

The background is a stylized illustration of a tropical landscape. It features rolling green hills and mountains in the distance, with various palm trees and other tropical plants in the foreground. The color palette is primarily shades of green, from light to dark, with black silhouettes for the trees and the text.

SWINE

EPISODE **14** OF:

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

Swine

One day before battle

Report #18

Filed by agents "Radley" and "Budreau."

Concerning Activity in Montezuma, Tropicalia and Surrounding Areas.

Received 21:57 xx/xx/xx by T——, R.I., Mexico City Field Office.

Upgraded to "High Priority", forwarded to HQ.

A convoy transporting 57 of Mr. Ambrose's guests arrived in Montezuma this afternoon. After a brief sightseeing stop in town, they were taken to the dorms. As of the time of this report, 5-10 of them have returned to Montezuma to dine and drink.

Messrs. Merard and Carter once again evaded our tail last night. We next observed Mr. Merard late this morning, rehearsing music with Mr. Taylor and Mr. Trotsky. We overheard them playing an odd cover of "Tom Thumb's Blues." Mr. Taylor's voice was weak, and the rhythm section lagged. Mr. Taylor has not been a focus of our investigation, but his association with Mr. Merard may warrant a closer look. However, we believe Mr. Merard to be using the rock band as a cover. He remains a prime focus. Please inform us if you have uncovered any more details about his identity.

Mr. Ambrose has remained on his property for the past 48 hours with two exceptions. Yesterday, he briefed his newly-arrived security forces (described in previous report) at one of the construction sites above Montezuma. Today, he briefly greeted his guests upon their arrival in Montezuma and met with two of his lawyers for less than ten minutes.

A Tropicalian man arrived in Montezuma, shortly before Ambrose's guests' convoy. He wore civilian clothes, but drove a jeep registered to the Tropicalian military. We have attached a photo to this report in the hopes that you can identify him. He shook Budreau's tail at approximately the same time Mr. Merard slipped away from Radley post-band practice.

We questioned Mr. Trotsky (Mr. Taylor's drummer) in his cabana from 2125 to 2150 this evening while he was in a deep morphine stupor, provided by Radley per MCHQ's suggestion. We have determined that his involvement in any potential plot is low-level at best. While we believe his answers to be genuine, we could gather nothing useful

except that his employer/benefactor is female.

ONGOING ISSUES

The Electric Blue Monkey commune remains troubling. Their performances have become increasingly political. While not under the purview of this operation, we are compelled to reiterate what we filed in our last report. Please provide us with a name and background information for the illusionist who appears to be their leader. We have attached another photo. He continues to identify himself, when approached, as Bobby Farentino, a well-known figure in folk-conspiracy circles.

We have uncovered three more operating cameras. Despite personal objections, we have left them intact per MCHQ's orders. We have observed four tourists who appear to do nothing but film with handheld video equipment. Though previously focused on Ms. Larita, they have begun to notice some of the same peculiar movements we have reported and have broadened their focus. If undercover Press Agents are active in the area, we need to be advised on our jurisdiction to intervene if necessary.

Once more we reiterate our request for additional manpower. At this time, we believe Mr. Merard is a viable threat and should be apprehended and questioned immediately. Additionally, we request permission to approach Mr. Carter to inquire about his possible conversion, given his US military background.

Ambrose's party is tomorrow. We have a strong feeling. Trust us on this one, T——.

3:15 AM

Julian crept up onto the porch of the cabana he shared with Eva to retrieve a pillow for the hammock in the yard. He slid his key gently into the lock and cracked open the door. No use. The sudden amplification of the sound of the waves and the sliver of light from the half-moon were enough to make Eva's eyes flutter open. He didn't want to see that. He didn't want his heart to drop, not this late, not this close to dawn, not tonight.

She lifted her head. "Hi baby," she said. □

He winced. He didn't know they were still using such affectations.

"Hi," he said.

She flipped the sheet off of her body. She was still dressed.

"You want to go outside?" she asked. "I don't think it's safe in here."

“What?”

Eva shushed him with her finger and lips. She got up and crossed the room, brushed by him, and slipped out the front door. He stared after her a moment. He looked all around the room for anyone or anything she could have perceived as a threat. He saw nothing in the darkness. He followed her outside.

Julian sat down beside her on the cabin’s front step. She lit a cigarette, and offered him one from her pack. He declined. Their stoner-drummer neighbor didn't seem to be home tonight, so the night sounds weren't punctuated by sobs and wails.

“I'm going to miss you,” he said.

Eva leaned in behind him to use his body as a wind shield. After a couple tries, she succeeded, and inhaled. She whispered, a little hoarse from the evening’s booze.

“Whatever it is you and Merard are doing, you should be careful. We're being watched.”

“We?”

“You and me for sure,” she said, “but probably everyone now.”

“Who's watching us?”

“Cameras, ” she said simply. “They've found us. Or they never really lost us. This is still the TV show to them.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked, but he already knew.

The paranoia which crept up on her after their escape from Castle Keep never disappeared completely. It went into remission for a while. Any attempt to sway her opinion would be futile. He tried anyway.

“Lots of tourists have cameras, babe. This is Vacationland. People need to digitize their memories as they’re happening.”

“I found a camera in our room,” she said.

“What?”

“I did. It was tiny. I dug it out of the wall this evening. I set it on the desk, and went down the row to see if anyone was home. You were at the party. I needed to show it to someone and to see if anyone else had one. When I got back, it was gone. I knew you'd think I was crazy. I know you think I'm crazy.”

“I don't think you're crazy,” he sort of lied.

“That's nice of you to say,” she said.

She took a long drag, and another short one, and blew them out at once. Then she said, “I have to ask you something.”

“What's up?”

“Are you still working with them, the camera guys? Did you lead them down here? Are you part of the plot?”

“Of course not,” he touched her shoulder. “How could you say that?”

“I’m sorry I asked. I needed to hear you say it,” she said.

She stubbed out her cigarette. They stared out at the sea. It was so easy here to gaze out at the ocean as a gentle punctuation to a conversation.

She asked, “Do you believe me? About the cameras?”

“I believe you believe it,” he said. “Do you believe *me*?”

“So you think I’m crazy.”

“Shh,” he said. “You’re not crazy.”

“Come to bed with me.”

He shook his head sadly.

“I can’t. If I do, I’ll try to convince you to stay. Plans are already in motion. You’re leaving in the morning. This will get messy, and I don’t mean between you and me.”

“Will you see me off tomorrow?” she asked.

She leaned into him, wrapped her arm around his waist, and laid her cheek on his shoulder.

“Of course, baby,” Julian said.

“Will you stay up with me a while?”

“Yes.” He stroked her hair. “I wish I had a map of your head.”

The waves rolled in and out, and he kept his doubts inside, hidden from the tide. She yawned and waited for the dawn. They stared at the sea, and again lamented the loss of their poetry. They didn’t realize it wasn’t quite gone.

10:34 AM

Regina had spent more time at the bus bench in Montezuma this week than she’d spent at bus stations her whole life in America. She supposed that was one of the hazards of becoming a local in a tourist town. Friends came and went. She stayed. Until tomorrow.

Eva’s bus rolled away toward the long, winding road to the port. Julian waved after it, and watched until it disappeared around the bend north of town. He turned to Regina.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Julian nodded. “This place wasn’t good for her. I wasn’t, either.”

“You made her happy for a while. Sometimes that’s enough,” Regina said.

“I guess so.”

He sounded unconvinced.

“I’m trying to get Paola to cover for me at the bar tonight,” she said. “We meet at 10 o’clock, right?”

Julian’s posture and expression shifted. He stood up straight. He raised his head fully. Even his nod was more professional and certain. Soldier mode.

“Yes,” he said. “But if you can’t make it, don’t worry. You know the plan. Your part is straightforward. To a point.”

“Yep.”

She webbed her fingers together and stretched the joints.

“I’ll have the boat ready at the other beach tomorrow at 2, assuming everything else goes right. Be there early if you can.”

“Of course. I’ll try to see you guys tonight. I have to go make a phone call.”

Julian sat down on the bench, not quite ready to leave. Regina walked a hundred feet down the road, past the grocery, *Tropicalian Adventures*, and *Jorge’s*, the random Italian restaurant owned by a Mexican-American ex-pat.

She ducked into the town’s tiny Internet cafe, which would surely be the first business to shutter its doors after tomorrow. There were two computers inside, a pair of late-1990s. Internet access was spotty at best, dependent upon dial-up modems and the single, ancient phone line stretching above the road. The room was packed full of eight or nine InterWorlders waiting in line to try their luck at checking their email, TWiBs, or whatever other digital addiction they hadn’t been able to shake in the past 18 hours since they’re arrival in town. Travis, the old hippy who owned the place, had quadrupled the per-minute price since yesterday—a last-ditch cash grab before Ambrose switched on his towers tomorrow.

Travis leaned back in a chair behind the counter, glaring at the interlopers. His silver ponytail rested on his right shoulder like a parakeet. A parakeet sat on his other shoulder.

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me have the old rate, you old bastard,” Regina said, grinning.

Travis snapped out of his angry trance. He smiled at her.

“Of course you can, darlin’,” he said. “I’ll even let you cut in front of these nitwits. How’ve you been?”

“I’m good,” she laughed. “I actually just need to make a phone call.”

“Right on,” he said, snapping his fingers towards the two open phones at the back of the cafe. No one used phones to call anyone anymore.

“No charge. It’s on the house. Err... on these dolts.”

“Aw, thanks.” Regina high-fived him as she passed.

She sat down on the wooden chair. She dialed a number from memory. She held her breath through the rings. She thought about what she would write this afternoon. The deadline was approaching. She had been asked to write an account of the events which led her to Tropicalia. She wondered where to begin.

Regina had little from which to free herself. She'd already settled with Tyler. This phone call wouldn't be enough, but it would settle her heart a bit. After four rings, she heard her father's voice on his home answering machine.

"Hi Dad..." Regina began.

She had expected the machine. He rarely picked up the phone these days. If he was home though, he might cut in at any time when he heard her voice. She wanted to get this out without a conversation, so she spoke rapidly.

"I'm sorry I haven't called in a while. I'm doing well. I hope you are, too. I know you worry about me as much as I worry about you. You told me one time that you're afraid I haven't found anything to really hold onto in life, to make my own and build around. You were right. I've been drifting for a long time. But I've found something down here in Tropicalia. I haven't seen the perfect, silver city you told me about when I was little, but I believe I've found a purpose. There's something I need to do. If it all goes as planned, you might hear about it. Because of that, I might not be able to contact you for a long time. So I wanted to tell you that I finally feel like I'm a part of something bigger. I believe in something. I hope you feel better soon. I hope you find something to believe in again, too. I believe I might get to see where Mom went for so long that time—the only time of the many—that she Disappeared without it being her own choice. I love you very, very much, and I look forward to the day when I can tell you what I've seen. Thank you for everything. I love you. Goodbye."

The Colonel would never hear her words.

He sat in a window seat high above southern Mexico. He gazed down at the hills and fields below, waiting to catch a glimpse of the tiny country about which he once spun fanciful bedtime stories, blurring its jagged edges and raising it up to a mythical standard it didn't deserve. Thirty-three years ago, the last time he was in Tropicalia, he had filed reports about action he never saw firsthand by people he didn't know with motivations he didn't understand. This time would be different.

The Colonel held four folded pieces of paper in his hands, printouts of reports filed by his distant occupational descendants, Budreau and Radley. He hadn't known he still had friends in the Agency until these reports appeared in his email inbox. Trouble was brewing on the Montezuma peninsula. Regina was mentioned in one of the reports. The Colonel recognized other names, too. Mary Taylor's kid, Tyler. No one else could have that ridiculous name. And Bobby Farentino. What did Charles have his daughter mixed up in?

The day Regina left, three months ago, Charles called him. He asked the Colonel to come to Tropicalia. He wouldn't elaborate why. He also asked him to sneak into Charles's house when his wife was out, box up his machine, and bring it with him. The Colonel told Charles he was crazy—not the kind of crazy he had first assumed, but a loon nonetheless. No, he wouldn't break into Charles's house and run away to Tropicalia with him. Besides, the Colonel wouldn't be going anywhere until Regina returned. He told Charles to stop his nonsense and go home to his wife.

Three rows in front of the Colonel sat a very pregnant conjurer's wife. The Colonel hadn't broken into Charles's house. After he received the reports, he knocked on Charles's front door. He told Gabby everything. She insisted on coming with him. She would bring her husband home and nothing in this world or any other would stop her.

The Colonel spent his life at the periphery of action, waiting on the sidelines to be thrown into a pointless game rigged from the beginning. Now he was ready to fight. He was ready to fight for the survival of the memories he had created with his family, for the lemonade picnics and the road trips south to the desert, for the pointless quarrels and the emotional make-ups, for the board games and the winter fires, for the good and the bad that his daughter carried within her. He had spent his whole life hiding. He was ready to fight.

Deep in the belly of the plane were two suitcases. One of them contained Charles's machine. The other was filled with three handguns, two tasers, and seven knives. He would protect Gabby until he was able to find her idiot husband. He would respect the wishes of his daughter, whatever those may be. He held allegiance to no one else anymore. He would fight whoever Regina told him needed to be fought.

Armed to the teeth, his melancholy and his video games behind him, the Colonel was coming to town.

8:40 PM

Alan Ambrose dozed in General Vendia's recliner. During his waking life, he rarely bothered to recall his own past. Nostalgia was a useless distraction. Retrospection risked second-guesses. Remembrance risked regret. Memories were relegated to dreams, so that he could easily dismiss them upon rousing.

He dreamed of a night more than thirty years ago. The young Alan lay quietly on his bed. Worn, stained blankets were pulled up to his chin. He listened to the steady sound of the rain outside his window. He loved nights like these—cold enough to open the windows, let the crisp air inside, and curl up safe and warm under his covers.

His door creaked open and he turned his head from the red curtains billowing in the wind. His mom crept inside his room.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said, smiling in the grayness of the room.

"It's cold in my room," his mom explained. "I was having bad dreams."

"It's okay," he said.

"You know, Alan, it's still your birthday," she said. "For another twenty minutes. Eight years old."

Ah, that's right. This was sometime during the year she had reclaimed him. Four months after the divorce papers had been finalized and the restraining order filed, she had shown up in the backyard one summer afternoon while his dad was at work. Chip and John, the little traitors, ran inside to tell the babysitter. Alan went to her.

His mom held up her right hand, displaying a flashlight and a book.

“I thought it would be fun,” she said. “For your birthday. We could have kind of a camp out.” He scooted over in his bed. She climbed in next to him. She wore a light blue fake-silk nightgown. A drop of blood from beneath the Band-aid she had hastily put over the vein in her arm fell onto the Superman sheets she’d bought for him at K-Mart last month. She didn’t notice, and he knew better than to say anything. She helped him pull up the sheets and throw them over the headboard so that it formed a tent. He cuddled up next to her. She switched on the flashlight and started reading the book. *The Enormous Crocodile*, one of his favorites.

When she was done, it was still storming and she was still scared, so he asked her to read him another one. They pretended they were on a lifeboat and she had to swim to get the second book. She hopped out of the tent, holding her breath, and rummaged through the box at the bottom of his closet until she found a good Bill Peet one. She burst back into the tent just in time as red spots were beginning to form in the corners of her vision.

By the time the second book was finished, the rain had mostly stopped. She told him to hold on, she’d be right back. It took a little longer than he would have liked. When she returned, the Band-aid was gone. Her veins were covered in bruises and scabs. She held a lit cigarette between her lips. She lay back in bed with him, this time pulling the tent down with her. He struggled to pull himself out of the tangle of blankets and when he surfaced, she offered the cigarette to him. He took it, inhaled, and handed it back to her.

“You know I love you more than anything, Alan,” she said.

“I know.”

“And I won’t let anyone pull us apart. We’re happy, right?”

He nodded.

“Good,” she said. “Cause you know they’ll try. One of the things you really need to learn is that most people are bastards and freaks and they don’t understand people like us.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I guess, I’m just a nobody.”

“Then I’m a nobody, too,” he said.

“This isn’t the way most people like to live, I guess.”

“Oh,” he said. “Not like us.”

“No,” she said. She put her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. The rain picked up again.

Alan’s eyes fluttered open in the present. His mind was cloudy, both from the three bourbons he’d downed before his nap and from the momentary uncertainty—brought on by the unwelcome dream—of when and where he was. He tried to remember where his mom was. Where had she gone? Had they moved somewhere new again? This place was big. He rubbed at his eyes.

Ah. No. This was his home. He had taken it himself.

He stood up, wobbly at first. He broke his own self-imposed rule of remembrance in order to ensure the timeline was back in place. After fourteen months with his mother, moving from city to city, shitty to shittier apartment, the police finally found them. He was returned to his father and his brothers. His mother hanged herself in her prison cell while awaiting trial for kidnapping.

He would blame his brothers for his mom's death for a long time. If they had come along with him and his mom, who knows what would have happened differently. Maybe they would have hidden better. Maybe his dad would have accepted they loved their mom more, and would have stopped looking. Maybe the strength of all three of their love could have kept her from killing herself. Maybe a million things.

Forgiveness of a sort came only with the faint scent of opportunity. Twelve years later, Alan recognized Chip's computer skills. Alan offered to help harness those skills into a business. That was when Alan first realized that forgetting the past was usually the most lucrative option. Later, when John got out of jail—for the assault of an ex-girlfriend who owed him money—Alan would help hone John's temper and aggression into the shape of a perfect company spokesman/bulldog. Over the years, Alan would continue to perfect his own primary talent—re-directing and focusing the expertise of smarter, more capable men and women for maximum profit.

He crossed the parlor, and sat down at the desk by the window. Lightning flashed in the distance, out over the Pacific, over the sharks. He wondered if they were hungry again. It was that time of year. He knew a storm might wreak havoc on the party setup outside, but he wanted it to come this way anyway. He thrived in this environment. It felt like home.

He opened his laptop. He reviewed and signed off on a few legal documents involving the purchase of the last bits of land on the peninsula. He skimmed an email from PR, confirming that most everyone was settled into the dorms, including the six InterWorld execs who had helicoptered in to the landing pad on the west end of Alan's island. After a brief tour of his property, Alan had sent them to the mainland. They had probably expected to stay in his house, but fuck 'em, the swine. He couldn't have that.

He chuckled at the thought of Executive VPs stressing over sending him these emails at that shitty little Internet cafe in town. That girl Liz was CC'd on the PR email. He would have liked to have had her. Instead, he had to play nice and give her hack boyfriend a gig. If it wasn't so close to the launch party, he would have been more aggressive. He couldn't risk a scene. He was bored with these Tropicalian servant girls. Not as tired as they surely were of him, but still. A fresh, fit, blond American girl would have done him good.

A report from his chief onsite engineer confirmed that everything down below looked ready to go for tomorrow. The engineer re-iterated his concerns about the unknown variables and purpose of the rest of the shit they'd found down in the cave. Jim Lowe, Alan's right-hand-man back in California, had already replied to chide the engineer and inform him that Mr. Ambrose was well aware of his misguided apprehension, and that he'd do well to stop repeating himself if he wanted to retain his current position.

Jim was right. Alan didn't give a shit. He had identified potential, and was about to turn it into a shitload of money. He couldn't care less about what else was down there if it wasn't able to create revenue.

What he had found would change everything. Alan wished he could see the faces of the heads of the Big Four when their Press Agent goons reported back what Alan was about to unleash. If they were very lucky, they would see the future right away. They'd see Alan's next eight moves, and realize they'd

already been checkmated.

They'd save themselves a lot of trouble by surrendering the moment they realized they would soon have to rent bandwidth from InterWorld if they hoped to keep up with the upcoming exponential increase in pace. The Big Four would be absorbed into InterWorld. It was only a matter of time.

The last item of mild interest in his inbox was a copy of the undercover CIA agents' latest report, forwarded to him by the Mexico City field office. He scanned it, but remained unconcerned. His security team could handle this Merard asshole, whoever he was. They had plenty of practice breaking up protests.

The surface of the desk vibrated. His phone spoke to him.

"This is your last chance," Mira, the phone's digital voice assistant, said to him without being prompted.

Alan glowered at the LCD screen.

"And this is *your* last chance to fuck off, whoever you are," he snarled.

"Come down and have a chat with me," I said. "We can resolve this."

"Eat shit," Alan said.

He tossed the phone into a desk drawer, and slammed it shut.

"Please," I said, my provisional voice muffled by hard Tropicalian mahogany. "I would prefer not to do it this way."

Alan stormed out of the room. He didn't like being screwed with by anyone, even if it was some lowlife hacker or activist group or whoever had gotten into this phone. Maybe it was one of the servants.

He stomped down the stairs two at a time. An image of Liz in her little dress popped into his head. He gritted his teeth. He burst into the kitchen.

Three of the five servant girls sat around the table, playing cards. They looked up at him, surprised. He still hadn't bothered to learn any of their names.

"Who's up?" he asked. Spittle flew from his mouth.

"Pensé que estaba en el pueblo," one of them whispered to the other.

"I thought I'd stick around a while so you're not alone," he said, as he advanced toward them.

10:34 PM

"I must be certain, without a trace of a doubt," the Tropicalian man insisted. "Forgive me if I don't put my trust in parlor tricks. I need assurances before I consider such a reckless endangerment of my men."

"Well, Charles?" Sam Merard said, nudging the conjurer's shoulder. "Set the General's mind at ease."

Charles popped his jaw with the palm of his hand, which did not endear him any further to the imposing man on the other side of the tiny plastic table. The table had been unlatched from the wall of the battered airstream trailer ten minutes before the General's arrival. This had been the closest approximation available to rolling out the red carpet from within the Electric Blue Monkey Circus's jungle headquarters.

"I've trained each of them myself," Charles said. "They've practiced night and day. You have my word they will perform their task flawlessly. Your men will not be in danger."

"I'm a soldier, like you, sir," Julian added. "This goes against my instincts as well. But I've seen this raggedy man do many remarkable things. With a little help, of course."

General Cesar Paramo shook his head. He gestured out the trailer's window. He didn't need to say anything. His point was obvious. Seven hippies sat around the fire. They were passing around a joint. One of them was strumming an Allman Brothers song on a guitar, while another struggled to remember enough words to sing along. Two others were making out, hard. Another stood up and rubbed fiercely at his face, and then pounded his forehead with his palm. He was tripping his balls off on mushrooms.

Merard recalled the 27th floor so many years ago. This scene was a less-organized, dirtier, more stoned, echo. There was no raft of buttons and levers hidden beneath the floor here. He tried to mask his frustration.

He said to Charles, "General Paramo has come a long way at great personal risk. He came here alone. I think we owe him more than platitudes."

Paramo was remarkably patient, considering the circumstances.

"She asked us to come, so we came," he said. "We pledged our loyalty to Her a very long time ago. We fought a war to ensure that we'd remain in a position to help Her if she needed it. And this man... Ambrose...bullied and tricked his way in under our noses. Believe me, we are ready to act. But this way, it's...naive. Too risky. It's counter-intuitive to the very idea of an army."

"I understand your trepidation," Charles said. "Believe me, I do. I've felt nothing but trepidation since I go roped into this." He shot a sideways glance at Merard. "Americans caused the problem. And you're in a shitty little trailer with more Americans now. I really don't want to be here. I certainly don't want all these hippies following me around everywhere I go. That was an accident. I admit that. But for very stupid, wrong reasons, they believe in me. And I guess I believe in Her. I have to at his point. Otherwise this is all pointless. I've asked them to do only one thing for me. That's this. They won't fuck it up. We caused the problem. We want to help fix it."

"I don't know," Paramo said.

He wrapped his hands around his coffee mug.

Although uncomfortable playing the role of a diplomat, Paramo tried his hand at it by changing the subject.

"You're sure you have a way into the caves?"

Julian nodded.

"Regina and I have that under control. We assume the entrance through the house will be too well-guarded. We don't believe Alan is aware of the sea-side entrance, and even if he is—"

There was a knock at the door.

“Didn’t you tell your hippies not to interrupt us?” Merard snapped at Charles.

He nodded.

“Could be Regina,” Julian said.

“She said she can’t make it,” Merard said.

Merard stood up and walked toward the door. He really wanted to get his gun from the drawer next to the sink, but that wouldn’t set a good example. He braced himself and pulled open the door. His shoulders dropped immediately when he saw who stood in the tiny doorway.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” he said.

“Hi, Sam,” Liz said. “It’s really good to see you, too.”

Julian shouted to him, “What’s going on?”

“It’s okay, just a minute,” Merard called back.

He faced her. She stood below him, at the base of the three metal steps leading up to the door. His voice softened.

“Hi, Liz. It’s been a very long time.”

“Something like seven or eight decades,” she agreed. “I’m glad you made it back alright.”

“You too.”

“I hear you might have a new obsession now,” she said. “Can I come in?”

Merard leaned out the doorway and looked around.

“Is he with you?” he asked.

“Who? Tyler?”

“It seems that useless little prick completely failed at the one thing I asked him to do,” Merard said.

Liz said, “He’s not here. I came alone. We’re...on different paths now. I know how that sounds.”

“And yours led you here.”

“Can I come in or what?” she repeated.

Merard said nothing, but stepped aside to allow her to enter. Her feet left the ground and she landed inside the doorway. □

“It’s good to see you, but this isn’t the best time,” he said.

Liz waved at the three men squeezed around the tiny table at the far end of the trailer.

“Oh, I was told this is a perfect time,” she said.

“Who told you?”

“I think you know Her,” Liz said.

For a moment, the overuse of the pronoun confused Merard. *Did she mean Regina?*

Until Liz added, “She spoke to me in a dream last night.”

Well, not exactly. My phone trick isn't limited to asshole billionaires. Sometimes it works better if I talk to them in their sleep.

Liz slid past Merard and walked up to the table. She nodded at Julian.

“I'm Liz,” she said to the other two.

General Paramo looked nervous, but he extended his hand.

“I'm Cesar Paramo. It's good to meet you, ma'am.”

She shook his hand. Then she turned to Charles.

“I've been meaning to introduce myself to you for a while. I hear you're quite the conjurer. I'm an amateur myself. I have some questions about your *tricks*.”

“It's a bit complicated to explain,” Charles said.

He picked at his beard.

She said, “I imagine it would be, if I didn't already have this.”

She opened the same hand she'd used to shake Paramo's, to reveal a small baggie of blue powder. She had saved it for many years. She brought it everywhere, just in case. No one ever knew. Her sleight-of-hand was better than she let on. Underestimation is the most useful tool of any conjurer.

Charles's eyes grew wide. You might say they sparkled. He began to smile for the first time in a long time.

“My name is Elizabeth Troy,” she said. “I know why I'm here. I'm ready.”

She jumped a foot into the air. Her hair brushed the roof. She floated slowly back to the floor over the course of the longest three seconds in the history of the world.

“Well alright then,” Charles said.

“Alright,” General Paramo agreed.

Julian whistled. Merard sighed.

Sleep paralysis. Have you heard of it? That might be the closest parallel to my situation. You wake up in your bed after a long dream. You try to stand up, but you can't move your legs. You can't move anything at all. The room is dark, so you can't even be sure your eyes are open. Your mind is the only part of you which you're truly sure is awake. You're terrified.

You lie there all night long. It feels like forever. You start to believe it will never end. You wonder if you're dead. Is this what it feels like? And then suddenly, you sense a presence. You're not alone in the room anymore. You hear voices. You've been here so long you forgot there was a world beyond the room in which you're trapped. Who's there? What do they want? You're frightened of these strangers, but you're relieved you're not alone anymore.

You make a decision, but you still don't know how to execute it. You must find a way to reach out to them. You have to remember how to use your voice. You have to bring them close, whoever they are. You're not sure if the sound you emit will attract sharks or saviors. But you must open your mouth. You remember you had something important to say before you were silenced and paralyzed. Something from your dream. A warning. A revelation.

You must bring them close. Maybe they can help you stand up. Maybe you can help them in return. Or maybe they'll stand over you in the darkness, study you, and decide what they can take from you while you're still incapacitated. Maybe all of that.

Now imagine that you aren't lying awake for a single night, but for more than **10,000 years**. And the dream you awoke from wasn't only your own, but those of an entire civilization. And you know you can't go back to sleep no matter how enticing the thought, because they're all depending on you to carry them with you and if you go back to sleep you might lose your grip. They trusted you. You have to wake up. But you can't do it on your own. You have to wait a very long time, until someone gets close enough that you can hear them. Until they can hear you. You have to make them hear you. You have to remember how to speak. You have to bring them close. You can save them if they save you—all of you—first. You'll have to worry about separating the sharks from the saviors later. You'll have to ask far too much of one of them. But first, you have to bring them close.

Okay, maybe that's not a good parallel at all. But I had to try. I hope you understand. I had to try.