

EPISODE **12** OF:

**THE RUINS OF  
TROPICALIA**

**FLOAT TRIP**  
**PIRT TAOLT**



# Float Trip

## *Five Days Before Battle*

The knock on Regina's door was so timid, it slipped unnoticed beneath the hip-hop forcing its way out of her phone's tiny speakers. Eva caught it on the second attempt twenty seconds later.

"Yo, the door," Eva said.

She sat on the edge of Regina's bed, gazing into her makeup mirror and applying mascara despite Regina's admonition that the sun and water would wash it away within the first hour of their expedition. These days Eva always had to live as if she was being filmed at every moment. She wouldn't let herself be caught unprepared.

The lens embedded in the shelf above the bed remained hidden.

Regina stopped ruffling through her backpack long enough to call out, "Come in."

The door swung open and Liz stepped inside.

"Hello there," Regina said.

"Hi, girl," Eva echoed.

"Hey," Liz said, her voice as timid as her knock.

Last night at *La Mesa*, Liz had overheard Eva and Regina discussing a planned daytrip on the river. Eva off-handedly suggested Liz should join them. Regina hadn't expected her to say yes, though she supposed if their roles were reversed, Regina might want to confront the issue at hand straight on. Or perhaps Liz didn't know the true depth of Regina's past with Tyler. The third, far preferable scenario was that Liz didn't really give a shit at all. Regina didn't want drama. Not this kind. She smiled at Liz.

Liz cocked her head in the direction of the music. She scrunched her face.

"Is this *The Chronic*?" she asked.

"Hell yeah it is," Regina said.

She noticed the pack of Camels poking out of Liz's impractical shorts pocket. The inadequacy of female pockets was one of her pet peeves.

"Do you have a lighter?"

She knew the answer before Liz responded, because she could see the outline of one in her other pocket.

Liz nodded. She stuck two fingers into her pocket and tossed the lighter to Regina.

"I don't think I've heard this since like middle school," she said.

Regina caught the lighter.

“Thank God,” she said. “I’ve been looking for a lighter forever. I keep bumming them to degenerates. Hold on to this. I just need to borrow it for a minute. Make sure I give it back in case I forget. They’re in short supply.”

She caught the accidental double-meaning of her words after they were already out. She hoped Liz didn’t notice. She pulled a joint from behind her ear, placed it between her lips, lit it, and inhaled. She offered it to Liz. A peace offering.

“Thanks,” Liz said, “But I can’t. I wish I could. I’m—oh, fuck it, what the hell.”

She took the joint and breathed in. She hadn’t gotten high in over a year. Its legalization in Colorado had tempted her, but she hadn’t yet had the right combination of time and desire to check out any of the countless shops that popped up on every street.

Today was Sunday. She hadn’t been sure if she was supposed to stick to a normal US work schedule until she showed up at the temporary office in the dorm yesterday and found it deserted. She’d tracked down her on-site supervisor—an aloof, puffy, aging hipster named Travis—on the beach. He’d confirmed she wasn’t expected to report back till tomorrow morning.

The three women were dressed nearly identically. They wore flip-flops and tank-tops and jean shorts over their swimsuits. The only noticeable difference was that Regina’s top was white, and Liz and Eva’s were different shades of pastel.

Regina touched her forehead to ensure her sunglasses were in place. She stood up.

“Ready?” she asked Eva.

Eva nodded and flipped closed her mirror. She dropped it along with her mascara into her purse.

“Can I leave this here?” she asked.

“Of course.”

They walked outside. Regina locked up. She paid Fernanda, a sweet little old Tropicalian lady, a weekly rate for her cabin. The rooms on the jungle side of the road were twice as cheap as the ones on the ocean side.

They finished the joint during the walk down the strip. Regina wasn’t overly concerned with being discreet. There were only three full-time cops in Montezuma. A fourth commuted in from Alban once a week to help fill the weekend shift. Alban was the closest town of any reasonable size, thirty miles up the coast at the northern end of the peninsula.

InterWorld’s private security force had been building up its presence over recent months. The cops’ two-room station was situated at the north end of town. They spent most of each day sitting on a pair of lawn chairs on the station’s front porch. Four times a day they patrolled the main street. During her time here, Regina had seen them in action only once, when two of them had needed to break up a drunken fight between a pair of surfers.

At Merard’s suggestion, Regina had gotten to know all three of them. She was particularly friendly with the man in charge, Sergeant Mendoza. Six weeks ago, he had invited her to dinner at his house a half-mile

north of town. His wife expertly prepared a delicious meal of red snapper, potatoes, rice, and vegetables. His seven-year-old son showed off his recently-acquired skills on the guitar. After dinner, Mendoza asked her if she'd heard how many more IW Security forces would be coming to town.

They stopped in front of a tiny building—little more than hastily-erected plywood and signage surrounding around a large open-air window—that served as the base for *Tropicalia Adventures*. A beat-up van was parked in front of it. Bright blue inner tubes were strapped to the roof and stuffed in the rear cargo area.

They were going tubing. A small river called Xibalba flowed north to south, bisecting the peninsula. Its current and depth were perfect for meandering downstream on tubes or canoes. The three tour companies operating out of Montezuma all included river trips among their offerings. The trip they'd signed up for would last four hours and would carry them through six miles, including several spots where the river flowed through caves.

Renny, the retired German banker who owned *Tropicalia Adventures* with his wife, was a regular at *La Mesa*. He'd secured them a 50% discount. He told Regina that he was negotiating with Ambrose's people to become the official local tour operator for InterWorld. Whichever of the three operators that didn't win the deal would likely be forced to close.

As of eight months ago, InterWorld was the official landlord of everyone in Montezuma. Renny's competitive nature and business acumen from his years in the German finance world forced him to vie for the deal, but he confessed to Regina his annoyed weariness. He didn't come here for this. He only wanted to sip drinks by the bay and tear down the beach on his four-wheeler.

The other four floaters were already waiting in the van. Regina, Liz, and Eva signed a release, and then piled into the van, too. Their driver/guide Luis climbed in the front seat, along with an unnamed assistant, and they headed out of town. Liz recognized three of their four companions for the day as InterWorld employees. She didn't know their names, so she introduced herself.

Tom, a short, muscular man a couple years younger than Liz worked in Operations, the department responsible for managing relationships with Tropicalian construction companies. Liz recognized the blonde girl sitting next to him from the PR office. Her name was Maggie, and it turned out she would be accompanying Liz to Tropicalia City later this week to pick up Ambrose's guests. Maggie and Tom were new, secret lovers, confirmed by their nervous glances at each other and the way they continually shifted closer and further from each other during the ride to the river.

The third InterWorld employee, James, was an accountant. His age was difficult to ascertain, as his hair was prematurely graying. He had sharp, angular features, accentuating his precise, no-nonsense demeanor, which Liz guessed was par for the course for his job. He introduced his husband George—a handsome, friendly, jocular man with deeply tanned skin. Swirly tattoos peeked out from the straps of his blue tank-top. He was a History teacher at a private high school near InterWorld's headquarters in northern California. He, like Tyler, had come along for the free trip with his significant other. He'd only been able to take off three days from work, so he was returning to the States tomorrow.

The eight-mile trip upriver took close to an hour. At times, the road dwindled down to a single track partially overgrown by weeds. Tom explained that the roads were scheduled to be paved, but the schedule had been pushed back to prioritize the construction of the main buildings above town. He also said that a new fleet of forty golf-carts was supposed to have been delivered via ship last week. The ship,

too, was late. The carts were to be shared by all visitors on a first-come, first-serve basis. Luis overheard them.

“Bad roads bring good people,” he said. “Good roads bring all kinds of people.”

Luis, a thin man taller than most Tropicalians, looked to be in his forties. He spoke flawless English. He told them he worked in the natural history museum in Tropicalia City. He came out here two weekends a month to make some extra cash and to explore the caves. He joked that he might be a bit over-qualified for the position, and that if this group was anything like his own kids, they would beg him to shut up at some point.

Luis steered the van off the main road, onto a flattened patch of grass by the river. Everyone piled out of the van. Luis and his assistant handed off tubes and headlamps to each of them. Eva, Liz, and Regina stripped down to their swimsuits. They tossed their clothes into the van. Liz brought a bottle of sunscreen spray. Regina and Eva both deferred. Their base tans were deep and strong.

The water felt good. The current was slow and mellow, like a lazy river at a water park. Regina’s tube sprung a leak near the start of the float. Luis patched it up with little effort using a kit he wore around his neck. The sun climbed above the trees. Whenever they got too hot, they’d plop off their tubes into the water, or paddle over toward the shaded shore. The latter tactic ended after Luis pointed out a yellow eyelash viper coiled up on a branch less than five feet above them.

In the beginning, Eva, Regina, and Liz stayed close to the rest of the group. They listened to Luis recite facts and stories about the regions. Because of the absence of a significant native population in Tropicalia, there was also a dearth of local legends that might entertain tourists in other parts of Central America. Luis stuck to scientific facts about the habitat, rumors of gringos who went missing in the jungle, and the occasional dark reference to the Tropicalian civil war. When he spoke of ancient legends and mythology, he had to pull from beyond the borders of Tropicalia.

After half an hour on the water, they approached the entrance to the first of five caves through which they would float. The entrance was low and wide, the top of its lip a mere six feet above the crystal clear water. Luis suggested they keep their headlamps off during their passage through this first cave. It was smaller than the later ones, he assured them. Total darkness would envelop them for a few seconds at most before seeing the other end.

Eva’s nervous giggle bounced off the limestone walls. Water dripped into water. The light dwindled and darkness grew.

“The cave system on the peninsula is very large,” Luis said. “And it hasn’t been completely mapped yet. Much of it interconnects beneath the surface of the entire peninsula.”

The light waned to nothingness. The air was chilly. A soft splash from the rear of the group turned into a series of thrashes. James yelped. An echoing bellow of laughter from George followed.

“Asshole,” James said.

His anger changed to laughter. George had sneaked up behind him and raked his nails across his husband’s neck and shoulder.

“You’re so wound-up all the time,” George said. “Always on the verge of screaming.”

As promised, a pinpoint of light on the other side appeared, and quickly grew.

“Do you know where the word Xibalba comes from?” Luis asked the group when they emerged out into the sunlight.

His patter, though forced, was friendly enough. He had played this role a long time.

“Doesn’t it mean ‘Hell’?” Maggie offered.

Luis grinned.

“Someone’s been to Mexico,” he said.

“Well, Belize and Guatemala,” Maggie said.

She exchanged a glance with her not-so-secret lover Tom.

“Ah,” Luis said. “The guides at the big ruins can be a little bit... sensational, if that’s the word. It doesn’t mean Hell precisely. Xibalba was the Underworld. To the Mayans throughout Central America, it wasn’t where bad people go when they die. It was a very real place. It was a vast civilization beneath the earth and the water. It was a great city of palaces, temples, ball-courts, gardens, and homes for thousands of inhabitants. True, it wasn’t a very nice place to outsiders. The twelve Lords of Death who ruled Xibalba demanded brutal sacrifices of the humans who lived in the outer world. Anyone who entered Xibalba was subjected to a series of vicious trials, which they would have to outwit, or else be sentenced to death. Few survived, at least until the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque defeated the demon rulers of Xibalba and ushered in a golden age. But I’m getting ahead of myself...”

The river narrowed for a stretch. The current increased a bit. The wall of trees on each side met each other above the center of the river, embraced, and blocked much of the sunlight.

“There were many entrances to Xibalba,” Luis continued. “Various caves in Belize and Guatemala, a grotto in El Salvador, an underground pool in southern Mexico. They even said you could see the road to Xibalba if you looked close enough at the great, dark rift that breaks apart the Milky Way. The source of this river we’re on is a lake twenty-five miles beyond Tropicalia’s northern border. The Mayans who lived in that area named it ‘A Road to Xibalba’, which your people so graciously shortened. At its source, the river is wide and straight. There are no caves or underground passages; the usual markers of gateways to Xibalba. Many people believe that in naming the river, the Mayans must have been referring to the Montezuma peninsula, despite the lack of evidence that they ever ventured this far south...”

Eva rocked back and forth in her tube, struggling to open the plastic waterproof bag on her chest. Regina back-paddled to her, and motioned for Liz to do the same. Regina helped steady Eva’s tube. Eva finally pried open the seal of the modified phone case, and pulled out her Marlboro Lights and lighter. Instead of a cigarette, she retrieved a tightly rolled joint. She put it to her lips, lit it, inhaled and passed it to Regina. The rest of their group drifted further downriver, out of earshot.

“When do you leave for Tropicalia City?” Regina asked, as she handed the joint to Liz.

Liz didn’t hesitate this time. She inhaled deeply, and immediately launched into a coughing fit. The smoke seemed to billow through her entire body, through spaces it shouldn’t normally go. Her eyes darted back and forth. She lifted a leg to determine if it felt lighter. Inconclusive in this position. But she couldn’t have

gotten too high this quick. It couldn't be paranoia.

"You alright, girl?" Eva said, a mix of mild concern and mild amusement on her face.

Liz recovered enough to nod.

"Tuesday," she said.

She coughed again before continuing.

"We bring them all back here on Thursday. I'm sorry about that, by the way. I really am."

"That" was the influx of InterWorld executives and Media agents Liz and the other PR people would usher into Montezuma for Ambrose's launch party.

"I'm sorry too," Regina said. She wondered if that was enough to serve as an apology for her affair with Tyler. Probably not. "But it's okay."

"You're just doing your job," Eva said. "Everything changes sometime. I'll be gone by then, anyway."

"What?" Regina exclaimed. "You didn't tell me that!"

"I don't want to deal with that bullshit. And *come on*. I'm on the run. I'm hiding out. I can't be around that many more cameras."

Regina frowned, not only because of Eva's imminent departure, but also because of her phrasing of "that many more." She worried about her friend. She'd listened multiple times to Eva explain her suspicion of being trailed by cameras here. Due to her involvement with Merard and Julian's schemes, Regina was hyper-vigilant, yet she had seen no evidence of anyone watching Eva. She feared her long-standing belief that too many reality TV shows were harmful was being proved true in an unexpected way.

"Anyway, I need to find somewhere quieter than here to finish my thesis," Eva said.

Regina didn't bother to ask for the seventeenth time what her thesis was about. Eva wouldn't spill. She said it was bad luck to talk about it before it was finished; she was afraid that discussing it might lessen her focus. Given her current psychological state, Regina hoped to God that the pages of her notebooks and tablets weren't filled with *All work and no play makes Eva a dull girl*.

In reality, Eva was quite serious about her work. Before her arrival, she believed she would have plenty of time and energy to devote to her thesis once she was in Tropicalia. She was able to find opportunities to work on it, but her mind was too distracted and her body too lazy from the tropical sun to fully concentrate.

She left CU after her freshman year and returned home to LA. The reason was simple and annoyingly clichéd; she was homesick. She missed her family, she missed her friends, and she missed the ocean. She enrolled at UCLA. She went to USC for grad school. Shortly after beginning her Masters' classes, she began auditioning for TV shows.

I don't know if she has finished her thesis yet, and she's more innocent than most anyone else regarding the events that transpired in Montezuma, so I'd like to respect her wishes. I won't talk about its content either, except to say that Regina was right for the wrong reasons to worry about her. Her reality show

work was neither accidental, nor ego-driven. Neither was her boob job. Something like deep undercover work.

“Julian’s not coming with you?” Regina asked.

She immediately cursed herself for her own indelicate phrasing. She hoped Eva wouldn’t notice the presumption that Julian wouldn’t abandon his work in Montezuma before the launch party. She handed the joint back to Liz.

Liz inhaled again. She tried to be clinical this time. There it was again. The hollow feeling. The smoke filled her whole body. She didn’t cough this time. She examined Regina and Eva’s tubes to see if they sat lower in the water than hers. They did, but that didn’t prove anything yet. With the exception of Eva’s chest, they were all built similarly. Liz tried to remember if they were taller than her.

Eva shook her head.

“We’re done, I think,” she said softly. “He said he’ll come meet me after he’s finished here, but I think we both know it’s run its course.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, hon.”

*Hon.* Regina had never used that word before.

Eva took the joint back from Liz. She held it in her fingers for several seconds before saying, “We got caught up in the moment. In the rush. We thought it could be something more than it was. We thought we could be someone for each other more than we ended up willing to be.”

“That happens more often than you’d think,” Liz said.

They had drifted nearer to the rest of the group. Luis was narrating.

“...I mentioned the Maya Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who would eventually defeat the Lords of Xibalba. Their legendary heroism was not constrained to traditional feats of battle prowess and armed conquest, although they did possess considerable skills in those areas. They relied primarily on cleverness. They were geniuses, tricksters, illusionists—and on occasion, when forced into it, they’d perform very real magic.”

This piqued Liz’s attention. She paddled closer to hear. Her interest in conjurers, con men, and illusions ballooned during the months after she’d returned from the Dyatlov Pass. Perhaps if she learned and practiced enough magic tricks, she could find a way to explain the biggest Disappearing act of all. Luis continued, “The twins’ birth came as a result of what you might call an immaculate conception. The Mayan version of immaculate conception, however, is a bit more... graphic than yours. Their father had been a famous ballplayer beheaded by the Lords of Xibalba for playing too loudly. His body remained in Xibalba, and his severed head delivered back to his mother. She spoke with the head, encouraging it to remember who it once was, until it finally spoke back to her. It spat into her hand. You can fill in the blanks of what she did with the spit, but it caused the twins to be conceived in her womb.”

“How long are you planning to stick around?” Eva asked Regina.

She passed cigarettes and the lighter around.

“I can’t imagine much longer,” Regina said. “I imagine this place is gonna get pretty shitty pretty quickly, no offense.”

“None taken, believe me,” Liz said.

“I’m supposed to work the party. I should make a chunk of change there. I’ll probably head out sometime after that.”

*La Mesa* had been contracted, along with all the other local bars, to provide drinks and service for Alan’s party. Regina, however, was thinking more of the other job she would perform. Much more satisfying work. A long time coming. She curled her fingers. Stretched them. Cracked her knuckles. She didn’t know what she would do after that job was finished. Not so much because she was unsure of her future prospects, but because she literally had no idea what would happen once she climbed that wall.

“Hey,” Regina said to Liz. “Did you ever ask Tyler if he wants to play the party? What did he say?”

Liz lit her smoke.

“He’s doing it if…” She exhaled. “If. Lots of ifs. If Alan can get him the equipment he needs in time. If he can put together a band in time. He won’t play alone. If Alan’s serious about paying him. He’s being a little prima donna. You’d think he was David Byrne or someone. Alan says none of that should be a problem. There’s plenty of equipment already here for the other bands. And there are plenty of musicians hanging around. Alan put the word out, but Tyler’s already found a few of his own. They’re actually practicing today, in one of the almost-finished buildings above town. That tweaker-looking kid apparently plays drums. And your friend Sam Merard says he can play guitar.”

Regina’s face showed surprised amusement, trailed closely by annoyance. She didn’t know Merard played guitar. And even if he did, she couldn’t imagine why he’d want to complicate their plans. Liz’s expression revealed nothing, but she was even less pleased than Regina that Tyler was hanging out with Sam.

When Tyler returned the other night from his late-night trip with Sam, she of course asked what they did. He claimed Sam and Julian drove him around, showing him the jungle, some ruins, and the construction sites. He gave no indication that Sam told him anything about his past relationship and…adventures with Liz. Tyler was a practiced liar, but he was rusty, and she didn’t believe he was ever that good of one.

She hadn’t had a moment alone with Sam. She wasn’t sure she’d want one. She couldn’t think of a thing to say to him except for “How?” over and over again, and both the thought of him having an answer and not having one were equally terrifying. Excepting his drive with Tyler, he’d kept his distance.

A deep roar came bellowing out of the jungle.

“You hear that?” Luis asked the group. “Tackier tour guides might try to convince you that’s a jaguar. More truthful guides may tell you it’s a howler monkey. I, however, will tell you it’s the spirit of the twins’ older brothers.”

Polite, confused laughter peppered throughout those still paying attention.

Luis said, “Early in their lives, all of the twins’ relatives except for their mother despised them. Immediately after their births, their grandmother banished them from her house for their crying. Their

older half-brothers placed them on an anthill covered in thorns, hoping the ants would devour them. The older pair were long revered in their town as skilled musicians, artists, and thinkers; they were jealous of the attention the twins might take from them. Throughout the years, the older brothers continued to torture the twins. They would force the twins to do their chores, including hunting for birds, while they sang and played music all day. For the most part, the twins harbored no ill-will for their older brothers, but one day they decided they'd had enough, and performed their first feat of real magic. They began by tricking their brothers to climb high into a tree to retrieve some birds they'd shot. Once up in the tree, it grew rapidly to an impossible height, and when the brothers returned to the ground, they had been transformed into monkeys. They ran away from their village, into the jungle, in shame.

“This account of performing actual magic was a rare instance; they generally relied upon wits and illusion. Actual magic was usually only indirectly tied to them, with a couple significant exceptions. Much later, after their ascension from the earth, the twins, perhaps feeling guilty for what they did to their older brothers, turned their idle, mean-spirited, howler-monkey brothers into gods—the patrons of musicians, scribes, and sculptors.”

“How *is* Tyler, anyway?” Regina asked. She laughed when she said it, but she was horrified that the words escaped her mouth. She did not wish to reveal an interest in Tyler to his girlfriend.

Liz sighed.

“He’s the same. Probably the same as when you knew him. Despite his big move to quit music and join the business world, he’s still the same. Still nervous, indecisive, needy, uncertain, eager to please and be praised. Although now that he doesn’t have his fans, I’m his only audience. It’s not always fun.”

Thankfully, Eva asked the question so Regina wouldn’t have to.

“Are you guys having problems?”

“It’s hard to say,” Liz said, well aware that her indictment of Tyler’s uncertainty was being reflected back on her.

“I’m having doubts. Some about him. Some about me. All about us, I suppose.”

Liz finished her cigarette. She squeezed the cherry out into the water. She didn’t know what to do with the butt. She didn’t want to throw it in the river. Although it was gross, she settled on tucking it into her bikini top. It felt good to speak her thoughts aloud. For the first time she was ready to elaborate on what had been bothering her about her relationship, but she needed someone to prod her. She was used to being Counselor Troy. She was new to the couch/tube.

“What sorts of doubts?” Eva finally asked.

“Maybe they’re somewhere between specific doubts and broad questions. I accepted his obvious surface flaws a long time ago. He used to cheat. A lot. When he was on the road with his band. He never brought it home with him.”

Regina forced herself to look directly at Liz when she said this, ready to face whatever would come at her. But Liz wasn’t looking at her. *So she doesn’t know...*

“I accepted that. I told myself that when he was home he was with me and me alone. That’s fucked up, I

know. Maybe a part of me knew that if he was screwing around on me, he'd never be serious enough to commit to anything long-term, but he'd feel guilty enough that he wouldn't leave. I think I liked the feeling of stasis. The illusion of stability, maybe. Temporary balance through chaos.

“But this past year, he's tried to change. Not just his job. He tries to be more present. He doesn't cheat anymore. But he hasn't changed at all. And since he's around more often, the questions have started coming. Of course I question why I was so okay with his lifestyle before. But more than that...I wonder why I fell for someone so good at creating, but so terrible at maintaining anything. Someone who often doesn't feel completely real.

“Sometimes it's like he's not a whole, realized person, but a reflection of how he thinks people should be. Or a sponge. Like he has no center. Like he absorbs other people and squeezes them out into songs. I fell in love with someone who I can talk and joke around with endlessly, but to whom I can never confide anything. I've never told him a real secret. And I ask myself why I don't want more than he can offer.”

“That's a lot of questions,” Eva admitted, to fill the awkward silence. “I'm sorry. It sounds rough. But I understand. We're the ones who've been left behind. Everyone else got married, are having kids, buying houses. We all have our own reasons why we don't want those things. We're the leftovers.”

*In more than one way.* Liz thought of the Building That Disappeared without her.

Luis's stories helped, too.

“Every once in a while the twins would combine cleverness and magic. They'd use one tactic to cover the other. For example, they would use their abilities to hasten their completion of chores. They could make it so that one swing of an axe would perform a full day's worth of wood chopping. Before they'd head home to their grandmother, they would cover themselves in dust and wood chippings to make it seem like they'd been hard at work all day.”

Regina stared downriver, at the backs of the heads of the other floaters, and out into the jungle. She wrestled with the decision to let Liz's turmoil lie where she left it, or take a chance with selective honesty to see if it would help.

“The twins spent their early teenage years like many teenagers do—defeating arrogant gods and renegade kings with their wits. They vanquished one pair of gods at the behest of other gods, angered by the gods' pretending to be the living incarnations of the sun and moon. When the twins were seventeen, they discovered—through trickery of course—both their father's identity as a famed ballplayer and his gaming equipment. Their grandmother had hidden the equipment away after he died and refused to speak of his profession because it had been responsible for his death. They quickly became experts, and the noise they made once again disturbed the Lords of Xibalba. Like their father before them, the twins were summoned to the underworld.”

Regina made her decision.

She said, “I often felt the same way when I was with him. I loved him, but I was always on-guard. And that was before he was a musician. I never felt I could tell him my secrets, either. That felt wrong to me. Like something important was missing between us, or within him. In the end, it didn't matter. He still wrote about me, or more accurately, since I left him with little to go on, he wrote about who he thought I was. So if you do decide to leave, uh, watch out for that.”

“Wait wait wait,” Eva said, before Liz could answer. “Are you saying both of you dated the same guy? The guy you’re with now? Tyler?”

She pointed at Regina.

“Is he the guy you dated after I left CU?”

Liz and Regina both nodded.

“It’s a long story,” Regina said.

Eva scrunched up her face.

“My God, I can imagine,” she said. “I’ll make you tell me one day.”

“What couldn’t you tell him?” Liz asked.

This time she did look directly at Regina with challenging eyes.

Regina swallowed.

“My mom was one of the Disappeared. I never told him that. And thank God. Can you imagine what he would have tried to write about that?”

The memory Regina most often returned to when thinking about that period of time when her mom first went missing was barely a memory at all. Or at the very least it was an amalgamation of memories from which her own thoughts could be easily removed. She recalled being glued to the TV all day, every day, for any hint of actual news. She remembered the ubiquitous sense of uncertainty, and the overwhelming power of mystery, and the tragedy of the unknown. But she remembered these things not because they were her own memories, but because the countless talking heads on TV told them they were so.

Although it was clear from almost the beginning that there was no actual evidence as to where the building had gone, there were many false leads. With each new potential thread came a new cycle exactly like the last, where the experts would trot out, spout off the newest theory, and then debate it. For weeks and months, the news coverage was a series of these seemingly unending circles, until a silent consensus was reached across the country that it might never be solved, and the best thing we could do was pretend it never happened. Luckily, a cruise ship in the Caribbean sank, killing over 100 people, just in time to fill the vacated airtime.

“I was there too,” Liz said.

Her eyes were closed.

“Sort of.”

“Where?”

“In that building. Not the night it happened. The night before. But I Disappeared too, for a while. And I can’t decide if it’s that I didn’t come back all the way, or if I was never all here to begin with. Maybe that’s why Tyler and I fit together for so long. Neither of us are whole people. I didn’t tell him that I was there, either.”

At that moment, Regina became absolutely certain Liz was not here by accident. Tyler's presence was the coincidence—the mathematical and metaphorical remainder—not Liz.

“I think it's time you decide to tell him, and see what happens,” Eva said. “Or decide that you will never tell him that or anything else. It sounds like you're coming up on a big choice either way.”

“What happened in that building?” Regina ventured.

She had to try.

Liz shook her head.

She said, “I don't have any useful answers. It's even more a blur now than it was back then. But your friend Sam Merard was there, too. I feel like you should know that, Regina, if you're getting close to him in any way. And you too, Eva, because of Julian.”

Regina did know. A few weeks ago, Merard had told her and Julian what he remembered of that night, and what led up to it. As unbelievable as his story was, it wasn't half as crazy as most of the Disappearance theories [floating around the Internet](#). He didn't claim to have any answers, either. Unlike Charles, Merard wasn't starting a cult. She still had no idea where her mom went for all that time. And she had no idea that the hollow girl Merard referred to might in fact be Liz. Now it was her turn to gauge whether Liz's tube sat lighter in the water than her own.

She wasn't surprised, though. Merard also told her and Julian [what he did in Colorado](#), and in Montana, and in Mexico, and Charles introduced them to the Curator. She had come to accept there were few coincidences during the final days of Montezuma.

Eva didn't know, but she didn't care. Julian was a grown man. He was a soldier. He knew what he was getting into. She kept secrets from her boyfriend, too. Everyone did. She didn't tell Julian what her thesis was, but she wasn't willing to tell these girls, either.

They drifted downstream in silence a while. They entered another cave. Luis warned them this would be the longest one. They switched on their headlamps. He continued his tale from the [Popol Vuh](#).

“The demon Lords who ruled the city of the underworld laid traps to confuse and embarrass the twins on their way to Xibalba. The twins passed each test with ease. They identified which benches were actually super-heated cooking stones, and avoided them. The Lords had multiple...simulacrum, I think that's the word...made of themselves. The twins sent ahead a mosquito to bite the Lords to uncover which were real and which were copies.”

“When the twins finally arrived in Xibalba, the Lords forced them to play numerous ballgames against the citizens of Xibalba for their entertainment. Whenever they lost a game, they would be sent to one of the specially designed houses where the deadly trials required of all visitors were held. Much to the frustration of the Lords, the twins would often lose on purpose, just so they could get the trials over with. One by one, they passed challenges in the Dark House, the Razor House, and the Jaguar, Fire, and Bat Houses.

“Eventually the Xibalban citizenry and Lords alike grew embarrassed by their continued defeats at the hands of the twins, so they decided to kill them outright. They constructed a massive oven. They summoned the twins and attempted to trick them into entering the oven. The twins saw through the ruse,

but they allowed themselves to be burned. Their ashes were ground into dust and cast into an underground river. But the twins had planned for this, and in another of the rare instances of seemingly real magic, their bodies regenerated in the river. First, they turned into a pair of catfish, and then, before the eyes of multiple Xibalban witnesses, they changed into young boys—younger than their former selves and thus unrecognizable as the loathed twins.”

Darkness still surrounded them, broken only by their headlamp beams. Regina wasn’t finished.

“I don’t know if you know this,” she said to Liz, “but Tyler and I met when we were very young—”

“I do know,” Liz cut in.

“Okay, good. Well, a short time after that, my dad took me to southern California for vacation. We were on the beach one day. He left me on our blanket reading a book for a few minutes while he ran back into the hotel to grab a fresh shirt for me, since the one I had with me had gotten soaked. I got really hot all of a sudden and even though he told me to stay put, I went for a quick dip back in the ocean. I didn’t think I’d gone out very far, but all of a sudden I felt a surge of water, and my feet were swept out from beneath me. I was being pushed out to sea by a rip tide. I started screaming. A lifeguard heard me. He and another guard raced out after me. I overheard the cops talking later. They said the first guy had just started the job last week, and he’d forgotten to bring his float with him. He got so close to me. It couldn’t have been more than five feet. And then another current pushed him right past me. The other guy made it to me, grabbed me, and took me back to shore. The first lifeguard drowned. All because I was a little brat who didn’t like the feeling of sweat on my body. I don’t even remember his name, if I ever knew it. That fucked me up for a really long time. It made me afraid to do a lot of things. I couldn’t take the chance someone else would pay for my foolishness. I saw his face in my dreams. And guess who I never told about that, either.”

Despite preparing herself to tell the story, tears had formed in the corner of her eyes anyway. She dabbed at them with her fingers. She hadn’t cried in many years. If she tried, she could stop this one before it technically counted.

“That’s terrible,” Eva said, “but it’s not your fault. You were a little kid.”

“I know, but my dad blamed himself. And I decided that I’d rather take the blame in my own mind than put it on him.”

“I’m sorry,” Liz said.

Eva attempted to lighten the mood.

“I guess if we’ve learned one thing today—besides the adventures of the Mayan twins—it’s that the things you two haven’t told Tyler could fill books.”

“The boys were allowed to remain in Xibalba,” Luis said, as they finally emerged from the cave. “A new legend began to grow around them as news of their transformation from catfish spread. They became famed dancers, entertainers, and magicians. Their illusions were spectacular, but many of them had more than a passing resemblance to stage tricks of magicians today. They would set fire to homes and then restore them unharmed. One of them would disappear from one corner of a house and reappear immediately in another. They would swallow fire. And one brother would saw the other in half across a board, and he would subsequently, miraculously rise from the dead.”

The three women floated for a while in silence, smoking cigarettes and staring up at the sky, deep in their own private and recently less-private thoughts.

Liz lifted her head.

“Men don’t know how to be men anymore,” she said. “Their models are outdated. They have too many stimuli. The big-bruiser staples of fishing and bullfighting and dueling are one in a million now. The older archetypes don’t hold up. They don’t know how to define themselves.”

“Some do,” Regina said, thinking of the two men she and Eva had most recently come to know.

“For better or worse,” Eva sighed.

“Some women do, too,” Regina added. “And sometimes it’s up to some women to give some men a push.”

They drifted into the final cave of the trip.

“Hearing of the boys’ performances, the Lords of Xibalba summoned them to perform a private show. The twins performed their litany of illusions. They burned one Lord’s house and brought it back from the ashes. They slew another owner’s dog and brought it back from the dead—the Lord didn’t seem too concerned that the revived dog didn’t respond by name. For their performance’s climax, one twin offered himself up as a sacrifice to the Lords. He allowed himself to be sawed in half upon a table by his brother, and he rose from the dead.

“The highest lord of Xibalba, named Seven Death, became giddy with excitement. He demanded that the miracle be performed upon all the lords, so that they too could rise from the dead in order to be truly immortal. The twins obliged. They killed all of the Lords, each of whom offered himself willingly. They of course did not resurrect them. They dragged the bodies out to the front of the palace, displayed them to the Xibalban citizens, and revealed their true identities. The entirety of their years in Xibalba—all the tests, tricks, performances, and deaths—had been leading up to this. It was all one big, brutal, magic trick. One very long con.”

Liz inventoried the tricks she could perform. They didn’t add up to nearly enough. She lifted both her legs again, trying to determine if they were lighter. She wasn’t sure it was such a bad thing if they were. She might be able to drift away instead of dealing directly with the inevitable.

Eva thought about her thesis, and how she was going to write herself out of the last corner in which she’d trapped herself.

Regina wondered what she’d see when she scaled the wall. And she tried once more to remember the lifeguard’s name.

They’d all spent more than enough energy thinking and talking about the men with whom they were romantically entangled, both in their current and past lives. Sometimes you have to pass your own Bechtel Test to understand who you truly are.

Luis warned them they were approaching the end of their journey downriver. He reminded them that their tips would help fund his trips to explore and map the caves around Montezuma. He finished his story.

“The twins assumed control of Xibalba and then as punishment for the Xibalbans’ crimes, they

immediately ordered the dismemberment of the underworld city, in a way doing the reverse of their usual death and rebirth tricks. The people who walked the Earth above would no longer be beholden to Xibalba. An age of peace and prosperity was ushered in.

“Before they returned to the surface, they stopped at the Xibalban ballcourt. They dug up the remains of their father. They used all their magical skills to try to restore him to life. They made him a new head out of clay, and revived his body, but he wasn’t the same. Their powers had limits. They managed to give their father peace by making him the patron god of those praying for hope.

“The twins climbed back to the Earth’s surface, but the legends say they didn’t stop there. They kept climbing straight up to the sky. Assuming the roles of the pretenders they vanquished long ago, one became the sun, and the other the moon.”

Liz, Regina, and Eva’s own road to Xibalba ended abruptly, without fanfare or resolution, on a sandy embankment upon which a 1991 Econoline van idled.