupted. He nodded satisfactorily.

I opened my mouth and began to stutter. Liz was trying to say something at the same time as me. We stumbled over each other.

“This is...weird...” Liz began.

“No shit,” Tyler said.

“...But I have a question, too.”

My eyes widened in amusement. We’d figure out how to better share communication and information later. There were easier ways.

“Go ahead,” I said.

Using the same mouth and a nearly identical intonation, she asked, “Where does Dyatlov come in? And

how were we able to go back there? You've spoken about space travel but nothing about traveling through time. I'm pretty sure that's what we did."

Looking like a mental patient, I answered myself, "Well, kind of. There are rules that can't easily be broken. But space and time travel are sort of the same thing, at least the way we do it. The portals are artificial, modified wormholes. I'm not a scientist; even if I was, it would take a long time to explain properly. Suffice it to say that if you stack enough of them on top of each other, you can start to push through time as well as space. Usually, when you do that, you can only observe. You're not really a tangible force. You two pushed it a little farther than usual. I blame Titus, may he rest in peace."

"What do you mean we pushed it too far?" Liz asked.

"You changed things," I said.

"You haven't looked up the Dyatlov Pass Incident since we got back?" Merard asked, addressing Liz.

She shook my head.

"That was always your thing," she said. "I was *really* done with it once I made it back."

"The rescue crew found seven bodies," Merard said. "They never found Dyatlov or Zinaida."

"Did we save them?" Liz asked.

"I don't know," Merard said.

I began to open her mouth to give my own take, but a sharp whine emanated from the direction of Charles's machine. His foot was on the guitar pedal. He jerked it away and looked sheepishly at me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to. I was testing something."

"It's okay," I said, smiling.

The whine ceased, and the loop of wire snapped upright. It glowed green for a moment. Then the green began to dissolve. It had established a connection with the other side. Although it would soon become a door, it was now turning into a window. A scene began to form. For the first time since this silly adventure began, I gazed into the portal with the same sense of awe, excitement, and enchantment as everyone else.

There was much activity happening in the foreground of the view, but most of our eyes first drifted to the distance. The portal on the other side was positioned on a large hill above a city. My city. It was three times as large as it was when last I saw it, but it was still recognizable. It was still standing, all these impossible millennia later. It shimmered silver against the pale blue sky.

Regina squeezed her father's hand. He in turn exchanged a glance with Paramo. This was the city of which he had told her fantastic tales when she was a little girl.

Liz and I shared the tears that began streaming down her face. I cried because I was finally seeing my home after twelve and a half thousand years. She cried because amongst the towers she spotted a familiar shape—the building in which she worked after college, the building in which her bones were hollowed out, the building that disappeared—incorporated seamlessly into the rest of the cityscape.

I turned my focus to the movement on the hilltop directly in front of the portal. My people. Alive. Smiling, dancing, laughing. They were throwing a party.

It was an odd sight for many reasons, but I couldn't help comparing it to Alan's pathetic little shindig earlier today. This one, I hoped, celebrated a much purer purpose.

There were well over a hundred people on that hilltop. Some were eating food, some were cooking it. Long before I was born, we had adopted the once-daily consumption of nutrient pills in lieu of regular meals. Real food was reserved for special occasions and celebrations. This looked like a feast.

The whole scene was less alien than the people around me might have imagined. Some of it seemed even old-fashioned. Banners were strung up, albeit inscribed with words in a language they couldn't read. People laughed and smiled and shouted. Two rectangular containers, about nine feet long and four feet wide and tall, sat in front of the portal.

My people looked a little different than when I had last seen them, but they were still recognizably human. In general, their skin was a slightly darker shade as Paramo's, although there were some variations. This—and the paleness of the sky—could be explained by the twin suns. One sun was beginning to rise above the hills behind the city, and I guessed the other must be setting somewhere behind the portal. Before we sent our city out across the stars, we knew this planet had fifty-hour days, thirty-nine of which were under sunlight.

Their hairstyles varied wildly. To outsiders, my people would originally have appeared to be comprised of several races gathered together from every corner of our now-frozen continent. Over time, they had blended together to share a common skin tone; the differing hairstyles were the most stubborn remaining genetic markers. They were dressed in a wide variety of types of clothes—dresses, pants, short-sleeves, long-sleeves—a similar distribution as you'd find anywhere on Earth. They certainly weren't all wearing the bland jumpsuits your sci-fi writers think everyone in the future will adopt.

I couldn't be sure, but it seemed like their heads were slightly larger proportionally. Good for them, haha. Most of them wore what looked like tattoos on their temples. These were actually computer interfaces that they designed to fit their own personal styles.

I counted five children. That was higher than I expected. Given our greatly extended life spans and the easily available method of more reliable methods, traditional reproduction was rare even in my day. Sex was for fun.

One aspect that wasn't initially apparent was that most of them stood between six and a half and eight feet tall. Gravity was slightly weaker on their new (although it could hardly be called new anymore) planet. I didn't have the proper perspective to notice the size difference until I spotted a few shorter ones. I recognized their faces the same way the other people at my side did. They were new arrivals. They were the Disappeared. The original crew I'd assembled. The new, smaller crew at my side recognized them, too. I wondered if the children were theirs.

Not all portals transport sound. Charles, despite his doubts and franticness brought on by being so close to the end of his commitment to me, had built his expertly. I could make out snippets of conversations. Our language had changed over the millennia, but I could still get the gist.

I also heard music. For a moment, I wondered if my people had finally slowed down enough to create a

sustained Arts culture, but then I recognized the song. It was The Beatles. The Disappeared brought music over with them. Apparently it had caught on. I smiled again. Again and again.

The music and voices died down. An amplified, disembodied voice, emanating from somewhere outside of the portal's view, began speaking. I translated for the others as best I could.

The speaker thanked the crowd for coming out to celebrate the brave team's departure. The voice, which sounded male, said that all their hard work over so many years was about to pay off. He thanked the team. He acknowledged that their mission would be very dangerous and full of uncertain variables, but he had confidence they would be successful. He promised that one day soon they would all be able to return home; and one day even sooner they would be re-united with their long-lost sister who had stayed behind for so long to prepare the way; who had volunteered to remain behind even after leading her squadron to the victory which had enabled their escape and the continuation of their society. The speaker encouraged the crowd to face the portal and wave to her, in case she was watching. The crowd looked at me and erupted into cheers and applause.

More tears rolled down Liz's cheeks. I wasn't ashamed. I was grateful to be able to cry, to feel, to walk, to talk, and to hear my people. To welcome them home.

However, I didn't translate all the details of the last part of the speech. I was still capable of modesty. Sort of. I did write it here, after all.

Several people stepped in front of the portal from the sides. I thought I counted eight, but I couldn't be sure. Not only were they dressed identically in matching gray jumpsuits (okay, maybe I jumped the gun on my previous comment regarding future fashion), but they also all looked identical to two different men. One set was thickly muscled with dark wavy hair. The other set was leaner with lighter hair and rounder noses. *Vessels. Clones.*

Two of them lightly touched the surface of the rectangular containers. The boxes rose a few inches into the air and hovered.

They began walking through the portal.

They began entering the chamber instantly—or what seemed to be instantly. We all stepped back to allow them space. They blinked to adjust to the dimmer, green light. A couple of them looked back wistfully through the portal, watching the applauding crowd, knowing that they were already more than two years removed. I was mildly sympathetic. Try 12,000.

The containers shuddered slightly upon their entrance, but their expertly designed machinery adjusted rapidly to the change in gravity.

As soon as they were all through, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around the first one. He, like the others, was a giant—nearly seven feet tall. Liz's head came to his chest. Clone or not, he was the first of my people I had touched in a very long time (if I haven't reminded you of that fact enough already). The others moved in to embrace me. A trio of them greeted Señora Viracocha as well.

I apologized to the, for lack of a better term, Earthlings and asked them to be patient. I conversed with the emissaries for a few minutes in my native language.

Finally, I turned and faced my own loyal crew, to whom I'd be eternally grateful. But I wasn't the first to

address them. The lead man spoke to them in a strangely accented English. They had been taught by the Disappeared.

He said, “Thank you very much. Our sister here has told us how much you’ve sacrificed to help us. We hope to help you as well. For simplicity’s sake, you may call me Methos. Please don’t be alarmed at our appearance. Our sister has reminded us how unusual we appear to you. These bodies are merely cloned vessels. Each of these vessels carries three distinct...personalities—the consciousnesses of four of our best and brightest. Each of us contains within this body a scientist, a warrior, and a communicator—the latter is the part who’s speaking to you now.”

“Think of them as Me Version 2.0,” Liz said.

“They’re here to help,” I said.

I traded off with Methos in explaining the nature of their mission. Technically, they had several missions. The first priority was to attempt to secure the planet against the intruders and all other major threats, whether natural or unnatural—foreign intrusion, disease, famine, climate change, and so on. The containers carried various pieces of technology to combat these potential threats. Humanity had managed to back itself into several different corners all at once. My people wouldn’t exactly act as *deus ex machina*, but they did bring a bevy of possible solutions, enabled by unbiased perspective and thousands of years of planning.

One of the emissaries was assigned to turn back almost immediately, to let the rest of our population know that they made it through safely, to convey the first bits of intelligence, and to shepherd the first Earth artifacts to be stored away off-world. He won’t return until five years have passed since he walked through the portal a minute ago. The hope is that he will be the first of many return passages.

I announced to my fellow Earthlings that anyone is welcome to accompany this emissary. I wanted more than anything to go with him, but I couldn’t yet. There was still much work to be done here first.

Regina and the Colonel exchanged glances.

“We’ll go,” Regina said, excitement tinging her voice. “I want to see what my mom saw.”

“I’ll go too,” Julian said.

He glanced at Merard. Merard nodded tersely.

“I have a feeling you people can help me train,” he said.

Professor Burrell, the representative from the IMC, shook himself out of his nearly paralyzed state of astonishment, and got to work. He shuffled over to the crate filled with hard drives. He picked up a can of Ubiquitous and began spraying the drives.

The emissary designated to return to the city walked over to him. He procured a small three-inch sphere. He pressed a hidden button on its surface. The ball glowed orange. He brought it closer to the hard drives, and held it there for several seconds until its color switched to green.

“It’s all on here now,” he said.

Burrell frowned.

“You can bring them all if you want,” the emissary offered. “Or you can spray this sphere to make sure it’s safe for the journey.”

Burress considered the options for a moment. He shrugged. The emissary set the ball on the ground and Burress coated it with Ubiq. The emissary picked it up delicately.

“I’ll keep it safe,” he promised.

“Where did you even come from?” the Colonel asked Burress.

“I’m not a soldier,” Burress said apologetically. “I stayed on the sidelines.”

Once satisfied that the portal was open, Burress would inform his colleagues around the world that they could begin shipping more artifacts to send through for preservation.

The emissary asked Regina, the Colonel, and Julian if they were sure, and if they were ready. They assented.

Regina locked eyes with Tyler.

“Take care of yourself, brother,” she said. “Keep your head up.”

“I will,” he said, as bravely as he could. “Be careful.”

Tyler wanted to go with them, but he had at least grown enough recently to realize that chasing his ex-girlfriend through a portal into another world would constitute an entirely new level of clinginess.

The emissary led the way through the portal. Julian followed. Regina and her father grabbed hands.

The Colonel thought of his wife, and stepped into the void.

They Disappeared. None of them appeared on the other side. They wouldn’t for another two and a half years.

Once they were gone, Methos tapped the top of the container nearest him.

“The first priority is to delay the...intruders’...return,” he said.

Earth faced multiple threats. Even we weren’t 100% sure we could stave them all off, which is why the Ubiq-preservation project remained a priority. However, one threat loomed higher than the others.

Methos continued, “Within this container is enough raw material to build a portal big enough to allow our ships through-”

“Ships?” Merard interjected, echoing the surprise of the other Earthlings.

“We believe we have the capacity to form a defensive perimeter. All we need to do is get to space. I assume that regular space travel must be occurring by now, given its status when your building came to us.”

“Uh, it’s a bit more complicated than that,” Merard said. He laughed darkly. “I don’t suppose any of you

speak Russian? Mine's a little rusty these days. That's the only way we're getting up there."

Two additional people had come through the portal some time after the rest of the team. Most of us hadn't noticed their presence because they were much shorter than the other emissaries. Now they finally poked out from behind the giants.

Dyatlov and Zinaida, holding hands.

"We might be of some assistance," Igor Dyatlov said in thickly accented English.

"Hooly shit," Merard said slowly.

I had long ago informed Merard of most of the details of the plan. He believed me. He had quietly accepted everything that occurred since the portal opened. However, the appearance of his Russian doppelgänger finally brought him to the edge of astonishment.

"Hi," Liz said to Zinaida.

She smiled at us.

"Hi."

Igor and Zinaida, their minds and bodies intertwined with Liz and Merard, had accompanied them on their unexpected return journey. They were deposited into the Building That Disappeared. Frightened and confused, they remained inside the building until after it went through its own portal. They had spent the last eleven years with my people. Strangers among strangers in a strange land.

Dyatlov addressed Merard.

"I am not certain if I should hug you or punch you in the face."

Merard smirked, as he tended to do.

"You're Russian," he said. "I have a feeling we both know which it will be. But we can sort that out later. It sounds like we have another adventure to begin. We've gone through worse together. [Let's rescue what we can. Let's figure out how to get to space.](#)"

Everyone had fulfilled or would shortly fulfill their purpose, except for Tyler of course. He was lost in the shuffle.

"So," he said meekly, a hair above a mumble, "what should I do?"

As I had done, perhaps ill advised, many times before, I took pity on him.

"I almost forgot about you," I said.

Liz chided me silently for my gruffness. She still cared for him.

"Why am I even here?" Tyler moaned, as usual.

"Once I'd assembled most of this crew, I realized I needed a chronicler, in case things went bad, or even if they went right. I studied the manifest of people who would be down here—actually, that's when I

realized Liz was coming—and I concluded you were the most...qualified. You'd do in a pinch."

"Gee, thanks," he said flatly.

"We have a lot of work to do," I began.

I swept my arm across the seven remaining emissaries; and Merard, Paramo, Señora Viracocha, Burrell, Dyatlov, Zinaida, Charles, and Gabby. Charles pursed his lips and shook his head when my gaze passed over him. Gabby stared me down.

I continued, "If we're successful, big changes will be coming. If we fail, big changes will be coming, too. It'd be nice if the world could know a little bit about what we're up to before that happens, so they're prepared. At least the little bit of the world you can reach."

*(That last part was mean but somewhat fair - Editor)*

Tyler literally threw his hands up in the air, like a petulant child. *(Ugh - Editor)*

"I don't know where to begin. I still don't understand or believe half of what's happening," he said.

"You can't be handed everything," I said, more than a little annoyed that I was reduced to such pandering in the midst of everything else. "You should have learned that by now. But I'll hand you this. This should help."

I spoke to Methos in my native language. He pressed the top of the nearest container to him. A panel slid open. He retrieved another small sphere similar to the one the other emissary used. He handed it to me. I grasped it with both hands. It glowed orange.

Over the course of twenty-three seconds, I "wrote" this account you're hopefully reading now. I hope you'll forgive its scattered, imperfect structure given the limited timeframe I had to piece it together and my inexperience with expressing myself via this medium.

Once finished, the ball will turn green. I'll transfer its contents to one of the hard drives that Tyler can use. I'll remind him that he has a responsibility to write about something bigger than his own selfish obsessions, but I'll tell him he can add his perspective if he feels it necessary. I'll tell him where he can find Regina's narrative. Liz's will already be included.

Charles and Gabby will return home to Washington. They will welcome their new baby to the world. Alan's disappearance and charges will transfer control of InterWorld to his brother John, [and then when that doesn't work out](#), to Charles. He will donate the property and interests of the Montezuma peninsula to an organization set up by General Paramo and Señora Viracocha. They will ensure that the portal remains open to the right people. The IMC's preservation efforts will continue, in case our other efforts don't pan out as we plan.

Merard, Dyatlov, Zinaida, Liz, and I will accompany the seven emissaries on their missions. Some of us will get to space. We'll open more portals. We'll wait. We'll preserve. We'll fight. We'll be going to space!

Someday I'll enter my city again—whether here or over there.

Tyler and Liz will say goodbye one last time. I can't claim to know exactly how it will go, but I know

how it must end.

Charles will use the last remnants of his “magic” box to send him and Gabby home. Paramo will accompany Burrell and Señora Viracocha back to the mainland, where he and his men will send the rest of the InterWorlders packing. Liz and I, and our new team, will use another box to go where we need to go. Tyler will be alone in the cave. He’ll decide if he’s willing and able to do what I’ve asked. He’ll break down the stage, pack the gear up, and head home.