



THE PARTY

*EPISODE **15** OF:*

THE RUINS OF TROPICALIA

The Party

The day of battle

Sergeant Diego Mendoza used to write his weekly reports for regional headquarters in Alban without serious concentration. Nothing more than the occasional confiscation of marijuana from a tourist or the breakup of a petty bar squabble. Since he'd arrived in Montezuma three years ago, Mendoza had never actually needed to employ any of the investigative skills he'd acquired during his fourteen years on the Tropicalia City police force. He could recall only four instances in which he'd even had to break out his handcuffs.

He spent more time on this final report. After dutifully detailing the past week's three disturbances of note—placing an aggressive InterWorlder too intoxicated to be a real threat in the drunk tank for the night, treating a sprained ankle at the waterfall, and issuing a warrant for a tourist-shoplifter (likely long gone from town)—he added a new section titled *Preocupaciones*.

Mendoza's already limited authority would end completely on Monday. Eight months ago, InterWorld finalized its purchase of the bulk of the peninsula from eight real estate firms, seven wealthy landowners, and two consortiums representing over 100 individual residents. In order to complete its ownership of the entire region in order to build a new road, the company also procured from the government a fifty square mile chunk of undeveloped jungle north of town, contingent on its continued status as a wildlife reserve. Shortly thereafter, InterWorld negotiated an agreement with El Cuerpo Nacional de Policía de la Tropicalia to replace its local presence with private IW security forces. Mendoza's tiny force temporarily shared jurisdiction with IW Security.

The deal InterWorld made with CNPT included a fee which would be distributed to the officers whose jobs would disappear. To his mild surprise, a CPNT lawyer showed up two weeks ago with papers detailing the transfer of funds to an account of his choice, pending the uneventful final turnover of authority to IW Security this Monday. He could retire ten years earlier than expected, although he had already felt like he was semi-retired ever since coming to Montezuma.

No one in Montezuma was truly a native, and Mendoza was less so than even many of the gringos in town. But after so many years in the grit and grime of Tropicalia City, Montezuma's beauty and tranquility had seduced him and his wife. They made plans to stay here. He would build his family a proper house by the beach to replace the clapboard bungalow they currently rented. *Ni modo*. There were plenty of beautiful places in Tropicalia. He would soon have enough money to find another.

Mendoza was less concerned for himself and his men than for the rest of the residents of Montezuma—those who didn't have the weight of the national police force to protect their interests. Come Monday, they wouldn't have the police to protect them at all. The shopkeepers, innkeepers, and other proprietors had been kept in the dark about their place in Montezuma's InterWorld-saturated future. Vague assurances had been given, but the citizens couldn't help but notice that an entire new town was being built in the hills above their heads, a soon to be self-contained hamlet which seemed to require neither their input nor their services.

InterWorld lawyers had called for a town meeting of all interested residents this coming Sunday evening

to discuss plans for Montezuma's main strip. The timing was ominous. Mendoza read between the lines and the dates. InterWorld would wait to announce its specific plans until after Ambrose's precious party—but in the final hours when Mendoza's force would still be on the hook to help keep the peace. Their retirement plans hinged on it.

Mendoza wrote a sanitized version of these thoughts under the second section of his report. He also wrote of the apparent lack of a single Spanish speaker in IW Security, the lack of proper law enforcement facilities for the expected influx of people, and about his suspicion regarding the presence of American intelligence agents milling about town. He kept his prose professional and as impassive as he could.

He carefully slipped the report inside a yellow envelope for Patrolman Juarez to drive up to Alban tomorrow morning. Mendoza leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on his puny aluminum desk just in time for an urgent knock on the station door. He sat up and glared across the room at Juarez, who was oblivious.

Juarez sat at his table, listening to his headphones and failing to properly fold paper into origami. Juarez bought a how-to book from the book exchange at the hostel three weeks ago. He had been insufferable ever since. His crude, shoddy handiwork adorned every empty space in the station. Mendoza would have put a stop to it long ago if there was anyone around to impress or if Benito's jokes about the little paper failures weren't so entertaining.

Mendoza reached atop the filing cabinet behind him and grabbed what was probably supposed to be a swan, or a skyscraper. He crumpled it and hurled it across the room at Juarez's head. Juarez whipped off his headphones and spun around.

“Que paso?”

Mendoza pointed at the door. The knocking resumed. Juarez stood and pressed the buzzer on the wall. The door swung open. A dark-haired white guy stumbled in, followed by a black man. Mendoza had seen them both around town the past month. The white one's sleeve was torn and blood dripped down to the tile.

“Can you help us?” the black man asked in English. “We were assaulted down on the beach.”

Mendoza sat up.

“By who? Cuando?”

The white one fell to his knees, a pained expression on his face. Juarez rushed over to him. Mendoza noticed the flak jacket a half-second too late. In a flurry of movement, the black man produced a length of rope, slipped it over Juarez's body, and pulled his arms tightly to his sides.

Mendoza jumped to his feet as fast as his puffy fifty-year-old body would allow, but the white man leaped up faster. He lunged at Mendoza's desk. He swiped the baton from its surface and vaulted over it. His momentum knocked Mendoza back into his chair. It tipped back against the wall. The gringo put one knee up on the chair, touching Mendoza's groin, and pressed Mendoza's own baton against his collarbone. Mendoza silently cursed these last listless years here in Montezuma. He would have moved faster before.

“¿Dónde está el tercer policía?” the gringo demanded.

“Don't phrase it like that,” the black man said.

Mendoza could see he had Juarez face down on the floor, his knee dug into the small of Juarez's back. He was securing Juarez's hands with the rope.

"The fourth's in Tropicalia City. Where's the third policeman?" the white gringo repeated, ignoring the other's warning.

Mendoza could have sworn at him, or spit, or lied, or tried to fight back. He would have in the old days. But he had a wife and a son now. And the thought of early retirement was beginning to feel nice. He wasn't a fighting man anymore. He didn't want to take the risk. Besides, this land had already been raped by Ambrose. Mendoza didn't know who this man was, or what his plan may be, but his actions indicated he wasn't part of InterWorld. Frankly, Mendoza was a bit curious.

"Benito is out on morning patrol," he said.

"Call him back here," the gringo said.

He tugged Mendoza's radio out of his belt and switched it on. He backed up a few inches to allow Mendoza to speak. Mendoza did as he was told, then switched the radio off. The gringo took it and tossed it on the desk.

The black man finished tying and gagging Patrolman Juarez. He walked toward Mendoza with another length of rope in his hand. The white man pulled Mendoza's chair out away from the wall. He spun Mendoza around so that his back was to the black man, who began wrapping the rope around him. The white man held Mendoza's hands to the arms of the chair while his colleague worked the rope. His grip was firm, but not painful.

The white gringo said, "We, or someone you'll be happier to see, will return to release you in a few hours. We will not kill anyone. We won't hurt any Tropicalians. We will not steal or damage Tropicalian property."

"Who are you?" Mendoza asked.

"My name's Sam Merard and I would have liked to meet you under better circumstances. Regina speaks highly of you. She says you're a good man. I would rather shake your hands than tie them. I'm sorry for the violence, and for the restraints. We want to ensure your hands are clean. We will be gone before nightfall and InterWorld will leave soon after. We'll be nothing but bad memories. You'll suffer an economic setback because of our actions, and I apologize for that, too. It will be temporary. The bit of blood that spurts out when we remove the bullet. We'll cauterize the wound as best we can."

Merard backed away, and the black man slipped a cloth over Mendoza's mouth. He didn't care to speak anymore anyway.

Merard moved swiftly to the door. It opened, and Benito came in. Benito's jaw dropped, and his body followed, thanks to a blunt hit to the base of the neck with the baton from behind. Julian joined Merard at the entrance.

Until five minutes ago, Merard had been all talk. Julian didn't know how he'd react to real action. He wasn't a trained soldier. But Merard was barely out of breath. His hands were steady and his movements calm. Julian was proud. And relieved. He felt certain for the first time he'd placed his trust in the right man. In the right cause.

“I’ll finish tying him up,” Merard said. “And then I’ll go meet our friends.”

Julian nodded, slipped out the door, and headed to the beach to meet Regina.

Executives, developers, and salesmen alike jostled around Liz, vying for her attention with an alarming combination of stupid anecdotes, bawdy jokes, and creepy corporate-speak. They were harder to tell apart than usual, thanks to the party’s dress code. All InterWorld employees had been instructed to wear powder blue, company-issued polos with the InterWorld logo stitched across the left breast. The swarm of mostly pale sunscreen-streaked faces and blue torsos blended disconcertingly into the sky and puffy late morning clouds atop Alan’s island.

They were supposed to have name tags, but there was a delivery date mix-up with the printer in Tropicalia, for which Liz’s co-worker Jeff might end up getting fired. Surmising who was an exec versus a developer or anyone else based on age wasn’t a reliable tactic in the tech world. Guessing based on the choice of wearing shorts and flip-flops with the polos, versus donning khakis and loafers, was equally impossible.

Luckily, Liz didn’t give a shit. Not anymore. She just had to push through this. It wouldn’t be long now.

Conservatively, ten percent of the guests were women. Even fewer were visible as many of them were, like Liz, surrounded by eager, horny, young men. The youngest of the men felt particularly lucky to be here. They double-fisted beers, high-fived each other, and leered at Liz when they thought she wasn’t looking. She was looking, and she felt like this big rock was as impermanent and vulnerable as a certain skyscraper. She shuddered at the thought of how many of these spiky-haired dudes would jerk off to her memory when tucked in their cots in the boarding house tonight.

“This party is sick!” a guy whose faux-hawk too closely resembled Tyler’s shouted.

He pumped his fist in the air. Another guy connected with it, and they grunted after touching fingers and bellies.

“I can’t believe my agency picked me to come down here,” another one said. “How did you get here?”

Liz vaguely realized she was being addressed.

“Um, I’m in PR. I helped set this up,” she said and sipped politely at her beer.

“Right on, right on.”

She leaned on the edge of a round card table covered in a white cloth, one of thirty such tables spread across the grounds. Two large white tents containing long tables and mini-bars had been erected on the eastern edge in anticipation of the usual afternoon storm. The plywood stage where Tyler and his “band” were supposed to perform sat on the northern edge of the island, mere yards from the edge of the sheer cliff face. The stage had been assembled over the past two days. She could see movement on and around the stage, but couldn’t tell if any particular shape was Tyler.

Liz estimated 150 people or so were milling about. More were still arriving. The official guest list was 211. Two dozen or so Media Agents were interspersed throughout the crowd. Some carried cameras,

others microphones. They wore their usual black t-shirts, as if in defiance of the tropical sun. The local bartenders and servers who had been contracted to work the party wore white, blending—probably by design—into the tents, tablecloths, and chairs.

Beyond the stage was a vast, impressive view of the Tropicalian coast—the wet jungles, the steaming distant volcanoes. The sun was out, the threat of rain distant at the moment. A perfect party day.

Tacky little booths were set up all around the grounds, topped by what looked like fifth-grade science project dioramas describing various jobs that would be opening up in the Montezuma area thanks to Alan's "Growth Initiative."

A busy Tropicalian waitress edged into the group, offering a tray of appetizers. Liz took advantage of the momentary distraction and floated out of there.

She maneuvered through the crowd until she reached the stage. She rounded the side of it. Wedged in the space between the back of the stage and the edge of the cliff were three plastic chairs. A small cooler of beer sat on the ground between the chairs. Tyler sat in one of the chairs. His leg tapped nervously. His eyes were closed. The other two chairs were empty.

"Hey," Liz said.

He opened his eyes and either forced or allowed a smile. She couldn't tell.

"Check it out, pretty sweet, huh?" he said, sweeping his hand across the backstage area.

"Just like the Fillmore, right?" she said.

He shrugged.

"Can't beat the view though," she said.

"It's refreshing," he said. "Telescoping."

"What do you mean?"

"It distills my options. There's these chairs to sit around in and do nothing, and there's all those people out there who are technically about to be my co-workers, and there's a stage, and there's a cliff. Four choices, I suppose."

She clucked her tongue.

"Tyler."

"It's okay," he said. "I'm learning my place in all this."

"Where's your band?" she asked, feigning ignorance. She felt bad for him. She didn't completely understand why Sam did this to him. She resisted the temptation to hug him. Instead, she closed the lid of the cooler and sat down on it.

"I don't think I have a band," he said. "I don't think they're coming. Neither of them showed up to practice yesterday. Craig was getting high. I don't know where Merard is. Have you seen him?"

“What are you going to do?” she asked, instead of answering.

His leg started tapping again.

He said, “I shouldn’t have left my band. The Amends. That was a real band. Or we could have been. Maybe. If we tried harder. If we committed to it. I don’t have a band here. I can’t do this on my own. I’m not a real singer. I can barely play guitar.”

“You can do anything you put your mind to,” she said automatically.

Tyler stood up. He climbed two of the wooden steps leading up to the stage. He peered out at the crowd.

“I don’t want to play for these people. This isn’t what music’s supposed to be.”

“Then don’t. Do what you want to do. Don’t do what you don’t want to do. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

He turned back to face her and sat down on the bottom step.

“But I have four choices,” he said. “I’m not content sitting around on my ass anymore. The cliff isn’t very appealing. So what else is there?” He pulled at the fabric of his InterWorld polo. “This? Or that?” He jabbed his fingers at the stage.

“Were you planning to wear that out there?” she asked.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Don’t wear it.”

“Where’s your company spirit?” he asked.

“It’s thinning.”

He let out an exaggerated sigh. She waited for it. She didn’t owe him anything, but she would always love him in certain ways. She’d let him talk it out. She’d listen.

“My songs don’t mean anything, not really. They were never quite right. Never all there. But this isn’t about me. I’m not really a part of this. Any of this. I’m just here. Watching it all. I’ll never be one of them. I was kidding myself. And I’ll never be the great artist I thought I could be. I think maybe I’m supposed to stay out on the periphery. But I was paid to do a job, so I think I’ll do it. And besides, I have at least one song that still means something to me. I wrote a song for you yesterday. Finally. Too late.”

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “But you know me. You know I had to.”

Liz stood up. A gust of wind surged. She caught her balance and dug in her heels before it could do much damage. She steadied herself.

“I’ll be out there watching, like the night we met. You’ll do great.”

She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. She touched his shoulder. He grabbed her hand and held

it against his InterWorld polo. She let him have this last touch for a few seconds, and then slipped away.

The 19-foot, sand-colored dory cut across the water. Regina perched on the bench seat nearest the bow, despite Julian's warning that it would be roughest up there. She wanted to feel the mist on her face and smell the salt instead of the gasoline fumes.

The boat had been left for them by a local fisherman named Carlos Rivera who was sympathetic to their cause. It was moored to a large rock just north of the Montezuma beach, hidden from view by an even bigger slab of ancient lava. They circumvented the line of other small transport vessels carrying guests to the island beneath the gondola by hugging the shore until they passed the north end of the island. Then Julian turned the boat left and they headed toward its rocky shore.

He made a wide arc behind the island, and then cut the engine. They drifted two hundred feet or so from the rocky base of the high cliff wall. The waves were much more intense out here. The dory began dipping up and way down as soon as the engine stopped. Julian felt a wave of wooziness. He hadn't been on a boat in a long time.

Regina stood up on the bench. She scanned the side of the cliff. Her eyes darted back and forth and she bit her lip to contain her excitement. It had been too long. She cracked her knuckles. She spotted seven different possible routes. She reached down into the bottom of the boat to grab her notebook from her backpack. She flipped it open to the page on which Charles had sketched a likeness of this very wall. She glanced up and down, comparing the features, until she was certain she had identified the particular protrusion Charles had circled. That narrowed her choice of routes to two. She pointed them out to Julian.

"Let's try the further one," he said. "I think I can maneuver around that big boulder to get you close enough. The waves shouldn't be as bad there. You'll have to be quick."

She nodded.

"Give me a minute to get ready."

Regina dumped the rest of the contents of her bag onto the bench. She removed her t-shirt to reveal her gray sports bra, a shade darker than her Marmot shorts. Camouflage would be her friend. She picked up her chalk bag and fastened the belt around her waist. She clipped her water bottle to a loop on her shorts with a carabiner and slipped a headlamp all the way over her head, around her neck. She had already blackened the bright blue patches of her Scarpa shoes with a marker. As soon as she tightened her laces, she nodded over her shoulder to Julian.

"Do you have the sand?" he asked.

She patted her chalk bag.

"In here," she said. "In the other compartment. With my phone."

He said, "I'll get you as close as I can. Jump when you think you've got it. We can make a couple passes if we need to. I'll yell if I have to get us out of there. I'll wait here till you make it up."

"No," she said. "You'll be spotted before I am."

“If you fall...” he protested.

“I won’t. And even if I did, you couldn’t do anything. You won’t be able to get to me with the boat. I won’t fall.”

Julian nodded, admiring her confidence. He swallowed hard to force a potential puke back down his esophagus and re-started the engine. He scanned the top of the cliff for any potential onlookers. He saw nothing but the upper half of the mansion. The party tents were too far north and set back from the edge to see, and thus too far to see or hear them.

He steered the boat into a tight circle and approached the rocks slowly. He cut the engine again. Regina climbed back onto the bench, set one foot on the rim of the boat, and gripped it with her right hand to steady herself.

A wave surged beneath them, pushing them ten feet closer in two seconds.

“I’ve gotta reverse!” Julian shouted. “We’ll try again.”

“No, I got it,” Regina said.

She tensed her leg muscles, let go of the rim, and propelled herself out of the boat. She smacked into the bumpy, convex side of a rock. She dug her finger into its surface and hauled herself up. Behind her, the engine started. Julian flashed her the “okay” sign and she returned it.

“Good luck!” he called out over the din of the engine and the crashing waves.

He switched from Reverse, and headed back toward the mainland.

Alone at last. She preferred it this way. This was the thrill. No safety net, no rope, no rescuer. She would live or die by her own movements, her own choices. This is what she lived for.

She hopped across the rocks, trying her best to avoid the spray from the waves. Twenty feet from the base of the wall, she paused to re-assess her route. She studied each handhold, each crack, each bulge. Her hands jerked about in front of her, like she was casting a spell, practicing her planned movements. Once satisfied, she navigated the last span to the base. She dipped her hands into her chalk bag, smacked them together, and began her climb.

Forty feet up, she caught a glimpse of the hole in the wall that had been hidden from the view from the sea by the long, narrow protrusion circled on Charles’s drawing. A momentary swell of frenzied elation flowed through her.

In that moment she believed the words she’d spoken to her dad’s answering machine the day before. This was her purpose. This climb. This is why she was here. All her meanders throughout the past decade had not been feckless after all. She had learned to love to climb, and she had come here. And soon she would see what was hiding behind that chunk of rock.

The last two-thirds of the climb was easier than the first part. The rock higher up was dry, safe from the waves. A perfect, on-sight climb was spoiled only in the final stretch. She began to pull herself up onto a good, deep ledge when a flurry of feathers flew at her. She had disturbed a cormorant nest and the protective mother flew at her with great fury. Luckily, her feet were still secure, and she was able to swing over to an adjacent hold. The bird circled around her and squawked angrily, but didn’t attack.

Eventually, as the distance between Regina and the nest increased, it returned home.

She estimated she was 140 feet up when she reached the bottom of the narrow slot in the wall. It was maybe eight feet high and less than three feet wide at its entrance. The bottom of it, unfortunately, formed a V-shape. Regina struggled to pull herself up into it. She tried twice, but she couldn't get enough leverage. On the third attempt, her left foot slipped loose and dangled precariously beneath her until she was able to find the hold again.

Unable to enter from the bottom, she looked for another way in. She climbed diagonally for several feet until she was flush with the opening. She found a crack running more or less parallel to the larger slot. There were no footholds beneath it for the final five feet, but she was confident enough she'd make it. She inched along horizontally. When the footholds ran out, she didn't pause to catch her breath or think about what she would find inside the cave. Adrenaline would carry her through. Her fingers dug into the stone and she passed hand over hand. They were fulfilling their perfect function for the first time in forever.

The crack terminated eighteen inches from the closest edge of the slot. She began swinging back and forth until she produced enough momentum to stretch her leg around to the inner wall of the slot. Hoping to God there was something to hold onto inside, she released her left hand and felt along the inner wall of the cave. She found a grip. She hauled herself inside.

She leaned against the opposite wall of the cave to catch her breath. She took a deep gulp from her water bottle. She slid down to a squatting position. Her knees almost touched the opposite wall. She cracked her fingers against the cave floor. The floor was remarkably flat. Completely smooth. Six inches from the edge, the smooth surface terminated into a perfect, obviously human-carved, ninety-degree angle. The natural rock face resumed two inches below the angle, dipping down into the V-curve she'd struggled with on her climb. If she'd reached a bit higher, she would have been able to haul herself up with it.

The floor was made of a different kind of stone than the cliff itself. It was dark blue with light gray veins streaking across it in nearly symmetrical patterns. She couldn't begin to identify it. Her rock climbing had come in handy, but her geology courses were still probably useless.

She pulled her headlamp up around her forehead and switched it on. She paused a moment before turning her head toward the cave's interior. She took a deep breath. Then she faced the darkness. Illuminated it. The passage widened steadily, and then curved sharply to the right. She could see about thirty feet before it angled away from her line of sight. The perfect floor contrasted with the walls.

Okay. This is it. It's here. The floor had been laid out, smoothed, polished, and carved. There was no denying that.

"Alright then," she said aloud. "Here we go."

She stood and walked into the shadows. When she turned the corner, her eyes grew wide and she barely suppressed a gag.

The passage had widened to fifteen feet or so. Thirty feet ahead of Regina, the hall terminated into a gigantic door made of the same material as the floor. A pair of corpses sat on decaying camping chairs on either side of the door.

The bodies were not mummies. They weren't ancient. Regina was no coroner, but she couldn't imagine they were more than a year dead. They didn't smell, but they looked horrific. Their eye sockets were

empty and most of their clothing had disappeared, along with the bulk of their skin. Patches of both remained here and there. Upon a second quick glance, she noticed movement in one of the bodies' sunken chest cavity. Maggots.

One of them appeared to be a woman. One M-16 rifle stood upright between the legs of the man, and another leaned against the side of the woman's chair.

Regina was as mystified as she was sickened. Why were these people here? Were they guards? Why did they die? Why were they still in their chairs? And what on Earth were they guarding?

Their names were Lucia Bolivar and Pedro Cauleres. They were the last of a very long line of loyal, honorable men and women who had sworn oaths to protect the entrance to this cave. When Alan Ambrose killed General Vendia and took over his house, Lucia and Pedro's replacements were unable to return. Instead of trying to escape, they remained faithful to the very end. They died of thirst.

I'm very sorry that they suffered. They were guarding me. I never knew they were there. I never knew how many men and women had come before them, for so long. I thought I was more alone than I was.

Regina took a deep breath. She'd come too far to stop now. Charles hadn't mentioned the bodies, but the door was here as he'd said it would be. As I had told him. And when she neared the door, she spotted the shallow indentation in its surface she had also been told would be there.

She pulled her chalk bag from her belt. She dug around inside until she found the even smaller plastic bag. She pried open its seal and dumped its contents into the little bowl in the door. The sand that Charles had collected from the museum in New York settled into place.

And then the surface of the door, along with the floor beneath Regina's feet, changed from blue to green. The hollow space in the door became less than solid. It wrapped around itself and then became absorbed back into the surface of the door.

There was a hiss and the sound of ancient gears grinding back to life for the first time in centuries. The door slid open horizontally. Regina took one more look at the bodies behind her and she stepped inside.

The road was in terrible condition. The bus rattled and shook ceaselessly, jostled by potholes, rocks, and stray branches. Occasionally, flimsy, rotting boards had been laid down to try to cover sections of the road entirely washed out by some past flood. Once, the driver narrowly avoided careening into a steep valley to avoid a three-foot boulder in the middle of the road. Another time they baked beneath the noon sun for ten minutes waiting for a huge, slow-moving herd of goats to cross. The bus continued to shake violently even when it paused, then and at the occasional rural way station, as if too far gone and injured to bother trying to recover.

The Colonel wasn't troubled. Despite the anxiousness brought on by his mission, he found the rough ride comforting. Thirty-five year old memories returned to him. He had never been to this part of Tropicalia, but much of it was familiar. The wet, fresh smell of the jungle wafted through the windows. He picked up snippets of conversations among the Tropicalians on the bus and began to recall the nuances of their bright, pleasant patois.

They passed from hilltop savannah to jungle and back to savannah again. Charles's wife Gabriela sat

beside him. Her belly was round and full. She said she was seven months along.

Suddenly, the driver screeched the bus to a halt in the middle of a sunny glade. He turned the engine off. The sun beat down on the tin roof of the bus. The Colonel wasn't alarmed. They must be close to Montezuma by now. They'd been on the bus for almost three hours since leaving the ferry in Oban. Whatever was causing the delay, he guessed he could get out and walk the rest of the way if need be. Except...

Gabriela couldn't. Since he had agreed to her accompanying him, he was responsible for her safety. He wouldn't be able to leave her behind. His eyes drifted to her pregnant belly. He pushed back other less distant and more personal memories. No, he certainly could not abandon the pregnant wife at his side who promised to help find his missing daughter.

Gabby had her head pressed to the window.

"There are military men and jeeps on the side of the road," she said.

The Colonel jerked to attention. He stood up to see out the windshield, five rows up. A pair of dark green Jeeps flanked the road, and an armored Humvee sat square in the middle. A soldier, dressed in a camo uniform and helmet, approached the bus. The driver pulled open the door.

"El camino está cerrado," the soldier said. "Usted tendrá que volver."

"¿Por qué, señor?" the driver asked.

These days, a military presence along a random road was not as common of an occurrence as in some other Central American countries.

"El camino está cerrado," the soldier repeated.

This time he pointed down the road the direction from which they'd come.

"What's happening?" Gabby asked.

"He says the road is closed. He won't say why," The Colonel said. He remained outwardly calm, but his heart pounded. This was not good. He began to piece together a back-up plan, but it was far from ideal. After the bus turned around, he could force the driver to pull over. He'd try to get Gabriela to go back to Oban, and he could circumvent the roadblock on foot. Convincing her to stay on the bus would be... difficult.

Another man climbed out of the passenger side of one of the jeeps. He was dressed differently than the other four camo-clad men on the side of the road. He wore a beige uniform. There were stars on his shoulders.

The Colonel recognized his face. The context came a few seconds later, followed by his name. He could hardly believe it, but even three and a half decades since he'd last seen him, he recognized Cesar Paramo.

Paramo had been the Colonel's main liaison with the military when he was stationed in Tropicalia City. And he had been his friend and poker buddy. The Colonel was sure. Almost sure. Sure enough.

The Colonel charged forward as the driver began to push the door shut.

“Cesar!” he shouted. “Cesar!”

The soldier by the door fumbled for his rifle. The Colonel wedged his body into the doorway and shouted Paramo’s name again.

General Paramo frowned and furrowed his brow. He stepped forward a couple steps to get a look at the crazy American in imminent danger of getting shot, or at least clubbed. Was the lunatic shouting his name? Then the gringo peeked his head around the door and recognition spread across Paramo’s face as well.

Private Pimentel had managed to un-shoulder his rifle. He pointed it at the Colonel.

“Baja el arma!” Paramo barked.

Pimentel obeyed. The Colonel squeezed out of the door and stepped out onto the dirt.

“Is that you, Cesar?” the Colonel asked, a little more tentatively.

“How are you, old friend?” Paramo said.

The formation of a smile upon Paramo’s face surprised even himself.

“Still younger than you,” the Colonel said.

They embraced.

“What are you doing here?” Paramo asked. “It’s dangerous here today.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’m afraid my daughter is mixed up in this. I’m looking for her. What’s going on here?”

Porter, Paramo thought. *Mierda*. He hadn’t met her yet, but Merard had given him her name.

“Is her name Regina?” he asked.

The Colonel’s eyes widened.

“Yes,” he said, suddenly breathless. “You know where she is? Is she okay?”

“Not precisely, but yes, she is okay. Come with me. I’ll take you to town soon.”

“I have someone with me,” the Colonel said.

He pointed to the bus. Gabriela stood next to the driver. Paramo nodded. The Colonel waved for Gabriela to join them. The driver opened the door, and she stepped out onto the road.

“You rascal,” Paramo said, smiling again at Gabriela’s youth, beauty, and belly. “What have you done?”

“It’s not like that. She’s looking for someone, too.”

Paramo squeezed the Colonel’s shoulder.

“Let’s go find your daughter,” he said.

Alan Ambrose vaulted up the side stairs at the sound of his name. The crowd, packed in close to the stage, erupted into cheers and applause. Alan waved to them as he strode across the platform. He shook his VP of Product Development's hand.

"Should be good to go," Tom Sykes whispered in his ear.

He passed the microphone to Alan and exited the stage.

"Hello everyone!" Alan shouted, putting on his best enthusiastic face. "It's good to see you all out of the office for once. Welcome to my newest home. Welcome to Tropicalia! How's it feel?"

More whoops and cheers. The Press Agents' cameras were trained on him.

"Good, good. I just wanted to say hi before we kick off the festivities. Thank you for coming. We've got some great music for you, and strong drinks. You'll see me again in a couple hours. I trust you all brought your phones with you, like we requested? Let's see 'em."

The InterWorld revelers dutifully reached into their pockets and purses and held up their phones.

"They must seem pretty useless now, huh? 'No service'. The worst words an InterWorlder can hear, right? Well, just wait. Have we got a surprise for you! While you all are partying and misbehaving, I'm gonna head down to town. We've got a little power station down there and I'm gonna flip a switch. The next time you see me, it will be up here."

He pointed to the large, blank video screen above and behind him.

"That's when the real fun begins. I'll be announcing—"

The sharp rumble of a distant bang cut him off. The crowd whipped their heads toward the mainland, where the sound seemed to emanate from. Three seconds later, another explosion sounded.

Alan forced a smile and spoke loudly into the mike.

"Well, that was a surprise," he said. "The fireworks weren't supposed to start till later. Someone must have gotten a little eager."

Sirens in Montezuma began to wail across the water. The crowd began to shuffle toward the east end of the island to see what was happening. Smoke billowed from the hills above Montezuma.

Alan laughed into the microphone.

"You all stay put here. I'll figure out what's going on. These Tropicalians, you can't trust them to do anything. It's nothing, I'm sure. Stay here. You'll see me on the screen soon. Enjoy the music. First up is Tyler Taylor and his ban—well, no, I think it's just Tyler Taylor. He used to do backup vocals and rhythm guitar in a band called The Amends. Now he's one of us. I'll see you soon. Wait till you see what we've got to show you."

He jammed the microphone in its stand and motioned furiously for Tyler to come up on stage. One of the musicians from the next band, a group popular in Tropicalia City, patted Tyler on the shoulder, urging him

forward. Tyler, his guitar strapped to his chest, complied.

Alan walked with deliberate calm to the side stairs. His head of security was waiting for him, and holding out a walkie-talkie.

Tyler checked the pickup on his acoustic guitar and plugged into the amp in the middle of the stage. Despite Alan's directive, the crowd was still edging toward the east end of the island to see what was going on. Nervous laughter punctuated the air between siren wails. No one was paying attention to him, thank God. He would have already checked out too, if he didn't want to get this one last song out. He was tiny. His voice was weak. No one cared. He wasn't part of the story anymore, and he was happy. Although he couldn't spot her, [he began to sing to Liz](#). He knew it was too late, but he wanted to get this out before she was a ghost like Regina.

More explosions rang out across the narrow sea. The towers fell.

Merard tore up the road. His Blazer almost spun out on the previous curve, but he needed to make up for lost time. He radioed for the status of the others. Everyone else seemed to be on schedule.

I'm such an idiot, he thought.

After the final "band" practice the other day, Merard had forgotten to swipe a guitar pedal. He had stuffed a Wah pedal, a tuning pedal, and some cables into a canvas backpack before helping Tyler and Craig pack the rest of the gear into the back of a pair of InterWorld-loaned Gators for transportation to the island. Then Julian showed up to take him to the EBMC camp and Merard forgot about the backpack. Charles was gonna be pissed.

After abandoning Tyler and forcing him to play the party alone, Merard did not want to ask him for a favor. And he couldn't bring himself to ask Liz to... No, that was out of the question. Even now. His only hope was that the backpack was still near where he left it, in the half-finished dormitory where Tyler rehearsed and where IW Security slept.

He approached the towers. A military jeep was pulled sideways across the road. A Tropicalian soldier stood in front of it, his rifle trained at Merard's Blazer. Merard slowed down, but didn't stop. He leaned out the window.

"Soy Sam Merard. Tengo que ir a los edificios de InterWorld. El general sabe," he called out, rapid-fire, followed by something that sounded like, "Data comin' pristine."

The soldier glanced over his shoulder. When he turned back, he lowered his weapon. He motioned for Merard to drive around the jeep.

Merard rolled up onto the grass. Half a dozen soldiers stood around the towers, packing explosives around the legs. One of them turned to watch him pass. Merard knew him. Carrasco. They exchanged nods. Merard pulled back onto the road and accelerated.

A welcome, pleasant adrenaline rush of certainty filled him for a moment. He knew without a trace of a doubt that he was doing what he was supposed to be doing (except for the misplaced pedal). He realized how lucky he was; how rare this feeling was. Few but the most ardently religious and most loyal soldiers

would ever know this sensation. He also recognized its impermanence, and the fact that it was hitting him while he moved as fast as he could was no coincidence.

Movement was the defining characteristic of most of his adult life. He had roamed for years, first chased out of his parents' house by his strange cancer, and then by other, darker, more powerful forces.

I barely registered his presence when he entered my building the night before it Disappeared, but I certainly took notice when he and Liz returned intact from a trip back in time and across the globe by retrofitting the technology I'd loaned them. He had survived a confrontation with an incomprehensible Horror, shrugged it off, and kept moving. Both of them had.

Then came the disaster in California, the unfortunate situation up in the Yukon, his Battle of Glory Saint America Montana and the trail of charred chain stores he left in his wake. He kept looking for the right war. [But I wasn't the only one who became curious about him.](#)

After his second, cockier, showdown in the Colorado mountains a year after his return from Dyatlov, I had little choice but to reach out to him. He forced me to expose myself for the first time since the Disappearance. I needed him to recognize the nature of the hidden reality against whose surface he pounded and scratched. I needed him to gauge the direction and likely destination of the momentum into which he and his people were being swept. I needed him to understand that his actions had accelerated an inevitability. I needed his help.

One of the shadows in my dark room had revealed himself to me, and I in turn showed him who I was. He would do.

By the time Merard approached InterWorld Row, his blissful rush had subsided. If the plan succeeded I would be set free, and I might have to leave him alone to find his own wars again. But I had my own certainty that the right wars would be all too easy to find soon enough.

Merard forced his mind back to the task at hand. He spotted another trio of soldiers pouring gasoline around the base of the main dormitory. The building he needed was at the far end of the clearing. Tin sheets had been nailed to the plywood skeleton to keep out the harshest elements. Construction on the second dorm had been paused six weeks ago in order to ensure the crucial buildings were ready in time for the party.

The jungle had already started to creep back up around it. Some of the security guys who camped out there regularly took machetes to the encroaching vines, but the jungle was insistent. Tree branches had extended out over the flimsy roof, as if trying to pull it into the forest.

Bury it forever, like it was never there.

Merard left the Blazer idling on the road and charged across the weeds to the building. The door was unlocked. He waded through the rows of cots, sleeping bags, and suitcases, searching for his pack. He didn't notice the man lying on one of the cots until he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and spoke.

“What are you doing here? Who are you?”

Merard spun around. The muscular, sandy-haired man was barefoot and in boxers, but he still wore his IW Security polo. A handgun sat atop his blanket, a few inches from him. He was already awake and alert. His right palm rested on his thigh, his fingers poised to grab for the gun if needed.

Merard didn't even have to lie.

He said, "I'm in one of the bands. We were rehearsing here this week. I left my guitar pedal here. Have you seen a green backpack?"

The guard relaxed. He brought his hands together and cracked his joints. He stood up.

"Actually yeah," he said. "One of the other guys found it last night. He took it with him to the island when he clocked in this morning. Figured someone would need it."

"Well, shit," Merard said.

Shit.

"His name's Shane. Short guy. Shaved head. Wedding ring. You'll see him. Sorry you came back all this way."

"Me too," Merard said. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you working the party?"

"I took last night's shift."

"Ah."

Merard was about to figure out how to turn around and leave without showing the police baton stuffed in the back of his waistband and the stolen handcuffs dangling from a belt loop when that action was suddenly made moot. The thin walls rattled violently half a second before the roar of an explosion reached their ears.

The guard cocked his head, cast judgment upon Merard's lack of surprise at the sound of the explosion, and reached for his gun. Merard leaped over the cot in front of him and sprinted the six feet to the guard. He whipped the baton out of his pants and connected it with the guard's temple. The guard crumpled to the floor.

Two more explosions sounded in the distance.

Merard knelt down and felt for a pulse. Alive. He sighed in relief. His record remained clean. He still hadn't murdered anyone. Humans, anyway.

He clicked the cuffs around the unconscious guard's wrists. Then he dragged him by his ankles to the door. He managed to hoist him up over his shoulder, and carry him to the Blazer. He shoved him into the back.

Before he climbed into the driver's seat, he gazed in the direction of the explosions. One of the towers was gone, replaced with a thin plume of smoke.

Fifty yards away from the building he'd left, Merard grinded to a stop. The proximity of the trees and the lack of rain over the past several days gave him pause. Fire would be imprudent. If the soldiers doused this building in gasoline, the whole jungle might go up in flames. They might realize that themselves once they made their way here, but he didn't want to risk it. He could take care of the problem himself. He wouldn't need this Blazer after today anyway.

He turned the truck around. He revved the engine only once—nothing too showy—shifted gears, turned up the Rage on his stereo, and floored it.

“Your anger is a gift,” he reminded himself in a hoarse whisper.

He struck the approximate center of the south wall at 30 miles per hour. The tin split, the thin boards cracked and broke apart, and he was inside again. His tires crushed cots and suitcases. He allowed himself to smile. He kept his foot on the floor until he crashed through the opposite side. He slammed on the brakes and spun the wheel to avoid a big, gnarly, ficus tree. He was partially successful. As he swung around, the bumper clipped the trunk and his head bounced off the window frame.

He shook it off, and reversed the jeep back onto the road. He angled it so he faced the wider front side of the building. He took this approach a little slower, because he wasn't sure if the wooden ramp on this side would hold the weight of the jeep. It did, and he pushed into the wall. The wood groaned and protested, but finally snapped and gave way. He smashed more cots and crushed a pair of laptops. He edged into the opposite wall, and the jeep punched through. He reversed immediately and got momentarily stuck on, of all things, a pile of sleeping bags. One of them got twisted up in the wheel well. He smelled burning.

He climbed out and inspected the damage. He tugged at the sleeping bag until it tore free from his wheel. The guard began moaning. Merard climbed back in the Blazer, and turned up the volume on the stereo. He allowed himself to admire his handiwork so far—the devastated interior and the gaping hole in each of the four walls. He looked intently through the rear view mirror and lined up to the southeast corner. This would be the finishing move. If he hit it just right, the whole side of the roof would cave in.

And then he did it. He punched right through. Easy as pie. The roof folded in on itself, and the Blazer landed back on the weeds near the road. He still didn't have the fucking guitar pedal.

He would see Liz again soon. Despite his best efforts, he'd dragged her into something terrible and violent again. Or... as he headed back down to town, he considered that the reverse might be true. I was proud of him. Though he didn't have to be so heartless to Tyler. Did I write that last part, or did Tyler the Editor add it in? You might never know for sure, but you can guess.

Alan paced back and forth across the foyer of General Vendia's house. Then he stopped.

“Fuck this,” he muttered.

Then louder, “Let's go.”

The two security men left to guard him jumped to attention. He didn't know their names. Why should he? His idiot chief of security had told him to stay put in the house until they figured out what was happening in town.

The fat one protested, “Chief Roberts said to wait—”

“I said ‘fuck this.’ I'm not waiting anymore. Come on.”

How does a fat man get this job?

Alan made a mental reminder to look into this asshole after he dealt with the more pressing situation.

They dutifully followed him out the door. The stage was empty. More than half the people were gone, despite Alan's directive. Apparently no one listened when told to stay put. Thick smoke obscured the hills above town across the water.

The security men surged ahead of him when they got to the gondola hut. They ordered the line of people waiting for a ride back to the mainland to step aside.

"Everyone out," both guards barked, once inside.

They pushed the confused, scared, half-drunk InterWorlders out of the building. The taller, slim guard locked the door. They waited for the gondola to return.

"Have you heard anything?" Alan asked.

Both guards shook their heads.

"Give me your radio," Alan said to the fat one.

The fat man obliged. Alan struggled for a moment to figure out how to turn it on. The fat man reached out to help, but Alan yanked it away. He'd handle things himself from now on. No more delegation.

He pressed the button on the side of the walkie-talkie.

"This is Ambrose," he said. "What's going on down there?"

Alan began pacing a tighter path this time. The radio finally crackled to life as the gondola returned. The doors opened, and the guards stepped in first.

Roberts' staticky voice said, "We saw what looked like a military jeep in town. The disturbances are up above town. We're heading up there now. It doesn't look good. At least one of the data towers is... gone."

Alan's face flared red.

"Gone?" he screamed. "Someone blew it up?"

He realized he was screaming into the radio without having pressed the button. He pressed it and said, "Hurry the fuck up. Get up there. I'm coming to you."

"Sir, I highly advise—"

Alan switched off the radio and stepped into the car. The doors clicked shut behind him. The gondola began its journey down.

The guards were not inside the gondola. A single man sat on one of the benches.

Charles Artbuthnot Reilly.

He held a straight razor in his left hand.

“You...” Alan snarled.

“I knew you’d have to come,” Charles said.

“I should have known. What the fuck do you think you’re up—”

Charles cut him off.

“The gondola takes four minutes and twenty-two seconds to get to the bottom,” he said calmly.

Alan attacked.