



THE
ELECTRIC BLUE MONKEY

CIRCUS

EPISODE **10** OF:

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

The Electric Blue Monkey Circus

One Week Before Battle

Tyler Taylor rocked restlessly back and forth on his heels near the edge of the swimming hole. He wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. A distant howler monkey bellowed a warning at hikers coming up the steep jungle trail. The howlers were all bark; the capuchins were the real bastards. Two hours ago, a small, angry troop of capuchins had greeted Tyler and Liz's approach to the top of the waterfall with a barrage of nuts, sticks, and stones.

Before and below him, Liz sat on a submerged rock shelf, the water lapping against her blue bikini top. She was chatting with a girl named Eva. They'd only met last night, but Liz had caught glimpses of her many times before on gossip blogs and reality TV clip shows. Tyler pretended not to care about their conversation, but as usual Liz saw right through him.

"What made you need to leave?" Liz asked.

Eva finished a swig from her metal water bottle. She screwed the cap back on and set it on the rock behind her. She was of course quite pretty, though she wore more makeup than the Tropicalian jungle required. Her father was Tropicalian, and her olive skin seemed to welcome the harsh midday sun like a returning relative. Her large, fake boobs bobbed on the water. Tyler tried not to become mesmerized by their motion.

She paused a moment to consider her answer before speaking.

"I was tired of being portrayed as the villain," she finally said. "I wasn't who I was anymore. And I was in love, and I couldn't act on it. I was tired of it all."

Eva had escaped—quite literally—a month ago from the set of her third reality show, a competition called *Castle Keep*. The premise of the show was simple. One team defended a castle-esque mansion on the northern California coast, while another team attempted to sack it. Both teams used modified paintball guns for weapons.

During the production of her previous show, a *Survivor* rip-off contest in the South Pacific, she had fallen for the cameraman who had been assigned to her. They spoke in hushed, rushed, desperate whispers when the cameras were off for the night. Julian mouthed words of encouragement and strategy to her from behind his lens during the daytime. She ended up getting second place, the prize for which was \$20,000 and a Kia Sorrento. They had five days of bliss together at an island resort, before she was whisked off to LA to do promotion for the network. Three weeks later, *Castle Keep* began. Julian managed to get assigned to her again.

[They carefully planned their escape, and pulled it off during one of the fiercer battles.](#) Eventually, they made their way down to Tropicalia, at Julian's suggestion. He had a friend in Montezuma, and was also half-Tropicalian himself. His mother was from a small village on the Caribbean coast, a descendant of Jamaican immigrants.

Eva pushed herself a few inches out of the water. She craned her neck around to check her surroundings.

Her eyes darted back and forth.

A trio of Australian guys, having returned from an excursion upstream, stood on a boulder atop the twenty-foot waterfall that cascaded down into the swimming hole. They all erupted in laughter at something one of them said. On the opposite side of the pool, two Spaniards were making out hard, nearly pornographically. A twitchy, skinny American kid with a goatee sat near the border of the jungle, doodling in a notebook and scratching at his neck. Seven or eight other Americans were camped out by the edge of the bigger waterfall, taking turns leaping off into the water below. Someone's portable speakers were playing "[16 Military Wives](#)". Julian was at the far end of the long narrow pool, screwing around on a rope swing with his friend and a couple local Tropicalian kids.

"I wish I could be sure," Eva said. "One way or another."

"Sure of what?" Liz asked.

"I don't think I got away completely," Eva said. "I think they might have followed me. I think I might still be on the show. I keep seeing people film me."

She shook her head.

"Julian thinks I'm crazy," she added.

Liz glanced up at Tyler, to see if he was still listening, before replying, "You're not crazy. You've been through a lot. Everyone has a camera these days. And you're kind of famous. People are probably just excited to see you."

"Even if that's true, it still doesn't make me feel any better."

Eva let out a laugh without much humor behind it.

"I just want to work on my thesis," she said. "Why can't they just let me go? Why can't they edit me out?"

Liz didn't know how to respond, so she left Eva's question hanging there for a while. Eva sank back into the water. She dipped her mouth into it, and squirted out a stream. Tyler felt like an outsider, an unnecessary appendage. He stood up. Maybe it was time to try again.

Eva, recognizing the conversation had taken an uncomfortable and dead-end turn, changed the subject.

"So the place where we were filming *Castle Keep* actually used to be owned by your boss. It might still be, I don't know," she said.

She reached behind her for her pack of Marlboro Lights and lighter.

"Who?" Liz said, thinking initially of her chubby supervisor Steve. "Oh. Ambrose. Ha. He seems to own a bit of everything. You mind if I bum one of those?"

Eva nodded and tossed her the pack. A quick scowl appeared and faded on Tyler's face. Liz hated that he smoked cigarettes, and he tried not to smoke too much around her. She only smoked when she was really drunk. Was she trying to goad him into commenting? Or was this some sort of peace offering?

"Have you met him yet?" Eva asked.

She leaned over to light Liz's smoke.

"Yesterday morning, briefly," Liz said. "But I'm actually supposed to have dinner with him tonight."

She and Tyler arrived in Montezuma on the evening bus three days ago. Liz had today off until dinner with Alan this evening. She'd worked the past two days while Tyler wandered around town, read, and attempted to avoid running into Regina.

Alan Ambrose showed up at a meeting yesterday in the conference room at the newly constructed above town. Her teammates had been surprised. He was technically invited to most major meetings, but he rarely appeared. He was silent throughout, sitting off at the far end of the table. After the meeting ended, he introduced himself to Liz and asked if she'd like to go to dinner with him tonight so he could give her the lay of the land.

"Oooh," Eva cooed. "Jealous."

"Shut up," Liz said. "Your boyfriend is fifty yards away."

She purposefully didn't look over towards Julian's direction.

Eva's bright tone lowered.

"We'll see," she said.

"Trouble in paradise? Literally?" Liz asked.

She glanced at Tyler. He took that as his cue to stare down at his feet.

Tyler and Liz had a bit of a blow-up last night, the latest in a series. Liz went out on the town for dinner and drinks with her coworkers—the town being a cluster of ten or so restaurants, bars, surf rental stores, and souvenir shops along Montezuma's primary dirt road. Tyler had stayed in their cabana to read a sci-fi novel and hoped against hope that if he kept his head down he might be able to avoid the many annoying machinations of fate which had brought him here.

Liz recognized Regina working behind the bar at *La Mesa*. She was obviously surprised to see her there, but she'd harnessed her PR powers to remain overly friendly. They'd only talked for a few minutes, but Liz offered to bring Tyler by tonight if they didn't run into each other before then.

When Liz came home, her story about randomly running into Tyler's ex in a tiny town in Central America quickly, inevitably devolved into an insinuation that he knew Regina was here, and that's why he so readily agreed to come along to Tropicalia. Tyler vehemently denied the accusation. Although he knew from her Twib that she was in the country, he had no reason to believe she'd be in this little town. Secretly he wasn't surprised, given the other strange circumstances which had compelled him here. And he had indeed spotted Regina cleaning the tables at "*The Table*" earlier that afternoon. He'd managed to convince himself that he could either somehow avoid her during his time here, or that his four-year girlfriend wouldn't recognize the woman about whom he'd written two dozen songs.

He played the ignorance card, refusing to yet reveal the more pressing reason he'd come—the reason currently watching him from the far side of the pool.

Two of the Americans peeled off from the rest of their large crew. They looked ridiculous, dressed like a pair of Hunter Thompsons. Both of them wore Bermuda shorts, similar Hawaiian shirts, and big aviators. They appeared to be a few years younger than Tyler and Liz, maybe Eva's age. Their collars and armpits were wet with sweat. The taller of the two wore a fisherman's hat and the other one wore a Nike visor, presumably to accentuate his premature balding. The one in the visor sauntered up to Eva.

"Could I trouble you for one of those, too?" he asked.

He knelt down beside her.

"Yeah," Eva said coolly. "Go ahead."

She pointed at the pack.

"I'm Smith," he said, nodding at Liz.

He ignored Tyler.

"My friend here is John."

"You're kidding," Liz stated flatly, acknowledging the presence of the joke but denying it any further courtesy.

"He he he," he said, very pronounced, very practiced, accepting her skepticism by phonetically mimicking the sounds of laughter instead of actually laughing.

"No, really," he said. "I'm Smith Radley and he's John Budreau."

He jammed his thumb behind him.

"Liz."

"Eva."

Tyler turned his back and faced the waterfall. He was getting closer to ready.

"Pleased to meet you," John Budreau said, a slight southern twang in his voice. "Would it be crossing the line if I asked you for one, too?"

"Go ahead," Eva said.

Budreau fitted a cigarette into a holder he pulled from his pocket. Eva locked eyes with Liz and they stifled giggles.

"Can you believe we're in fucking Tropicalia?" Smith Radley said, stretching out his arms. "Just feel this goddamn air. Can you believe it?"

"Nope," Liz said.

Then she submerged herself, with her own cigarette still between her lips, and stayed under as long as she possibly could.

The Hunters waited patiently and awkwardly for her to come up before saying anything else. Eva finished her cigarette and smiled as Liz kicked her shin underwater.

When she finally surfaced, Budreau took his turn to speak.

“We’re fraternity brothers from the University of Washington. Washington state, mind you, not D.C.”

His words were far too precise.

“I see,” Eva said.

Her eyes widened and she waved. John-Smith followed her line of sight. Julian was heading over, his friend trailing behind. They’d been hiking upstream when Liz and Tyler arrived. On their way back, the Tropicalian kids had drawn them into playing on the rope swing. Julian must have spotted the Hunters approach the girls, and here he came like a knight to swoop in for the rescue. Tyler, on the other hand, preferred to turn his back and pretend not to notice while he psyched himself up to jump.

Smith nodded at Eva and Liz.

“We best be on our way,” he said. “Thanks for the smokes, ladies. I’m sure we’ll run into you in town sometime.”

They headed back to their group.

“Nice to meet you,” Julian called out after them, laughing.

He was tall and ripped and shirtless and still soaking wet. Water beaded off his small fro. Liz tried to read the faint lettering of the tattoo against the dark skin over his collarbone.

Tyler froze at the sound of his name. He knew he’d have to turn around, and introduce himself. And then he’d find out if Julian’s friend had accompanied him. And after, he might not be able to turn back around ever again. He took a deep breath. He turned around.

“Hi, I’m Julian.”

And there he was. Sam Merard stepped out from Julian’s shadow. He wore that same dumb grin from the museum, and nothing else except for board shorts.

“This is Liz,” Eva said. “She’s the girl I met last night.”

Julian’s laugh was a booming bass.

“So you’re the one to blame for Eva’s hangover this morning. She was a little monster.”

“I’m Sam,” Merard said.

Tyler forced himself to meet Merard’s gaze. Merard’s left eyebrow was raised ever so slightly higher than the other.

“I’m Tyler,” he said, louder than necessary. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“So you say,” Merard said.

He laughed.

“Good to meet you, too.”

Tyler looked to Liz. She was staring into the water. Her shoulders rose and fell with each rapid intake of breath and she also rocked back and forth, creating a nervous, circular motion.

So she does know him, Tyler thought.

Finally, after far too many seconds, she bit hard into her lower lip and raised her head. She smiled radiantly.

“I’m Liz.”

Her heart pounded so hard in her chest she was afraid the others might hear it, yet that was the least of her present fears. A rush of memories she’d spent the last several years trying to convince herself were dreams were beating against the flimsy gates she’d erected.

You’re not supposed to be here. You’re not supposed to be anywhere. You shouldn’t have come back. Neither should I.

“A pleasure,” Merard said.

He smiled again. His face betrayed nothing damnable.

So this is how we’re gonna play it, Tyler thought. *Who is he to her? An ex? And she had the gall to get mad at me for Regina? Or... what if he’s more... current? Could she... No.*

He banished that last thought. Tyler was the asshole here.

“You boys have fun?” Eva asked.

“Yeah we showed those kids a thing or two,” Julian said.

He dipped his foot into the water, swished it around.

“This one,” Merard said, pointing his finger at Julian, “showed me something, too. He’s got a pretty cool trick to hang on a rope as long as you need to.”

“I can’t claim the Army didn’t teach me anything,” Julian said. “But it’s not too complicated. You just wrap the rope around your foot.”

“You’re so full of surprises,” Eva said flatly.

Their eyes connected. Julian’s shoulders dropped slightly.

Two men and a woman emerged from the jungle. The man in front had a thick, bushy beard. A frayed cloak of some sort was draped across his shoulders, completely out of place beneath the Tropicalian sun. Or any place, really. The man even seemed embarrassed to be wearing it, like a sad-eyed dog dressed up in a Halloween costume. He also looked familiar. Tyler squinted and waited for him to get closer.

The monkeys screamed angrily after them. The leader's companions trailed a couple feet behind him. The girl was short and stout. She wore a tattered, homemade dress. The other man was thin and gaunt and young with a bushy white man's fro. He held a carved walking stick. He turned and watched the woods warily, unappreciative of the hostility hurled at them from high up in the trees. He picked up a stone and rolled it over in his hand, ready to strike if attacked.

Merard turned to see what Tyler was looking at. When he saw the group, he laughed loudly.

"You haven't met the Electric Blue Monkey Circus yet?" he asked.

Tyler shook his head.

"The electric what?"

He didn't particularly want to speak, but his curiosity got the better of him. If Merard mentioned Ubiq, he swore he'd punch him in the face.

"Our local freak show," Merard said.

"Some kind of hippy cult," Julian added. "They put on a show in town a couple nights a week."

The cloaked man exchanged a few words with the skinny tweaker with the notepad. The girl bent down next to him and accepted a joint. It was then that the memory clicked. Tyler recognized him.

Oh, you've gotta be Goddamn kidding me, he thought.

"Fucking weirdos, though," Merard said, staring directly at Charles Arbuthnot Reilly.

The Conjurer patted the tweaker on the shoulder. He turned his head in their direction for less than a second. The girl handed back the joint. Charles led his followers across the river, and into the jungle on the other side, where as far as Tyler knew, there was no trail.

"Anyway," Julian said to Eva, "we're gonna head back to town. Sam wants me to take a look at his Blazer."

"It sounds like it's farting when I put it in reverse," Merard said.

"You've got a car here?" Eva asked.

Merard nodded.

"I've been down here a while."

"You coming with us?" Julian asked.

"If Liz—and Tyler—will keep me company, I think I'll stay here a while. At least till the afternoon storm comes."

"Cool, I'll see you back at the cabin," Julian said. Then, to Merard, "Let's hit it."

"Good to meet you two again," Merard said.

Again.

He and Julian walked to the edge of the waterfall—the quickest way down. Merard jumped. Julian dove.

Liz stared straight ahead at the jungle. Tyler began pacing. Three of the Americans from the other group emerged from the trees, panting heavily from their climb back up the trail after a jump.

“I swear Julian’s spent more time with him than he has with me since we got here,” Eva said.

“That’s the friend you said he had down in Tropicalia?” Tyler asked.

Eva nodded.

“God knows what they’re up to. They disappear for hours at a time, night and day. He can’t have *that* many problems with his jeep.”

“I think I’m ready now,” Tyler said.

Eva looked puzzled. Liz was still staring.

“Liz,” Tyler said.

She snapped back to the present world.

“I’m gonna go for it,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “Good luck, babe.”

If he’d made his move ten minutes earlier, she would have gotten up to watch and give him encouragement. Reality had shifted since then and it hadn’t yet decided on a place to settle in. Now he was glad to do this on his own. He walked back over toward the ledge.

As a kid, Tyler’s favorite thing in the world to do was to jump off high places into water. He relished the surge of adrenaline when his body was in mid-air. How his stomach dropped and his body ignored his mind’s reassurances and prepared itself to die. The rush of the water wrapping around him, the thrill of survival.

When he and Liz first arrived in town, the locals told him about this place. He came here yesterday while Liz worked. He’d climbed up the trail, and watched a few jumpers take the sixty-foot plunge. He walked to the edge. Where he remained, paralyzed. He couldn’t do it. Something had changed. He’d become a coward. He met Liz for lunch and told her he’d jumped six times.

This time was different. He felt neither the excitement of his childhood nor the fear of yesterday. This simply must be done. Reality had indeed shifted, and it hadn’t yet decided on a place to land, but he had a pretty good idea where he would. He didn’t know whether he and the others were here because of fate or nefarious, meticulous planning. He accepted the inevitability of churning, invisible machinations. He would let them carry him or drop him where they willed.

In that moment before his old cowardice and uncertainty returned, he believed enough to leap into the air, and to trust the water would rise to meet him. He didn’t hesitate even as he recognized Regina’s face watching him from below. The final puzzle piece clicking into place. It may as well happen all at once.

He sank deeper than he expected. His feet touched the rocky bottom. He panicked and shot toward the surface, his lungs alarmingly empty from the long trip down. He breached the air with a puny little yelp, followed by a deep gasp. He rubbed at his eyes to make the red spots go away and he lay there on his back for a moment, waiting for his heart to return to normal.

He treaded water and kicked around so he faced the shore. Regina was still there. He managed to catch his breath and then dove underwater again, swimming beneath the surface toward the shore so he wouldn't have to make eye contact with her until the last second. He held his arms out in front of him, and when his fingers touched rock, he surfaced. He took his time opening his eyes. When he did, there she was.

"Tyler Taylor," she said.

She stood there in an oversized "Get Lucky in Kentucky" t-shirt covering her swimsuit and flip-flops, her sunglasses up on her forehead.

"We meet again."

He pretended not to be affected. He pushed himself up out of the water as gracefully as he could.

"Hey, Regina," he said, a bit too sing-songy for her taste.

She frowned. But then he stepped over a stone into a soft spot. His feet sank down into mud past his ankle. She was taller than him now. She preferred it this way. She laughed.

"So this is the retired version of you," she said.

The tropical light this time of day was perfect for her. The sun had begun its shift down the spectrum. This new orange light, the shadows of the trees behind her, and the breeze drifting in from the sea transformed her into something more than herself, more than even a symbol. Trouble.

"I guess so," he said.

He brushed his wet hair out of his eyes. He needed a haircut. Back in college, Regina cut his hair.

"How does it feel, Tyler Taylor?"

"Alright, I guess. Please don't call me both names."

"Why not?"

"My parents were rich. They knew I'd have an easy life. They gave me a weird name so I wouldn't have it so easy all the time. They thought it was funny, and then they got divorced."

"I'd never guess your dad had a sense of humor. But I do, too, Tyler Taylor," she said. "Think it's funny."

"What are you doing down here?"

"What are *you* doing down here?" she parroted.

"I don't have a good answer for that yet--"

“Jesus Christ, Tyler,” she interrupted, “give me a hug at least.”

Tyler pulled his feet from the mud with a slurp and stepped on a small rock so he was taller again. He wrapped his arms around her. When they pulled apart, she took her glasses down from her forehead and began chewing on one end.

“I met your girlfriend last night,” she said. “Well, re-met her, I suppose.”

“I heard.”

“Did you ever tell her?”

“Tell her what, Regina?”

He thought it a fair question. Tell her that she was almost his stepsister? Tell her that he became a songwriter by turning the pain of her leaving into two dozen songs? Tell her how he crumbled into ash in her lap? Or tell her...

“You know what,” she said. “And if I can’t use both your names, you’re not allowed to say my name at all.”

“She knows I sometimes... strayed on the road.”

“But she doesn’t know about me. The last part.”

“You left me. You made me what I am. When you came to my show that night-”

“Cut the crap, Tyler Taylor. You’re not writing a song right now.”

Despite the words, she didn’t look angry. She kept chewing on the end of those glasses.

“Sorry,” he said, and lowered his head.

She put the sunglasses back on her face.

“You’re here,” she said, “so we’ll have to figure this out. I work at *La Mesa* again tonight. You two should stop by. I’ll be nice, I promise. Our secret is safe.”

She turned and walked away. Tyler watched her until the jungle swallowed her. He turned back toward the falls. He didn’t want to climb back up there. There was nowhere else to jump—just the jungle, and the road beyond it, and then the long steady slope to the sea.

Liz slipped outside the cabana door, and closed it gently behind her. Tyler was napping. The tropical sun had drained her too, but she needed to work. She wore a lime green sundress she’d bought two nights before they left Colorado. The sticky sea air left her with no choice but to wear her hair in a ponytail. Though she was unsure of the terrain where she was heading, she wore heels. Alan was a multi-billionaire who stood well over six feet tall, so she grabbed any small advantage she could take.

The sun had disappeared behind the jungle. At this hour, the insects’ buzz overpowered the sound of the sea. She headed down to the cluster of large, barnacle-encrusted rocks to wait for her ride.

She took long, zigzagging strides to stay on the scattered patches of grass amongst the sand, like Indiana Jones in the Canyon of the Crescent Moon. There was a time when the fear of a heel sinking in the sand would be the absolute least of her worries. She used to be light. Hollow. She had come close to flight.

The cabanas where she and Tyler—and some of her new friends—stayed were a quarter mile from Montezuma's main drag. She checked the rock's surface to make sure it wasn't wet before sitting down. From here, she could see the lights in town start to blink on.

She sat on the north tip of the wide arc of Montezuma Bay. At this end, the shore was rocky, and the waves were huge. Until Ambrose's purchase of the peninsula, the majority of the visitors here were surfers. In the center of the bay, where the town was situated, was a long stretch of white sandy beach. A handful of tourists remained on the beach, either asleep or too drunk to move yet. The jungle rose up behind the coast. It crept down over the rocks south of the cabanas. Its odd smell—a flowery, rotten, syrupy mix—battled with the salty scent of the sea for dominance.

Montezuma was located at the southwest edge of a peninsula jutting out of Tropicalia's Pacific coast, of which InterWorld now owned 96%. Forty miles long and ten miles wide, the peninsula remained the country's least densely populated region, because of both its inaccessibility and its dearth of fertile soil. The land was either too hilly, too forested, too rocky, or the soil too acidic from a century and a half of toxic banana plantation runoff.

The small airport under construction four miles north of town wouldn't accommodate commercial traffic for another month or so. Ambrose had a helipad out at his house, but Liz wasn't high up enough on the corporate ladder to make use of it. She and Tyler had taken a ferry from the mainland fishing town of Oban across the strait. Once on the east side of the peninsula, they boarded a bus, which took three hours to traverse the thirteen miles of winding, washed-out rock and dirt roads to Montezuma.

The wind began to pick up. Panic rose up from within her. She clutched around for something to grab on to, so she wouldn't be swept away, until she remembered her bones had re-solidified many years ago. She hadn't regressed in a long time.

She had accepted Tyler's invitation to hang out at Regina's bar after dinner without a fight. They had the kind of loud, intense sex two people who are working hard to prove they're with the person they want to be with have.

What is Sam doing here?

He'd looked as if he hadn't aged a day over the ten years since she'd seen him. She recognized him immediately, but it took several minutes for her to recall his name. Her memories of that time were hazy—purposefully made so with much effort and practice.

She remembered Dyatlov and Zinaida. And she remembered waking up in her bed after the Disappearance. Surprise that her survival had also been wrapped in regret. She had been under the impression it would be a one-way trip. She never possessed the sense of purpose her friends on the 27th floor had. She was too drained, too hollow. When she turned on the TV, The News confirmed that she was truly alone. Her friends were gone. They'd done it. Or else *it* had been done to them.

As the weeks passed she felt heavier and heavier, with both metaphorical and very real weight. She knew she would have to decide whether to let the weight drag her down, or to reclaim it. Her bones were

heavy, but they were her own again. She would haul them along with her and cast off all the rest of it.

If Tyler only knew, oh the songs he would sing... His ex-girlfriend would have nothing on the only girl in the world for which metaphors really apply.

She left Sam behind with all the rest of it. She never looked for him. The last real thought she had about him had been a long time ago. She decided that if he did make it back, then he probably hooked up with her friends in her building before they Disappeared. Yet now he was here.

Was it a coincidence, or was he looking for her? Did he have something he wanted to show *her* this time? And if so, did she want to see?

The answers would come or they wouldn't, but the questions would have to wait. Headlights swung across the cabanas. Her ride was here.

Liz waved and hopscotched over to the source of the lights. When she got close enough to get out of the beams, she saw a pretty Tropicalian girl standing next to the driver's side of a golf cart. Dressed in a white blouse, white jeans, and sandals, she smiled tightly and indicated that Liz climb in.

"Hola," Liz said.

"Buenas noches," the girl said.

She said nothing else for the rest of the ride.

They headed south toward town. Two ATVs zoomed past in the opposite direction. Liz had noticed an inordinate number of those since she'd arrived. They turned onto a side road before getting to Montezuma proper, but they were close enough to hear laughing American voices and Sublime.

There weren't any actual hotels in Montezuma, only a handful of cabanas and hostels run by old hippy Americans, burn-out Europeans, and thrifty Tropicalians. Downtown Montezuma was more or less delineated by a widened section of the main dirt road about a mile long, bounded by those hostels and cabins, a grocery store, three gift shops, two bars, five restaurants, two "eco-adventure" bases, and a surf shop.

Alan's house was north of the bay, hidden from sight except when standing on the most northwestern tip of the bay. However, the coastal road dead-ended a mile past Liz's cabana. The entrance to the only road that cut all through the jungle was in town. They turned left onto it.

The road rose sharply. The trees drooped over the dirt, enfolding the cart within a tight tunnel. In the fading light, the jungle appeared unbroken and devoid of human presence, but that had recently become a temporary illusion. In the evening, the sounds of frogs, insects, and owls still dominated, but during the day, the birds and monkeys were drowned out by massive construction projects.

The golf cart whizzed by silhouettes of bulldozers and earthmovers parked haphazardly on the side of the road. To the east, two dormitories were already completed—modeled after the ones on InterWorld's main California campus—in time for Ambrose's launch party next week. At least fifteen other buildings were in varying stages of completion. Construction moved fast, because the jungle was even more impatient than Alan Ambrose. It had swallowed much more in much less time over the past several millennia.

From the crest of the biggest hill, Liz caught a glimpse of the twin cell towers—the most obvious symbols of Ambrose’s attempted conquest of the peninsula. The towers were only marginally functional at the moment. There was still a lot of signal obstruction. Liz still didn’t fully understand what caused it. But Ambrose claimed his researchers had already designed a system to break through the interference, which he planned to set live during the party.

Half the stars were out to greet their final descent down to the western shore. The waves were bigger and louder here. A large, dark mass rose out of the sea, marking Liz’s destination for the evening. Her driver pulled to a stop next to a small, square wooden shack thirty yards from the surf.

The Tropicalian girl, whose name Liz felt guilty for not asking, led her around the side of the building. A circle of yellow lights, some on poles, and some strung from palm trees, illuminated the gondola. A burly, mustachioed security guard exited the shack and unlatched the gondola door.

“Ma’am,” he said.

American. He held the door open for her. She stepped inside. Her driver followed.

He said, “Mr. Ambrose will greet you on the other side. Enjoy the ride.”

He closed the door behind her. She sat down, and her driver sat on the opposite bench. The guard ducked back into the shack. After a moment, the gears began grinding, and the gondola lurched forward.

The gondola from the mainland to his island had been one of the first things Ambrose had built upon moving in. It looked exactly like the ones at ski resorts back home in Colorado, the only differences being that Liz had never before climbed onto one at a dead stop before, or over the ocean.

“What’s your name?” she asked, knowing that the question came too late to resemble normal courtesy.

“I’m Liz...”

Her driver smiled meekly, nodded, and said nothing. The gondola climbed above the sea. Liz gazed out the window, but it was too dark to make out many details. They eventually reached a high enough elevation for her to see the lights of Montezuma on the other side of the bay to the south, but by then the gondola was already slowing for its final approach. They passed mere feet above the edge of the cliff and slid to a stop beneath a small pavilion.

Alan stood waiting for her, his hands clasped behind his back. He forced his flat, bored lack of expression into a something resembling a smile. By the time the gondola stopped completely, the curve of his mouth had grown even more convincing. He wore a tight gray t-shirt and dark jeans. He was thin. His face was clean-shaven, his dark hair cut short and gelled. He was the very definition of square-jawed.

“Welcome to the new Tropicalia,” he said as he opened the door.

He offered Liz his hand to help her step out. Liz took it.

“Thank you for inviting me,” she said. “I’ve never traveled to someone’s house in quite that way before.”

Her heels clicked onto the wooden platform. Her driver slipped out behind her.

“How has Montezuma been treating you so far?” he asked.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “So much so that it’s hard to focus on work. But don’t worry; I’m not slacking off. Everything’s on schedule, as far as I can tell. It’s all quite impressive.”

Liz was assigned to be part of the welcoming committee for the launch party next week. Her job was to make sure the dorms were in good condition, to distribute and display the appropriate marketing/PR materials, and ultimately to help guide the guests to Montezuma. She had brought down two extra suitcases full of signage, brochures, and other documents her team back in Denver had prepared. And in a few days she’d travel back to Tropicalia City to pick up a group of semi-VIPs—mostly Press Agents and regional InterWorld managers—and usher them on the ferry and a chartered bus. The actual VIPs would of course use Alan’s helipad.

“I wouldn’t dream of doubting your dedication,” Alan said.

He grinded his teeth, as if his smile had developed as far as he’d allow. He squeezed out a little laugh.

Liz followed him out of the gondola shelter. They emerged onto the wide, flat cliff-top. A strong gust of wind hit them as soon as they hit the open air, and this time Liz was justified in feeling that it might bowl her over.

The ridiculous, four-spired mansion had been repainted, and was much better lit than when Alan first arrived, but it still looked wildly out of place. The grounds were well-manicured, but signs of continued construction were everywhere. Gravel paths had been laid out amidst freshly planted grass—which, signaled by the abundance of patches of straw, looked to be struggling to thrive in this climate. Rows of hedges bordered the pathways, neatly trimmed but already bent by the wind. The hedges did an adequate job of protecting the flowers planted in their shadows. All but one of the pipa trees had been removed. Bent hedges were one thing, but the trees had been too humbled by the wind for Alan to accept.

The south half of the grounds was almost bare, save for a half-constructed stage near the very edge of the cliff. Alan nodded in that direction.

“That’s where the party will be,” he said. “We’ll have some tents set up, and a lot of tables and chairs of course. We’re waiting to finish the stage. It won’t last long in this wind this time of year.”

Liz’s driver jogged ahead of them to pull open the door. They entered the opposite end of the long hallway Alan had stepped through the night of his arrival eighteen months ago. The portraits had been removed, the walls papered, and the old, creaky floorboards replaced with light-colored new ones. Alan led her into the dining room. He had boosted the electricity and three lamps and several candles lighted the room. The table was far too big for two people, so they sat in the middle, across from each other.

Liz of course knew what he was trying to do. Fifteen other InterWorld employees had arrived at roughly the same time as she. The table was set for two.

Dinner consisted of local red snapper in a mango sauce, potatoes, rice, and plantains—a more meticulously prepared version of a typical Tropicalian meal. The wine was excellent and undoubtedly expensive, accentuated by Alan’s recitation of facts about its vineyard of origin.

Their conversation began with typical, awkward small talk. Alan asked where she was from, what her parents did for a living, and so on.

“My family moved to the Chicago suburbs right before I went to college. I stayed behind on the East Coast. I have two younger sisters. My middle sister Katie is a housewife in Chicago. She’s pregnant with her second son. [My youngest sister Claire is...I’m not sure](#). She might have moved out of Chicago to go back to school in Washington. We’re not as close as we used to be,” Liz answered.

Sometimes Liz wondered why she didn’t concern herself with hitting the marks of a conventionally fulfilling personal life. She wondered if that part of herself had shut down after her time on the 27th floor or if it had broken long before. Most of her college friends had long since married, and were in varying stages of child rearing. She couldn’t recall ever having craved a husband, kids, a house, or even a damn dog.

And so she remained dating a guy who was clearly incapable of providing any of those things. At least she used to think he wasn’t. Ever since Tyler’s abandonment of the music life to pursue more mature ventures, she had become antsy.

“What about you?” she asked.

InterWorld was founded by the Ambrose brothers. Alan was the only one left. She knew it might be a touchy subject, but she was wine-buzzed and at a billionaire’s table in a mansion high above the sea, so she felt a bit loose.

“John finally cashed out a couple years ago,” Alan said. “He decided he didn’t have the disposition to be a company spokesman. He wasn’t technically a founding partner, but he made out pretty well, I’d say. [He built a mansion in Nicaragua. He and his wife live there half of every year. I visited him last month. He’s good](#). I haven’t heard from Chip in a long time.”

“Is that what brought you to Central America? To be closer to your brother? Nicaragua’s a lot closer to here than to California.”

Alan furrowed his brow.

“No, I came here for what’s under the ground. To solve the problem no one else could solve.”

“Oh. Right,” Liz said, feeling stupid.

Midway through the meal, Liz did her duty by casually mentioning that she’d brought her boyfriend along. She pretended to ignore his transparent efforts to mask his disappointment through a rapid succession of questions about Tyler.

“[The Amends](#),” he said. “I’m not as up to date with bands as I used to be, but that name sounds familiar.”

He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen.

“You’ve got good service out here then,” she said.

“Shh,” he said, smiling. “Don’t tell anyone. We’ve got a working prototype of the device we’re launching next week set up here at the house. You wouldn’t believe the speed I’m getting. It’s unreal. A game changer. Seriously.”

“Wait,” Liz said. “I knew you’d cracked the signal transmission problem, but are you saying it’s faster than back at home?”

“Oh, you have no idea. What’s going on here, literally beneath the surface, is incredible. I’ll spare you the details—those will come after the announcement—but suffice it to say that what we thought was the problem is actually a *solution* to a problem no one knew they had. And after we release the product, we’ll realize how much of a digital stone age we were stuck in.”

“You’re speaking to me like I’m in PR.” Liz laughed, but she was determined to make up for her earlier faux pas.

“Fair enough,” Alan said. “So basically, once we made some minor adjustments to account for what we previously thought was interference, the mineral compound native to this area acts as a signal transmitter the likes of which we’ve never seen. Not only that. It serves as a natural compressor. We had to make some fundamental changes to the way we transmit data, and that changes everything. Put it this way—If you have a few seconds and you’d like to download the entire seasons of every TV show on the air to your phone, by all means, feel free.”

He sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

“Wow,” Liz said.

“This shitty little backwater peninsula is the only place in the world where this mineral compound is found. And InterWorld owns it.”

“Holy shit. I’m gonna have to update the marketing materials,” Liz said.

She finished her glass of wine.

“Don’t worry,” Alan said.

He stood up, leaned across the table, and refilled her glass.

“That comes later. I want to take them by surprise.”

“Who?” she asked.

“The Big Four, of course. Media. I’m—we—are a thorn in their side now. Once everyone realizes what we’ve got, the thorn will grow into a broadsword and—” He cut himself off. “Sorry, I get carried away sometimes.”

“So this place isn’t really gonna be an InterWorld retreat. It’s a mining operation.”

Alan shrugged.

“It’ll be both at first. I need my guys to *want* to come down here. Make it our new headquarters. A think tank.”

He pressed a button on his phone. A barrage of guitars erupted out of the walls. Liz hadn’t seen any speakers.

“Thought so,” Alan shouted above the din of [the first track of Tyler’s band’s first album](#).

“I’ve heard them before. You said he quit the band? Why? They’re decent.”

He decreased the volume to a reasonable level.

“I guess they weren’t where he wanted them to be,” she said. “He decided to go into business. And weirdly, he started working for a startup that InterWorld just bought.”

“Hmm. He’s in town now, you say?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I’d like to talk to him.”

“About what?”

She realized she was drinking wine with one of the richest men in the world and speaking to him as if he was a dude hitting on her in a bar.

“We booked a few bands to play the party next week. One of them is this Caribe band my people say is popular in Tropicalia City. I can’t stand them. Do you think... I’m sorry, I don’t know your boyfriend’s name...”

“Tyler,” she sighed.

“Do you think Tyler would want to fill in? He could play on his own, or I’m sure he could scrounge together some musicians around here if he wants.”

“I really don’t know. I can ask him,” Liz said.

“How about I handle that part?”

Liz frowned, yet nodded her assent. She told him of their plans to meet at *La Mesa*. Alan knew Regina, a bartender there. Of course he did. Liz checked her watch. She didn’t usually wear one, but she wasn’t counting on reliable cell service anywhere in the area, so she didn’t bring her phone.

“Shit. I was supposed to meet up with him about thirty minutes ago.”

She took a long gulp of wine. She imagined the scene in Montezuma. Tyler might be drunkenly reminiscing with Regina. Or he might be listening to very strange story told by Sam. She couldn’t decide which would bother her more. To be safe, she assumed both were happening at once.

“I really should get going soon,” she said.

Alan shrugged.

“No worries,” he said. “He’s probably late, too. Everyone’s on tropical time here. Appointments are suggestions.”

“For now,” Liz said, laughing. “I have a feeling that will change around here shortly.”

“Probably. Among other things.”

He finished his own glass.

“I’ll go down with you. I haven’t been out on the town in a while. I suppose Montezuma will change too, so I should soak it in while it lasts.”

If her job wasn’t literally to be a corporate yes-woman, Liz’s response to Alan’s last statement might have been markedly different than a demure smile. Behind her smile were questions about how many people her age pretended to not spot the wrongdoings of the world slide right by in order to climb the ladder or simply to cash a check. It was the smart, practical thing to do. And if the smart people became rich and apathetic, did that mean the dumb and poor were the only true agents of change left? She knew it was neither an original nor sunny line of thought, but it kept her mind from wandering to darker areas piled high with hollowed-out bones, blue powder, frozen bodies, and missing tongues.

She wondered if the moon would show itself tonight, and how the stars would look over Montezuma on the return gondola ride. She strained to hear the sound of the sea.

Tyler Taylor sat—uncomfortable in more than one way—on a wooden swing suspended by thick rope from a crossbeam above Regina’s bar. Eva and Julian were already twisting around in a pair of swings when he arrived. Traveler’s Code dictated he had no choice but to pull himself up onto the unoccupied plank next to Julian. Thankfully, though, their presence prevented him from exchanging anything but a few superficial words with Regina.

Regina wore a tank top and board shorts, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She looked beautiful without any trace of makeup. The climate suited her.

La Mesa was offset from the main road, built upon sand beneath a thatched roof. Swings bordered two sides of the rectangular, open-air, bamboo-trimmed bar; the other two sides were standing room only. If you wanted to sit, you’d have to deal with the swings. Sensing his displeasure, Julian asked when Tyler had become the type of person who was annoyed with swings rather than enchanted by them. It was a good question, Tyler had said, and he didn’t have a good answer. He’d get back to him.

Tyler learned that Eva and Regina were freshman roommates. *Re-learned* is probably more accurate. Although he couldn’t recall any specific anecdotes, he vaguely remembered Regina talking about her former roommate when they began dating during their sophomore year. Eva had already dropped out to try her luck in LA.

“You guys didn’t run into each other here accidentally, too, did you?” Tyler asked.

Regina snapped a look at him when he said *too*.

“Because that would be ridiculous,” he continued.

“Eh, sort of, not really,” Eva answered unhelpfully, missing one adverb and subtly offering another.

Regina said, “When I was heading down here six weeks or so, I knew Eva was in Tropicalia. She and Julian were on the Caribbean coast—”

“We were visiting the area where Julian’s mom grew up,” Eva cut in.

Regina continued, “They said they were heading to Montezuma afterwards.”

“We wanted to see it before InterWorld wrecked it, no offense.”

Tyler laughed.

“None taken,” he said, but he felt like he should.

He checked the time on his phone. Liz was late. Then he instinctively tried to check his email, despite the lack of service. His strange-sounding sigh was made of both relief and frustration. He wondered whether anyone at work was missing him. Probably not. Management was occupied with finalizing the terms of the InterWorld acquisition. But he wasn't sure he'd be missed under normal circumstances, either.

He needed another drink. When he checked back into the conversation, it had somehow turned into a philosophical debate between Julian and Regina. That had erupted out of nowhere.

“We used to believe in ourselves,” Julian was saying. “There was a time when we dreamed we could do anything with enough brains and guts. We turned our bombs and guns into rockets and dreamed of spreading to space. But then we woke up from the dream. We realized our true nature.”

“And what was that?” Regina asked skeptically.

“It wasn't hard to see. You just had to pick up a newspaper to see we had no business spreading ourselves anywhere but here. We thought we could will our problems away by dreaming bigger, but the global pissing contest continued. We stopped dreaming and woke up to a nightmare.”

“That's a bit fatalistic, don't you think?”

“Right now there are two Americans in orbit, in the so-called International Space Station. We have no way to bring them home ourselves. We have to depend on the Russians' retro space buses to bring them a few helpings of powdered macaroni and cheese so they can drift aimlessly around in circles for another year. This is where we're at. This is who we are.”

Regina sighed.

A distant drumbeat grew louder.

“What is that?” Tyler asked, hoping whatever it signaled might ease the tension.

“You met them earlier,” Julian said. “Some of them. The Electric Blue Monkey Circus. Three times a week. Tonight's their late show.”

He did not sound enthusiastic.

Some of the tourists who knew what to expect stepped out of the scattered bars and restaurants and stood on the edge of the road, drinking and laughing. Others muttered under their breath and worked to shield themselves as best they could from the oncoming spectacle.

“I suppose you better see this,” Julian said.

Tyler followed him out to the road.

Two cloaked torchbearers led the way. They held their flames high above them, so that the detail of their carved wooden masks remained in shadows beneath their hoods. Directly behind them, but towering over

them, followed three drummers on stilts. They wore checkered pants and creepy clown makeup. They pounded on balsawood drums tied to their waists, and they lifted and settled onto their stilts with practiced ease.

Tyler raised his eyebrows and looked at Julian.

“There’s a lot of them.”

“No shit,” Julian said.

Next were the masked fire-twirlers. They spun long batons with flames on both ends over their shoulders, through their legs, around their necks, continuing to march to the drumbeat. The predictably pretty hippy hula-hoop girls followed, flanked by two more torchbearers. The hoop girls walked in a straight line and wore determined faces. They jutted their hips with perfect precision and mechanical rhythm. They were the only ones without masks, but their faces were painted. Two more clowns on stilts juggled red balls and kicked up the rear.

They formed a wide circle in the road, near the center of the biggest cluster of bars and restaurants. Two of the hooded torch men positioned themselves in the middle of the road, but didn’t remain long. As soon as everyone was in position, the circle began to move. Two of the fire dancers stepped in the center and performed an elaborately choreographed fight routine, swinging their fiery batons at each other, ducking and jumping to a soundtrack of drums, whistles, and handclaps.

Most of the tourists on the street around the outside of the circle were into it. Tyler studied their faces, attempting to guess who were InterWorld employees or contractors and who were surfers or backpackers. It was harder than he would have thought. They were all relatively young. At this time of evening, at this point of inebriation, with these entranced expressions on their faces, they all looked the same. Julian was one of the few bored ones, having seen this many times already.

One of the cloaked men broke rank and stood in the center between the fire dancers, who in turn backed off to the perimeter. Tyler recognized the tattered garb and the beard.

Charles Arbuthnot Reilly held his torch high and then rammed it town into the ground, at least six impossible inches into the dirt. He whipped off his cloak and held it high above his head. He turned 360 degrees. Then he dropped the cloak and melted into the ground. The crowd cheered and clapped wildly.

So he’s a magician, Tyler realized. That explained the trick with the Ubiq and the security guard in the museum. Tyler wished Liz, the amateur magician, was here to see this. She would love it. And she’d be able to tell him how the tricks were done. He tried to assume her mindset, to look for what she’d see. He counted how many people he saw. Fifteen?

The two juggling clowns took their turn in the center. Tyler scanned the perimeter for signs of the Conjurer. One of the clowns pocketed his juggling balls and bent all the way over while the other one held him by his comically stretchy waistband. The first clown picked up the torch and tossed it into the air. Someone in the circle without a torch caught it. *Damnit*, Tyler thought, recognizing Charles again. This guy’s good. Liz might have been able to follow his movement.

The Conjurer handed off the torch and joined the clowns. Tyler noted there were no fires near him this time; he must require this trick to be in shadows. Liz once told him lighting was the most important controlled variable in magic shows.

Charles motioned for the jugglers to toss him their balls. They did and he juggled them as he received him. And as he did, more kept appearing seemingly out of nowhere until they blurred together. Then the ring was solid, and instead of throwing them, he twirled it around his arm and tossed it to one of the hula girls, who bowed her head and caught it around her waist. The Conjuror still had another hoop, and he tossed it to another girl, and then he had one more and he got rid of that one, too.

The Conjuror bowed and stepped back into the ring. Tyler tried to follow Charles' movement around the circle, but everyone sped up, and he lost him inside a brief window behind a frenzied flurry of fire.

The drummers changed beats and another torchbearer stepped into the middle. He removed his mask to reveal a narrow goateed face. He spouted off a silly, forced rap about U.S. foreign policy and the destruction of rain forests. Tyler's expression twisted into the type of cringe reserved for listening to a shitty, earnest white rapper while standing next to a black man.

The rap took a turn near the end. Tyler cocked his head, trying to catch the change in lyrics.

He caught, *"...She's coming up from way under, awake from her slumber, and she's got all your numbers, and all of the others will come back too...all those who were lost've already been found, you better gather your treasure and bury your crowns, cause you don't wanna be here when you see what's made them come back around."*

The rapper bowed his head. The other torchbearers joined him, and made another smaller circle. They all removed their masks, and one of them—the bearded Conjuror—stepped into the center of this circle within a circle. The beat grew faster and he grew shorter. He sank lower and lower until only his head and shoulders could be seen between the legs of the others. And then there was just his torch, planted firmly in the ground.

Applause pattered along the street. The fire-twirlers broke out and marched back down the direction they came. The remaining torchbearers followed them out. The drumbeat faded. In one last slightly-mean-spirited trick, the clowns and the hula girls produced jars, and solicited donations.

They returned to the bar to find someone occupying Julian's swing, chatting with Regina and Eva. Regina nodded at their return and Merard twisted the swing around to sort of face them. He wore a plain blue running shirt, jeans, and hiking boots.

"This is Sam," Regina said to Tyler.

"We've met," he said.

Julian set his club soda down on the bar.

"Is it time already?" he asked.

Merard nodded. He looked at Tyler.

"Wanna come?" Merard asked.

"Where?"

"Going for a little night ride. Gonna see if Julian's fixes hold, or if he's all talk."

“Fuck you, man,” Julian said good-naturedly. “The work is solid. You know it.”

Tyler pulled his phone from his pocket again to check the time.

“Liz was supposed to meet me here.”

Merard shrugged.

“We won’t be long. Up to you.”

Regina grabbed Julian’s empty glass and dropped it into the sink below the bar.

“If she swings by, I’ll let her know where you are,” she said.

Tyler considered a moment and said, “Fuck it. Alright.”

Merard stood up, clapped his hands, and rubbed them together. “Let’s go then,” he said. “Let’s light out for the territories.”