



THE TERRITORIES

EPISODE **11** OF:

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

The Territories

One Week Before Battle

The Blazer rumbled up the same stretch of road east of town that Liz had traveled earlier in the evening, until Merard bypassed the left turn which led toward Alan's h—the house that Alan had occupied. The truck was a newer model, but the wear and tear you'd expect from tooling around in the jungle made it a lot older and weathered. The floor mat beneath Tyler's feet was streaked with mud and lined with leaves and stray vines of burrs and thorns, having been pulled free from shoelaces at some earlier time by some unknown passenger. Julian sprawled out across the back seat, his back against one door, his feet resting against the opposite one.

The jungle wrapped around them. All four windows were down. The sounds of the forest competed with the low growl of the engine and the thuds and crunch of the dirt and gravel beneath the wheels. Much like its scent, the cacophony of bird and monkey calls, buzzing insects, running water, and wind whipping through the trees co-mingled into a single, pleasantly indistinguishable blur of jungle noise.

The dry season was coming to an end. It had rained four times over the past two weeks and more would come soon. The road remained dry though, the parched ground having absorbed the first rainfalls with a thirsty desperation more suited to living creatures.

No one said much for the first five minutes. No words were exchanged regarding the quality of Julian's repair work; not that Tyler believed that's what this ride was about. Tyler recalled the countless drives he and his friends took in college, on the foothill roads above Boulder, to smoke weed and listen to Tool, Blind Melon, Zeppelin, or whatever else grabbed hold of their muddled minds at the time.

He reached into the pocket of his board shorts.

"Do you mind?" he asked, flashing a pack of cigarettes in Merard's peripheral vision.

"A bit," Merard said. "But go ahead."

Tyler didn't feel like submitting to either passive aggression or politeness. Besides, Julian had been silently smoking in the backseat since before they left Montezuma.

"Didn't you bum a smoke from me at the museum?" Tyler asked as he lit up.

His first mention of their first meeting was deliberate. If Merard was going to continue keeping his cards this close, Tyler was willing to poke and prod until he dropped one. Still, he couldn't help but remember the rush of exhilaration, frustration, and other unnamable emotions brought on by the half-revelations in the museum within the museum of a museum. Something loose and heavy rattled around in the back. *Ubiq?*

"I was being polite. Sociable," Merard said. "I quit years ago. They're a crutch."

Tyler exhaled out the window.

"Hey guys," he said with sarcastic brightness, "the car sounds like it's running great!"

Julian muttered a response from the back. Merard said nothing.

They approached a long section of road where the jungle had been cleared away. The outlines of newly constructed buildings revealed themselves on both sides of the road. Tyler counted at least fifteen. They varied in size, shape, and degree of completion. Two of them were at least four stories tall, higher than any of the trees. Most of the buildings remained dark, empty, generic husks, but one near the edge of the clearing was illuminated both from without and within. Tyler spotted a man, probably a guard, leaning against an inside wall, bathed in a fluorescence that felt particularly obscene surrounded by jungle. This must be one of the dorms Liz toured yesterday.

Merard slowed down a hair as they passed the dorm. Tyler heard a fast series of clicks behind his head. Julian was leaning out the window, pointing a camera with a very large lens at the building. There was no flash. He ducked back inside, and Merard sped up to his normal speed again—that is to say 12-15 miles per hour.

The jungle swooped back down around them. The road split into a fork. Sam steered them left, uphill and north. After a half-mile or so, the jungle once again thinned. Merard turned off the road onto a path of flattened grass and stones. He switched off the headlights.

“Do you remember Al Brunski? The pitcher?” Merard asked. “For Cleveland, I think. He was big in the 80s. Something like a 2.25 career ERA.”

That question was low on the list of things Tyler expected Merard to say, below *“What’s your horoscope sign?”* and significantly higher than *“I used to date your girlfriend back when her bones were hollowed out by scientists, and the day before the Disappearance we sort of went back in time to get obliterated by an unknown compelling force.”*

“Sounds familiar,” Tyler said. “I stuck to the National League when I was a kid.”

“Anyway,” Merard continued, “he moved out here after he retired. Look off to your right.”

Tyler peered into the darkness, not sure what he should be looking for, his eyes not quite adjusted to the lack of headlights. He saw shadows flittering around in the trees, and the trees in turn swaying in the breeze.

“Look closely,” Merard said. “There are ruins in there. Mayan.”

Tyler squinted and convinced himself he saw solid shapes that didn’t look quite natural. They could have been remnants of walls or pillars, but they could have also been random piles of rocks. He was half-convinced Merard was fucking with him.

“A tiny little Mayan trading post on the northern border of an already collapsed empire. There’s not much to see. That’s the point.”

“What point?”

“In a way, Brunski was Alan Ambrose’s less funded, less organized, more redneck-y predecessor. He wanted to build a resort here, right on top of the ruins. He’d visited a couple of the big ruins sites while on drunken vacations to Mexican resort towns. He heard that ruins had been discovered in Tropicalia—the first ever found in the country. He sent his lawyer down here to buy the land, sight unseen, from the

local fisherman who owned it. Brunski expected pyramids and temples, courtyards and ziggurats and altars.

“When he came down here he discovered there were just a couple crumbling walls from barely ancient houses and piles of rubble. The ruins were dated to the late 1600s, well after Europeans had conquered most of what was left of the Mayan Empire. A tiny band of no more than ten or fifteen refugees likely followed the coast down from the North and stopped here for a couple years. That’s all. No real archaeological—or tourism—value at all.

“It hadn’t crossed his mind that buying the kind of grandeur and history he imagined shouldn’t be so easy. But he didn’t give up. He hired a crew to clear out everything they could. You can see how long that lasted before the jungle reclaimed it. And then he built this.”

They rolled ahead up to a cleared five-acre section of the forest. In the center was a monumental pyramid. It rose almost two hundred feet into the air. At the top, instead of narrowing into a point, it widened and held a bungalow divided into four different rooms.

Dogs began barking as they neared. Merard braked, so as not to agitate them further. Tyler could see the outline of an old once-yellow school bus at the edge of the clearing. The tires had long since disintegrated. Vines draped over its windows, some of which were intact, some boarded up with plywood. The front end of the bus had begun to sink into the earth. A small light burned inside. The barks came from inside.

“Why did you bring me here?” Tyler asked.

He finished his cigarette. He squeezed the cherry out onto the ground and pocketed the butt. He was many things, and he tried to be many more; a litterer was not one of them.

“He lives in the bus now, alone with his dogs,” Merard said. “They’re mostly strays he adopted. He’s not a bad man. He comes to town every once in a while. I talked to him once. I think he understands his mistakes. His silly dream collapsed because there was no foundation beneath it. He thought he could fake one. Sound familiar?”

Tyler frowned. Was it so obvious to everyone who’d heard his music?

“Why are you busting my balls?”

Merard scoffed.

“Don’t flatter yourself, guy. This isn’t about you. None of it is. There’s a much bigger picture. The sooner you realize it the better.”

His face softened somewhat. He didn’t mean to inject so much venom.

He continued, “This was actually Brunski’s second venture of a similar nature. He’s originally from Colorado, and he tried something similar there with an amusement park built on top of a ghost town. She said I should tell you that. It would mean something to you.”

He shrugged.

“She? Who is it you’re speaking for?”

Liz? Did the two of them have some sort of agenda? Were they in cahoots? He couldn't hold it in.

"Liz?" he blurted.

Merard smiled.

"No," he said. "Not Liz. We call her the Curator. She doesn't tell many people her real name."

Tyler briefly flashed back to the parlor in the museum, but he couldn't focus on that at the moment. Once he'd uttered Liz's name, he couldn't let it go.

"How do you two know each other? Liz and you, I mean."

Merard put the Blazer into reverse. He shook his head as they began to roll backwards.

"You're wanting to see the bigger picture, but your ego keeps getting in the way. Liz and I knew each other a long time ago. We dated very briefly, when we were both in New York. It's ancient history."

Literally, he thought.

Merard continued, "You have nothing to worry about. I never should have brought up that I knew her. I'm sorry. That may have been my own ego."

"How did you know we were coming to Tropicalia?"

"The Curator told me," Merard said, purposefully avoiding another confusing pronoun. "I never finished explaining why I showed you this place. What I meant was that Alan Ambrose and his company are attempting to do the same thing, on a larger scale. They too will fail, on an even larger scale. Brunski misjudged the scale of the ruins. So has Ambrose, but in the opposite direction. He has no idea what he's building his house upon. He has quite literally only scratched the surface. There are much bigger, older, and more powerful things buried here than Brunski's pile of Mayan stones."

"You're not talking about Mayans, are you," Tyler said.

He had heard the stories. More precisely, he'd watched crazy-eyed, wild-haired men gesticulate and rant about the supposed Lost City of Tropicalia on Media4History's *Ancient Unsolved Mysteries*.

The persistence of the myth of the Lost City was peculiar even among peculiar theories proposed by even more peculiar men. The physical evidence for its existence was a complete lack of physical evidence. Fringe "scientists" theorized that the total lack of Mayan ruins of any kind in Tropicalia (especially given that their empire surrounded it for thousands of years) suggested that they never entered the region—possibly because a more powerful, technologically advanced civilization already occupied what would later become Tropicalia.

The conquistadores' priests burned most of the native records, but a few scattered carvings, murals, and oral stories from both nearby Mayan and faraway Incan sites—especially when linked together by desperate social outcasts with urgent, driving needs to interconnect and make sense of the world—told of a great calamity that befell the people of Tropicalia, which rippled throughout all of Central and South America, and which ultimately wiped away all traces the entire city ever existed. (When faced with criticism from the more traditional scientists that an advanced civilization would never remain contained within such a tiny landmass, the ancient Tropicalian theorists revised their theory to claim that the lack of

ruins did not represent an entire civilization, but merely a city—an outpost perhaps half a world away from the still unknown power center).

The theory was the clearest example of the impossibility of trying to prove a negative. The lack of evidence was embraced *as* evidence. So the theory survived in New Age/paranormal circles, popping up every so often on TV shows such as the one Tyler had caught.

“You don’t—” *actually believe that shit, do you?* Tyler began.

But... Merard did have some sort of access to the Museum of Natural History. He had spouted off a weird conspiracy theory of his own. Could that be connected?

“Is... that why you’re here?”

He swiveled his neck around to address Julian to see if he could get a different, more direct response.

They rolled back onto the road. Julian complied.

He said, “We’re here to make sure your new boss meets the same fate as Mr. Brunski here, at the very least.”

“How do you know I work for InterWorld?”

“Stop asking that,” Merard said. “The answer is always the same.”

“If you know I work for them, why are you telling me this? What makes you think I won’t tell someone?”

Julian leaned forward. Tyler could feel his breath through the neck rest.

“How about let’s not,” he growled.

Merard said, “I don’t want Liz—and by extension, you—to get caught up in any collateral damage. I haven’t seen her in more than ten years. I don’t know who she’s become. I don’t know where her loyalties lie. But I don’t want her to get hurt. Not again.”

“Collateral damage? What are you planning?”

He’d have to tackle the most pressing questions first.

“No one should get hurt,” Julian said.

He seemed to be directing this at Merard. Tyler sensed Julian wasn’t fully on board with this talk with him.

Tyler said, “Should?”

“We don’t need to get into specifics, do we?” Julian said.

His intonation did not suggest it was a question.

“I don’t believe the particulars are particularly relevant,” Merard agreed. “I don’t know Liz anymore, but I think I’ve got a bit of a read on you. You’ve got more than a whiff of uncertainty on you, about more than

one thing. I can't imagine it's doing you much good, but it works for us. I can't believe, given your recent past that you harbor too much loyalty to the corporate world. I could be wrong. But you didn't tell anyone what you saw in the museum. Something tells me you've got some experience with keeping secrets."

There were an awful lot of *don't believes*, *don't thinks*, and *I'd imagines* coming from someone accusing him of uncertainty. But given its surface accuracy, Tyler let the judgment pass. He couldn't allow the last statement to slip by unchallenged, though.

"You don't know me," he said.

"I don't want to see Liz get hurt," Merard repeated.

If a threat was implied, it was masked by his suddenly softer tone. Still, Tyler couldn't help but think about Regina tending bar, waiting for Liz to arrive.

A breeze strong enough to whip through the dense jungle passed through the open windows of the Blazer.

Merard said, "We pretend we're above history. That we don't need it anymore. That we're better than those before. We aren't and we do and we're not. Especially invisible histories."

Merard appeared to take Julian's warning against specificity to heart. Tyler sensed an impending soliloquy. He struggled against the breeze to light another cigarette, and let Merard speak.

"Everything is built upon ruins. The world is too old not to. This is a good thing. We build upon existing foundations and learn from those who came before. We rise and fall over and over, growing an inch or two each time before falling back into ruin. This is how we progress. Exploration and expansion on the ideas of our predecessors is the only way anything new is created. This, like everything else, is not a new idea. We get into trouble when we forget that, whether willfully or accidentally."

"And we're in big trouble. Our sense of history has diminished; our memories shortened. We're flooded with stimuli, with easy access to facts, pornography, art, whatever. There's no order to it anymore. There's no progression. We're forgetting how to learn. We think we're building something new, but we're drowning. We're circling, spiraling, and we forget that there's a drain beneath us—patient in its gentle, relentless pull. We don't realize that the strength of what we worked so hard to build before was our only defense against the pull."

"You said the only ruins in Tropicalia are Brunski's. Insignificant, small, not very old. Are you talking about more recent history?"

The modern history of Tropicalia loosely mirrored that of other Central American countries, except that there wasn't much of a native population when Europeans arrived. As the invaders conquered other areas throughout the regions, refugees from other areas throughout the region moved into the once off-limits land. Eventually, the Europeans followed, and did what they did best—a brutal mix of genocide and forced integration. The borders raised around Tropicalia were less arbitrary than elsewhere in Central America, leading to less in-fighting over the intervening centuries. Tropicalia won its independence from Spain bloodlessly in the mid-1800s, the crumbling empire too weary and short of resources from its loss in Mexico to put up a fight.

The only major eruption of violence came thirty-five years ago. A short, brutal civil war erupted between the military and the civilian government. Some historians claim a third, shadowy faction from within and

without the government was also a player, but little concrete evidence of its existence or influence ever emerged. The United States of course got involved discreetly, but the Tropicalians ended up resolving the situation themselves. The Tropicalian government had been officially pacifist ever since. The American presence, however, ended up becoming a bridge to a boom in tourism beginning in the 1990s.

Merard shook his head.

“The latest incarnation of history remains present enough in the minds of the people here. The biggest tragedy is when the ruins are invisible. When we can’t see the paths blazed by those before us. When we believe we’re the first to face a challenge. Sometimes it’s through no fault of our own. More often it is.”

He paused and cocked his head, as if to assess for himself whether his words were sounding right.

Julian picked up where Merard left off.

“Alan Ambrose has seen the traces of a history here that remain invisible to most,” he said. “He’s chosen to use them for his own gain, and to pretend to build something out of nothing. That’s why he has to go.”

“What did he find?” Tyler asked, more genuinely curious than defensive for the first time. “What is he building?”

Merard gestured at the road ahead of them. The jungle retracted, submitting for the time being to human effort. A giant cell tower rose above them. Stars surrounded its crest, hundreds of feet above them. It was more triangular and sturdier than most towers of its kind, resting upon three broad legs. The road bent south, revealing a second, nearly identical tower. Two-thirds of the way up the towers, a horizontal platform stretched from one to the other.

Tyler whistled, recognizing the symbol. The towers were hard to miss from town during the daytime. They were situated on top of the highest hill on the peninsula. From the angle of the town, they resembled inverted versions of the stylized “W” in InterWorld’s logo. The logo also had a horizontal bar running through the “W,” so that they were two interconnected, upside-down A’s. In the early days of the company, the A’s represented the Ambrose brothers’ founders. In recent years, long after taking complete control of the company reins, he began incorporating the design more often. Now of course—and perhaps always in his mind—the A’s signified only one thing. Alan Ambrose.

“We gave up on the sky,” Julian said, perhaps continuing his argument from *La Mesa*.

He certainly wasn’t contemplating corporate logo aesthetics.

“We stopped dreaming big. We got smaller. Faster. These aren’t big. Not really. We build towers only to compress ourselves further.”

“How long have they been up?” Tyler asked.

Merard pulled off the road onto the edge of the well-kept grassy area surrounding the towers. He switched off the ignition and the lights.

“Construction was finished five months ago,” he said.

He and Julian opened their doors. Merard gestured at Tyler to follow suit. Tyler blinked several times to adjust to the reduced light. His hand hesitated on the door handle. He felt nervous. Paranoid thoughts,

misdirected but understandable given the course of the night, stumbled through his mind.

Maybe Merard fancied himself a clichéd supervillian—confessing his devious plans before murdering Tyler out in the jungle and swooping in on his girl. Tyler shrugged off the stupid thought. Paranoia was unnecessary. The weights of strange new realities were beginning to tug at him. He opened the door and followed Merard and Julian toward the back of the Blazer.

Merard said, “Ambrose claims they won’t be ready to go live until his launch party next week. But we’ve all seen Star Wars. His Death Star is already fully operational. He only has to flip a switch, whether literal or proverbial.”

He opened the back hatch. Tyler stared at the taillight. He didn’t want to see what was back there.

Please don’t be explosives. Not already.

Merard leaned into the trunk and rummaged around. He found what he was looking for—a tape measure and a small notebook. He backed away from the hatch. Julian stepped forward. Their movements seemed choreographed. Tyler couldn’t help but see the small wooden crate Julian retrieved. It looked like the ones Merard and his conjurer friend had carted off from the museum. Whatever was inside, though, did not give off the predictable clanking noises of tightly packed cans of Ubiq.

They set off toward the towers in silence except for whatever was causing the crate’s minor cacophony of rattles, thumps, and jingles. It wasn’t until they’d reached the point where the grass turned to gravel that Tyler noticed another human shape. A figure sat on the rocks next to the nearest leg, his back turned to them.

“Buenos noches,” Merard said.

The figure lifted his head but didn’t face them.

“Evenin’,” he said.

“What are you doing out here, sir?” Merard asked.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Tyler’s fist clenched involuntarily. What was about to happen here? What was he getting involved in?

He stopped walking. Julian and Merard continued on. Julian set down his box on the gravel.

“We’re surveyors from Infinity,” Julian said.

He paused melodramatically before adding, “Infinity Telecommunications.”

Merard handed Julian one end of the tape measure. The man sat on the inner side of the south leg, and Julian crouched on the outer side of it, holding the tape to the metal. Merard headed to the next leg.

“You boys work some odd hours,” the man said.

He remained mostly motionless.

The man’s voice almost sounded familiar to Tyler. He stood as motionless as the man sat, scrunching his

face to either place the memory or dismiss it.

“We work nights back in the States,” Merard said. “I guess we’re used to it.”

Julian added, “Back home the night’s quiet. Here the jungle is louder than the daytime.”

Tyler surmised through the blur of movements in the darkness that Merard tucked the tape measure under his armpit and scribbled something into his notebook. Then he headed to the third leg.

“Say,” the man said, “What are you guys measuring for?”

Merard didn’t hesitate; though it was obvious he was lying.

“We’ve been ordered to put a fence. There’ve been reports of, um, *trespassers*.”

He nodded politely at the man.

“Infinity, huh,” the man said, chewing on the word. “Never heard of it. Must be a little start-up international electric corporation. Also, it’s an equilateral triangle. You don’t have to measure all three sides, genius.”

Merard stopped in his tracks, a couple feet shy of the third leg. He threw his head back and groaned.

“Fiiiiine,” he groaned. “You’re right. We’ll give more thought to our cover stories.”

Tyler’s heart pounded. He shifted his feet on the gravel, preparing to run. The man finally turned his head to identify the source of the sound. The whites of Charles’s eyes shone remarkably brightly, enough that Tyler could see his eyes roll against the darkness. Also, Charles’ beard was getting out of control.

Charles whipped his head back around toward Merard and Julian.

“You guys seriously brought *him*?”

Then he glanced back over his shoulder at Tyler.

“No offense,” he said unconvincingly.

“Right,” Tyler said.

“It wasn’t our call to make,” Merard said.

“We brought your shit,” Julian said.

“I’d hope so,” said Charles.

He had shed his tattered show-robe. He wore old tennis shoes, dark shorts, and a light hoodie. Even in his off-hours, the ability to shroud his face at a moment’s notice remained appealing.

Merard gave up on his measurements. He nodded at Julian, who released his end. The tape snaked back to Merard across the gravel.

“It’s not so easy to find all those random things out here. Ambrose hasn’t set up a Walmart yet. Julian had to run to Tropicalia City the other day. I hope what you’re building is worth it.”

Charles scoffed.

Tyler said, “What are you building?”

“He speaks,” Charles said.

He twisted around toward Tyler again.

“What am I building? That isn’t exactly my call to make, either.”

He spotted the crate in his peripheral vision. He gestured at it with his right arm, which also held a cell phone.

“Could you?” Charles asked. “I’m indisposed at the moment.”

Tyler noticed that his left palm was pressed firmly against the metal leg. It had been there since they arrived. Tyler had been ready to tell him to get it his fucking self, but he decided he didn’t want to hear whatever ambiguous nonsense Charles would spout off to explain why he couldn’t get up. So instead, he shrugged and walked over to the crate.

As he picked it up, he peered inside. It was filled with what looked like the type of random junk he could have guessed from the noises the crate made when Julian carried it from the truck. He spotted a rolled loop of wire, a box of 3.5” computer disks (which he hadn’t seen since he was a kid), a toy kaleidoscope, a pair of gloves, a surge protector, a jar of jam, and a bunch of loose screws of variable sizes. He set it down in front of Charles, wondering if the simplest explanation for what these men were up to was that they were fucking loons.

Charles smiled.

“I get it now,” he said, calling across to Merard. “I get why you’ve brought him. I realize his purpose now. He’s absolutely *amazing* at carrying crates.”

“Hey, fuck you, man,” Tyler finally mustered the will to say.

He was offended more by Charles’s tone than his words. Tyler had no idea what he was doing out here, either. He made a broad accusation of his own.

“Didn’t I just see you in town doing your silly little magic show? How’d you get up here so quick?”

“Magic,” Charles said.

Then, disgusted with either his attempt at humor or his accidental revelation, he groaned.

“How’d *you* get up here?”

Tyler pointed at the Blazer.

“Yeah, it’s not so hard, is it?” Charles said.

Tyler shrugged.

Charles set his phone on his lap. He leaned in over the crate and poked around.

Seemingly, ludicrously satisfied, he said, “Well, it’s been a real pleasure, as usual.”

“Likewise,” Merard said.

He and Julian had returned from the other side of the tower.

Julian said, “Just make sure you’re ready when it’s time.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Charles said.

Then his voice unexpectedly softened.

“Be careful. Let’s do this right, alright?”

Merard and Julian nodded.

“Goodnight,” Merard said.

“Goodnight.”

They headed back to the Blazer. Tyler followed. Charles watched them close up the back hatch, climb into their seats (Julian drove this time and Tyler sat in the backseat), and drive away.

The Conjuror drew his hood up over his head. He needed a shield. His smile from before had disappeared, replaced with tracks of tears, both new and dried. He was a master of illusion, after all. If he couldn’t convince two criminals and a dopy musician he was content here, then what good was he?

He picked up his phone from his lap. He pressed his other hand harder against the tower until the reception bars built up to an acceptable level. The soft LCD light illuminated his face. Words appeared on the screen.

Where did you go?

He typed: *I’m still here.*

He closed his eyes and waited for a response.

I want to hear your voice.

I can’t, he typed.

Come home.

An absurdly sexual saxophone trilled through his speakers, signaling a voice call. It had been his wife’s ringtone for years. She called it his sex-a-phone. He pressed *Ignore* and waited.

Thirty seconds later, more words appeared.

This is stupid. Answer. Come home.

The phone rang again, and he muted it again.

Answer.

Ring.

Come home.

Ring. He flipped off his hood. His fingers curled around the metal, and his fingertips turned white. The whole tower seemed to wobble. He made the tears Disappear again.

“Goddamnit,” he muttered, and then he tapped the *Answer* button.

“Gabby,” he said quietly.

He tugged at his beard hard enough that it hurt.

“Where are you?” his wife asked.

The connection was crystal clear. She sounded like she was standing right next to him.

“I had to leave,” he said. “I know you don’t understand, and I’m so sorry.”

“Where are you?” she repeated. Her voice quivered. “I’m going to come get you.”

“I had to leave,” he repeated, attempting to make it his mantra.

“Why?” she shrieked. “Don’t say because she asked you to.”

She began to sob. He wanted to reach through the phone and hold her shoulder steady and pull her face into his. But he wasn’t quite that skilled. Not yet.

The thoughts he’d kept swimming around in his head, hidden from so many people for so long, came spilling out as a babbling blur.

“I love you so much and I’m so sorry and she isn’t anything like what you are to me, not anywhere close, but she needs my help and I had to come here because she helped me a long time ago and because it’s not just her, it’s everything, and she’s trying to help us all because something big and bad is coming for us and she may be the only one who can stop it or at least hide us away from it since she’s done it before and I’ve seen her in my dreams, asleep in her cave, and she’s been there for so long and she’s so alone and she’s doing this for her people and for us and there are others here too but I’m the only one who can build what she needs and all those weird things about myself, all the things I thought were wrong with me, they’re what she needs and I have to do this to help us—”

“Shut up shut up shut up,” she said, still crying.

He hadn’t wanted to talk to her because he knew his words would come out as uncontrollable gibberish. He couldn’t stem the flow once he heard her voice. She was his wife. She was his comfort. His control. Hearing himself speak made him believe he was as crazy and mean and selfish as she must think he was. When they stuck to exchanging digital words, the level of heartbreak was manageable.

“I love you,” he said.

He physically closed his mouth with his fingers so nothing else stupid would come out.

“Then come home, you bastard.”

She sniffed. He pictured her trying to compose herself, and his heart broke again that he wasn't there to help her, and that he was the one doing this to her.

He shouted his fallback phrase.

“Gabby, I had to leave!”

It was like he had Tourette's. He couldn't stop himself.

“I've seen so many wonderful, terrible things and I've learned how to do tricks and build things I could never imagine before and people saw me doing something impossible, I got caught, and I had to pretend to be a monk or a seer or a cult leader to cover my tracks and now I can't get out and I know that something bad is coming for us and we have to bury our treasure and guard it and that when things get bad we have to rescue what we can and I had to leave, don't you see?”

She sighed. Her tears had disappeared too, without the aid of magic.

“I think you're crazy, maybe,” she said with a gentleness that surprised and floored him. “But I won't give up on you. You're my husband. It's time for you to be a father again. Please tell me where you are. I'm coming to get you.”

He let go of the tower. The call disconnected. He pictured the shape of his wife's belly. How much it had grown since he had left. He wailed. A flock of macaws, which had settled into a tree at the edge of the jungle, screeched and took flight. He fell to his knees, and began sobbing. He cried so hard the wind took notice. It swirled around him and picked him up and carried him across the peninsula to my cave, exactly where he didn't need to be.

“What about the Ubiq?” Tyler asked.

Although he couldn't tell one patch of jungle or section of road from another, he sensed they were heading back to town. His time out in the territories with Merard and Julian was drawing to a close, and he had many more questions than answers.

“What about it?”

Tyler leaned forward, poking his head in the space between Merard and Julian.

“Did you bring it here? What are you trying to preserve?”

“Yes, I did,” Merard said. “And everything that's worth saving.”

“*You* determine that?”

“Of course not,” Merard scoffed. “That's what museums are for. I told you that back in New York. I'm just their deliveryman. They're saving what they can where they can. The curator is directing it. The key

will be dispersion. Spread it out. Storing it all in one place—or a few museums—is too risky. As it turns out, there's somewhere down here that's as safe and far away as you can imagine.”

“But what are you protecting it from? Why the urgency? Why now?”

His voice trembled, a deep primal fear beginning to rise.

“I told you before, we're circling the drain. We've forgotten how to build upon what's come before. Nothing's new. We're just repeating ourselves now. Remixing. Not building. This is it. We're done, at least for now. We've accomplished a lot. We've gotten this far. We should be proud. And now we should pack it in. Bury our treasure, and guard it.”

That didn't answer the question. He tried again.

“Guard it from what?”

Merard shrugged—a response Tyler considered completely inadequate to the supposed gravity of the situation.

“Something. Anything. But it's coming. Soon. Over the past few years, I've seen and heard of a lot of plausible contenders. [One or two in particular might lead the pack](#). But it could be anything. Nuclear war, disease, aliens, ancient gods, global warming, solar flares, zombies... Who knows? It doesn't matter, in the end. All I know is that it's coming.”

“And how do you know that?”

“She told me. It's happened before. It will happen again soon. She has a calendar that's never been wrong. She's going to help us minimize the damage, and to rescue what we can before things get bad.”

Tyler caught sight of Montezuma's lights flickering between the trees.

“Who is she?” he asked.

He sat back in his seat. He believed he'd finally found the right question.

“You'll meet her, if you want,” Merard said. “She should tell you that herself. You'll have to work for some of this, if you're really interested. Not everything should be explained to you in the back of a Blazer.”

He turned around in the passenger seat to look Tyler in his disappointed, skeptical eyes.

“What I'm concerned with—the reason I told you any of this—is to make sure Liz stays safe. I don't care if you run off and tell your bossman Ambrose everything I told you. That won't change anything. I need you to promise me that when the time comes—you'll know when—you make sure she's as far away as possible from this. She got sucked into my bullshit world once before. I can't let that happen again.”

His words, though not precisely true, were genuine. For the first time this evening, he cared about whether Tyler understood what he was saying.

He continued, “She's here. I don't know why. But I have to try to shield her. I don't want her to be hurt again. Not by me. And not by you anymore. Do you understand?”

Tyler swallowed hard. His hands trembled more than his voice had. He understood almost nothing of what Merard had told him tonight. But he nodded anyway.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Julian turned onto the main road through town. Most of the bars had already closed down for the night. The lights were off at *La Mesa*. Regina and Eva stood talking on the side of the road. Regina waved at their approach.

“This is you,” Julian said to Tyler.

He waved to Eva. She waved back, but frowned.

Merard said, “You didn’t know it until tonight, but you dropped into the middle of a war. You’ll see the battlefield soon. You’ve already met some of the soldiers.”

He nodded at Regina.

He added once more, “Please help me keep Liz out of it.”

Regina hugged Eva and then walked up to the Blazer. She opened the back door. She smiled at Tyler.

“This is your stop, old sport,” she said.

Tyler climbed out.

“Rather,” he said.

His head was spinning, but he tried desperately to play it cool.

“Liz headed back to your room fifteen minutes ago,” Regina said. “She showed up with Alan Ambrose a little bit after you left. I told her where you were. Ambrose wants you to play music at his party. I think you should.”

As if there hadn’t been enough dropped on him tonight.

“Okay,” he managed to squeak out.

He didn’t have the strength to ask any more questions.

“Walk Eva home. And be a gentleman for once in your life. Make sure no one follows her with a camera,” Regina said.

And then she climbed into Tyler’s vacated seat in the back of the Blazer.

“We’ve got a meeting to go to,” she said. “And you’ve got a girlfriend to attend to.”

She closed the door behind her. Julian waved one more time to Eva and then accelerated down the road. Tyler watched it until it disappeared around the bend at the far end of town. Regina was involved. Despite everything Merard had told him that evening, he was an outsider. He had made his choice long

before he came here. He couldn't be trusted. He and Liz were, by default at least, on the other side. Merard had essentially charged him with making sure they stayed that way. He was in Investments now.

Eva walked up to him.

“Looks like it's just us,” she said. “The leftovers.”