

The background is a stylized illustration of a tropical landscape. It features several layers of green mountains and hills, with silhouettes of palm trees and other tropical vegetation scattered across the slopes. The color palette is primarily various shades of green, from light to dark, with black used for the silhouettes and the main title text.

HANDS

EPISODE **13** OF:

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

Hands

Three Days Before Battle

Regina watched Tyler step up off the piano bench and kneel onto the keys. The top third of his body disappeared into the piano's open lid. Life might be a lot simpler and more fitting if it swallowed him whole.

She, like Charles and Julian before her, had come to think of him as an unnecessary complication. He was a vestigial appendage—his purpose pushed aside and forgotten by everyone including himself, assuming it ever truly existed as anything more than a poorly reconstructed rendering of a clichéd pipe dream. Playing a few songs for a few thousand dollars for a few hundred assholes at Alan's stupid party wasn't going to change that.

Her indictment was harsh but accurate, and she wouldn't let herself soften to him enough that he became a distraction. Still, she felt for him. She used to love him like a brother, then a lover, then a ghost. Liz was going to crush him soon. He might return to a pile of ashes again.

She walked over to the piano. She set one hand atop the curved wooden rim next to the upper keys. She stood on her tiptoes and peered inside.

"It's pretty bad," Tyler said over his shoulder.

He grunted and ran his left hand across the broken strings. He tapped two of the remaining strings with the tuning fork he'd found duct-taped to the pedal housing, as if he'd know what to do with it. He sighed and pushed himself out. He kicked his legs wildly before finding solid ground. Regina giggled.

He wiped at his brow. He sat the tuner down on the bench next to a small case of wrenches Regina dug out from a supply closet. He knew before he plunged into the piano's broken innards that he didn't have the skill to repair what he found. Now he faced the fact he didn't even know the right words to fake knowledge.

"You've got eighteen good keys left. I can't imagine they're in-tune. All the rest are warped and bent or snapped completely."

Yesterday, Alan Ambrose, flanked by a bodyguard and a nervous assistant, had approached Tyler at the bus stop after Liz and the other PR people rolled on down the road toward Tropicalia City. He asked how practice was going, and he pretty much forced Tyler to verbally commit to playing, despite the characteristic wobbly vagueness of Tyler's answer. Tyler had trouble remembering some of his songs enough to teach them, but Merard and that stoner kid Craig were quick learners. Alan asked if the equipment he'd had delivered to their makeshift practice space was working out. Tyler thanked him, but asked if he knew of any keyboards around town. Alan said he'd find one, and his assistant typed a note to himself on his phone. In the meantime, he added, Tyler could try out the piano Alan donated to *La Mesa* two months ago.

"I figured as much," Regina said.

Unsurprising. Ever since Alan's crew unloaded it onto a narrow strip of concrete by the bar's storage shed, the piano had been exposed to all the elements, protected only by a thin tarp. She'd only played it twice early on.

Regina straddled the piano bench. She pressed down a trio of keys she knew to be working. Tyler winced. They sounded horrible together. Regina didn't give up. She searched for usable notes and tested out a few combinations. She stretched her right hand as far as her rock-stretched fingers would. She connected a D with an F# an octave and a half below. She found three suitable notes with her left hand, and began alternating the rhythm. Tyler smiled.

The only reason Regina had accepted Alan's invitation out to his home ten weeks ago was to size up the cliff faces on his island. Her hands had been restless since she'd arrived in Tropicalia. Pouring drinks didn't cut it. She'd fruitlessly scoured the coast for good climbs. She even hiked up the Xibalba to take a look at the caves, but their exteriors were nothing more than tree-covered humps. There was the waterfall outside town of course, but she wasn't desperate enough to scale slick wet rock while water poured over her.

Alan's house looked haunted. He treated his servants like shit. And he spent most of the evening humble-bragging and plying her with wine. She lasted two hours there. After dinner, she had coffee with him on his back porch. She took the opportunity to wander to the edge and inspect the cliff face. It looked like a blast. She'd have to rappel down during low tide. But then Alan threw a tantrum at one of his servants, a young girl who hadn't returned promptly enough with the sugar. The girl apologized and walked inside. Alan screamed at her that she shouldn't walk away without his permission. He stormed into the house after her. Regina headed to the gondola, and swore she would never come back there alone.

Two weeks later the piano arrived at *La Mesa*. The accompanying note apologized for his inexcusable behavior. In the note, Alan recalled her mentioning missing her mom's baby grand back home in the States. He said there were three pianos in the mansion, so one would not be missed. He didn't think through the consequences of letting a wooden piano sit exposed to the tropical climate.

Regina rotated around on the bench. She leaned back on her elbows against the keys.

"Why did you quit your band?"

Her tone suggested obligation more than curiosity.

"And don't say it's because you wanted to go into Investments. Only assholes want to do that. You're a dick. Not quite an asshole."

Tyler wasn't thinking about her hands. He watched the tiny beads of sweat on her forehead and he remembered other times he's seen her sweat. He remembered the way her skin felt, the smell of her hair, the taste of her lips, the movement of her hips; all those thoughts he had no business thinking.

He forced down a swallow of cold coffee and set the chipped mug down on the bar.

"I decided there was nothing new worth doing anymore," he said.

"Explain yourself."

"The best our generation can be is editors," he said.

“Editors?”

“Yeah. By now every combination of every chord has been played with every other chord, on one record or another. All lyrical themes have already been explored. The best we can do is put a polishing, finishing coat on all of it. We can re-arrange passages and marry one chord progression to another, and we can update a lyric with a new catchphrase or hooky rhyme. But that's it. The same's true with most other art, too.”

She sat up and cracked her knuckles.

“Why does that bother you?”

“Maybe it doesn't,” he said. “Being editors at the end of the world isn't entirely a bad thing.” She laughed.

“You seriously believe the world is ending? You sound like Merard.”

“We might as well assume so. Why not work to polish the final product before the big bang or the little whimper or however we end up playing ourselves out? We should try to make a clean presentation. It should be a thesis of what we accomplished—everything we did right in the face of everything we did wrong.”

“That doesn't tell me why you quit—only why you didn't create anything new, why the songs you wrote about me were so trite.”

“Ha, ha,” Tyler said phonetically. “I guess I don't have the right mind for it. Or the attention span. Or maybe once I realized I didn't have anything original to create, I was just too selfish to contribute in any other kind of way.”

“Alright, fair enough. That's honest at least, even if a little high-minded,” Regina said.

She scratched at a fresh mosquito bite on her temple.

She said, “I was hoping you'd say you quit because you wanted to be a better boyfriend to Liz.”

Tyler scowled. “That's not fair.”

“Yeah it is,” Regina insisted, “but I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it.”

An awkward silence hung in the thick, humid air between them. Tyler ran through a list of possible excuses to leave. Regina reached behind her and tapped out a few notes on the good keys.

“Can you fix this if we get new strings?” Regina asked.

Tyler shrugged.

“Maybe,” he lied. “But they'll break again if you keep it out here. I'll just hop on my bike and run over to the local music store.”

“Don't be an ass,” she said. “You could always go Tropicalia City. There has to be one there somewhere.”

“So could you, right? That's a tall order for an errand.”

No, she couldn't. She had bypassed Tropicalia City when she first arrived. She was supposed to change planes in Acapulco, but she bailed. She took buses east and south for several days. She was afraid to see the real Tropicalia City after hearing her father's fantastical tales. She didn't want to discover that the silver utopian capital city of peace he described didn't really exist.

"You should go," she said.

"Why?"

Tyler felt, not for the first time recently, and not by the first person, that he was being pushed aside. Minimized.

"Find your girlfriend. She's thinking about leaving you. If you love her, go find her. Tell her how you feel."

Tyler's heart, though still in his chest where it belonged, felt endangered again. It thumped hard and fast. His face absorbed Regina's words poorly. Over the course of three seconds, his expression registered shock, then disbelief, then anger.

"What did you tell her?" he yelled.

"I didn't tell her anything, you shit. Don't yell at me. For once this has nothing to do with me."

Tyler tried to catch his breath. He backed into the bar. His voice softened.

"What did she say?"

"Not much. She knows you used to cheat on her. Weirdly enough, that's not what this is about. She's having other doubts. She says she can't confide in you."

Tyler's face scrunched up in confusion.

"What does that even mean? She tells me everything. Why didn't you tell me this before she left?"

"I didn't see you till now. And I didn't know if it was my place to say."

Regina stood up and began to walk toward him.

Tyler's eyes darted back and forth.

"What time does the bus leave today?"

She checked her watch.

"In about thirty-five minutes."

She touched his forearm lightly. He shook her off and stood upright.

"I've gotta go," he said.

He pushed one of the barstools aside.

“Thank you for telling me,” he said over his shoulder as he sprinted toward his cabin.

Tyler took one last glance around the room to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything vital. He slung his backpack over his shoulder. He didn't allow his mind to linger on Regina's words. He couldn't afford to get lost in speculation, panic, or regret. Not yet. He'd have several hours on buses and ferries to do that. Now he had to act.

Knuckles rapped lightly at his door just as he was about to turn the knob. He opened it. Regina.

“I want you to be my brother again,” she said.

It might have been excess sweat from her walk here, but her eyes looked wet.

“I want to look out for you, and I want you to look out for me. Like we used to. In the beginning.”

Tyler shook his head.

“I've got to go,” he said gruffly.

He locked the door.

“I know,” she said. “I'll walk with you.”

Montezuma was humming with strange, extrinsic activity this morning. A contingent of seventeen InterWorld security guards had arrived in six brand new Land Rovers yesterday evening. Most of them remained up in “New Montezuma” above town, but one jeep was parked near the middle of the road across from one of the two general stores. Two young, solidly built men carried metal crates and various pieces of electrical equipment into the store, while an Asian woman bantered with the storekeeper in Spanish. Regina knew Lupe, and she smiled at her as she passed. The normally good-natured old woman frowned and then ignored her. Many more merchants, Tropicalian and ex-pat alike, stood outside their stores. They surveyed the action, arms folded across their chests, chattering and muttering to each other.

Two small yachts, contracted by InterWorld to serve as transport vessels, were anchored two hundred yards out in the bay. Three dinghies were being loaded up with supplies. A fourth was beached. Two more InterWorld security guards were transferring folding tables, chairs, and lights from the boat into the back of a flatbed truck.

“How old were we when we first met?” she asked.

She struggled to keep pace with his quick strides.

“I don't have time for this,” he said.

“You have twenty-five minutes for this,” she insisted, glancing at her watch again.

The usual afternoon storm clouds decided to make an early appearance today. A helicopter buzzed high overhead, flying toward Ambrose's house.

Tyler sighed.

“I was six when my parents separated.”

“That sounds right,” Regina said. “I remember you and your mom were at our house for my birthday. I couldn’t remember if it was my seventh or eighth.”

He remembered. The icing of her cake was decorated with a picture of She-Ra atop her unicorn. Before she even opened it, Regina excitedly identified a tall, inelegantly wrapped present as a pogo stick. Most of her other presents didn’t stick in his memory. After she’d finished, her dad walked her to the window. She shrieked with joy at the freshly installed tetherball set in the backyard. She and Tyler ran out to play with it. Her father and his mother watched them from the deck, sipping beer and possibly holding hands for the first time.

“I remember your dad’s house,” Tyler said. “The backyard. That crazy elaborate treehouse he built for you. The sandbox beneath it. One time you cut your head on the trap door, and we all went to the emergency room with you to get stitches.”

“Only three stitches,” Regina scoffed. “Hardly worth it. I remember the time they got really drunk and fought like banshees. It was near the end. Just after dinner. I can’t remember what they were fighting about. Your mom dumped the garbage all across the floor and screamed at my dad to pick it up. He yelled at us to go upstairs. That’s what I remember. Sitting in my room with you, listening to the muffled, angry sounds beneath us, holding hands, waiting for it to pass. It wasn’t as traumatic as it could have been if we didn’t have each other. We were stronger together. That’s what I miss. That’s what I thought we could recreate the second time we found each other.”

[“Someone wrote a song about that.”](#) Tyler said. “It wasn’t me, I swear. Not that one. It was much better than I ever did.”

Despite the ruckus around town, the bench at the bus stop was empty. Tyler looked up and down the road to make sure the bus wasn’t early. He dropped his backpack onto the dirt ground and sat down on the bench. Regina sat beside him.

“Why are you bringing this up?” Tyler said. “I’ve been good.”

“No, you’ve been contained. You subdued yourself. There’s a difference.”

An ancient memory shook itself free. Regina’s dad washed his Lincoln Towncar in the driveway. The runoff flowed down the driveway and into the ditch where Tyler sat. He piled up pebbles from the rock garden to dam up the ditch. He set ants on leaves and watched them set sail. He turned his head, and Mary was there, hands on her little hips, telling him he wasn’t doing it right.

“I’m trying, I’m just a little late,” Tyler said as Regina drew her legs up onto the bench.

She stretched. He tried not to stare. He tried not to remember Regina’s smooth, toned muscles and perfect curves. He tried not to think about their first past together, or the second one, and especially not the buried third.

Liz. Liz wanted to leave him. He would win her back.

Regina perceived his confusion. She wasn’t trying to torture him. She wanted him to be, even for a moment, what she thought he could have been to her. [What they could have been together.](#) She wanted to

wringing out the sponge he'd become and see what was left. Like Liz, she wanted to trust him. She wanted to confide in him.

"My mom died last year," she said.

He turned to her. He resisted the impulse to touch her.

"Oh God, I'm sorry," he said. "Was she still living in New York?"

She shook her head.

"She and my dad got back together for a while."

She still didn't feel comfortable telling him everything.

"What happened?"

"She killed herself."

"I'm sorry. God. I'm really sorry. I don't know what to say."

"It's okay," Regina said. "No one ever does. I just wanted you to know something true about me. Instead of the distorted memories."

Tyler lowered his head.

"I'm sorry for all that, too," he said. "It wasn't fair. I shouldn't have used you like that to make myself someone new."

"At least you admitted it," she said. "How did that one song go? [*Please don't tell her that I tried to sell her piece by pretty piece, memories chopped to verses sung between clenched teeth.*](#)"

"Yeah," he said quietly.

The fact that she knew the line by memory made him feel even worse.

"It's funny," she said, "that both of our parents got back together. They split up long enough for us to meet. And it seems we keep finding each other, but we're almost as fleeting."

"I never believed in fate until I met you again. And kept meeting you. Over and over."

"Yeah. Maybe it keeps slamming us together to try to shake us awake. To tell us we've been going about this all wrong."

She stood up and stepped in front of him. He sheepishly looked up at her. The storm clouds gathered behind her head. She looked beautiful and terrifying.

She said, "I love you, Tyler. I always have. You have to understand though—it's not the kind of love we thought it was. It's better than that. And more necessary. You told me that when I left you, I created you. I created this new you. I need to be sure I didn't create a complete monster that needs to be destroyed."

Her lips curled. She flashed her teeth, and then she turned it into the faintest wisp of a smile.

“Do I pass?” he asked nervously. “Do I get to live?”

“That depends,” she said. “Are you ready to be my brother again?”

“I do love you,” he said. He nodded. “I pretty much have to. Yes. I’m ready.”

“Then love me for who I actually was, and who I am now. I’m not a ghost. I’m not an ideal.”

He nodded. He would soon be facing possible decimation. He might be turned to ash again. But Regina had released him. He felt free, absolved without ever admitting the crimes for which he was really guilty. He still felt pushed aside, but with a gentle, loving touch.

The bus to the ferry rumbled down the road. Tyler picked up his backpack. Regina wrapped her arms around him. She squeezed his hand with her thumb and index finger and kissed him on the forehead.

“Go,” she said. “Rescue what you can. And don’t forget my piano strings.”

Tyler climbed the stairs to the Tropicalian Museum of Natural History.

Of course this has to happen here, he thought.

Even the font and size of the museum’s name emblazoned across the entrance’s marble archway were the same as in New York. The museum was located at the north end of downtown. The buildings in this part of the capital city were shiny and tall and new. If Regina had teleported directly here without passing the other parts of the city, the images her father instilled in her would not have been entirely compromised.

Car horns blared endlessly behind him, but they were not composed of anger and impatience like in the States. The beeps and honks and five-second-tunes coalesced into another form of communication:

“Hey! I’m here! What are you doing tonight? Do you want to come over to my place? Or should we go to the club? My father died in the spring, and I haven’t finished grieving. My sister is studying abroad in Argentina. The Americans are stealing again. We will not tolerate this for long. They will feel our wrath. They will face our army. Hey! I’m here!”

Tyler had taken the ferry across the strait to the port town of Oban. A second bus had carried him along the 73 twisty miles to Tropicalia City. The jungle thinned twenty miles from the coast. Streams poured out of the trees, combined forces, and became rivers and lakes. Rolling farmland and orchards dominated the landscape.

Before coming to Tropicalia, Tyler had no idea pineapples grew directly out of the ground. Sometimes he believed there was a secret all adults share once they reach a certain age. A plain, simple truth that would nonetheless alter the way he saw the world. Something everyone would learn to silently accept. He never suspected that secret would be the growth cycle of pineapples.

The concierge at Liz’s hotel informed him that she and the other InterWorlders were at a cocktail meet-and-greet at the museum. The sun was beginning to set as he climbed the stairs that led to the museum’s front doors. A cluster of loud, drunk Americans in khakis and rolled-up sleeves passed him. He hoped he hadn’t missed her.

He pulled open the glass door and stepped inside. A rotund security guard approached him.

“Lo siento, señor,” the guard said. “El museo esta cerrado.”

Tyler paused to process the Spanish. Every Tropicalian he’d encountered so far had spoken enough English that he was surprised to be addressed in the country’s official language.

“Esta bien,” he sputtered. “Soy con InterWorld.”

The security guard shrugged and pointed toward the dwindling group of Americans across the lobby, on the other side of the stegosaurus skeleton. Tyler spotted Liz through its rib cage. His heart pounded. She looked gorgeous, dressed in a dark skirt, stilettos, and a white blouse; her hair curled, her face made up. She held an empty flute of champagne. She threw her head back in exaggerated laughter at something said by the middle-aged man with dyed, jet black hair and a gold chain around his neck who stood next to her.

Tyler rounded the massive fossil. Regardless of the potential gravity of the situation, a childhood sing-along danced around his head on repeat:

My name is Stegosaurus, I’m a funny looking dinosaur, on my back are seven bony plates, and on my tail there’s more...

The jingle was on its fourth repetition when Liz spotted him. She stared at him for several seconds, before her body decided how it would react. Then her shoulders slumped so much that it appeared as if her heels had no effect on her height. Frowning, she motioned at Tyler with her free hand to stop where he was. She exchanged some words with the three men nearest her, tapped one lightly on his jacket sleeve, and crossed the span between them.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered harshly.

His presence was not a happy surprise for her.

“I...”

All that time on the ferry and buses, and he hadn’t decided what he wanted to say, or what to admit.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

She looked him up and down. Everyone else was dressed somewhere between formal and business-casual. Tyler wore board shorts, flip-flops, and a bright green *Belize Zoo* t-shirt.

“I heard some... troubling things,” he tried. “I heard you might not be happy with me.”

Liz bit her lip and shook her head.

“You talked to Regina,” she said.

She took a deep breath.

“Wait here a minute. Let me wrap up. I didn’t want to do this like this.”

She headed back to the other InterWorlders. The three men she’d left wore puzzled expressions, and studied Tyler over her shoulder. Tyler didn’t hear what she said, but they laughed and absorbed her back

into the group.

I didn't want to do this like this.

So that's it then. It was true. She'd made up her mind.

It had been many years since Tyler faced an impending catastrophe like this. Since Regina. He was out of practice. Even if he wasn't so rusty, his past experience in matters like this was not a foundation he wanted to build upon. He had cried, he had begged for understanding and pleaded for second chances. He had written three-dozen songs.

He wasn't breathing right. His breaths were too sharp and quick. He wasn't getting enough air. His hands trembled. He sat down on the stone wall surrounding the stegosaurus.

My name is Stegosaurus, I'm a funny—Fuck! Get out of there!

He focused on each breath. He counted to three during each inhalation and exhalation.

Once the regular functions of life were under control again, he ran through the possibilities of why Liz wanted to get away from him. There were many. So many transgressions he didn't even try to recall each individual instance. He saw a blur of hotel rooms and booze and drugs and naked flesh and so much sweat. And the girls he met through the band's social media, even off the road, back home in Colorado. The hundred little lies he'd told ran together and began to form a sing-songy melody like the stegosaurus song.

Regina, of course, was the only sin that stood out. *Sin*. It was unfair of him to think of her that way, but that was the word that came to mind. He had lied. He wasn't ready to call her *sister*. He never had been. Even when they were little kids. He tried, but when he thought of her now, so many descriptors preceded anything remotely sisterly. She insisted this had nothing to do with her. He believed her that she hadn't told Liz anything. But her presence alone must at least be some sort of catalyst.

No.

There was no one to blame but himself. Whatever the impetus, whatever Liz's reasons—she was right, and he was wrong. He deserved this. He was a shit. A selfish, whiny little shit. He shouldn't have gotten away with it for this long. Liz deserved so much better... Is that... Merard?

No.

It didn't matter. Tyler had taken her love for granted for far too long. *Of course she loves me*, he'd say to himself whenever he bothered to think about it. *Why wouldn't she?*

He wouldn't cry, or beg, or plead. He would try to understand. He would apologize. And if need be, he would release her as Regina had released him. By the time she returned to him, he was far calmer than someone who was about to be pushed aside for the second time in a day should be. He prepared himself to be diminished. This is what he needed, and what he deserved.

"Come with me," Liz said.

She pointed at the entrance to the traveling exhibit, which Tyler had seen advertised on a banner outside the museum.

“They’re all heading back to the hotel soon. We can talk in private there.”

The Evolution Revolution exhibit had toured through science museums across the United States over the past four years, and now it was heading south. Tyler had meant to see it during its two-month residence in Denver, but he had been on his own tour with The Amends at that time.

The exhibit’s entrance archway was bridged by the bare skeletons of two pterodactyls. The tips of their hollow bones, once covered by leathery wings, touched each other. Liz shivered. She assured the guard that they would be quick. She led Tyler inside.

They emerged into a round room bathed in a low red light. The walls grew brighter and filled with more defined reds and blacks. Volcanoes emerged from a brown wasteland. Digital stars blinked into focus. The whole room flashed white and meteors streaked across the sky. One smashed into the ground and a crater exploded, its sound deafening through hi-fi surround-sound speakers.

A voice arose over the din—a calm, reassuring voice which could belong to only one man. A voice with enough gravitas to remain un-translated in foreign lands. The confidence of the voice clouded the uncertainty between the Words.

Leonard Nimoy said, “During the Earth’s first four billion years—the Precambrian Era—life first began to evolve, and flourish, and change the planet forever. The atmosphere contained carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and water vapor. High levels of carbon dioxide trapped the sun’s heat. Volcanoes poured lava and released gases from deep inside the Earth. Volcanic steam condensed into heavy rains, which accumulated into shallow seas. Hardened lava formed continents. There are two competing theories about the origin of the first organic compounds...”

In the Beginning there was a Word, whispered into Tyler’s ear.

The word was followed by four more. His eyes grew wide and then empty. His molecules fell apart, began to disintegrate out from under him—rushed back toward their source. Liz backed away from him. Her heels were just for show. She could have reached his ear and could have walked around all evening on her tiptoes with no effort. She was light again.

“It’s not about what you did,” she added. “I’ve known about all that since the beginning.”

“I’m sorry for everything I did,” he said. “I’m sorry for what I could have been. For what I failed to be for you. I’m sorry for who I am.”

“You probably are,” she said. “But this isn’t about you. None of this is.”

She was the third person to tell him that since he’d been in Tropicalia, and the first he’d truly believed.

They stumbled into the next room. I followed behind, picking through the pieces they left in their wake. I planned patterns for the required, impending reconstruction.

The captions beneath meteorites and stone prokaryotes described how the single-cell organisms learned to photosynthesize, and excrete oxygen, and ultimately transform the entirety of the Earth. Eukaryotes appeared, bringing with them mysterious nuclei with the capacity to hold an infinity of information not yet created. Sexual evolution was discovered as an antidote to loneliness, boredom, and entropy.

“I’ve been in stasis for too long. It’s like I’ve been asleep. I knew I could stay that way as long as I stayed with you. I have to take some time to understand why I wanted that. I need to know what I could have been. [What I could be.](#)”

“Not what *we* could be,” he said.

She shook her head sadly.

“It’s not that it’s too late for that. We’ve already found that out, this past year since you’ve been away from the band. It’s not enough.”

The entrance to the Paleozoic Era glowed with soft blue neon letters. A moving digital sea wrapped around the walls. Long, leafy plants wavered under the waves. Ribbon-shaped mollusks twirled around upside-down pine cones and honeycomb-shaped structures. A monstrous something-or-other glided into focus, with a stingray torso, big bulbous black eyes, and two giant caterpillars for a mouth. Horseshoe crabs and snails slid across the sand.

Leonard Nimoy said, “Animals in the shallow Cambrian seas first developed skeletons. Some of these creatures hid beneath elaborate mineral armor...”

Lizards crawled out of the sea, stood up, and decided what they wanted to be.

I began assembling his pieces into hard little clumps. I had an easier task than Liz did years earlier. He hadn’t allowed himself to regress fully to ash. There was still a memory of Form in his disparate pieces. I might be able to assemble them better this time.

Tyler grabbed hold of Liz’s hand. She didn’t resist, but she bit her lip, terrified that this was when the begging would begin.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” he said. “Way back when we met. You put me back together. You did all you could for me. The rest is on me.”

She released her lower lip from her tooth’s grip. She smiled and squeezed his hand.

Tyler lifted her arm a few inches. He frowned.

“You feel light,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, still smiling.

I smiled at her, too, though she didn’t see. She was almost ready for me, if she’d have me. If I could get up the nerve to ask again.

The security guard from the entrance touched Liz’s shoulder.

“Usted debe seguir adelante,” he said.

He tapped his watch.

They did as they were told, and emerged from the sea, into the Ordovician period, when animals developed backbones.

“Please don’t write about me,” she said. “Don’t do to me what you did to Regina.”

He said, "Maybe just one song. No more than that, I promise."

"You only write about the people you think you love once we're gone. When we're unable to offer a rebuttal."

"I'm sorry. But you're not gone yet. You're just on your way. Once more before you reach the door."

"Don't think I didn't hear that rhyme," she said, and smiled.

"We did a little too much to fit it all in a song."

The security guard reappeared, and urged them along again. They passed through the Earth's first mass extinction, but didn't notice. They slipped into the Silurian period. Plants climbed out of the water onto the shore. Tetrapods crept behind.

I waited for them in a fiberglass Carboniferous jungle. A giant dragonfly buzzed around my head, and a six-foot millipede twisted around my feet. I nudged it away before it could ruin my pile of broken musician parts. A wind whipped around me. I spat onto my pile, and blew on it, and stirred it, and sang to it.

I watched them through the plastic branches.

"Don't leave yet. Come back to Montezuma. Play Alan's party. It will do you good. You can see if you're really ready to leave all that behind. I don't think you are."

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

"What's one more delay?"

The guard again herded them onward toward the present. They passed the Pangaea hall where tetrapods and reptiles brawled and mauled each other to see which species would prove worthwhile. The guard guided them through the scarred land of the fourth and fifth extinctions, and reality began to sink in. With loving threats and quiet epithets, they let their words fly with controlled smiles.

"Thank you for being exactly the person I needed you to be," she said. "I will always love you for that."

He said, "My heart's about ready for you to tear it apart."

She said, "Don't start, we're trying to play this smart."

The last gasps of love and lust thrust them past the halls of cosmic dust and critical mass, and the murals on the walls that recalled the last days of dinosaurs and Russian czars, past dried-up reservoirs and dying stars.

I followed, though they couldn't see, and watched on, urged on, as they pretended to be free.