

VALOR TALE DISENTHRALL

VOLUME I

DAVID EARL WILLIAMS III

Copyright © 2007, 2020.

This book, in its entirety, is under copyright held by the author, David Earl Williams III. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without permission from the author, except for fair use and book reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 9781699493274

Illustrations by, Marcell James, Michel Hillebrand, Ramon Manuel Ochoa Lopez, Chaya Yusuf, Azkaryu D. & Michael Nguyen

Final & Revised Edition, September 2026.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue	5 - 6
Main Cast of Characters	7 - 15
Flag of Mesovilla & Country Profile	16
Map of Mesovilla: Northern Region	17
Chapter 1: The Cry for Freedom	18
Chapter 2: “Shining Lighthouse”	40
Chapter 3: Nocturnal Caper	62
Chapter 4: A Speedy Trial	73
Chapter 5: Up in Flames	89
Chapter 6: Down Memory Lane	107
Chapter 7: Quiet Before the Tempest	131
Chapter 8: Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire	141
Chapter 9: The Next Big Score	161
Chapter 10: A Minted Betrayal	169
Chapter 11: An Explosive Spectacle	182
Chapter 12: Pick Yourself Up and Try Again	194

Chapter 13: A Forbidden Love211

Chapter 14: For the Greater Good224

Chapter 15: Party Crashers.....242

Chapter 16: A Reckoning Shadow253

PROLOGUE

In its infancy, the equatorial archipelagic country of Mesovilla enjoyed unity, peace, and order. Under the guidance of a representative democratic government, the natives' lives were simple. As the years passed, the nation's politicians grew complacent, becoming more concerned with the wealth they amassed while ignoring the social and economic turmoil brewing beneath the surface. Before long, a series of violent social uprisings erupted, followed by the deterioration of law and order. Thus began the two-year period known as the Great Liberation.

In its aftermath, the country of Mesovilla would eventually regain order, but at the cost of 150,000 lives. Under the guise of security and stability, a police state was established. This new form of government proved effective for a time through fear and the subjugation of the masses. Many years later, the country would once again face instability, this time on the brink of civil war.

The province of New Havenport had seceded from the Helix Capital following years of escalating political tensions. Along with seizing a top-secret government research facility and retaining control of the biological weapon being developed, this marked the beginning of the *Great Civil War*. Mesovilla was thrown into chaos as citizens, soldiers, and officials alike were forced to choose a side. As the *Great Civil War* raged for eight years, the provincial government eventually threatened to unleash the biological weapon against the capital to secure its complete independence and military supremacy. The conflict finally came to an end after the Helix Capital secured a series of decisive victories against New Havenport before launching a single nuclear strike on the province.

The Helix Capital maintained its dominance and passed increasingly stricter laws, snuffing out whatever freedoms remained. As the years passed, government corruption continued to fester. Among the people, only a few dared to oppose the tyrannical regime. These freedom fighters became the voice of the innocent and the defenders of civil liberties. They are the *Aurora Blade*.

Once again, the country of Mesovilla is plunged into turmoil. This time, the corruption runs deeper than anyone could have imagined. Many challenges lie ahead as the events unfold before our protagonists. What fate awaits them?

MAIN CAST OF CHARACTERS



Dew Wilder

“Forsaken Warrior & Chivalrous

Freedom Fighter”

Age: 26

Height: 5ft, 9 ½ in

Weight: 159 lbs

Weapon: Bo Staff

Birthdate: January 13th

Birthplace: Twin Pines

Occupation: Co-Leader of Aurora Blade

Blood Type: O+

He is the main protagonist of the story, a former member of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE during the *Great Civil War*, and co-leader of the Robin Hood-like thieves called – *The Aurora Blade*. Dew and the *Aurora Blade* contend against the oppressive Helix Capital to put an end to their rule. Growing up, Dew lived with his grandfather after his parents tragically passed away in a car accident. He deeply admired his grandfather, a decorated veteran of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, and aspired to follow in his footsteps. Rena, Dew's Bōjutsu Sifu (teacher), has been the secret object of his affection since his teenage years. Alongside his childhood friends, the Arlington sisters, Hoplyn and Emily, Dew often skipped school for fishing trips and other adventures. Following his grandfather's death, Dew's determination to uphold his family's honor was further fueled. Within the party, Dew is recognized for his selflessness, consistently assessing situations before taking action.



Lorenzo Arana

“Torrential Rebel & Collector of rare stamps”

Age: 34

Height: 6ft, 0 in

Weight: 174 lbs

Weapon: Brass Knuckles

Birthdate: May 5th

Birthplace: Helix

Occupation: Co-Founder and Co-Leader
of the Aurora Blade

Blood Type: A-

Born into poverty and orphaned during the tumultuous era of the *Great Liberation*, he and his brother Estiven found themselves thrust into the harsh realities of survival. Their formative years were marked by hardship, leading them down a path of desperation where they resorted to petty crimes such as mugging and pickpocketing. Tragedy struck one fateful night during a botched mugging, resulting in Estiven's death at the hands of a SWAT TROOPER. Enraged, he retaliated, only to be thrown off a bridge in the aftermath. Fate intervened when his unconscious body was discovered by a man named Aquagonla, who would become his mentor, guardian, and a key figure in founding the *Aurora Blade* gang. Although harboring a deep-seated animosity towards his brother's killer, Aquagonla's disciplined tutelage tempered his thirst for vengeance. Even after Aquagonla's passing, Lorenzo remained committed to championing the oppressed and resisting the corruption entrenched within the government of the Helix Capital. Lorenzo silently suffers from depression after witnessing his brother's murder. To cope with this, he collects rare stamps as a hobby and cherishes the stamp album that he named “Mamie”. Among the members of the party, he is forthright and always ready for a good fight if it can't be avoided.



Rena Cullen

"Resplendent Sifu & Veiled Femme"

Age: 47

Height: 5ft, 7 in

Weight: 132 lbs

Weapon: Scythe

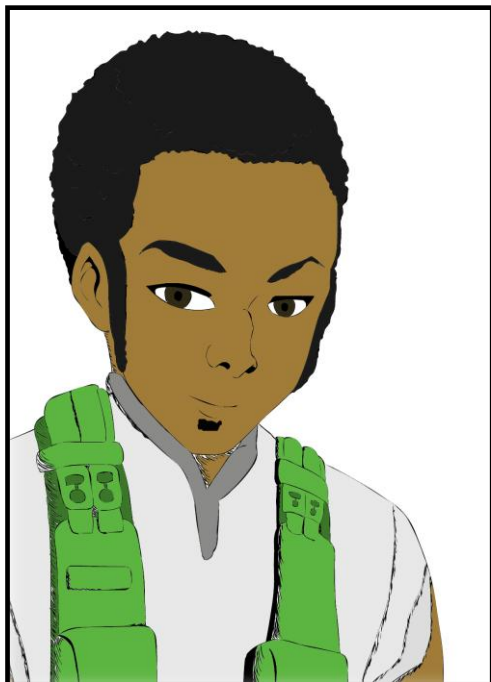
Birthdate: September 14th

Birthplace: Demmin

Occupation: Martial Arts Instructor

Blood Type: O-

Having left her failed marriage and children behind, Rena relocated to Twin Pines at the age of 29 to start anew. She harbored regret over relinquishing custody of her children to her workaholic ex-husband. However, three years later, she befriended Dew and his grandfather, eventually offering to teach Dew Bōjutsu free of charge. In times when Dew's grandfather was away on business, Rena would step in as Dew's caretaker. Even though having other students, Rena devoted herself to Dew's training, often instructing him outside of regular hours. She marveled at his rapid progress, reminiscent of her own learning experience under her adopted father's guidance. Dew affectionately calls her Sifu, indicating her role as his teacher. Rena possesses extensive knowledge of martial arts weaponry and science, and unlike her younger companions in the party, she is quick to catch on to things. Ironically, she remains unaware of Dew's secret crush on her.



Cooper Tyler

***“Valiant Brother in Arms &
Fighting Custodian Engineer”***

Age: 25

Height: 5ft, 8 in

Weight: 166 lbs

Weapon: Mop/Broom

Birthdate: November 20rd

Birthplace: Demmin

Occupation: Custodian Engineer

Blood Type: O+

Hailing from a family with a strong military background, Cooper always aspired to join the esteemed SWAT TROOPER ELITE. However, witnessing his father's struggles with depression and alcoholism post-retirement from the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, which took a toll on the family both emotionally and financially, made him realize the harsh realities of the path he idolized. Before his father's passing from severe liver damage caused by excessive drinking, he made Cooper promise to become a better man than he was and to care for his mother. Taking this pledge seriously, Cooper juggled multiple part-time jobs with his studies to provide for both him and his mother, even though the family continued to receive a modest military pension. Finally fulfilling his dream of joining the SWAT TROOPER ELITE as an adult, Cooper's joy was short-lived when he received news of his mother's death in an attack on their home province shortly after he visited her while on leave. Assigned to a unit led by General Landmore, he struck up a friendship with Dew, sharing mutual disdain for their duties. Injured during a covert mission at a New Havenport lab facility, Cooper's military career was cut short, leading to an eventual honorable discharge. In the aftermath of the Mesovillain Civil War, he found work as a janitor in the Helix Capital, using his job as a distraction from his grief and disillusionment. Though his hardships, Cooper remains observant, steadfast, and deeply values the well-being of others, particularly Elvir.



Krista Naples

"Pleasant Wayfinder & Straight Arrow"

Age: 23

Height: 5ft, 5 in

Weight: 128 lbs

Weapon: Boomerang

Birthdate: August 3rd

Birthplace: Llivisaca

Occupation: Tour Guide

Blood Type: AB-

Before Krista was born in the province of Llivisaca, her father passed away from a drug overdose, leaving her to be raised by her abusive, neglectful, and drug-addicted mother. However, she found comfort and love in her brother, Ketcy. Despite the difficult circumstances, the siblings shared a deep bond and seemed inseparable. Krista would occasionally flee from home to escape the harsh environment, yet she always returned to be with Ketcy. After years of battling substance abuse, Krista's mother passed away in her sleep due to respiratory failure. With no other relatives to rely on, Ketcy took on any job he could find to support himself and Krista. Determined to provide a better life for his sister, Ketcy joined the local gang, *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. Their life improved, thanks to the rewards from Ketcy's involvement in the gang. Krista later joined the gang and as they rose in rank, eventually assuming leadership, the siblings played a pivotal role in solidifying the gang's dominance in the province. However, as time passed, Krista began to realize the corrupting influence of the gang on her brother. She understood that benefiting from others' suffering was no longer acceptable. Eventually, she made the difficult decision to leave her brother and the gang behind, seeking a fresh start. Her brother would denounce her for doing this. Using her knowledge of Llivisaca's urban and rural areas, she became a tour guide. She is the most optimistic and cheerful member of the party, and proudly Lesbian.



Vilmer Prasad

***“Famed Mountaineer,
Guano Harvester, & Recluse”***

Age: 53

Height: 6 ft, 2 in

Weight: 205 lbs

Weapon: Grappling Hook

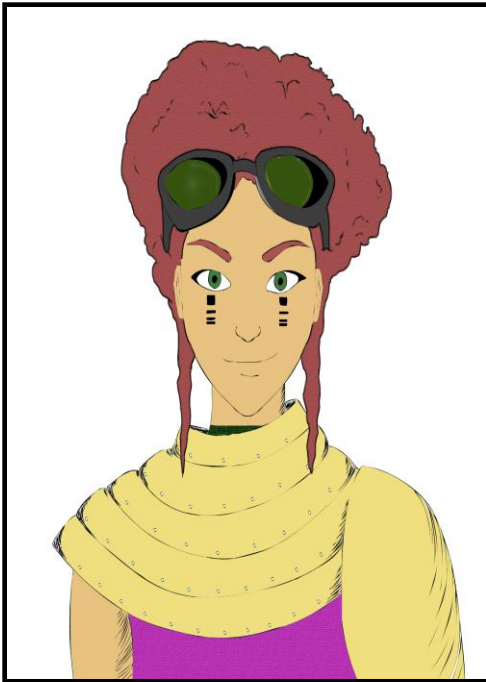
Birthdate: July 9th

Birthplace: New Havenport

Occupation: Mountaineer

Blood Type: B+

He is famously known throughout the country of Mesovilla as the first person in history to conquer Mount Illini, standing at 29,030 feet. However, his remarkable achievement came at a great cost. At the beginning of his ascent, his friend, lover, and fellow mountaineer, Aldous, joined him. Sadly, tragedy struck when they reached the mountain's midpoint, as harsh weather conditions caused Aldous to fall to his death. Even while continuing his climb in memory of his lover, Vilmer couldn't shake the feeling that he had failed to save Aldous and deprived him of his chance at glory. Following the incident, Vilmer abandoned mountain climbing and withdrew from society, seeking to atone for Aldous's death. Eventually, making his home in a small village, a young boy named Konrad, who had heard of Vilmer's exploits and looked up to him as an uncle, would occasionally visit him. As the eldest member of the party, Vilmer possesses exceptional physical strength, flexibility, and expertise in mountain climbing and medicine.



Elvir Harjo

"Sassy Thief & Last of the Hozho"

Age: 21

Height: 5ft, 3 in

Weight: 117 lbs

Weapon: Dual Daggers

Birthdate: March 16th

Birthplace: Anahit

Occupation: Member of Mantid

Oscuro Sociedad - Thief

Blood Type: O-

Coming from an affluent family in the Anahit Province, Elvir experienced a childhood of privilege. Her father held prominent positions in the business world and was formerly one of eighteen members of the defunct Plenum. Although the opulent upbringing, Elvir craved her father's affection above material wealth. Nevertheless, he was too preoccupied with work, deepening the bond between Elvir and her mother. As years passed, Elvir's mother received a diagnosis of ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), which rendered her bedridden. Elvir dedicated herself to attending to her mother's every need, spending as much time with her as possible. Regardless of her father's efforts to provide the best medical care while remaining focused on work, Elvir's mother's condition deteriorated, ultimately leading to her tragic suicide, leaving Elvir devastated and resentful towards her father. After cutting ties with her father, Elvir sought refuge in a local orphanage, where she found the sense of family she had always longed for among the caretakers and fellow children. As she came of age, she ventured into the world, eventually settling in the province of Llivisaca and joining the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. Once she became increasingly involved in the criminal activities of the gang, she found herself growing indifferent to others and

succumbing to greed, mirroring her father's business ambitions. While her care-free demeanor and tendency to joke may often irritate Dew, she consistently proves dependable in aiding the party when needed. Over time, she forms a close bond with Cooper as the story progresses.



Thornton Videl

***“Serrated Reckoner & Servant of the Sōl
Congruum”***

Age: 42

Height: 6ft, 1 in

Weight: 196 lbs

Weapon: Bastard Sword

Birthdate: October 7th

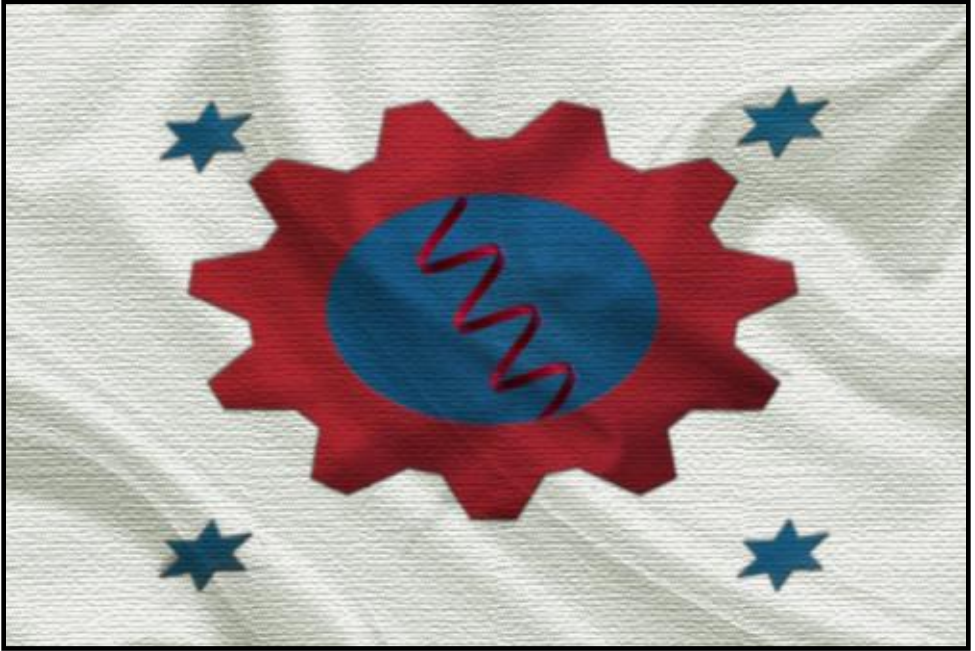
Birthplace: Helix

Occupation: Ex-SWAT TROOPER ELITE
(Sergeant)

Blood Type: A+

He formerly served as a high-ranking member in the same unit as Dew and Cooper during the *Great Civil War*. Renowned for his boldness, pugnacious nature, and loner demeanor, he possessed remarkable ambidextrous skills on the battlefield, excelling in firearms and stealth. Speculation arose among the rank and file regarding a romantic involvement with a woman from the opposing province of New Havenport during the war. After the war ended, his whereabouts were unknown.

FLAG OF MESOVILLA



Total Population: 13,420,069

Total sq miles: 54,777

Established: March 27, 1888

Capital: Helix Province

Type of Economy: Mixed Economic System

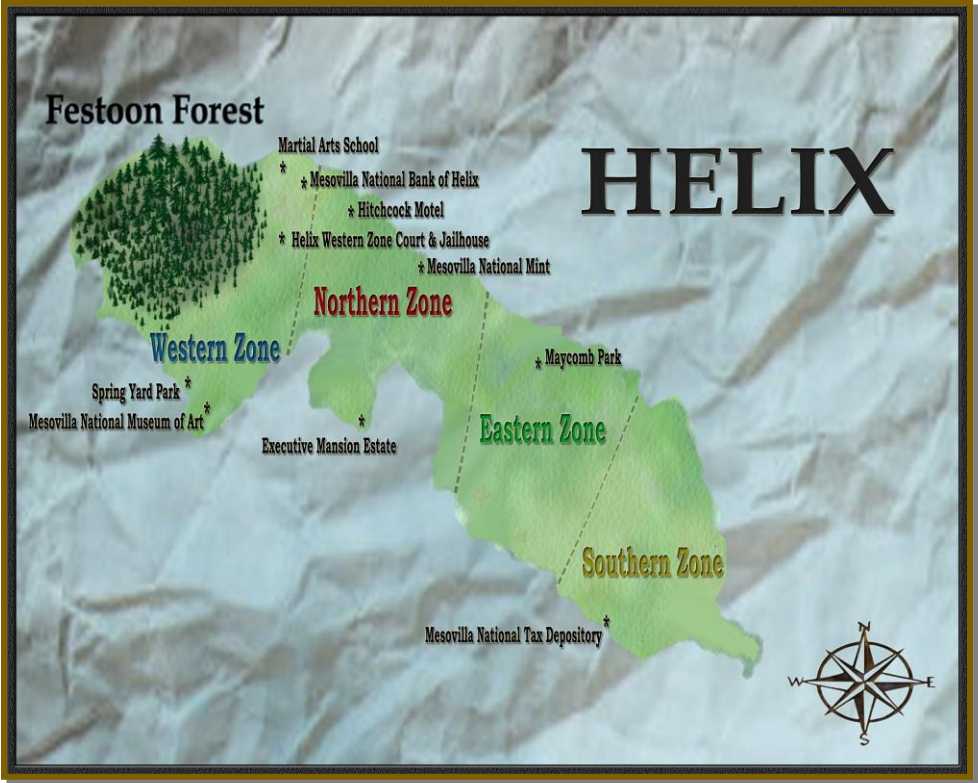
Motto: "Forever Blessed We Are!"

Anthem: "Alms to the Heirs"

Ethnic Groups: 52.2% Caucasian, Latino 18.3%, Black 17.8%, Asian 6.1%, Indigenous 4.2% & Other/multiracial 1.4%

Religion: Choshism 74.9%, Unaffiliated 25% & Other 0.1%

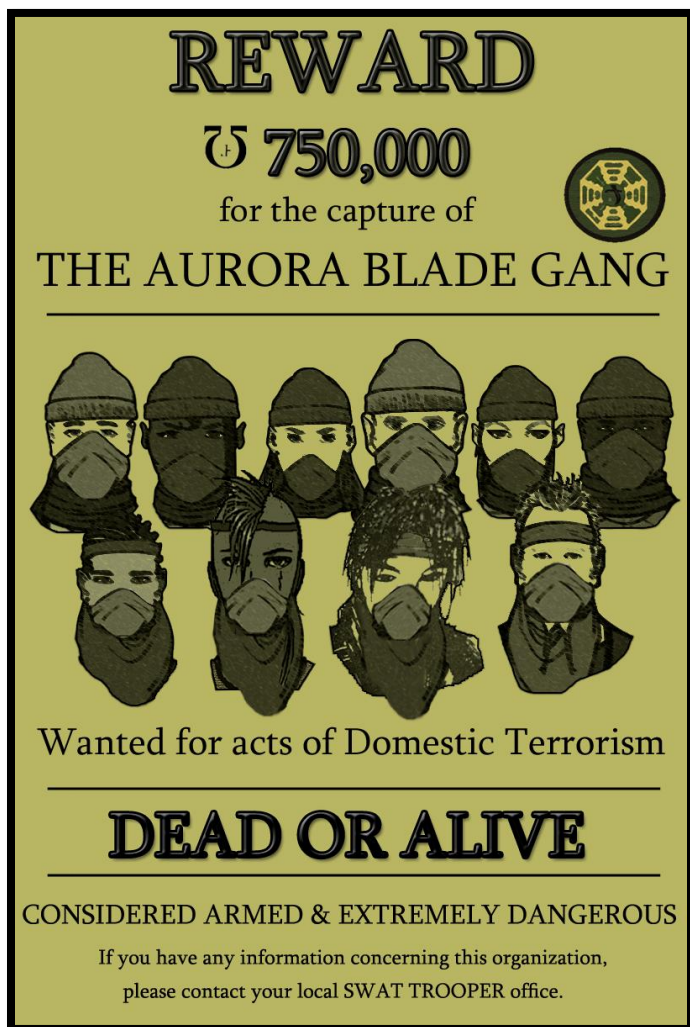
MAP OF MESOVILLA: NORTHERN REGION



CHAPTER 1 – THE CRY FOR FREEDOM

Narrator: At first sight, there is nothing but a dark empty void. Then, off in the distance, a twinkle from a faint green light can be seen. The light begins to emanate from the distorted source slowly, then rapidly pans inward as a phantasmagoria of muffled voices, laughter, crying, and screaming can be heard. As the viewer tries to focus on the source, for a moment, the image of a lighthouse can be seen, and then in its place, a female silhouette appears before disappearing entirely. As the green light progresses, it blinds the viewer as the illumination entirely consumes the void. Everything then fades to white. Moments later, we find our protagonist, Dew Wilder—a lean, athletic man with medium-length black hair, a short boxed goatee, and a headband—being tapped on his shoulder by one of his comrades, snapping him out of his daydream state. Dew is dressed in a white short-sleeve shirt beneath a sleeveless black vest, olive green pants, and rugged combat boots. He at first looks flummoxed and then hesitates for a few seconds until he regains his composure. He looks over his shoulder to the person behind him and nods his head in acknowledgment. He then continues to lead his group forward as they trek through a dimly lit corridor within a large complex. In the background, several unconscious guards are laid out on the ground, and a damaged security camera dangles down from the ceiling. Our story begins in a parallel universe to our own, on a different Earth. The year is 2007, on a late-spring night in the Southern Zone of the Helix Province in the country of Mesovilla. Dew and the gang—a crew of Robin Hood-style thieves known as the *Aurora Blade*—creep along a shadowed catwalk deep within the Mesovilla National Tax Depository, their eyes fixed on the scene below. The warehouse stretches out beneath them, its concrete floor awash in harsh industrial light that casts long shadows between towering rows of metal containers. Here, the nation’s collected tax Werte is under audit. Among the gang are Lorenzo—a broad-shouldered, muscular man with a long purple mohawk, shaved sides, and a

jagged vertical light tattoo beneath his left eye—along with Paca, Lynch, and three other masked members who move with silent precision. They huddle behind a stack of crates lining the catwalk railing. Lorenzo carefully peeks out from behind them, scanning the area below.



Lorenzo: ...Damn. Look at all that Werte they hauled in. Greedy bastards look pleased with themselves.

Paca: How much you think they stole from the people this tax season?

Dew: (*watching with narrowed eyes*) ...More than they need. (*then grabs and begins scanning with binoculars*) Hmm. It looks like they're loading the rest into those containers near the far bay doors.

Narrator: As the gang observes, Sherwin Cromwell—Mesovilla's Secretary-Treasurer and head of Environmental Preservation & Scientific Research—steps onto the warehouse floor. His dress shoes click against the polished concrete as he approaches the Auditor.



Sherwin: Auditor, are we nearly finished..? Premier Videl is expecting our final report. I don't intend to keep him waiting.

Auditor: Just a few more Werte to count, sir. We're almost there.

Sherwin: (*turning to a nearby SWAT TROOPER*) ...You there. Get the rest of this Werte loaded into the containers. I want them prepped for immediate shipment as the audit wraps up.

SWAT TROOPER: Yes, sir. Right away. (*shouts to the others*) You heard the man—double time!

SWAT TROOPER 1: Roger that.

Narrator: The SWAT TROOPERS quicken their pace, heaving metal containers onto automated lift trucks. Overhead on the catwalk, Dew lowers the binoculars and tucks them away. With a single nod to the others, the gang slips into motion, stealthy descending to the lower level. They take position behind a cluster of crates, crouched and waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Lorenzo: We ready to do this..?

Dew: (*with a grim smile*) Always ready. Move out...

Narrator: With swift precision, Dew and the gang launch their assault on the unsuspecting SWAT TROOPERS. The element of surprise is theirs—they strike hard and fast, taking the SWAT TROOPERS down before an alarm can be raised. A startled auditor bolts for the exit. Sherwin, caught off guard and alone, suddenly finds himself face-to-face with the *Aurora Blade*.

Lorenzo: Good evening, Secretary-Treasurer.

Sherwin: ...Who are you all?!

Dew: Allow me to introduce myself and my associates. We're the defenders of the innocent and keepers of the peace. We take back from the rich and corrupt and return what rightfully belongs to the poor and wholesome. We're the shepherd dogs to the flock that keeps you wolves at bay. We are the *Aurora Blade*...

Sherwin: So... you're the infamous *Aurora Blade* gang that I've heard so much about. Oh my. You're all just oozing with nobility and altruism. Ha-ha-ha... So, do you have a name, young man?

Dew: You want to know my name? Ghosts don't have names... But, yeah— the name is Dew. Dew Wilder. Don't ever forget it...

Narrator: Upon hearing the mention of his surname, Sherwin froze— just briefly, but noticeably. Something about

it unsettled him, as if a shadow from the past had stirred. He shook it off before responding.

Sherwin: Wilder? Hmm— Wilder, is it?! Ha-ha ...I'll be sure not to forget that.

Narrator: Suddenly, more SWAT TROOPERS arrive to confront Dew and the gang.

Sherwin: It looks like the cavalry has arrived. This is where I depart.

Dew: Going so soon..?

Sherwin: (*smirking*) Indeed I am. (*then faces the SWAT TROOPERS*) SWAT TROOPERS—kill them...

Narrator: Sherwin casts one last smug glance over his shoulder before striding toward the exit. As the steel doors hiss shut behind him, Dew and the gang clash with the SWAT TROOPERS swiftly overpowering and defeating them. After the battle, Dew walks over to one of the crates.

Lorenzo: That didn't go as planned.

Paca: ...How are we going to get all this money out of here?

Dew: We aren't—

Lynch: What do you mean..?

Dew: We're leaving it here. We don't have time; we've been discovered, and there are probably more SWAT TROOPERS on the way. We're going to blow this place up along with the money.

Lynch: What?! ...But, why..?

Dew: We have no other choice.

Lorenzo: Ugh. This sucks... But it has to be done.

Narrator: Dew then retrieves a few explosive devices from a knit bag strapped to his belt. He hands one to each of the six other *Aurora Blade* gang members. Together, they plant the charges on the crates. After setting the timed explosives, Dew and the gang swiftly exits the depository and head towards the harbor. Five minutes later, the charges go off, and the depository erupts in flames. From a nearby bridge, they watch the destruction unfold beneath a sky tinged red with firelight.

Lorenzo: There she blows...

Lynch: ...This seems like it was all a waste. No?

Dew: If people do not have justice, the government will not know peace. It was all for the common good...

Lynch: Common good?! But... don't you think what we did tonight may have financially burdened the innocent more?

Lorenzo: ...Lynch. Sometimes when making a statement, you have to go all out. I would have preferred to grab as much as we could, but that didn't happen. Thankfully there weren't any rare stamps lying around. Oh, how that would have broken my heart... I would have been super pissed, and gone on a hunger strike over such... At least now, the government can't get its filthy hands on the money. It's not like those taxes were going to be used to benefit the welfare of the people. That's one less source of income for the police state and a massive smack in their faces.

Paca: A stinging smack that'll last for a while for sure...

Lynch: Hmm... this just seems wrong for some reason.

Paca: Lynch, don't overthink it. We did good...

Lynch: Did we? ...I suppose so.

Dew: All right, guys, we're done here. Let's split.

Lorenzo: I'm with ya on that...

Narrator: As Dew and the gang run off, a helicopter appears over the burning depository. A vexed Sherwin looks out of the cockpit window at the inferno below. Moments later, an explosion erupts, and the flames intensify as approaching fire trucks race to the scene. Sherwin watches in horror, visibly unraveling as a nervous breakdown sets in. The pilot continues circling overhead— until Sherwin suddenly bursts into manic laughter. Hearing this, the pilot turns his head, visibly concerned by Sherwin's behavior.

Pilot: Sir, is everything okay..?

Sherwin: Yes... Yes, I'm— Ha-ha... I'm fine... Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...
(then whispering to himself) Dew... Wilder... Dew...
 Dewwwwwwww ...Willllldeerrrr... Ha-ha-ha... Heh...
(then eerily regains his composure and turns to the Pilot) Take us away...



Narrator:

The helicopter veers off into the night, away from the blazing ruins of the depository. One year later. The scene cuts to a pitch-black receiving and storage room in the basement of the Mesovilla National Museum of Art. The air hums with the sound of nearby machinery and the steady trickle of water through aging pipes. Suddenly, a ventilation cover from a suspended shaft pops loose and crashes to the floor, the sound echoing through the chamber. A rope slithers down from the darkness above. One by one, Dew, Lorenzo, Paca, Lynch, and two other members of the Aurora Blade gang rappel silently to the ground. Their boots land on the concrete with soft thuds as they quickly unclip and fan out. Dew and Lorenzo then exchange a glance before breaking the silence.

Dew:

...Here we are... (*looking around*) Another easy intrusion...

Paca:

You think this would get old after a while, no?

Lorenzo:

Not for me... (*excited*) YEAHHH!!!

Paca: Shhh!

Dew: Not so loud...

Lorenzo: Sorry, man. You know me; I'm always pumped up when it comes to these missions.

Lynch: *(whispering to himself)* At least somebody is...

Narrator: The lights automatically turn on in the room.

Paca: "Let there be light..."

Narrator: The two *Aurora Blade* gang members pull down on the rope from the air vent, causing it to drop to the floor. Lynch retrieves the rope and begins coiling it.

Dew: All right. Paca, you do the honors.

Paca: *(nods her head in acknowledgment)* ...Ladies first.

Narrator: Paca walks over to the door and cautiously opens it. She then takes a quick peek into the hallway to survey the area.

Lorenzo: Hey Dew.

Dew: ...Yes?

Lorenzo: Have you ever noticed how gigantic the ventilation ducts are?

Dew: Hmm... yeah, they are. You would think there would be dangerously sharp edges from sheet metal or a rotary fan to worry about.

Lorenzo: ...And, nobody heard us crawling through it. It must be totally soundproof.

Dew: Okay. What's your point?

Lorenzo: Nothing really... just the small details a person can notice.

Narrator: Moments later, Paca signals Dew and the gang to advance. Lynch places the coiled rope into a black duffel bag. Dew and the gang then exit the receiving and storage room, entering the hallway of the basement. Some time passes as Dew and the gang come to a stop near the entrance of the museum's double spiral stairwell.

Paca: *(looking around the corner, then turns to Dew)* ...It looks all-clear from here. Based on the schematics and intel we received, security on the upper levels will be a bit more challenging.

Lorenzo: Nothing ever comes easy. It sounds like my type of fun...

Dew: I second that... Let's keep going.

Narrator: Dew and the gang advance upward through the museum undetected, bypassing all security cameras and patrols. Finally, upon reaching the third floor of the museum, they come to a stop.

Dew: I had a thought just now.

Lorenzo: Was 'up..?

Dew: We'll be able to cover more ground if we split up.

Paca: Sure thing... But do you really want to go at this alone, Dew?

Dew: Why not? This will be no sweat for me. I'll take the sixth floor. You all can handle the rest. Remember, we're in and out of here. Don't get careless now.

Lorenzo: Don't worry; I've got this. I always do.

Paca: Hey guys. Before we proceed, don't forget to equip your *Elementome Bracelets* and *Elementomes*.

Dew: Right. Thanks for the reminder, Paca...

Lorenzo: Shit. I almost forgot myself. We'll definitely be needing those magical rocks...

Narrator: Then, each *Aurora Blade* gang member reaches into their side pockets, pulling out the *Elementome bracelets*. They take a moment to strap on their bracelets. Once equipped, they reach back into their side pockets, grabbing some magical gemstones called *Elementomes*. After inserting the *Elementomes* into the engraved slots on the bracelets, they emit a subtle and gentle radiance. Looking satisfied, Dew and the other *Aurora Blade* members are ready for the mission ahead.

Dew: I'm good to go.

Paca: Same here.

Lorenzo: Time to put these to good use... (*then turns to face the two accompanying Aurora Blade gang members*)
...You two, come with me.

AB Rebel: You got it, boss.

AB Rebel 1: I'm right with you...

Paca: Lynch and I will take care of the rest.

Dew: We'll meet up at the rendezvous point.

Lorenzo: Right. Spring Yard Park.

Lynch: (*walking off*) Whatever you say...

Lorenzo: What's up with him?

Paca: I don't know...

Lorenzo: Hmm... Your boy hasn't been himself lately.

Dew: Guys. Don't mind him right now... Let's focus on the mission. Gather what you all can, and we'll meet up later... See ya...

Narrator: Dew then runs off and ventures alone to the sixth floor. Along the way, he avoids detection by the SWAT TROOPERS patrolling the area and eventually reaches his destination—the special exhibition room. In the center of the room, he notices a display case containing a red gem. Thin red laser beams crisscross around it, faintly visible in the dim lighting. He pauses to reflect.

Dew: Oh-ho-ho... What do we have here? Clearly, something of great value. Hah... This will be too easy...

Narrator: Dew then uses his agility to maneuver through the laser beams, making his way to the display case. Once in front of it, he pulls out a small cutting tool and punctures a hole in the casing. With precise dexterity, he reaches for the red gem and lifts it from its place.

Dew: Like I said, too ea—

Narrator: Suddenly, an alarm blares. The entrance to the special exhibition room seals shut, locking Dew inside—much to his irritation.

Dew: Ugh. Just great...

Narrator: As the alarm continues to blare, a security bot suddenly drops from the ceiling, landing directly in Dew's path. In a flash, he stashes the red gem in his front pocket. The bot lunges—Dew pivots smoothly, sidestepping the strike, then rolls to his feet and whips out his bo staff.

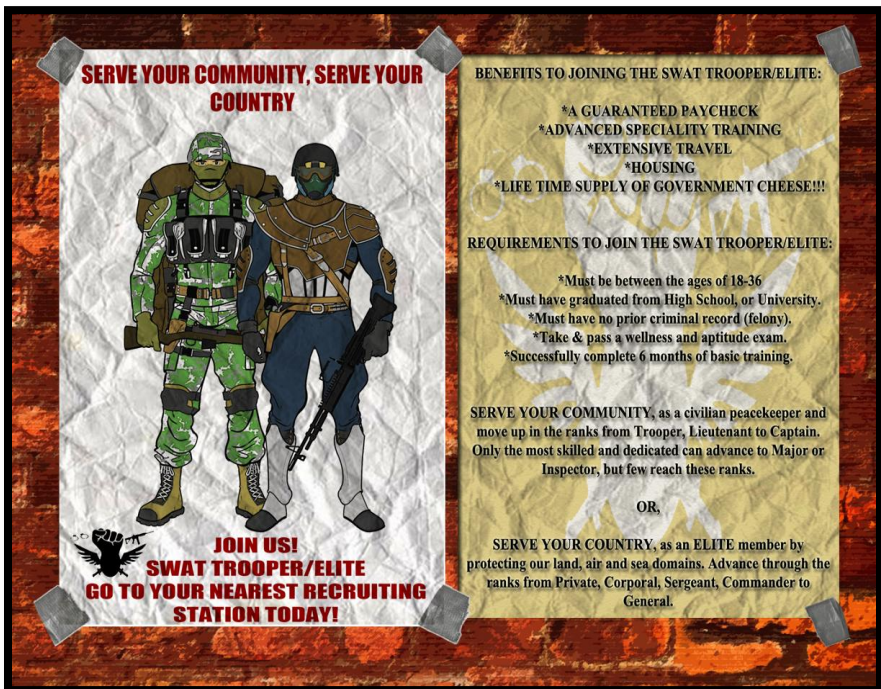
Dew: Heh... And here I was thinking this would be too easy. All right, rust bucket—let's do this...



Narrator: The security bot unleashes a harsh, metallic bellow before advancing toward Dew, who stands ready as the battle begins. Sparks erupt as steel clashes against alloy, each blow echoing through the chamber. Dew weaves and strikes, battering the bot's joints and plating, denting its armor with each precise hit. The bot staggers, its movements growing slower and more erratic. With a final, crushing strike, Dew disables the bot, sending it crashing to the floor in a sparking, twitching heap. He wastes no time. Scanning the room, he spots an open ventilation shaft in the far corner. The thunder of boots grows louder—SWAT TROOPERS are seconds away. Dew quickly rigs the walls with explosives, arms them, and dives into the shaft just as the SWAT TROOPERS begin breaking through the door. He crawls through the narrow ducts and emerges onto a high ledge overlooking the street. Behind him, the charges erupt in a fiery blast, engulfing the exhibition room and killing the entering SWAT TROOPERS. The shockwave propels Dew forward—he leaps, landing hard on the rooftop of a nearby building. Dazed but alive, he coughs

through the smoke, brushes off debris, and moves toward the edge. Sirens wail as fire trucks arrive below. Dew scales down the side of the building and slips into a nearby alley, vanishing into the shadows. A searchlight from a hovering helicopter scans the area, but Dew remains hidden. In the distance, bloodhounds bark as heavily armed SWAT TROOPERS sweep the surrounding blocks. He exhales quietly, then disappears into the night. Time passes. Eventually, Dew arrives at Spring Yard Park, undetected. He spots his comrades waiting near the public restroom area. With a silent nod, they file into the women's restroom. Dew follows, lingering for a moment to cast one last glance over his shoulder—then quietly shuts the door behind him.

Dew: Women's restroom... Yeah, this feels "appropriate."
 AB Rebel: Glad you made it, boss.
 Lorenzo: Took your sweet time getting here, huh?
 Dew: Had a few... minor complications back there.



Lorenzo: Yeah, I see that. Well—those SWAT pricks are crawling all over the place.

Paca: It looks like we'll have to bunker down here until the coast is clear.

Dew: Looks like it. So... what did you all get?

Paca: I got enough myself... It doesn't look like any of us are empty-handed.

Lorenzo: I got a lot of shit too. Oh, and I came across an old book of stamps. They look pretty rare, but they won't be worth much to the others... so I'll be adding that to my personal collection. I can't wait to see "Mamie"...

Lynch: You know, "Mamie" is not real, right? It...

Lorenzo: "She," you mean... "She."

Lynch: Yeah, "she" is just a stamp album...

Lorenzo: Nobody asked you... Mind your own damn business.

Dew: Hah! You and your stamps... So what about you, Lynch?

Lynch: A few trinkets, nothing more...

Dew: Hmm... Looks like we all did well tonight. I wouldn't expect anything less.

AB Rebel 1: *(walking over to the small restroom window and surveying the outside area)* Let's see... Umm... Guys... It looks like we're all clear.

Lorenzo: Good! I was getting tired of smelling ass and period blood.

Dew: Oh, geez.

Paca: Hey! This is a Woman's restroom, you know?!

Lorenzo: This wasn't my first choice for a meetup spot. Who the hell locks up the Men's restroom but will leave the Women's unlocked at night!?! No common sense... But you know... I didn't even notice the smell until you mentioned it. *(sniffing)* ...Kinda tangy. Hah...

Paca: Oh, gross, Lorenzo!

Lorenzo: Well, at least it doesn't smell fishy in here.

Paca: Ewww... Stop it.

Dew: Okay. Okay. Now be a bit chivalrous. There is a lady in our presence.

Paca: "My hero. I thank thee" ... *(then playfully does a curtsy)*

Dew: "No problem, 'my lady'" ... Ha-ha...

Lynch: *(whispering to himself)* *Lame as fuck...*

Dew: ...Another successful mission... All right, gang, let's head home.

Lorenzo: Say no more...

Narrator: Dew and the gang exit the Women's restroom, running down the bike pathway and disappearing into the night. Meanwhile, in the background, the Mesovilla National Museum of Art is still ablaze. Sometime later, the gang arrives at an inconspicuous, timeworn well near some bushes off to the side of the bike pathway. They come to a stop, and Lorenzo slightly pushes one of the stones on the well wall. He then tugs on the well's rope, causing a section of the well to pivot, revealing a secret passageway underneath. One by one, the gang descends into the secret passageway before the well resets itself, concealing the entryway. Dew and the gang traverse through the dimly lit, moss-covered, abandoned tunnel system, eventually emerging into the dense moonlit Festoon Forest. As they navigate through the forest, sounds of rustling leaves, branches snapping, and the enchanting ambiance from the nocturnal wildlife fill the air. In the distance, a fort with a looming watchtower, surrounded by a long wooden wall, comes into view. A watchtower guard, surveying the area, spots Dew and the gang approaching the compound and waits to warmly greet them once they're within range.

AB Watchtower Guard: *(shouting)* Hey..! *(then waves with his fingers outstretched, moving from side to side heartily)* ...Made it back in one piece, eh?

Narrator: Dew smiles and returns a friendly hand wave to the AB Watchtower Guard who then pushes a button on a panel nearby causing the massive wooden front gate to slowly creak open.



Lorenzo:

Ah. There's no place like home... (*then cracks a satisfied smile*)

Narrator:

With the front gate fully open, it reveals a central courtyard bustling with activity from its inhabitants. Additionally, a Storehouse, Infirmary, Canteen, an Armory (which also serves as the *Aurora Blade's* Command Center), several small housing units, and the watchtower off to the side come into view. As Dew and the gang enter the compound, three *Aurora Blade* gang members approach them.

AB Rebel 2:

Welcome back...

AB Rebel 3:

Thank Chosha, you all made it.

Dew:

And, hello to you, my friends.

Narrator:

Moments later, the massive wooden front gate closes behind them. The two *Aurora Blade* gang members who accompanied Dew on the mission walk ahead, entering the forest compound to be greeted by more of their fellow comrades.

AB Rebel 3:

Any injuries..?

Dew: Not a single one. Just a few bruises. But we're all still kicking... *(then he pats AB Rebel 3 on her shoulder)*

AB Rebel 4: I take it you all brought back many spoils?

Paca: A lot...

AB Rebel 4: Hearing that is like music to my ears every time.

Lorenzo: I'm sure Premier fuck-face blood pressure is a bit higher than usual after tonight. Ha-ha...

Dew: *(sarcastically)* "Poor him"... By the way, I'm sure this will sell well on the black market...

Narrator: Dew digs around in his front pocket and pulls out the red gem. He then tosses it to AB Rebel 4, who catches it.

AB Rebel 4: *(looking at the Red Gem in awe)* Holy smokes?! You weren't lying...

AB Rebel 2: We'll make a killing off of this for sure!

Lorenzo: You know it... All right. All right. I'm starving.

Paca: Me too...

AB Rebel 3: You're all in luck. Ha-ha... Dinner is just about to be ready.

Lynch: The only promising thing to look forward to tonight...

Narrator: Lynch then walks coldly toward the Canteen, leaving Dew and the others confused by his attitude.

Dew: Huh?

Paca: Lynch..!

AB Rebel 2: What's all that about..?

Lorenzo: Somebody is still in a foul mood...

Paca: *(shaking her head in disappointment. She then embarrassingly turns to face Dew and Lorenzo)* I apologize for that, again. I don't know what's gotten into him... I'll talk with him soon.

Lorenzo: Bah. I don't know what's bugging him... but a good hardy meal after a day's work of freedom fighting can fix that...

Dew: Hey... *(then turns to face and hands AB Rebel 2 the bag full of the collected riches)* ...Be sure to distribute this to the others. Single mothers, the elderly, the ill, and the disabled first before anyone else, okay?

AB Rebel 2: *(nods head in approval)* Yes, boss...

Lorenzo: Okay. Enough yapping, already. It's time to chow down..!

Narrator: Dew and the gang then head to the Canteen for dinner. Meanwhile, back at the Executive Mansion Estate, Premier Zircon Videl sits quietly in his chair, which is turned to the window at his desk in the Premier's suite. Killbin Janerio, Videl's loyal Chief of Staff and the Commissioner of Energy, Transportation, and Health, enters the room.



Killbin: ...Sir, it seems the *Aurora Blade* has struck again. This time it was the Mesovilla National Museum of Art.

Narrator: Zircon sits in his chair, still facing the window, while his bodyguard and the director of the Executive Mansion Estate security, Peoria Arinova, serves him a cup of Peppermint Cream-flavored tea.

Zircon: Thank you, Peoria... *(taking the cup of Peppermint Cream flavored tea from Peoria)*

Peoria: My pleasure, sir... *(then walks to the side of his desk and stands guard facing Killbin)*

Killbin: ...Sir, what are we to do?

Narrator: Still facing the window, Zircon holds his index finger up, signaling to Killbin to pause his thoughts as he takes a sip of his Peppermint Cream-flavored tea. While sipping, Zircon extends his right pinky finger, revealing the gold band he's wearing. After a moment, he stops sipping and contently exhales.

Zircon: Ahh... Tasty... Mmm...

Narrator: Enraged, Gwinnett Hepworth, the sheriff of Helix Capital and constable of the Justice & War Department, enters the room.

Gwinnett: Premier Videl, what in tarnation is going on here?! My damn men are getting slaughtered by those terrorist bastards!

Zircon: Hmm...

Killbin: Sir, since their appearance in the Helix Capital almost three months ago, there seems to be an increase of further activity from the religious sect known as the *Bush of Life*...

Zircon: ...and, are they interfering in any form of government affairs?

Killbin: No, sir...

Zircon: Then, why should I care? If the masses enjoy hearing the delusional ramblings of vagrant street preachers, let them. At the end of the day, the people depend on and belong to us.

Gwinnett: Hey..! Are you listening to me?!

Zircon: *(turns his chair to face Sheriff Hepworth while setting down the teacup on his desk)* ...Sheriff, I didn't hear you come in. Why do you speak to me in that tone..? Have you forgotten who's running this country here? ...In regards to the *Aurora Blade*, things are going as planned. This is what I exactly expected them to do.

Killbin: Premier, they're becoming a problem.

Zircon: I don't see them as a problem. I think of them as a means of entertainment.

Gwinnett: What?!

Zircon: We'll play with them a bit longer, and then you'll see.

Gwinnett: These terrorists cannot be taken so insouciantly. They're not like the protestors who we can easily crack down on.

Zircon: ...It seems like every day there is some sort of protest going on... The ingrates do make excellent laborers.

Killbin: Sir, the sheriff, has a point. Your approval ratings are slightly dipping. According to other polling, a little half of the public views the *Aurora Blade* in a positive light. If this trend continues, the public may lose trust in their government entirely.

Zircon: Of course, the public views them positively. After all, the *Aurora Blade* blew up the Helix Provincial Student Debt Collection Agency, months ago. And before that, they stole a refrigerated truck filled with 42 tons of egg-shaped chocolate candy worth 68,000 Wertes', and then gave it all away for free. Why wouldn't they?! The masses are such fickle little ants, aren't they? We should take away all access to porn, criminalize those dank memes on the interwebs, and have those people rounded up and sent to the labor camps too!

Gwinnett: Happy as a tick on a fat dog! Now you're talking. All I need are names...

Zircon: I was joking, sheriff.

Gwinnett: Oh...

Zircon: The public's momentary favorable opinions of the *Aurora Blade* are of no concern to me. After our past three elections, the public clearly knows what's best for them.

Killbin: That's because we rigged every election with unfavorable candidates, sir. In this upcoming election, you don't have any opponents.

Zircon: Oh, yeahhhh... And a mighty fine job you have done with that, Killbin.

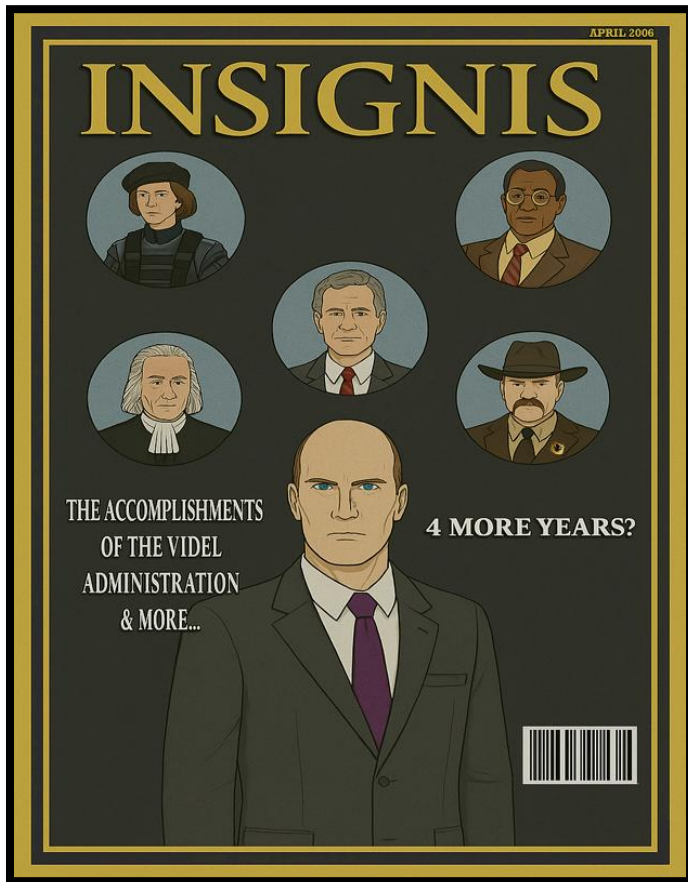
Killbin: Sir... it seems since last year after the *Aurora Blade* blew up the national tax depository, their attacks have become more frequent compared to previous encounters.

Zircon: *(sarcastically)* You think?!

Killbin: ...Plus, they did cause Secretary-Treasurer Cromwell to have a nervous breakdown. He hasn't been right ever since.

Zircon: ...Uncle Sherwin will eventually recover. If it weren't for me using my emergency powers to instruct the mint to print more Wertes', this country would have been in an economic crisis. Yes, we may have lost trillions of Wertes' because of the *Aurora Blade's* financial terrorism, and yes, inflation rose by 11%, requiring the people to pay a bit more to make up for it. But it was all necessary. We all still got our fair share. If the Plenum were still around, we would be worse off. "Checks and

balances," Bah..! I never regret dissolving those do-nothings. How much easier things are now... The *Aurora Blade* won't be too much of a threat for long. Sheriff, I want you to double security in all four zones of Helix.



Gwinnett: ...With what men?!

Zircon: Even if you were granted more personnel, you haven't captured a single member of the *Aurora Blade*. Also, why is that? *ISPYA*, Mesovilla's leading counterterrorism, counterintelligence, and criminal investigation agency under your direction has failed to deliver, time after time... I think I made a mistake appointing you to that post... I wonder if all your failure is because of incompetence.

Gwinnett: Incompetence?!

Zircon: Hmm... Maybe self-sabotage?

Killbin: ...

Gwinnett: What?! I would never...

Zircon: No. I don't think it's the latter either. Not even you are that brazen to commit treason. I do know, the *Aurora Blade* has eluded us for far too long. This is unacceptable, sheriff! You will work with what you have and get me results... or face demotion.

Gwinnett: Demotion? Work with what I have?! Did you not hear me the first time? We can't—

Zircon: Just do it! That is an order from your Commander-in-chief. If you fail me again, you'll be indefinitely assigned to a labor camp getting a fraction of what you're making now. Is that clear?

Gwinnett: Grr... Yes. Yes. Understood Premier Videl. I will see to it personally that the *Aurora Blade* is dealt with.

Zircon: See to it that you do that. You may excuse yourself now, sheriff.

Narrator: Sheriff Hepworth turns around and then rolls his eyes angrily as he heads to the exit of the Premier's suite. Zircon then turns his attention to Killbin.

Zircon: ...Are there any other reports, Killbin?

Killbin: Yes... *(then looks over at Peoria)*

Zircon: Ah. *(then turns to face Peoria)* ...Peoria, leave us.

Narrator: Peoria nods her head in acknowledgment and exits the Premier's suite.

Killbin: ...As for my report, there have been several more cases of wild animals attacking the citizenry. Oddly enough, these infected animals died shortly after... Many of the victims, who were bitten or scratched, showed signs of flu-like symptoms hours afterward. They were placed into quarantine for treatment and observation.

Zircon: How many people has this happened to?

Killbin: At least 200, sir...

Zircon: The media has only reported 23 cases... they're at least doing their job minimizing it. How many of the quarantined have recovered?

Killbin: Sir... none of them has. Each infected patient showed signs of increased aggression and strength, austere dementia,

cataracts of the eyes, convulsions, and progressive necrosis - that can only be described as massive “black boils” forming all over their bodies... The physicians have never seen anything like this before. There was an incident when the infected did attack the medical personnel, killing a total of six. Safety measures had to be taken... we had no other choice but to put down all the infected.

Zircon: Hmm... I understand.

Killbin: All the infected human and animal corpses were later incinerated to prevent any chance of this from turning into an epidemic.

Zircon: ...You made the right call, Killbin. If there are to be any other future incidents like this, proceed as you have been. We should keep this under wraps for the public’s sake.

Killbin: Yes, sir.

Zircon: Killbin, thank you for the update... You may be excused...
(then turns to the window again)

Killbin: Thank you, sir.

Narrator: Killbin then exits the Premier's suite. Zircon turns his chair around to face the window again. A moment passes as he sits there quietly, evilly smirking to himself while he puts his fingers in a raised steepled position.

Zircon: *(thinking to himself) It’s all coming together as intended... all for the greater good...*

Narrator: As Zircon continues staring out the window, his sinister smirk remains, his seated silhouette cast against the glass. Whatever machinations he has quietly set into motion, their true purpose remains known only to him. The view slowly pulls away from Zircon, beyond the Premier’s suite and into the night surrounding the Executive Mansion Estate, until its illuminated windows fade into the distance and the scene dissolves into black.

CHAPTER 2 – “SHINING LIGHTHOUSE”

- Narrator: Four days later, Dew and the gang return to Helix’s Western Zone in disguise to do some reconnaissance on their next hit—the Mesovilla National Bank of Helix. They slowly stop walking as the national bank comes into view several blocks away. Dew and the gang inconspicuously then stand at a nearby bus stop shelter. Lorenzo grabs a newspaper paper from the ground and pretends to be reading through it. Lynch takes out a coin from his right pant pocket and begins fiddling around with it using his fingers. Dew pretends to be staring in the opposite direction of the national bank looking for a bus, while Paca looks in its direction. The two other *Aurora Blade* gang members accompanying them stand off to the side. As Paca observes the area around the national bank, she notices the increased number of SWAT TROOPERS patrolling the area.
- Paca: Hmm... That’s a lot...
- Lorenzo: ...More flat-foots than usual, eh? (*still pretending to read through the newspaper*)
- Paca: It looks like it.
- Dew: (*turns his head slightly to look in the direction of the national bank*) ...It does look a little challenging.
- Lorenzo: No expense was spared there... (*looks out the corner of his right eye in the direction of the national bank while still pretending to read through the newspaper*)
- Lynch: (*sigh*) ...Oh boy, we're going to hit up another government financial institution. (*still fiddling with the coin*) Hey, "Great Leader", tell us how we'll pull this one off?! (*sarcastically*)
- Narrator: Dew then turns to face Lynch giving him a puzzled look. Lorenzo puts down the newspaper on the bus stop bench and turns to face Lynch.
- Lorenzo: I’m not sure if you’re being sarcastic, or just being a plain mean dick.
- Narrator: Lynch then gives Dew and the others a dissembling look.
- Dew: Well, Lynch, we’ll pull it off just like all the other missions. Everything okay..?
- Lynch: Uh... (*accidentally drops the coin and immediately picks it up*)

Paca: Lynch, you haven't been yourself lately.

Lynch: What makes you say that? I'm fine, don't worry. *(then places the coin back into his right pant pocket)*

Paca: I dunno...

Lynch: Thanks for asking. It's a good thing you still care, though.

Paca: Huh? That was random... What are you talking about?! *(concerned)*

Lorenzo: All right. All right. That's enough you two. We don't want to draw any unneeded attention. Save the lovers' quarrel for later.

Lynch: Sorry... I apologize. I know I haven't been myself recently... I'm just dealing with some things...

Paca: What?

Lynch: ...I won't let it get in the way. I'll be fine... the mission comes first... always... Sorry, again.

Dew: No worries, Lynch...

Lorenzo: ...Good thing we came here to scope things out.

Dew: Yeah.

Paca: Our intel scouts were a little off with their assessment, but even with the increased SWAT TROOPERS presence we should be able to still carry this out...

Dew: I agree. As long as those fake surveillance technicians we sent in the other day were successful in planting the jamming devices to help disable and hack the bank's surveillance and security systems, all should go as planned.

Lorenzo: Hey, Paca. What about the distraction you have in mind..?

Paca: *(then grins mischievously)* I've got something in the works...

Narrator: Lynch walks off to the side to observe a family across the street from him. He sees the father carrying a bag full of groceries, and the mother is holding onto her son's hand as they're walking. The son looks to be about six years old. The family is laughing and smiling as they walk off into the distance together. This makes Lynch smile.

Dew: ...This area is hot right now. I'm thinking we should split, take a break, and regroup later at the designated meet-up spot.

Paca: Why not? All that's left for me to do is get our getaway vehicle ready. But there's enough time for that later. We're here early, we should enjoy ourselves until then.

Lorenzo: I ain't against that.

Dew: Okay then... *(then turns to face the two Aurora Blade gang members)* Hey. You two, go take a break.

Narrator: The two *Aurora Blade* gang members nod their heads in acknowledgment and then walk off.

Lorenzo: Dew, what are you going to do in the meantime..?

Dew: Probably take a walk around the neighborhood. It's a nice day for it...

Lorenzo: Got ya. Stay out of trouble now, and don't be late.

Dew: Who me? ...I'll be there looking for the white van with the comically large satellite dish on the top and a fake business logo on the side of it. I'll catch you all later... *(then walks off)*

Paca: Hey, Lorenzo...

Lorenzo: Yeah?

Paca: About Lynch... I haven't had a chance to talk with him. But I will...

Lorenzo: *(nods his head in approval)* ...Hey, Lynch.

Lynch: ...

Lorenzo: Yo, Lynch!

Lynch: ...

Lorenzo: Lynch!

Narrator: A startled Lynch then turns around and walks toward Lorenzo and Paca.

Lynch: Yeah..?

Lorenzo: Daydreaming over there? Anyway... I'm gonna split and meet up with you two later at the meet-up spot. Okay?

Lynch: Got it...

Lorenzo: Oh. Don't be late.

Paca: Never. We'll both be there. See ya...

Narrator: Lorenzo then walks off leaving Paca and Lynch alone. A concerned Paca turns to Lynch.

Paca: Lynch, is there anything you like to talk about..?

Lynch: Hah... don't worry about it, babe. I just woke up on the wrong side of the bed today...

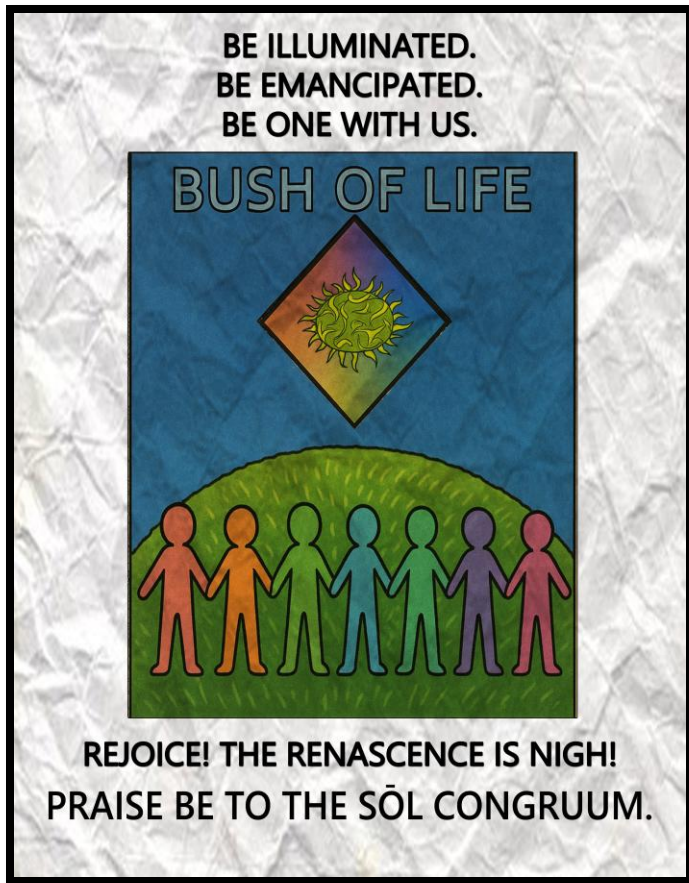
Paca: Oh? But it has been like this for a while with you now. Are you sure?

Lynch: It's fine. Really.

Paca: You don't have to lie to me.

Lynch: I'm not. Let's go enjoy ourselves before the mission, okay?

Paca: Okay. If you say you are fine, you're fine.



- Narrator: Lynch suddenly notices Paca's subtle signs of discomfort and fatigue.
- Lynch: (*concerned*) Hey, Paca. Is everything fine with you..?
- Paca: Uh, yes. Why do you ask?
- Lynch: Oh. (*then carefully studies Paca*) You just seem overworked or something. You're not getting sick, are you?
- Paca: No. I'm fine, Lynch. I'm just a little tired from all the planning for this mission.
- Lynch: Ah.
- Paca: Anyway. Let's get going. We have a truck to pick up...
- Narrator: Paca and Lynch take off in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, as Dew strolls through the bustling streets of Helix's Western Zone, he passes a crowd gathered around a street preacher,

catching only fragments of the sermon echoing in the distance.

Gospeler: "...Come forth, my brothers and sisters... We, the *Bush of Life*, bring tidings of renewal. This existence of suffering is but a fleeting trial. The Sōl Congruum shall first unleash chaos—to cleanse the unworthy and their transgressions from this plane. From that cleansing, order shall rise... and with it, the warm blanket of holy bliss will irradiate the world. The Renaissance shall be fulfilled! Now is your only chance for metanoia. Reject the cozening doctrines of the past! Refuse to be a pawn in *Chosha's* cosmic spectacle. Embrace the liberating truth that is the Sōl Congruum..."

Narrator: Several blocks later, Dew arrives at a run-down martial arts school.

Dew: Hmm... Did this place just open? Why am I noticing this now..? It reminds me of...

Narrator: Dew out of curiosity then enters the martial arts school. Once inside, he removes his disguise and looks around the room. He then sees a figure whose back is turned to him as she is seemingly searching through some books on a shelf. He recognizes her as his former martial arts instructor, Rena Cullen.

Dew: Sifu?! I mean, Rena... is that you..?

Rena: Huh?! ...That voice sounds familiar... (*then turns around*)

Dew: It's you...

Narrator: The two old friends—student and mentor—stand momentarily silent as they lock eyes, overwhelmed with happiness at seeing one another again after so many years. Rena has a strong, curvy frame and short black hair styled in a neat bob. A gold-chained talisman rests around her neck, and she wears a light blue sleeveless dress with sturdy brown lace-up boots.

Rena: Dew? Dew Wilder..? Well... this is a surprise... How have you been? (*then moves in closer to Dew and hugs him*)

Dew: Surviving... (*hugs Rena and then pulls back*) Yourself?

Rena: I'm well... (*then eyes Dew up and down*) My. You've grown since the last time I saw you.

Dew: ...And you're still looking young and vibrant.

Rena: I'm flattered. He-he-he... still the same Dew I remember. This is so unexpected. But here you are. If I knew you were in Helix, I would have contacted you sooner.



Dew: I would have done the same too... It's funny; I just happened to be passing by and had this urge to come to check this place out... for some reason.

Rena: It must be fate that brought us together again, huh?

Dew: It must be...

Rena: Honestly, I thought I would never see you again.

Dew: Why'd you think that..?

Rena: I figured you were out there somewhere living your life to the fullest. I wouldn't have held it against you if you were.

Dew: *(whispering to himself) I couldn't forget about you... my "shining lighthouse"...*

Rena: What's that?

Dew: Oh. Uh, nothing...

Rena: So... you still, practicing..?
Dew: What, Bōjutsu? I never stopped. When you learn from the best, it's ingrained in you forever.
Rena: Oh, yeah? Well, it helped to have a good student who was willing to learn. *(then cracks a smile)* ...It's refreshing to see you again, Dew.
Dew: Likewise. So, before I interrupted you, did you ever find that book you were looking for? *(then gestures to the bookshelf)*
Rena: Oh that. *(turns her head looking at the bookshelf, then looks back at Dew)* ...No. I was just adjusting them before you walked in. So... what have you been up to these days?
Dew: Nothing much...
Rena: Nothing much, huh? I'm curious...
Dew: ...About what?
Rena: Forget it...
Dew: Go ahead and ask away. It's fine.
Rena: Well, I was wondering... are you married? Any kids..?
Dew: Hah. No. I've been way too focused on helping others... I'm too busy for anything else to have a life.
Rena: Ah. So, you're working for a non-profit organization?
Dew: Yeah... if you can call it that.
Rena: Hmm... I see. Have you been back home by any chance?
Dew: No. Not since the last time we saw each other.
Rena: That's been a moment...
Dew: Yes... it has been. So, what brings you to Helix?
Rena: I got bored. I needed a change of scenery and to get away from Twin Pines. So, a month ago, I decided to come back to Helix and try teaching full-time again.
Dew: Ah. Speaking about that... Do you remember the old martial arts school? That place always felt like my home away from home when you, me, and the other students came to Helix.
Rena: I do. It was probably the nostalgia that brought me back here to Helix... But I think I made a mistake coming back though. I only say that because business

hasn't picked up. Plus, the taxation and crime rate here is insane.

Dew: Tell me about it...

Rena: Everything is so out of balance these days... sometimes it seems the world is just going to collapse at any moment. But, even in the darkest times...there is always hope... the *Aurora Blade* comes to mind...

Dew: ...Really?! Those troublemakers?

Rena: Is that what the media tells you to believe?

Dew: Well...

Rena: I take the media's news reporting with a "grain of salt." I don't blame the people for protesting and opposing this government. All these politicians are out to line their own pockets and maintain control. When is the last time this government has done anything for the people?

Dew: I... don't ...

Rena: Yeah, that's right. You can't! It's hard for me even to remember the last time when they did too...There's only so much people can take before reaching a boiling point. The *Aurora Blade* may be portrayed as "terrorists," but any group brave enough to defy this government by helping the poor and being the torch-bearers of civil freedoms; are heroes in my eyes.

Dew: ...You say that with such passion...

Rena: Well, yes. I think we all can learn something from the *Aurora Blade's* defiance... "Be an Eagle, and fly. Don't be the worm that crawls on its belly, and then complains when it's being stepped on."

Dew: So true that is...

Rena: I digress. We haven't seen each other for so long. I think the last thing you want to hear is some political rant. I apologize...

Dew: No worries.

Rena: I'm so happy we got this chance to reconnect.

Dew: Yeah, me too Sifu...

Rena: I told you a long time ago; you don't have to call me that any more.

Dew: Oh yeah... Hah. Force of habit... Well... I guess I'll let you get back to tending to your business.

Rena: Leaving already..?

Dew: Yes... unfortunately. Duty calls. But I know where I can find you now.

Rena: I won't hold you up any longer then. It makes me proud of you knowing that you're working with a non-profit helping others in need. Go and spread the goodwill... Also, try to come back and visit me when you have time, all right? I won't be going anywhere for a while.

Dew: I'll do that.

Rena: Take care of yourself now...

Narrator: Rena then hugs Dew one more time before they pull back from one another's embrace.

Dew: You too, Rena...

Narrator: Dew then turns around and exits the martial arts school. Once outside, Dew starts walking a few steps away but then pauses and looks back noticing two SWAT TROOPERS entering the building. The scene then cuts to inside where the two SWAT TROOPERS approach Rena.

Rena: Hello officers. How may I help you..?

SWAT TROOPER 3: Good afternoon, Ma'am. Are you the owner of this establishment?

Rena: Why, yes, I am.

SWAT TROOPER 2: We've been sent here by the government to collect the back taxes that you owe. You were likely sent a notice a week ago.

Rena: I did get that notice, yes. But as I explained in the response letter I sent back, this place just opened three weeks ago and hasn't been all that lucrative. Once I start getting students, then I can pay all that I owe...

SWAT TROOPER 2: Sorry, ma'am, that isn't going to cut it. If you wish to keep this place, you must pay now or forfeit your property over to us.

Rena: But I just told you...

SWAT TROOPER 3: We don't make the laws. We're just doing our job.

Rena: Well, officers, again- that's not going to be possible right now.

SWAT TROOPER 2: *(then eyes Rena's talisman necklace around her neck)*
That's a nice trinket you got there, Ma'am.

SWAT TROOPER 3: Yeah, it is. Looks like it's worth a lot. If you cannot pay up... I think that will do instead...

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 3 then tries reaching for Rena's talisman necklace, but she counters with lightning-fast speed by shoving his hand back into his face. SWAT TROOPER 3 is temporarily dazed by this as SWAT TROOPER 2 immediately pulls out a firearm aiming it at Rena.

SWAT TROOPER 2: Don't move..!

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 3 regains his bearings and then pulls out a truncheon ready to retaliate against Rena.

SWAT TROOPER 3: ...Oh, aren't we cheeky? You'll pay for that lady..!

Narrator: Dew enters the room. The two startled SWAT TROOPERS turn their attention away from Rena to Dew.

SWAT TROOPER 2: ...Who are you?

SWAT TROOPER 3: If you know what's best, you'll leave now. You're interfering in official peacekeeping matters.

Dew: No. I think I'll stick around... *(then draws his bo staff)*

SWAT TROOPER 2: What's this?!

SWAT TROOPER 3: Looks like a threat to me. Somebody is lookin' for a death wish..!

Narrator: Dew readys himself into a fighting stance.

SWAT TROOPER 2: You're a stupid one. Forget about her. Let's take care of this clown...

Narrator: The two SWAT TROOPERS rush at Dew, but they are easily defeated within second being knocked unconscious by his bo staff strikes. Dew then turns his attention to an awestruck Rena.

Rena: Dew, you came back.

Dew: We meet again... I had this nagging feeling that I should stick around... glad I did. But, Rena, you could have easily taken them down yourself. Why didn't you?

Rena: You didn't give me a chance to. Ha-ha... I see you have kept up your skills, after all.

Dew: What, did you doubt that?

Rena: Just a little, but I was wrong to do so... (*then looks at Dew's Bo staff*)... Hmm...

Dew: What..?

Rena: Is that a shower rod you're using for a weapon?

Dew: Nope... not at all...

Rena: Oh. It got the job done, that's all that matters.

Dew: Anyways. It's going to get ugly from here on out. We should leave, like now before more of those creeps come.

Rena: You're right. Let's go, my pupil.

Dew: Pupil..?

Rena: Force of habit. Hah... Hold on.

Narrator: Rena runs over to the other side of the room and grabs a scythe off the weapons display that's mounted to the wall.

Rena: I think I will be needing this...

Narrator: Dew nods his head in agreement. Dew and Rena then exit the martial arts school darting past two other SWAT TROOPERS who happen to be passing by. This draws their attention.

SWAT TROOPER 4: What the..?!
Narrator: The injured SWAT TROOPER 2 drags himself to the martial arts school doorway and falls to his knees in front of the two SWAT TROOPERS.

SWAT TROOPER 5: Hey. What happened?!

SWAT TROOPER 4: Are you okay?!

SWAT TROOPER 2: Stop... t-them... Ugh... (*then passes out*)

SWAT TROOPER 4: Those bastards!

Narrator: The two SWAT TROOPERS then run off, leaving the unconscious SWAT TROOPER 2 unattended to start their pursuit of the fleeing Dew and Rena.

SWAT TROOPER 5: HEY!!

SWAT TROOPER 4: STOP!

Narrator: Dew and Rena continue fleeing from the two pursuing SWAT TROOPERS, weaving through a maze of alleyways as the echo of footsteps trails close behind.

Their pace quickens with every turn, tension mounting with each step. Eventually, they skid to a halt—cut off by a dead end.

Dew: Dead end... Dammit.

Rena: What do we do now?

Dew: Lemme see... *(takes a look around and notices a maintenance hole nearby)* I got it... *(then runs over to the maintenance hole)*

Rena: What are you doing?

Dew: *(removes the sewer lid, and then turns to face Rena)*
...You coming, or you rather stay here?

Rena: This is the only way?! Yuck. Lead the way.

Dew: Great...

Narrator: Dew and Rena leap down the maintenance hole just before the two pursuing SWAT TROOPERS catch up.

SWAT TROOPER 5: Where'd they go..?

SWAT TROOPER 4: Hmm... they must have gone into the sewers. Do you want to go down there..?

SWAT TROOPER 5: Hell, no! Do you know what's down there?! No chance I'm doing that.

SWAT TROOPER 4: What are you talking about?

SWAT TROOPER 5: You haven't heard..? Allegedly there's a monster roaming the sewers.

SWAT TROOPER 4: Get the fuck out of here.

SWAT TROOPER 5: Yeah... Two guys from the Helix Northern Zone Department of Streets, Sewers, and Sanitation told me so. Both saw it with their own eyes.

SWAT TROOPER 4: That sounds so dumb... Were they drunk when they told you that bullshit?

SWAT TROOPER 5: I'm serious, man. I don't think it's worth it...

SWAT TROOPER 4: Hmm... Fuck it. I don't get paid enough for this shit. It's a waste of time ...They're good as dead down there, monster or not.

SWAT TROOPER 5: We'll deal with the paperwork later. Let's go...

Narrator: The SWAT TROOPERS walk off. Meanwhile, Dew and Rena are wandering around in the sewer.

Dew: Whew, it smells down here...

Rena: No kidding...

Dew: It looks like we lost those SWAT TROOPERS.

Rena: They gave up rather quickly. So, what now?
Dew: We'll have to keep walking until we find an exit.
Rena: Sounds about right.
Dew: Hey about the martial arts school... I'm sorry...
Rena: No need to be. That place wasn't turning a profit anyway. They can keep that dump. One less hassle for me now... us reuniting was a blessing in disguise.
Dew: All right. Good to hear. Let's get going..?
Narrator: Rena nods in agreement. Together, she and Dew push forward through the sewer's endless maze, the stench thick and the air heavy with decay. After what feels like an eternity, they finally spot a rusted ladder leading up to a maintenance hatch.
Rena: Finally... took us long enough.
Dew: Let's find out where this takes us.
Narrator: Just as they break into a sprint toward the ladder, the ground trembles beneath their feet. The murky water begins to ripple—then churn violently.
Dew: ...You feel that?
Rena: Yeah. What the hell..?
Dew: No clue—but it's definitely not good.
Narrator: Suddenly, with a sickening splash, a massive, grotesque creature bursts from the sewage—a bloated, pulsating leech-like monster with a gaping circular maw lined with jagged teeth. It rears up, dripping slime and sewage, blocking the only exit.
Rena: What is that thing?!
Dew: Whatever it is... it's not letting us through.
Narrator: The creature lets out a guttural hiss before whipping its massive body forward—its tail slamming into the ladder and tearing it from the wall. Metal screeches and falls, clattering uselessly into the muck.
Dew: No—our way out!
Rena: It doesn't want us leaving.
Dew: No, it doesn't.
Rena: ...Then we've only got one choice.
Dew: We fight our way out. Let's go..!



Narrator: With nowhere to run, Dew and Rena engage the mutated sewage leech. Their attacks cut through its thick, slimy flesh, dodging its violent thrashes. After a brutal struggle, the creature lets out a final death gurgle and collapses, its body melting into a putrid pool of flesh and bile.

Dew: Eww... Ugh! What the...

Rena: ...Hmm. (*whispering to herself*) ...I've seen this before... could this be, because of..? No... No.

Dew: Rena... Rena? ...Rena, what's wrong..?

Rena: I'm... I... Dew, what just happened?

Dew: I have no idea. I'm just as confused. Okay... Yep. That was so out there...

Rena: That was bizarre... Although, that creature destroyed our way out of here... We should try to look for another exit.

Dew: Let's do that. The sooner we are out of here, the better.

Rena: Agreed...

Narrator: As Dew and Rena walk off, a dim surveillance camera light can be seen flickering in the distance. Sometime later, Dew and Rena eventually find another sewer exit and make their climb

up to the surface. Dew removes the sewer lid and pushes it to the side as he climbs up. He then gets up onto his feet and lends Rena his hand pulling her up out of the maintenance hole.

Rena: ...Isn't this a stroke of luck?

Dew: What's that..? (*putting the sewer lid back on*)

Rena: We're close by to where I am staying...

Dew: That is truly convenient that we just happened to end up here.

Rena: Indeed.

Narrator: Dew for a moment surveys his surroundings and then comes to the realization he's no longer in Helix's Western Zone.

Dew: Are we... in the Northern Zone?

Rena: Yes.

Dew: We've definitely come a long way then...

Rena: Yeah. Anyway... I'll lead the way from here.

Dew: Wait. Rena. Is it safe to go to your place?

Rena: What do you mean..?

Dew: You're not worried about those SWAT TROOPERS looking up your business registry information? They may come searching for us at your place.

Rena: That won't be an issue. We'll be fine.

Dew: How so?

Rena: All that information I provided the provincial government is bogus.

Dew: Bogus? How'd you manage to pull that off?

Rena: Let's just say it's a trick of the trade I picked up on many years ago.

Dew: That's something you never taught me or the other students. How and where did you learn that?

Rena: A lady is entitled to her secrets... It's always good to be prepared when covering your tracks or needing to leave at a moment's notice. You never know when it may come in handy.

Dew: Ah. Well, it did today... Okay... Lead the way...

Narrator: Dew then follows Rena as they exit the alley and is led through several blocks of an underdeveloped neighborhood. As some time passes, the two make their way to a desolate and tacky-looking 10-room motel called the Hitchcock Motel sitting under a highway overpass.

Dew: Is this where you're staying..?

Rena: Come on... we're almost there.

Narrator: Dew and Rena then continue passing through the motel parking lot. They come to a stop after reaching the door to room 3. Rena pulls out her motel room key and then uses it to open the door. They both enter the room.

Rena: We made it... Well, that was all pretty exciting...

Dew: ...Yeah. (*sarcastically*) We should do that again sometime. Ha-ha...

Rena: As I mentioned before, we'll be safe here.

Dew: I guess I'll be sticking around for a bit just to be sure.

Rena: Why not? This would be a perfect opportunity to do some catching up... (*then smells herself and gives a disgusted look*) ...Whew. Not smelling too good at all... I feel gross.

Dew: We were just in a sewer for a couple of hours... I'm not smelling like flowers myself.

Rena: How about this? I'll go freshen up, and then you can afterward.

Dew: Sure.

Rena: In the meantime, feel free to make yourself at home. I don't have much in the fridge to eat. But I do have some buttered saltine crackers in the cabinet. Have at 'em.

Dew: I'm not hungry right now. But thanks.

Rena: Okay Dew. Hang tight. This won't take me too long... (*then exits the room and enters the bathroom. Moments later she shuts the door behind her*)

Narrator: Dew then walks over to the couch next to the king-size bed, and is about to sit down until he hesitates after being reminded of his sewage stench.

Dew: Eww... Oh yeah. I can't do that. Nope...

Narrator: Dew places his bo staff and other belongings on the couch instead and decides to lie on the floor.

Dew: This will have to do...

Narrator: A few seconds later, the toilet is heard flushing and then followed by the sound of the shower head turning on. Dew continues lying on the floor feeling the fatigue set in.

Dew: Ah... It's nice to... finally take a breather... Mmm... this floor isn't... so bad... feeling... kinda... comfy... I think... *(closing his eye lids)* I'll just...rest my... eyes... for a few... m-minutes... *(snore)*

Narrator: Dew then falls into a deep sleep on the motel room floor. He begins to dream of his experience when he was 20 years old in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE during *the Great Civil War*, six years ago, as the war wages on between the Helix Capital and New Havenport. The scene starts with an armored vehicle seen driving up a jungle mountain road. The sound of artillery discharging and fighting can be heard off in the distance. The scene then cuts to the back interior of the armored vehicle where Dew along with his fellow SWAT TROOPER ELITE compatriots are buckled and seated. Corporal Hoplyn Arlington, Dew's childhood friend, who is sitting next to him breaks the silence by initiating a conversation.

Hoplyn: Here we are... the day has finally come...

Dew: ...Yeah. Who knew we would be assigned to this detail, huh, Big Sis?

Hoplyn: Right.

Narrator: Another soldier, Corporal Cooper Tyler is seen sulking to himself while seated next to SWAT TROOPER ELITE Sergeant Thornton Videl who is sitting across from Hoplyn and Dew.

Cooper: *(whispering to himself)* Mom... *(then remorsefully shakes his head)*

Narrator: Off to the side, General Landmore is quietly reading through a file. Thornton then turns his attention to Dew and Hoplyn

Thornton: ...There's nothing more exhilarating than a good war that keeps you feeling alive and, on your feet... Are you two ready for this?

Hoplyn: Yes, Sergeant.

Dew: Yeah... I guess so...

Thornton: *(then looks in Dew's direction)* Hey, small fry. You okay? Are you feeling nervous..?

Dew: I'm fine...

Thornton: You sure..? Don't deny it. I see it in your eyes. Then again, at least you're not moping like Tyler over here...

Cooper: Hmm...

Thornton: Hmph. But don't you worry Wilder, I'll make sure you make it back in one piece. I wouldn't want you dying on us.

Dew: If I'm going to die, then I'm going to die.

Thornton: That's reckless thinking Corporal. Now, with that frame of mind, you won't last too long.

Dew: Then... I won't.

Thornton: Oh?

Dew: ...Then again, maybe you'll be the first to get killed. So, I'll make sure you make it back in one piece, Sergeant.

Cooper & Hoplyn: Ha-ha-ha...

Thornton: Oh. Trying to be funny?! Spirited little bastard...

General Landmore: *(turns to Dew and Thornton)* Okay. Cut the shit, you two. We have a critical mission ahead of us.

Dew: Yes, sir.

Thornton: Of course, sir.

Narrator: The armored vehicle begins to slow down and then comes to a full stop.

AV Driver: ...Sir, we're at the checkpoint...

General Landmore: Understood. Thank you, driver. *(then unbuckles himself and stands up in front of Dew and the other SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers)* All right, everyone, listen up... The mission is quite simple. While the other troops are out there fighting off the New Havenport forces, we will insert ourselves upward to the biochemical research facility on Mount Darien. From there, we will infiltrate the complex from that point. Thanks to our intel, it has been determined there will be no more than 43 Minutemen on post. Their security shouldn't be too much of a threat. Once we reach the complex and deal with their forces, we'll be in and out of there quickly. But, of course, with great caution. You're all not in boot camp anymore, nor is this some training exercise. The reality of war is

harsh, and there are no second chances here, as some of you have experienced already... Our primary objective is to retrieve the SKT virus vial from the facility. Earlier this year, we had interrogated a runaway New Havenport scientist who was captured just west of the complex on Mount Darien. It was confirmed that the virus vial was being stored in the lower levels of the facility.



Dew:

...SKT?

Thornton:

(turns to face Dew) What's wrong small fry, you don't know what that is..? Why the hell do you think we are here in the first place?

General Landmore:

Ahem...

Thornton:

Sorry, sir. Please continue.

General Landmore:

For those who need a refresher... SKT stands for "Systemic Karyotype Transmutation". Before the war broke out, scientists stationed in New Havenport were secretly tasked by our government over many

years with developing a “super-soldier” serum to enhance military readiness. Instead, the project led to the creation of a viral mutagen capable of causing catastrophic damage... we’re talking instant death. As you all know, when political tensions between New Havenport and the capital continued to escalate, the New Havenport provincial government eventually decided to secede. They seized the research facility and successfully retained the virus before the government could secure it. And here we are, many years later, with this war still ongoing. We received intel earlier this week that New Havenport forces are planning to unleash the virus on our nation’s capital. We’re not sure how this would be possible, as we have the shoreline under heavy guard. Yet there are a few New Havenport sympathizers back in the homeland. That’s why we’re here—to prevent the potential loss of innocent lives before it happens. It’s of the utmost importance that we retrieve the virus as soon as possible. For some of you, this will be our first time working together as a unit in an official capacity. However, every one of you has already distinguished yourselves on the battlefield. Your combat record is the reason the top brass handpicked you for this unit and entrusted us with carrying out this mission. So... let’s get it done. Leave no one behind. That concludes the mission briefing. We’ll be standing by until further notice.

Hoplyn:

Roger that, sir.

Cooper:

It feels like we’re waiting for impending doom... oh boy...

Thornton:

It’s too late to go AWOL now, Tyler.

Cooper:

It’s tempting...

Thornton:

You better not..! I wonder... How did you and small fry, there make it this far? They just let anyone join the SWAT TROOPER ELITE these days, huh? Hah... Well... you’ll be okay... (*sigh*) But... having to wait around like this is so boring. I can’t wait until we see some action.

Dew: Easy there, Sergeant.

Cooper: Hey, Wilder...

Dew: Yeah?

Cooper: You know, being out here makes me miss home more and more. Have you ever felt like this..?

Dew: I do... all the time.

Cooper: Man. This shit sucks!

Dew: Well, just hang in there, friend. This is what we signed up for. Once this is over, be glad that you'll be alive... look forward to that.

Cooper: Yeah. You're right. That's something I can look forward to. Hey... What were you doing before you joined?

Dew: Not much. I lived with my grandfather for most of my life since the death of my parents. I was young when they passed. I supposed I had a decent upbringing...

Hoplyn: And many good friends like me...

Dew: Yes, that's right...

Cooper: Ah. I kind of figured you two had some history...

Dew: Anyway... Hoplyn and I joined right after graduating high school... But I did it more out of family tradition. My grandfather formerly served too. If he were only here now. ...Yep. What about you, Tyler?

Cooper: I was working a bunch of part-time jobs helping my family as much as I could... I too also joined out of family tradition and wanting to fulfill my dreams of serving our country. So, here I am... But looking back I kinda regret doing it... Not as glamorous as I imagined. Ha-ha...

Dew: Hah. Tell me about it... *(then smiles at Cooper)*

Cooper: Hey. By the way, just call me by my first name.

Dew: ...What was it again?

Cooper: It's Cooper.

Dew: You got it, Cooper...

Cooper: And yours?

Dew: It's Dew.

Cooper: Oh. Okay, Dew.

Thornton: Oh, my Gawd. Why don't ya just trade phone numbers already? You two need to get a room...

Cooper: You don't have many friends, do you, Sergeant?

Thornton: I used to... but they don't last long out on the battle-field. Take my advice, don't get too attached... Focus on the mission, and nothing more.

Cooper: That sounds lonely...

Thornton: My solitude has kept me alive this long. As I mentioned before, nothing else pleases me more in this world than the feel of battle and survival...

Dew: Not even sex? ...or, pancakes?

Thornton: Heh... *(then cracks a smile)* Who doesn't love sex and pancakes? I take that back. There is something else that pleases me more... and, someday I may tell you what that is...

Narrator: Radio chatter can then be briefly heard coming from the armored vehicle cockpit.

AV Driver: ...Sir, I just received word from HQ. The way has been cleared for us to proceed forward.

General Landmore: Make it so driver. Proceed forward.

Narrator: General Landmore then sits back down and buckles himself in. The driver starts up the armored vehicle and continues driving upward toward the Mount Darian Biochemical Chemical Research Facility. Dew's dream sequence then ends as he starts waking up from his slumber. His eyes slowly open staring at the ceiling of Rena's motel room. He then moves his head to the right and finds himself still lying on the floor next to the couch.

Dew: Mmm... I wonder... *(looks at his wristwatch)* ...Damn!! *(then pops up to his feet)* I must have overslept a bit... Shit... Hold on... Where's Rena?! ...Rena! Rena! ...Rena, you here..? *(shouting)* Hmm... I guess not... Where'd she go..? It was nice of her to let me rest... I hate to leave... without saying goodbye, but I gotta go meet up with the gang...

Narrator: Dew in a blind rush retrieves his bo staff and belongings from off the couch, but unbeknownst to him leaves behind a small folded piece of paper. He then exits Rena's motel room.

CHAPTER 3 – NOCTURNAL CAPER

- Narrator: After leaving the motel premises, Dew then starts his transit through the now evening streets back to the designated meet-up spot near the Mesovilla National Bank of Helix. While traversing through the different neighborhoods in Helix's Northern and Western Zones, random pedestrians can be seen going about their business as vehicles hoot or zoom by leaving a deafening noise. At the same time, the delicious aroma from several street food vendors lingers in the air. Some more time passes, and Dew eventually finds himself entering an alley a few blocks away from the Mesovilla National Bank of Helix. He approaches from the rear of a parked orange & yellow food truck with writing on the side of it reading, "*Din Mando's Pizza – 'Warm or cold, it's the way!'*". Dew then gives five rhythmic patterned knocks on the food truck's rear door. He waits for five seconds, then two muffled voices can be heard coming from its interior. A few seconds later the rear door opens with Paca standing in the doorway.
- Paca: ...Dew. There you are... Finally.
- Dew: A food truck, eh? Nice pick.
- Paca: Glad you approve. Get in quickly...
- Narrator: Dew without any hesitation climbs into the rear of the food truck and the door then shuts behind him. Once inside, a cluttered of various electronic equipment and a laptop sitting on a table affixed to the wall can be seen. Two *Aurora Blade* gang members are seen quietly sitting down on a bench. Lorenzo is briefly speaking to Lynch who is sitting nonchalantly while smoking a marijuana joint in the cockpit of the food truck. Lorenzo turns around to greet Dew.
- Lorenzo: Dew. (*sarcastically*) Thanks for joining us...
- Dew: Yeah. Sorry. I didn't mean to keep you all waiting...
- Lorenzo: Shit. It's not like we were going to go in without you. What took you so long? Did you get lost or something..?
- Dew: No... I ran into an old friend of mine... then we dealt with some trouble along the way... ended up back at her place... and I lost track of time... that's all...

Lorenzo: Oh yeah? Old friend? “Trouble”, huh? Boy you were getting your swerve on, weren’t you?

Dew: Hah. No.

Lorenzo: Really? Ahhh... That sucks... If you were going to be running late, at least you could have gotten some ass then...

Paca: *(sniffing) (sniffing)* Ugh.

Lorenzo: Huh?

Dew: Paca?

Paca: Do you smell that..? That stench... where’s it coming from?

Narrator: Dew immediately is reminded of the sewage stench coming from off his now-dried clothing and is embarrassed, but then plays it off.

Dew: Stench? Ha-ha... *(nervously)* I don’t know what you’re talking about Paca...

Paca: You don’t smell that..? It smells like... sewage... yuck...

Lorenzo: *(sniffing) (sniffing)* Yeah... I smell it too... But are you sure that’s not coming from your... upper lip, Paca?

Paca: Tch. What?! Oh, fuck you, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: Ha-ha-ha... I kid. I kid.

Paca: “Funny”. Hmm. It’s probably just a dead rat somewhere close by...

Dew: Yep. So... Is everything ready to go..?

Paca: Just about...

Dew: Let’s see what you got.

Narrator: Paca walks over to the laptop and then starts typing away on the keyboard. Dew and Lorenzo gather around her. After a few more keyboard strokes, a digital map of the Mesovilla National Bank of Helix pops up on the display screen. Various blinking red dots are also seen scattered across it. The three studied the bank’s digital map layout intently.

Paca: Here we go... As you can see, the jamming devices are still in place.

Dew: Good.

Paca: Would you like to go over the plan one more time?

Dew: It wouldn’t hurt.

Paca: Okay. Let’s go over our roles first. It’ll be You, Lorenzo, and the other two on infiltration. *(then starts handing out ear-pieces to Dew and the others)* ...I’ll be staying behind here monitoring your progress and relaying any crucial information

that's needed. We'll be on a secured line, so there's no need to worry about anyone eavesdropping on our conversation. Lynch will be our getaway driver. Entering through the lobby or back service entrance is a no-go. The insertion point will have to be from the roof. To get there, you'll be using a neighboring building's rooftop and will launch yourself across with these grappling guns... *(then give Dew and the others their grappling guns)*

Lorenzo: Okay. And what's this big distraction you got in mind?

Dew: Yeah, you never did tell us what that was.

Paca: Right. So, I've already hacked into the traffic grid nearby the bank. Once you're all in position, I'll create a traffic jam that will draw any potential attention away from you guys as you're making it across to the bank. With the coast clear, you'll descend from the rooftop ventilation duct into the bank's interior. Once you're inside, I'll then activate the jamming devices. From there, getting to the vault should not be an issue. When everything is wrapped up with that, we'll pull up a few blocks near the back of the bank for retrieval, and then make a clean getaway.

Narrator: Dew nods approvingly.

Lorenzo: What could go wrong? Sounds solid to me.

Dew: Is there anything else?

Paca: *(then turns away from the laptop to face Dew and Lorenzo)*

No. Just whenever you're ready, we'll start the mission.

Lorenzo: I'm ready when you are Dew.

Dew: Hmm. All of a sudden it feels like I forgot something. Nah. Anyway. Let's go do this.

Lorenzo: All right. *(then signals toward the two Aurora Blade gang members sitting down)* You two. On your feet...

Narrator: The two *Aurora Blade* gang members spring to their feet and then start following Lorenzo toward the exit of the food truck.

Dew: I'll let you know when we're in position, Paca.

Paca: Good luck.

Narrator: Dew then gives a farewell gesture to Paca, and exits the food truck along with Lorenzo and the other two. Dew and the others exit the food truck one by one and then make their way to the building adjacent to the Mesovilla National Bank of Helix. After entering a fire escape and ascending it, Dew and the

others eventually reach the rooftop. Once there, Dew and the gang take in their surroundings of the Helix Western Zone skyline and nearby National Bank. Dew then initiates contact with Paca via his earpiece.

Dew: Paca. This is Dew. Do you read me loud and clear? We're in position and ready to go...

Narrator: The scene then cuts to Paca sitting in the food truck monitoring the gang's progress on the laptop.

Paca: I read you loud and clear. Give me a second. *(then starts typing rapidly on the keyboard)* Here comes that well-needed distraction... now...

Narrator: Paca with a single push of a keyboard button then initiates a traffic jam nearby the bank by shutting down its grid. This causes the vehicles in the vicinity to come to a halt, or crash into one another. Horns begin to blare due to the mounted frustrations of the trapped drivers. This grabs the attention of several SWAT TROOPERS on the lower floor of the national bank to go investigate. Paca watches the closed-circuit television feed on her laptop with glee.

Paca: Okay, Dew. The diversion is in place. You're up...

Narrator: The scene cuts back to Dew and the gang on the neighboring building's rooftop.

Dew: You're a doll. Thanks. *(then turns to Lorenzo and the others)* Get ready guys...

Narrator: Lorenzo nods his head in agreement, then pulls out his grappling gun as Dew and the others do too. They then aim their grappling guns toward the national bank rooftop and simultaneously fire them. Their lines zip across and securely attach to the national bank's rooftop. Dew and the gang then fly across the gap between the two buildings and land safely on the other side without being spotted thanks to the ongoing traffic chaos below. Dew takes the lead and quickly locates the ventilation duct. He removes the covering, and one by one the gang enters through the vent descending into the depths of the national bank. Paca while monitoring the gang's advancement, then begins jamming the bank's surveillance and security systems. While roaming around the corridors of the national bank, Dew and the gang would move swiftly avoiding the SWAT TROOPERS on patrol, and when it couldn't be

helped, they would easily and discreetly dispatch those whom they engaged in combat with. After a while, Dew and the gang would finally reach their destination, another room that leads to the vault.

Dew: According to Paca, the vault should be located in the next room from here.

Lorenzo: Sounds about right... (*then turns to face the two Aurora Blade gang members*) Hey. You two stand guard out here. We'll take care of the rest. All right?

Narrator: The two *Aurora Blade* gang members nod their heads in acknowledgment. They then stand guard armed with firearms, as Dew and Lorenzo enter the next room leading to the vault. Once inside, Dew and Lorenzo approach the vault.

Lorenzo: Here we are.

Dew: So far, so good. Time to get down to business...

Narrator: Dew then pulls out a small device and places it on the vault door. Seconds later, it emits a low hum and the vault doors start to open. Dew and Lorenzo then cautiously step into the vault room and are surrounded by stacks of open deposit boxes.

Lorenzo: (*cracking a smile*) Jackpot..!

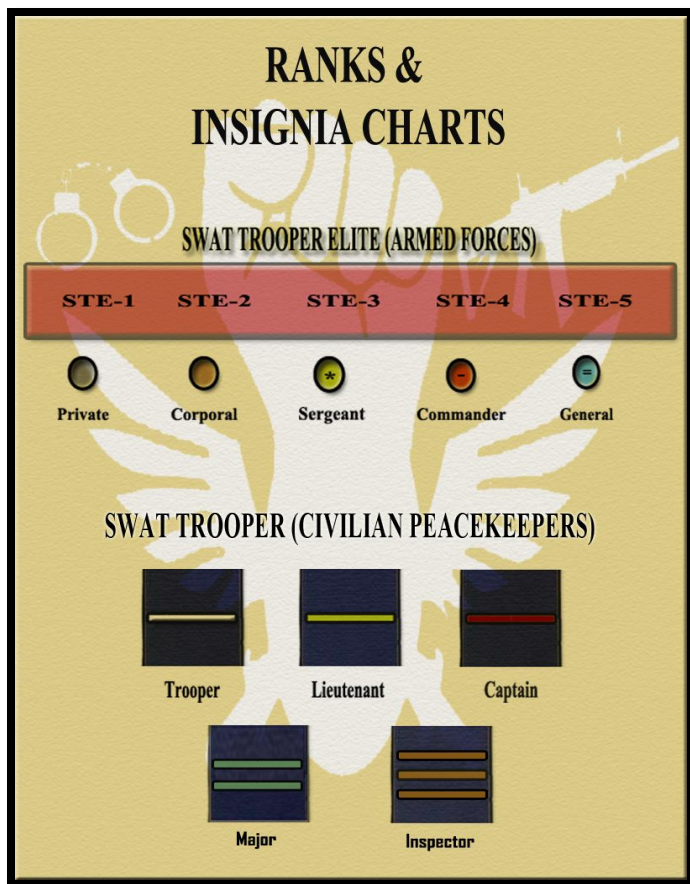
Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo then pull out their bags and begin filling them with all the Wertes' they can. Meanwhile, back in the interior of the food truck, Paca notices on the closed-circuit television feed on the laptop display screen that a horde of SWAT TROOPERS are moving in toward the location where the two *Aurora Blade* gang members are standing guard. She frantically tries to contact Dew and the others over their earpieces.

Paca: Shit! Dew. Lorenzo. You've got incoming company... Over.

Narrator: Lynch who's still sitting in the cockpit of the food truck turns his head around to face Paca.

Lynch: Paca, what's going on?!

Narrator: Paca briefly ignores Lynch, and silently waits for a response from Dew and the gang. She receives no response over the earpiece. Paca looks back at the laptop display screen and notices all her jamming devices are disabled and the bank's surveillance and security systems have been fully restored.



Paca: Oh, no. Fuck! How did this happen?!

Lynch: How did what..?

Paca: Lynch, they're sitting ducks... I've got to go in after them...

Lynch: Paca, what are you doing?! Wait..!

Narrator: Paca in haste, then unholsters her firearm and exits the back of the food truck heading on foot toward the national bank leaving Lynch momentarily confounded. Seconds later, he starts up the food truck, turns the vehicle around, and follows behind her. Back inside the national bank vault, Dew and Lorenzo have just finished loading up their bags with riches and begin to make their exit.

Lorenzo: This went by smoother than expected...

Dew: One of our best heists. I'll contact Paca, and let her know we're on the way... *(then initiate contact with Paca via his*

earpiece) Paca, mission completed. We've got a lot and some more. We're heading back up now. Be ready for retrieval. How are things looking up there? Over.

Narrator: Dew waits for a response over his earpiece, but no response is given. Dew then comes to a stop and furrows his brow. Lorenzo takes notice of this.

Lorenzo: Dew, what's going on?

Dew: Hm. For some reason... she isn't responding. Hold on... (*then tries initiating contact with Paca via his earpiece again*) Paca, are you there? Please respond...

Narrator: A few seconds pass by, and again Dew still receives no response from Paca.

Lorenzo: Well..?

Dew: Nothing. (*frustrated*) Is this thing busted or something..?

Lorenzo: Let me try giving her a call... (*then initiates contact with Paca via his earpiece*) Yo, Paca. It's me, Lorenzo. Can you hear me..? Is everything all right? Over.

Narrator: Lorenzo waits a few seconds and also receives no response either.

Dew: I don't think my earpiece is broken. Neither is yours. Something must have happened... I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about all of this.

Lorenzo: We've got the money now. Let's dip out of here and get back to Paca and Lynch ASAP.

Narrator: Dew nods his head in agreement, and the two then quickly continue making their way toward the exit until suddenly a chorus of gunfire is heard coming from outside of the room. Two loud thumps can be then heard followed by a moment of eerie silence. Dew and Lorenzo place their bags of collected riches on the floor and then draw their weapons as a horde of heavily armed SWAT TROOPERS burst into the room blocking their path.

Dew: It was too good to be true.

Lorenzo: Prepare to fight...

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo in their fighting stance stand surrounded by the horde of SWAT TROOPERS who have their rifles drawn and aimed directly at the two. Wary glances are exchanged as tension fills the air. Then from behind, a figure makes his way to the front of the SWAT TROOPER horde to face Dew and

Lorenzo. It is Sheriff Gwinnett Hepworth who then starts eyeing the two up and down.

Gwinnett: ...At last, we finally meet *Aurora Blade* terrorists.
Howdy. I am Sheriff Hepworth. I'm sure you've heard of me. I most certainly have heard a lot about you!

Dew: I see word gets around quickly about us.

Lorenzo: Hey. Who are you calling a terrorist, you fuckface pig?

Gwinnett: Hoo-hoo-hoo. This one has some fire in him. I like. I like. But let's skip the pleasantries, and get straight to the point. Sorry, but not so sorry to have foiled your attempted bank robbery. You didn't think you would be leaving with all that money so easily, did you? Not on my watch!

Dew: You're just "doing your job", huh? Marching to the beat of our "beloved" Premier's drum...

Gwinnett: It is what I'm paid to do.

Lorenzo: Hah. Go figure. I wouldn't expect anything more from a donut-guzzling dittohead such as yourself.

Gwinnett: Hoo-hoo-hoo... Don't get it twisted. The Premier is not my favorite person, either. Trust me when I say that. I despise his guts. But the law has to be enforced. Plus, I'm ensuring my job security by capturing you, terrorists.

Dew: By "enforcing the law", you mean by putting a boot on the people's necks? Trampling all over their rights! You keep telling yourself that.

Gwinnett: Save it with the moral posturing, boy. You *Aurora Blade* terrorists commit acts of crime hiding behind a façade of "noble causes". You may have some of the citizenry fooled, but not me! You are a crafty bunch I give you that. After all, it takes some skill to hack into the traffic grid and cause all that chaos that you did. Cool distraction. But too bad it didn't amount to much.

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo then give one another a brief curious stare before turning their attention back to Sheriff Hepworth and the horde of SWAT TROOPERS still surrounding them.



Dew: How did you...

Gwinnett: *(then cracks an evil grin)* Wouldn't you like to know? You've been caught like rats in a trap. Hoo-hoo-hoo...

Lorenzo: What the fuck do you mean by that?!

SWAT TROOPER 6: ...Sir. Requesting permission to lay waste to these terrorist lowlives... *(still pointing his rifle at Dew and Lorenzo)*

Gwinnett: Ah. You boys must be getting eager, eh? But the Premier wants them alive. After all, we live in a civilized society. And by golly, they must have their day in court. Although, he didn't say anything about not roughing them up. Hoo-hoo-hoo... This is where I take my leave. Believe it or not, after all these years of being on the force, I still get a little queasy watching

people's skulls getting kicked in. Well... do play nice. Have at it, boys..!

Narrator: As Sheriff Hepworth exits, Dew and Lorenzo then battle the hordes of armed SWAT TROOPERS. Despite the overwhelming numbers, Dew and Lorenzo manage to defeat and render all the SWAT TROOPERS unconscious. The two then snag up their bags of riches and pick up the pace while heading toward the exit. Once on the other side, they find the bloodied and bullet-ridden corpses of the two fallen *Aurora Blade* gang members aside.

Lorenzo: (*soberly*) Damn. They didn't stand a chance... I'm sorry.

Dew: They will be avenged. We'll see to that.

Lorenzo: You're right. We will...

Dew: Hey, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: Hm?

Dew: What the sheriff was hinting at back there... do you think there's a possibility that we might have been compromised..?

Lorenzo: Shit, I don't know Dew... I do know we need to find out what's going on with Paca and Lynch. We can figure all that out later.

Dew: Right. Let's go.

Narrator: The two with their bags of riches in hand then sprint off. As Dew and Lorenzo make their way through the corridors of the national bank, they encounter more SWAT TROOPERS who they easily defeat. However, the longer they remain inside the national bank searching for an escape route, the more they are pursued. While still on the run, Dew and Lorenzo gesture to one another and split up in an attempt to lose their pursuers. Dew eventually makes his way down to the first floor of the national bank and blindly rushes through the area leading to the back service entrance. He burst through the exit finally making it outside. He takes a split second to catch a breather and then continues to make his escape down the alley. Dew zig zags his way through several alleyways

until he sees off in the distance the food truck idly waiting on the other side of a fence.

Dew: *(shouting and signaling to the food truck)* Lynch! Hey! ...Lynch! I'm over here..!

Narrator: Suddenly a series of gunshots go off echoing in the distance. Lynch who is sitting in the cockpit of the food truck immediately speeds off with the tires screeching in the opposite direction leaving Dew stranded.

Dew: *(surprised)* Lynch?! Where are you going?! No. Come back..!

Narrator: Then without warning from behind, a SWAT TROOPER using his rifle's buttstock pops a distracted Dew in the back of his head. This knocks Dew out cold as he falls to the alley ground. Two SWAT TROOPERS are then seen standing over the unconscious Dew.

SWAT TROOPER 7: You got that terrorist bastard. Good job.

SWAT TROOPER 8: Thank you.

SWAT TROOPER 7: The sheriff will be quite pleased with this development. You may have earned yourself a promotion! Now take him away.

SWAT TROOPER 8: Affirmative...

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 7 starts walking off, and then SWAT TROOPER 8 follows behind as he recklessly drags the unconscious Dew by his left ankle.

CHAPTER 4 – A SPEEDY TRIAL

Narrator: An hour passes, and the scene cuts to a dimly lit, warm, and musty small jail cell that is occupied by Lorenzo, Paca, and the still unconscious Dew who is laying on a ragged mattress that sits atop a single metal bed frame firmly fastened to the wall. Paca stands with her back turned to the cell door and Lorenzo is leaning up against the gray-colored cell wall. As the two talk, Dew begins to regain consciousness and then groans as he slowly sits up. His head is still aching from the blow he took that knocked him out.

Dew: Ugh... (*rubbing the back of his head*) Oww...

Narrator: Lorenzo and Paca take notice of the awakening Dew, and then turn their attention to him.

Paca: ...Dew! You're awake.

Lorenzo: Rise and shine buddy.

Dew: Lorenzo? Paca? ...What's... What's going on...? Where... are we?

Lorenzo: We got caught. And you were knocked out after trying to escape from the national bank...

Dew: Ah. That much... I remember. (*still rubbing the back of his head*) Argh. That stings.

Lorenzo: ...Then those SWAT fucks brought us all here to the Helix Western Zone Court & Jailhouse.

Dew: So that's where we are... (*then pats down his pockets*) Let me guess, they confiscated our weapons and the loot?

Lorenzo: Yep.

Dew: Of course, they did. Duh... (*then looks around the room noticing Lynch isn't there*) Hey. Wait. Where's, Lynch..?

Paca: He was the only one who didn't get captured.

Lorenzo: (*whispering to himself*) Lucky fuck...

Dew: Paca, weren't you with Lynch back in the food truck..? Lorenzo and I tried contacting you, but we couldn't get through to the line. What happened?

Paca: I tried contacting you guys too, to warn you about the SWAT TROOPER ambush that was coming your way. But it looks like our line wasn't as secured as I thought it was. Also, all the jamming devices that were in place ended up being disabled... I'm not sure how they did it... how they knew... everything was foolproof... it doesn't make any sense... Ugh. So. Anyway... I left Lynch behind in the food truck trying to reach you both on foot, but I got captured along the way.

Dew: Lynch didn't come after you?

Paca: He did. But I was running so fast trying to get to you guys, I lost him.

Dew: *(then faces Lorenzo)* ...And you?

Lorenzo: After we had split up, I ended up getting cornered myself. I took down a few of those SWAT TROOPERS, but their numbers got the best of me... And here I am too.

Dew: Hmm... I do recall before being knocked out cold on my ass, I saw Lynch and the food truck... I tried getting his attention, but he sped away after some gunshots went off...

Paca: I hope he is okay.

Lorenzo: *(frustrated)* Well... when we do get out of this mess, he won't be after I have a word with him. He could have come back for us. He left us hanging..!

Paca: Now that's not fair. I'm sure Lynch didn't mean to...

Lorenzo: Well, Paca, he did... Where's he now..?

Paca: ...

Lorenzo: Hmph. And we fell right into these fucker's trap.

Paca: Huh? A trap? How..?

Lorenzo: Oh, come on, Paca. Everything was going too perfect... and then all of a sudden, our plans went up in smoke like a blunt on 4/20 day. When has that ever happened to us? They had our number tonight.

Paca: No. There's no way. I don't believe that at all... If anything, this is my fault. I... I must have made an error somewhere in the planning that was exploited. I should have been smarter about this. *(grimly)* I-I

messed up and cost us... (*sigh*) I got the other two killed... Dammit. Guys. I'm sorry.

Dew: Paca, stop that..! (*then gets up off the metal bed frame and walks over to Paca*) Don't be too hard on yourself. You did the best you could... trap or not. But everything is going to be okay. We've been through worse situations before. We'll overcome this together, as we always do... (*then places a comforting hand on her shoulder*) All right?

Paca: Okay. Okay, Dew... You're right. (*then deeply exhales*) I guess it's useless to cry over spilled milk right now due to our current circumstances. It's better to remain focused and do something about it... Thanks for keeping me together.

Dew: No problem... Now, I think we all can agree that we need to figure out a way out of here... because I'm not trying to stick around to see what's in store for us.

Paca: I hear you on that.

Lorenzo: I ain't digging this place either. What's the plan..?

Narrator: A door then can be heard opening down the hallway of the holding area.

Paca: Hm?

Lorenzo: Sounds like we got some company coming our way...

Dew: Yeah. Act natural...

Narrator: The door then shuts. A SWAT TROOPER, along with a janitor—short in stature, with a compact, agile build, medium-brown complexion, and short-cropped black hair—walks down the holding area corridor. The janitor wears a short-sleeve white shirt underneath a green apron, paired with dark pants and tan work boots. He carries a mop, broom, and a set of cleaning supplies. They both pass by several empty open cells until they come to a stop before the one that Dew and the gang occupy.

SWAT TROOPER 9: All right Janitor. Sheriff Hepworth wants these cells cleaned from top to bottom. Give them a good sweep and mop. You can start with this cell first... (*pointing to the open cell across from Dew's*)

Narrator: The Janitor then nods his head in acknowledgment.
 SWAT TROOPER 9: ...As you saw when we were walking down the corridor, those cells are quite a mess. We had a few unruly detainees in here a while ago before they were transported out... fucking disgusting animals...

Janitor: Yes... I'll get right on it.

Narrator: The Janitor's voice instantly catches Dew's attention as if he recognizes it from somewhere.

Dew: *(thinking to himself) That voice... sounds familiar.*
 SWAT TROOPER 9: Oh yeah. Pay no attention to our current "visitors". They won't be here for very long... Ha-ha-ha... Anyway. Do your thing... but don't take too long. I'll be standing guard down the hall on the other side.

Narrator: The Janitor nods to SWAT TROOPER 9 who then turns away and starts walking towards the exit of the holding area.

Janitor: Well, it's time to get down to work... *(sigh)*

Narrator: The Janitor then takes his cleaning supplies enters the open cell across from Dew and the gangs, and begins cleaning. An intrigued Dew glances over at the Janitor.

Dew: Hmm...

Narrator: Meanwhile, Paca is peeking out of the cell and observes SWAT TROOPER 9 exiting the holding area.

Paca: *(whispering) All right. Looks like he's gone, for now.*

Narrator: Dew turns his attention away from the Janitor and back to Lorenzo and Paca.

Dew: *(whispering) Yeah... If we're going to make a break for it, we need to do it now. (then looks around the cell) Let's check our surroundings... the answer may lie there...*

Lorenzo: Dew... *(then whispers) I mean. Damn. Shit. Shh... What about that Janitor..? It's too risky with him around...*

Narrator: As the Janitor is meticulously cleaning up the cell across from them, upon hearing Dew's name mentioned, he dramatically drops his broom to the floor and stops cleaning. Then turns his head peering at the cell across from him.

Janitor: *(thinking to himself)* Dew?! No ...it couldn't be him.
That's impossible...

Narrator: The Janitor hesitates for a moment, then peeks his head out of the cell to see whether SWAT TROOPER 9 is around and steps out approaching Dew's cell inquisitively. Meanwhile, Dew and Lorenzo continue whispering to one another back and forth until the Janitor interjects.

Janitor: *(emotionally)* Could it be..? Dew. Dew Wilder..? Is that... you?

Dew: *(then turns to face the Janitor with a surprised demeanor)* ...Huh? How do you know my...

Janitor: Do you remember me..?



Narrator: Dew then eyes Cooper up and down until he recognizes who the Janitor is.

Dew: Co-Cooper..?

Cooper: Yes, it's me.

Dew: No way. Hah... Of all the places to run into a familiar face. Today has been full of surprises for me. (*then smiles*)

Narrator: Dew and Cooper then embrace one another with a handshake before pulling back.

Cooper: I would have never imagined us meeting up like this again, especially in a place like this... I had always wondered what happened to you after the war. How have you been, buddy?

Dew: Not dead, as you can tell. Ha-ha-ha...

Cooper: That I can see.

Lorenzo: Who's this guy..?

Paca: You two know each other?

Dew: Yes. He's an old friend of mine... from my time in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE.

Cooper: Howdy, ya. (*then gives a friendly wave to Lorenzo and Paca*)

Lorenzo: S'up.

Paca: Hi.

Cooper: Hmm... Now, if I had to take a guess, you and your friends aren't locked up in there because of unpaid parking tickets, huh?

Dew: If I'm going to get in trouble; I'm going all out for a good cause.

Cooper: How valiant. You always were from what I remember... And they definitely don't hold people here in this part of the jailhouse for petty infractions. If I were to take another guess... something tells me that you and your friends are a part of that gang everyone keeps talking about. What is it called again? ...The *Aurora Blade*?

Dew: That's a good guess.

Cooper: Ah. Well, look at you... You went from a grunt to a freedom fighter.

Dew: Thanks for not calling me a “terrorist.” So... How long have you been working here?

Cooper: For far too long. But, it’s an honest living... keeps me busy.

Dew: I always, uh, pictured you starting a musical band.

Cooper: Really..? I was never musically inclined...

Dew: Yeah. You would have called your band, *The Bleach Boys. (then grins)*

Cooper: Tch. Jackass. You got jokes. Ha-ha-ha...

Dew: Sorry. Ha-ha-ha... I couldn’t help myself. It’s all in good humor.

Cooper: I know. That was a good one though. Ha-ha...

Dew: Ha-ha-ha... Are you enjoying that lifetime supply of government cheese?

Cooper: I am! It’s such good shit. Mmm...

Dew: Eww... That shit?! Yuck. What the?!

Cooper: Ha-ha... Okay. Okay. In all seriousness... I see you got yourself in a jam.

Dew: Somewhat...

Cooper: I think I can help. *(then looks around cautiously)*

Dew: How so..?

Cooper: *(determined)* I’m going to get you all out of there.

Dew: Cooper, are you sure? I appreciate it and all... but I’m not trying to get you caught up in our endeavors. And those SWAT TROOPERS, they’ll...

Cooper: I know the risks. Don’t worry about Dew. I’ll be fine.

Dew: Hm. Okay. I trust you. I guess this will be the second time you’ll be saving my ass.

Cooper: Oh. You haven’t forgotten... Hah. Don’t worry about it. What are friends for?

Dew: Thanks...

Narrator: Then the door down the hallway of the holding area opens, and SWAT TROOPER 9 enters. SWAT TROOPER 9 gives Cooper a suspicious glare from afar.

SWAT TROOPER 9: Hey! What are you doing over there..?

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 9 then urgently starts walking down the corridor toward Cooper who tries to appear casual by bending over nearby Dew’s cell to pick up several crumpled-up paper balls. SWAT TROOPER 9 then

comes to a stop a few feet from Cooper as he intently eyes him.

SWAT TROOPER 9: Hey. Did you hear me?

Cooper: I was... *(then rises with several crumpled-up paper balls in hand)* I was picking up this trash here.

SWAT TROOPER 9: *(then looks at the crumbled-up paper balls in Cooper's hand and back up to his face)* Oh. Okay. Forget about that... There's been a change of plans. Cleaning up here can wait. We need you immediately to clean up this mess from an overflowing toilet upstairs. There's shit everywhere. Shit on the windows. Shit on the walls. Goddamn mess!

Cooper: Sure thing... *(then pulls out a small garbage bag from his pocket and places the crumbled-up paper balls into it)*

SWAT TROOPER 9: Come on. Hurry. Hurry. Hurry.

Narrator: Cooper turns away from SWAT TROOPER 9, enters back into the cell across from Dew's grabs his broom, mop, and cleaning supplies, exits the cell, and then gives Dew a reassuring wink before walking off down the holding area corridor. SWAT TROOPER 9 then briefly turns to Dew, Lorenzo, and Paca and gives them a scrutinizing look before turning away and following Cooper. A few moments later, Cooper and SWAT TROOPER 9 both exit the holding area as three other SWAT TROOPERS pass by them entering.

Lorenzo: I sure hope your friend has a good plan for getting us out of here.

Dew: He does... I know it.

Narrator: A few seconds later, the SWAT TROOPER along with two others who are armed with rifles come to a stop in front of Dew's cell.

SWAT TROOPER 10: All right, time to face the music... *(then unlocks and opens the cell door)* You all have a date with the Master Arbitrator. This way.

Paca: I don't like the sound of that...

Narrator: Dew and the gang are handcuffed and then escorted out of the holding area by the two ST Escorts into an empty courtroom. SWAT TROOPER 10 stays behind in

the cell area. Dew, Lorenzo, and Paca along with the two ST Escorts approach the defendant's table and come to a stop. They remain standing.

Lorenzo: ...No jury? No court reporter? No onlookers? No Journalist? I am not liking this setup... Where's my lawyer?

Dew: You're expecting this to be fair?

ST Escort 1: Shhh!

Narrator: Sordid Clymer, Master Arbitrator of the Mesovilla Judiciary, then enters the courtroom from the Judge's door. He lethargically approaches the elevated Judge's bench and then sits down on it.

Bailiff: The Court of Helix Western Zone Criminal Division is now in session, the Honorable Master Arbitrator Sordid Clymer presiding.

Clymer: Bailiff, there won't be any need for swearing-in... What is the reason for this emergency hearing at such a late hour? And why wasn't one of the other Arbitrators summoned to do this..? You would think a man of my stature is above such proceedings by now.

Bailiff: Your Honor, I apologize for the inconvenience. But as requested by Sheriff Hepworth under the orders of Premier Videl, you are to head this trial in closed court.

Clymer: Trial?

Bailiff: Yes, your Honor. This case is *The People of Helix Capital v. The Aurora Blade*. The charges against them are as follows: 3 counts of arson, 7 counts of disturbing the peace, 16 counts of inciting riots, 32 counts of destruction of government property, 84 counts of assault/battery against peacekeepers, 142 counts of first-degree murder of peacekeepers, 51 counts of grand larceny and along with seditious conspiracy.

Paca: We did all of that?!

Lorenzo: Shit. I'm glad somebody's keeping count. I sure haven't been. Hah!

ST Escort 2: (*nudges Lorenzo with his rifle buttstock*) Quiet..!

Clymer: Oh, it's this case... (*then smirks*) This has been a long time in the making. Ah... It's going to be a privilege

presiding over this then. Shall we get to it..? May the first witness proceed to the stand?

ST Escort 1: Euh, your Honorable one...

Clymer: Yes, what is it?

ST Escort 1: About those witnesses...

Clymer: What about them?

Bailiff: As I have been informed, there are no witnesses your honor... none alive or unable to physically appear due to being incapacitated that is.

Clymer: I see... Then how can we have a trial without witnesses? Hmm.... I suppose I could put this off until a later date, or throw this case out entirely... that would be the lawful thing to do.

Lorenzo: ...The "lawful thing" would be to have a jury too.

Clymer: *(slams the gavel down on the sounding square three times)* ...ORDER IN THE COURT!

Lorenzo: I'll have a double cheeseburger, onion rings, and grape soda, Your Honor!

Narrator: Master Arbitrator Clymer looks at Lorenzo unimpressed, as the Bailiff lets out a brief snort-laugh. Master Arbitrator Clymer turns and gives a disdainful look toward the Bailiff.

Clymer: Is there something funny, Bailiff?!

Bailiff: Your Honor, no... *(then clears his throat)*
My apologies...

Lorenzo: ...See, he thought it was funny...

ST Escort 1: Yuck... Grape soda. That gives you smelly burps...

Clymer: *(slams the gavel down on the sounding square twice)*
ORDER IN THE COURT!

ST Escort 1: I'm sorry your Honor.

Clymer: Hm. This court will recess momentarily to make a decision... *(then pretends to rise from the bench, only to sit back down)* Ah-hah! So. Due to the uniqueness of this case, and as acting jury – In the interest of Mesovilla's national security... This court finds you all... GUILTY!!! GUILTY!!! GUILTY!!! Now that's funny! Ha-ha-ha...

Paca: Why am I not shocked...

Dew: That was a "speedy trial".

Lorenzo: ...Guilty!?!

Clymer: It's the only fair verdict! Incurrigibles like you deserve nothing more. You all running around, causing disorder, and spreading falsehoods to promote your terroristic cause will no longer be tolerated. All the SWAT TROOPERS and other innocents who have fallen at your hands finally get their retribution with this ruling. Justice has prevailed. You, *Aurora Blade*, have lost!

Lorenzo: Oh yeah?! You can take this kangaroo court of yours and shove it!

Clymer: Hah. Normally, this number of offenses would get you committed to multiple life sentences in the labor camps. However, I think that would be too light of a sentence for the likes of you... They say, "Little thieves are hanged, but great ones escape." Well, not today... I instead sentence you all to be put to death, by firing squad! As you, *Aurora Blade* scourge breathe your last breaths, just know that all your disobedience was for naught. SWAT TROOPERS, you may proceed with the execution.

ST Escort 2: Eh... In the courtroom, your honor?!

Clymer: You heard me. Judgment has been passed. Do it! Now..!

ST Escort 2: Yes, your honor...

Narrator: The two ST Escorts for a moment are reluctant, but then are about to execute Dew and the gang until Cooper suddenly appears behind them swinging his mop with all his might toward their heads. He connects whacking the two ST Escorts unconscious as they violently collapse to the floor. The frantic Bailiff runs out of the courtroom as Master Arbitrator Clymer remains sitting on the bench in shock. Cooper then walks over to the relieved trio with handcuff keys in hand.

Cooper: Missed me..?

Dew: ...Cooper, it took you a while.

Cooper: It's all about timing, you know... *(then starts uncuffing Dew and the others)*

Dew: Thanks. *(then rubs his uncuffed wrists)*

Clymer: How unjust..!

Cooper: I also brought you all your gear from the evidence room...

Narrator: Cooper then points to the evidence storage box at his feet. Dew, Lorenzo, and Paca with glee then quickly retrieve their weapons, *Elementome Bracelets*, *Elementomes*, and bags of stolen riches from it. During this, Master Arbitrator Clymer tries to sneak off, but Lorenzo runs up, grabs, and throws him over the bench onto the courtroom floor. Lorenzo then grabs Clymer by his shirt's collar lifting him halfway off the floor.

Lorenzo: ...Court is now in session. I sentence you to an ass beating...

Clymer: Ugh! W-w-wait... Have mercy..! (*shaking with fear*)

Lorenzo: Not feeling so high and mighty now, huh? (*shaking Clymer*)

Clymer: If you-u-u-u kill me, you won't get away with it.

Dew: Do you think your Premier cares about what happens to you..?

Narrator: Suddenly, more armed SWAT TROOPERS burst into the courtroom and surround Dew and the others.

SWAT TROOPER 10: Put down Master Arbitrator Clymer, right this instant!

Narrator: Lorenzo throws the frightened Clymer to the courtroom floor. Dew, Lorenzo, Cooper, and Paca then get into a fighting stance with their weapons drawn.

SWAT TROOPER 11: Trying to escape?

Dew: That's the idea.

SWAT TROOPER 11: Not going to happen... You're surrounded. Give yourselves up *Aurora Blade*..! (*pointing his rifle at Dew and the others*)

Paca: Not happening.

Lorenzo: Bring it on.

Cooper: Yeah. Let's mop the floor with these guys...

Dew: (*then confusingly looks at Cooper who has a mop in hand*) Cooper... Are you seriously going to use a mop?

Cooper: Well, yes. Why is there a problem?

Dew: I mean... it's a mop.

Cooper: Well. It laid out those two guys, didn't it? ...I can use a broom instead if you like..? Let's sweep 'em up!

Dew: Wow...

Cooper: Hey, don't judge. You're using a shower rod for a weapon.

Dew: Tch. It's not a shower rod, Cooper. It's a bo staff..!

Narrator: Dew then leaps up into the air and strikes two SWAT TROOPERS with his bo staff swatting them aside. Then the chaos ensues as the remaining SWAT TROOPERS try to swarm Dew and the gang who manage to overpower them intensely ending the battle. Dew and the gang stand in triumph after knocking all the SWAT TROOPERS unconscious.

Dew: You're not bad with that mop there...

Cooper: You're pretty handy yourself with that shower rod, eh, I mean bo staff.

Narrator: Dew and the gang then turn their attention back to Master Arbitrator Clymer who is now standing to the side. Lorenzo angrily approaches him.

Lorenzo: I'm not finished with you just yet...

Clymer: Oh? On the contrary, this is where things start to get interesting.

Lorenzo: *(stopping mid-step)* Huh?

Clymer: I will not allow you to make a mockery of this court.

Lorenzo: What are you babbling about..?

Clymer: He warned me that a situation like this might come up... Well then—let's see if his weapon really works.

Dew: "His" weapon..?

Narrator: Master Arbitrator Clymer pulls out of his pocket a vial and then injects himself in the neck with it.

Clymer: Heh-heh-heh... you've done it now... *(then throws the empty vial aside)*

Lorenzo: What the hell did you just do?!

Clymer: *(starts writhing in pain)* S-S-S-SILENCE in... the COURT! Order!! ORDER!!! *(then vomits)* Ha-ha-ha... Uggggggggggghhhhhh...

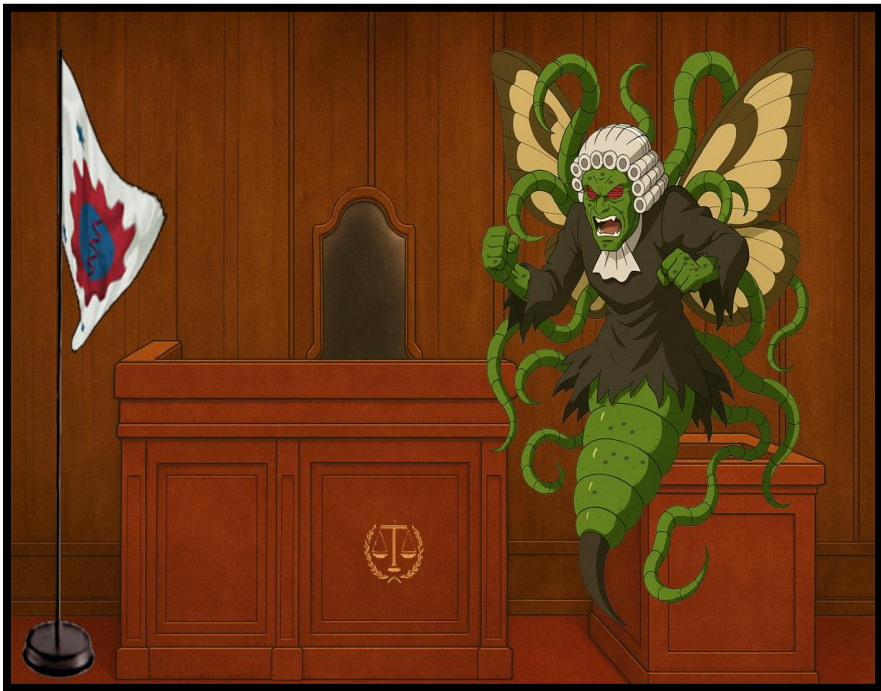
Paca: What's wrong with him?!

Lorenzo: I don't know...

Dew: ?!

Cooper: Eww... That doesn't look good... You might want to go see a doctor about that...

Narrator: Black boils then erupt across Master Arbitrator Clymer's flesh as he convulses in agony. His body twists and mutates, limbs elongating, wings bursting from his back, and a segmented tail curling beneath him—until he emerges as a grotesque scorpion-moth hybrid, pulsing with unnatural energy. Hovering above Dew and the others, the now monstrous Clymer glares down, eyes blazing with rage and madness.



Clymer: ...The DeAd... CRY ...OUT!!! JUsTICE will... Be... DELIVERED!!!

Lorenzo: What the hell is this?!

Clymer: Your sentence... IS... DEATH!!! ARRRRGGGGHHH!!!

Narrator: With a guttural roar, the mutated Clymer dives—his barbed telson snapping downward like a venom-tipped gavel of death. Dew and the gang leap aside just in time, the strike crashing into the courtroom

floor with explosive force, splintering the polished wood like fragile glass. Loose papers erupt into the air, caught in the gust of his furious wings, as the battle ignites. Clymer attacks with relentless ferocity—swinging his elongated limbs with lethal precision, wings beating violently as he fills the chamber with chaos. But Dew and the others hold their ground, dodging and countering blow after blow, gradually chipping away at the monstrosity's strength. Finally, one decisive strike lands. Clymer lets out a strangled, echoing howl and crashes to the ground in a spasmodic, flailing descent. His grotesque form hits the floor with a sickening thud, green ichor oozing from his wounds. The team watches in stunned silence as his body begins to writhe and melt—flesh sloughing off in clumps, wings shriveling, and segments of his mutated exoskeleton collapsing inward. In mere moments, all that remains is a steaming, stinking puddle of viscous green sludge. The courtroom falls deathly quiet. Dew and the others exchange wary glances, their breaths still heavy—haunted by the horrifying truth that this airborne judicial terror was once a man.

Cooper: *(backing away, eyes wide as he scans the chamber)*

Okay... that isn't normal. What just happened..?

Paca: *(jaw clenched, staring at the twisted mess of what used to be Clymer)* What did he do... to himself?

Lorenzo: Fuck if I know...

Narrator: Dew stands frozen, his eyes still locked on the mutated Clymer remains. Lorenzo notices the look on Dew's face and steps in close, his voice lowered with concern.

Lorenzo: Dew, you okay..?

Dew: *(thinking to himself)* There's no way this is a coincidence... it can't be that... no way...

Lorenzo: Dew?

Dew: *(snapping out of it, voice a little unsteady)* Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Just... wasn't expecting that.

Lorenzo: Shit. None of us was...

Paca: You don't see that every day...

Cooper: Freaky...

Lorenzo: You ain't lying. But enough about that—let's blow this joint before we run into any more trouble.

Dew: Right...

Cooper: *(hesitating, then stepping forward with purpose)* ...Hold up. You guys go on ahead.

Dew: *(turning sharply)* What? Cooper, I'm not leaving you in here.

Cooper: *(placing a hand on Dew's shoulder, calm but firm)* I don't plan on sticking around either. I've got an idea—I'll create a distraction, buy us enough time to escape. Go on ahead. I'll catch up...

Narrator: Dew locks eyes with Cooper and gives a nod. Cooper cracks a quick, defiant grin and jogs toward the side exit near the clerk's bench. Lorenzo and Paca move quickly, slipping through the main courtroom doors—boots echoing against the marble floor as they vanish into the dim hallway beyond. Before departing, Dew lingers for a moment, glancing back one last time at the mutated remains of Master Arbitrator Clymer. The faint hum of flickering light fixtures buzzes overhead.

Dew: *(softly, to himself)* ...SKT.

Narrator: With that, Dew turns and quickly follows the others out of the courtroom.

CHAPTER 5 -UP IN FLAMES

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Paca rush through the Helix Western Zone Court & Jailhouse evading the SWAT TROOPERS in the area and eventually find an exit to a stairway. Meanwhile, in another holding area of the court & jailhouse, the cell doors suddenly open, releasing all the prisoners. Then the alarm system starts blaring and red lights flash. Mayhem erupts as the now-freed prisoners run wild. Amidst the turmoil, several SWAT TROOPERS immediately head to the holding area and attempt to quell the situation but are overwhelmed by the escaping prisoners. Some of the SWAT TROOPERS are forced to retreat as others are laid out. Cooper now entering the stairway, re-groups with Dew and the others as they continue their descent. Midway down, Paca suddenly feels dizzy and starts to slow down. She then clutches onto the railing for support.

Paca: *(placing her hand on her forehead)* Ugghh...

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper who are ahead take notice of this, and come to a stop. They turn back around concerned and check up on Paca.

Dew: What's going on?

Lorenzo: Hey, Paca. Are you okay? *(then places his hand on her shoulder)* You're not looking too good...

Narrator: The three stand silently for a moment observing Paca until she brushes off her discomfort.

Paca: *(regaining her composure)* No. Mmm... I'm... I'm fine.

Dew: Are you sure?

Paca: Yeah... I just got a little dizzy all of a sudden... Weird. But it's nothing... I'm all good. There's no time to stop now. Let's get out of here...

Lorenzo: All right.

Narrator: As Dew and the gang are about to continue with their descent, a nearby door swings open. They're confronted by a startled SWAT TROOPER 9.

SWAT TROOPER 9: What the?! So, you've escaped too... *(then draws his baton)* Just hold it right there... *(then notices Cooper)* ...Hey, Janitor, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be cleaning up all that shit everywhere. Get back to work.

Cooper: Do it yourself. I quit!

SWAT TROOPER 9: What? Ohhh... You're with them?!

Cooper: Yup.

SWAT TROOPER 9: You disgusting terrorist collaborator!

Dew: Okay. We don't have time for this... *(then draws his bo staff)* Step aside.

SWAT TROOPER 9: You're not going anywhere.

Lorenzo: Wanna bet?

SWAT TROOPER 9: Prepare to answer for your crimes. Arrggghhh!

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 9 then desperately tries to assault Dew and the gang, but gets disarmed during the scuffle. His baton is sent clattering down the stairs as he is forcefully knocked into a nearby wall. The defeated and humiliated SWAT TROOPER 9 is left sprawled out on the stairway and gasps for breath before passing out. Cooper then kneels over SWAT TROOPER 9 and starts checking his pockets.

Dew: Cooper, what are you doing..?

Cooper: I'm looking for his key card... We'll need access to the parking garage. My card won't work... but his will. It'll be our best bet out of here...

Dew: Good thinking.

Cooper: Ah... I found it... *(finds the parking garage key card and then takes it)* All right... Let's go!

Narrator: The four then continue down the stairway toward the parking garage. Sometime later, the now exhausted Dew and gang eventually reach the parking garage as they stumble forward from the stairway exit. They then take a moment to catch their breaths before continuing with the escape.

Cooper: *(voice strained)* We... made it... *(huff)* *(puff)*

Dew: Finally... *(huff)* *(puff)* Whew... *(then wipes off the sweat from his brow)*

Lorenzo: That... *(huff) (puff)* ...that was a... *(huff) (puff)* workout...

Paca: Tell me... *(huff) (puff)* ...about it...

Dew: What now..?

Cooper: We'll take one of the squad cars... *(then clears his throat)* There are always keys left in them... Follow me...

Narrator: With Cooper in the lead, Dew, Lorenzo, and Paca follow but stop in their tracks when two SWAT TROOPERS are seen approaching them in the distance with their rifles drawn.

SWAT TROOPER 8: ...HALT! *(pointing his rifle at Dew and the others)*

Cooper: Grr.

Lorenzo: Again, with this shit.

Narrator: The two SWAT TROOPERS then come to a stop several feet away from Dew and the gang with their rifles still pointed at them.

Dew: Just when you think we're in the clear...

SWAT TROOPER 12: Give yourselves up. There's nowhere to run. *(still pointing his rifle at Dew and the others)* It's over...

Narrator: Suddenly, the headlights of a nearby parked car turn on blinding the two SWAT TROOPERS. The car engine revs and then speeds toward them. The car hits the two SWAT TROOPERS sending them flying into the air. Seconds later, the two SWAT TROOPERS come crashing back down to the ground. The car then stops in front of Dew and the gang, and the driver's seat window begins lowering revealing Rena in the cockpit.

Rena: How's it going, Dew..?

Dew: *(surprised)* Rena?!

Lorenzo: Who's this..?

Rena: Get in before more reinforcements show up.

Dew: But how the—

Rena: Well, just don't stand there. Come on! Get in!

Narrator: Dew and the gang waste no time and then hop into Rena's car just before more SWAT TROOPERS storm into the parking garage. Rena's car then immediately speeds off as the SWAT TROOPERS begin opening fire

on it. Moments later, the gunfire ceases as the car is too far off in the distance. A visibly frustrated Sheriff Hepworth hastily enters the parking garage and comes to a stop. The SWAT TROOPERS stand silent and uncertain. Sheriff Hepworth glances around the parking garage and then looks down at SWAT TROOPER 8 writhing on the ground muttering to himself.

SWAT TROOPER 8: P-p-promotion... Ugh... *(then passes out)*

Narrator: Sheriff Hepworth shakes his head in disgust and then looks off into the distance toward the parking garage entryway. He quietly stands there for another moment and then grits his teeth.

Gwinnett: Those varmints got away. Damn! That fuckin' Premier will have my head on a platter for this, for sure... I ain't working in no stinking labor camp for meager pay... noooooo sir... *Aurora Blade*, you're MINE..!

Narrator: Now determined, Sheriff Hepworth then walks toward another section of the parking garage while ignoring the still-silent SWAT TROOPERS standing nearby. The scene cuts to Dew and friends, who are speeding down a desolate highway after escaping from the court & jailhouse. Dew is sitting in the front passenger seat as Lorenzo, Paca, and Cooper are in the back.

Paca: That was a close one...

Cooper: *(relieved)* We made it.

Narrator: Lorenzo then turns around and looks through the car's rear window scanning for any signs of danger.

Rena: *(driving)* ...Interesting line of work you do, Dew. Quite the "non-profit"...

Dew: You make it sound like it's a bad thing.

Rena: *(driving)* I didn't mean it like that. I'm surprised that's all...

Dew: Rena, I'm glad to see you again and all... but how did you know where we were? I don't recall ever mentioning to you that I was with the *Aurora Blade*.

Rena: *(driving)* For starters, you left a folded piece of paper on my couch—with stick figure drawings and the

words “Me and my *Aurora Blade* buddies” written across the top... and a heart next to it, no less—laying out what looked like a full-blown heist.

Dew: Oooh. Damn. I knew I forgot something... So that’s what it was. Ha-ha... Ah.

Rena: (*driving*) I discarded it... so no worries...

Lorenzo: (*then turns his attention away from the car’s rear window to face Dew*) ...So this is the friend you were with earlier.

Narrator: Dew then gives Lorenzo a faint smile.

Rena: (*driving*) ...To confirm my suspicions, I had decrypted the SWAT TROOPERS scanners and overheard that you guys were captured after attempting to rob the national bank... I just couldn’t stand by and let you rot away in jail... So now here we are.

Dew: You’re full of surprises today, Rena... but thanks.

Cooper: Yes. Much appreciated...

Paca: We wouldn’t have made it without you.

Rena: (*driving*) You’re welcome...

Dew: (*slightly suspicious*) But how did you get inside the court & jailhouse parking garage? How’d you know where we would be exactly..?

Rena: I just drove in... the security was surprisingly lacking. Then again, I guess that’s what happens when there are prisoners on the loose... I overheard everything on the scanner.

Dew: Right.

Rena: I assume you guys had something to do with letting the prisoners loose..?

Cooper: That was me... (*then smiles*)

Rena: (*driving*) Clever cover...

Lorenzo: Hey lady. Could you drive a little faster, please..?

Rena: (*driving and glances at the rearview mirror*) This “lady” has a name...

Dew: Yeah, Lorenzo. Come on.

Lorenzo: Okay. Okay. My bad. I didn’t mean to come off rude. I’m sorry, and thanks for saving our asses back there... But please do understand our situation here... And Dew, who is she to you again..?

Dew: She's my Sifu.

Lorenzo: Huh? ...“Seafood”?

Dew: No. Ha-ha... S-i-f-u... It means “teacher.” She's the one who taught me Bōjutsu.

Lorenzo: You've never mentioned your teacher before to any of us...

Dew: Well, now, you know. Anyway. Allow me to introduce my friends to you.... Rena, he's Lorenzo. (*then gestures toward Lorenzo*) He and I are co-leaders of the *Aurora Blade*... (*then gestures toward Paca*) She's Paca; she handles the intel, mission planning & briefings... (*then gestures toward Cooper*) ...and this is Cooper. He's an old war buddy and someone who I happen to reunite with tonight as well.

Rena: (*driving*) It's nice to formally meet you all...

Lorenzo: Same here...

Paca: Hiya.

Cooper: ...Likewise, lady-friend of Dews.

Lorenzo: (*then turns around to look through the rear window*) ...I guess we're in the clear...

Paca: That's a relief.

Lorenzo: Hmm. Yeah. But it's odd how there's no traffic... Or pursuit chopper or squad cars following us.

Paca: Maybe they were more focused on re-capturing the escaped prisoners than coming after us..?

Lorenzo: Maybe...

Cooper: I know there's a lot of excitement going on at the moment, Dew... but have you stayed in touch with anyone from the unit? I haven't heard from any of them in years. How have they been doing? How's your friend, Hoplyn?

Dew: Oh... Cooper... she's... uhh... they're...

Narrator: As the car continues speeding down the desolate highway that seems endless, suddenly a massive tank appears from behind roaring in the distance. This catches the party's attention.

Paca: ...A tank?!

Lorenzo: They're going all out to get to us...

Dew: Cooper, hold that thought. We have bigger things to worry about at the moment...

Rena: (*driving*) Hold on, everyone! I'll try to lose it...

Narrator: The tires screech against the asphalt as the car accelerates trying to evade the approaching tank from its rear. As the car races down the highway, the pursuing tank menacingly trains its cannon upward until it fades into the distance. There is a momentary collective sigh of relief from Dew and the others. Suddenly, the tank's cannon unleashes a devastating blast that hits the bridge's upper section causing chunks of the structure to hurl to the ground. Rena seeing the newly formed barricade ahead, quickly deaccelerates the car as everyone braces themselves. The car swerves off to the side avoiding crashing into the barricade and then comes to a stop. Everyone in the vehicle takes a moment to regain their bearings.

Lorenzo: Fucckkk...

Dew: Is... everyone all right..? Rena?

Rena: (*still gripping the steering wheel tightly*) Yeah. I'm fine...

Cooper: I'm good here, buddy...

Paca: I'm still in one piece too.

Narrator: Meanwhile, the massive tank's engine grows louder as it closes in on them.

Lorenzo: Damn. The road is barricaded... and that tank is getting closer...

Rena: Ah, shoot. We'll have to get out and make a run for it...

Dew: Either that, or we'll take it on.

Rena: What..? Excuse me?

Dew: Enough running away. We'll stand our ground.

Cooper: That's pretty hardcore.

Paca: That's Dew for you. He's always daring...

Rena: Daring? Or stupid. Dew... I know I've taught you many things. You're pretty skillful and all... But that is a tank. You'll get killed.

Dew: Someone once told me, "Be an Eagle and fly. Don't be the worm that crawls on its belly, and then complains when it's being stepped on."

Rena: Oh, geez. Did you get a head injury or something?! It's a TANK!

Dew: Meh. But we fought a freakin' giant sewer leech earlier. This will be nothing.

Lorenzo: You guys fought what?!

Rena: That was different! This is crazy... (*shaking her head in disbelief*) Where did I go wrong..?

Cooper: Dew, your lady-friend, has a point...

Rena: Thank you, Cooper.

Cooper: But there's no turning back now... I'm with you.

Rena: (*disbelief*) Really!?!

Lorenzo: Fuck it. I'm down too. Let's take it to these bastards. ...You ready to do this, Dew?

Dew: Always...

Paca: Lead the way, boss.

Rena: What?! No. No. No. Stop!

Dew: Let's go...

Rena: Dew, guys, hold on a second... Wait! Ugh... Unbelievable...

Narrator: Dew and the others exit the vehicle as Rena reluctantly does so too. The tank's treads rattle the ground as it approaches them and then comes to a complete stop 12 feet away. The tank hatch opens, and Sheriff Hepworth appears with a megaphone in hand.

Gwinnett: (*turns on the megaphone and speaks into it*) Shoo we! You *Aurora Blade* don't disappoint. Hoo-hoo-hoo...

Lorenzo: Oh. It's this clown of a sheriff again...

Gwinnett: (*speaking into the megaphone*) ...You've caused quite a mess back there, releasing all those prisoners... I don't know what you did to the Master Arbitrator, but you'll pay for that. It's the end of the road *Aurora Blade*!

Dew: Let's finish this...

Rena: Are you guys sure about this?

Cooper: If we end up dying here, at least I'll be in good company.

Rena: Ugh...

Lorenzo: It's ass-kicking time.

Narrator: Dew and the party then draw their weapons and get into a fighting stance.

Gwinnett: *(still speaking into the megaphone)* Good. You're not running. Since my peacekeepers couldn't deal with you and your "merry men" properly, I'll be handling this myself. You should have made it easy on yourselves and just surrendered when you had the chance... But I'm okay with bringing you all in dead and cold... Whatever gets the job done... It's time to DIE STREET VERMIN! Yee-haw!!! *(then cuts off the megaphone and closes the tank hatch)*



Narrator: The fight begins as Sheriff Hepworth accelerates the tank toward Dew and the party, attempting to run them over. Sheriff Hepworth misses as they evade

the rush. Dew and the party then split up into separate groups running around and attacking the tank from different spots. A frustrated Sheriff Hepworth fires off a fusillade of missiles at them only to constantly miss, hitting parts of the highway and further damaging it. Seeing an opening, Dew takes advantage of the tanks' misfires by deflecting one of the missiles back at it with his bo staff. From the interior of the tank, a wide-eyed Sheriff Hepworth sees the incoming missile and utters his last words to himself.

Gwinnett:

Hoo boy..!

Narrator:

Dew and the party retreat to a safe distance as the missile strikes the tank. It instantly erupts into an enormous explosion, killing Sheriff Hepworth. Flaming debris is sent into the air, then rains back to the ground. The force of the blast also obliterates the barricade that once blocked Dew and his friends' exit. From afar, Dew and his party stand triumphant but tired from the battle observing the smoking, seared, and mangled tank wreckage.

Cooper:

TOASTY!!!

Rena:

(astonished) Wow... We did it! I-I can't believe it...

Dew:

You should never doubt your skills. After all, I did learn from the best. *(then smirks)*

Rena:

That you did, and it shows...

Paca:

We won't have to worry about him anymore.

Lorenzo:

Yeah. You could say, his career went up in flames...
Heh.

Cooper:

I guess we're done here...

Dew:

(then nods his head in agreement) We should get going before any more SWAT TROOPERS arrive.

Rena:

Way ahead of you...

Narrator:

Rena followed by Dew and the others quickly get back into the car, and then drive off as the sound of an approaching fire truck alarm blares in the distance. An hour passes, and the scene cuts to the Situation Room of the Executive Mansion Estate. The room is dark and Zircon, Killbin, Sherwin, and several

staff members are sitting around a large circular table in the middle. A spotlight hangs overhead lighting it. As Zircon sits at the head of the table, Peoria is standing guard to his left side. Zircon raises his hand gesturing to begin the meeting.

- Zircon: Thank you everyone for assembling here on such short notice. I hope there is good news to be shared. But before we commence with the report... (*then faces Sherwin*) It's nice to have you back with us again, Uncle Sherwin. I hope the time off helped you heal.
- Sherwin: Yes. Yes, it did immensely. It's great to be back.
- Zircon: Good to hear. Now, Killbin, you may proceed with your report.
- Killbin: Yes, sir... It has been confirmed that the *Aurora Blade* members who were apprehended earlier this evening did escape SWAT TROOPER custody. They and a handful of other prisoners to be exact. Sheriff Hepworth who was operating a tank was killed during pursuit trying to recapture the *Aurora Blade* members...
- Narrator: Sherwin and the staff members then exchange surprised glances when hearing this. Meanwhile, Zircon remains unfazed as his hands are clenched resting on the table.
- Killbin: ...The *Aurora Blade* somehow managed to destroy the tank... This act caused several substantial structural damages to the Machesney Bridge in Helix's Western Zone... But thankfully, there were no civilian casualties reported.
- Zircon: That sheriff was useless... a total failure til the very end... Tsk tsk tsk. And what of the media? Have they learned about what transpired tonight?
- Killbin: No, sir. They remain in the dark.
- Zircon: Good. Please continue.
- Killbin: Also, there was one other casualty... Master Arbitrator Clymer. His body was discovered in the courtroom. Well, what seemed to be left of it... There was nothing left of him... just a puddle of flesh.

Narrator: While everyone in the room then gives one another concerned glances, Zircon briefly looks away and towards the floor as he makes a chin-stroking gesture. Sherwin then looks over in Zircon's direction and takes note of his reaction. Peoria is still standing guard on Zircon's left side.

Zircon: (*thinking to himself*) *So he gave it a try, and it didn't work... Grrr... Dammit!*

Killbin: Sir..?

Zircon: Oh... (*then stops looking at the floor and directs his attention back to Killbin*) It's nothing. What else?

Killbin: As we speak, there's a toxicology test being run on his remains. Hopefully, this doesn't lead to some sort of public health threat. Dealing with the *Aurora Blade* is enough as it is. Shouldn't we involve Burgomasters Deilli, Brighthoof, Saghe, and, Ure along with Sene-schal Rahmer of Helix to assist us in this matter?

Zircon: Why?! Deilli is probably too busy stuffing his face with a Jill sandwich, and Rahmer's out there, running one of his nursing homes into the ground. There will be no need to involve any of them, especially those two useless husks.

Killbin: ...Jill sandwich, sir?

Zircon: Don't mind that. Is that all, Killbin..?

Killbin: There are no further reports, sir...

Zircon: Thank you. It seems as we continue to deal with the *Aurora Blade's* terroristic activities, replacements are in order for the new heads of the Department of Justice & War, the judiciary, and the Sheriff of Helix Capital. But with that aside for the moment... It is evident, the *Aurora Blade* situation does need to be handled. We've tolerated their shenanigans long enough. It's time to put an end to this.

Narrator: Everyone at the table then becomes intrigued by what they're hearing.

Zircon: It is time we take it to the *Aurora Blade*. Hit them on their home turf...

Killbin: But how? With what intel, sir? We know nothing about their base of operations, or even who their members are.

Zircon: But you would be wrong about all that, my friend... I know though. *(then presses a button on a nearby desktop intercom unit and speaks into it)* Escort him in...

Narrator: A door opens and Lynch being followed by a SWAT TROOPER enters the room. The door then shuts behind them. Sherwin immediately recognizes Lynch and becomes frantic.

Sherwin: Gulp! I remember you..! H-h-he's one of those terrorists. ...Why is he here!?!

Zircon: Ha-ha... Calm down, Uncle! Take a breather... Mr. Arroyo is working for us.

Sherwin: What!?!

Narrator: All the staff members are then left in shock while Killbin feels uneasy after hearing this revelation.

Killbin: Sir, he is... your mole?

Zircon: Yes.

Killbin: How long has this been going on..?

Zircon: Mr. Arroyo has recently come under my employment. He has been quite detrimental in providing us with useful intel on the *Aurora Blade's* activities...

Narrator: The staff members curiously maintain their attention on Zircon. Lynch remains standing silently off to the side.

Sherwin: And what does this intel consist of..?

Zircon: A great many things... but more importantly the location of their base of operations. The *Aurora Blade* has been using an abandoned dissident's fort, leftover from the days of the *Great Liberation*, as their base of operations deep within Festoon Forest. It's no wonder why they've been undetected until now... *(then deviously grins)* The *Aurora Blade's* next intended target will be the Mesovilla National Mint. They plan on hitting that up anytime within the next three days. Their co-leaders, unknowingly, will be walking right into our trap. Once they've been engaged and

disposed of, a raid on the fort will then commence shortly thereafter.

Killbin: Sir, are we bringing the rest of the gang in?

Zircon: No. There will be no prisoners taken.

Killbin: Sir, why are we raiding their compound then?

Zircon: ...Just for sport.

Killbin: For sport..?

Zircon: Correct. Then once enough blood has been spilled, the terrorist nuisance will be wiped out in one fell swoop by four bomber jets and their payload. Followed up by my tea and nap time...

Killbin: Sir, uh... don't you think that's convoluting things and a bit overkill? Festoon Forest is our nation's treasure! How will we explain to the public the destruction of the forest; and the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands there?



Zircon: Ha-ha-ha... Oh, this is the beautiful part of the plan. There are gas lines that surround the compound,

which are used to generate power there. We can simply say that the terrorists blew themselves up, knowing they were close to being defeated.

Sherwin: ...And the public will believe such a story too. Genius.

Killbin: Reconsider this, sir. What about the wildlife..? ...The trees? ...The innocent people there?!

Zircon: ...Innocent people? No one is innocent these days, Killbin. Were the New Havenporters innocent?

Killbin: ...

Zircon: Yes, I thought so... As for the wildlife, we're preventing overpopulation, and those trees; well, they were eventually going to come down anyway...

Killbin: This is wrong! Sir, please...

Zircon: Wrong? Hah... But this is for the greater good.

Killbin: But, sir!

Zircon: That's enough, Killbin. I am the government! What I say, goes.

Killbin: (*begrudgingly*) ...Of course, sir. I apologize...

Zircon: ...Once the *Aurora Blade* has been taken care of, peace will be restored in our capital and throughout the country... and it'll be all thanks to the invaluable contributions from Mr. Arroyo.

Narrator: A grateful Sherwin then turns his chair to face Lynch.

Sherwin: Young man, thank you for choosing to be on the right side of history. It looks like I was wrong about you. Your actions are brave and commendable...

Narrator: Sherwin along with the staff members then applaud Lynch expressing their gratitude. Lynch nods his head.

Zircon: But for now, we wait until the *Aurora Blade* makes their next move... In the meantime, since the media will be fishing around for information about the events that took place earlier tonight... (*then turns to face Killbin*) Killbin, have the press secretary inform the media that it was a construction accident.

Killbin: Yes, sir...

Zircon: Going forward, I will be increasing the security detail of all high-ranking officials within the administration, and surveillance of all movement. This is being done

for your safety and also in the interest of national security. As mentioned before, regarding the duties of the Department of Justice & War, I will oversee it from now on. It seems that I am the only one here capable of handling such responsibilities. Also... a new Master Arbitrator for the judiciary and the Sheriff of Helix Capital will be selected at a later date. With that said, that will be all. Meeting adjourned.

Narrator:

All the staff members then rise from their seats, and one by one start leaving the Situation Room except for Lynch and the SWAT TROOPER. Peoria remains standing guard next to the sitting Zircon's left side. A conflicted Killbin briefly looks back at Zircon before exiting the situation room.

Zircon:

Mr. Arroyo, you've done well tonight. Thank you again for putting our nation's security before anything else. This is just the first step in righting your wrongs. You've taken quite the risk of betraying your friends though.

Lynch:

They're not my friends, and it's the right thing to do. The *Aurora Blade* has lost its way. Innocent lives were being destroyed due to their recklessness.

Zircon:

And together, very soon that will all come to an end. And as promised, you and your significant other will have a fresh start... but as long as you continue doing your part for us.

Lynch:

That hasn't and will not change, Premier Videl.

Zircon:

Very good. Now, you may want to go run off... I am sure the *Aurora Blade* members will become more suspicious of your absence. Keep up the good work...

Narrator:

Zircon then rises from his chair, and smiles as he extends his hand towards Lynch who then shakes it before exiting the room along with the SWAT TROOPER. Meanwhile, Sherwin is seen hastily walking down the hallway of the Executive mansion and then entering the empty dimly lit crockery room. He shuts and locks the door behind him. The brown-trimmed room features a collection of various tableware from plates and utensils to glassware on display. Sherwin pulls a

flip phone from his blazer's inner pocket and then begins dialing numbers onto it. He brings the flip phone up to his face, with the receiver lightly pressed against his right ear. It rings three times before a deep and distorted voice answers.



???:

It's been a while. Have you found anything of importance..?

Sherwin:

(whispering) Good news. I may have a possible lead...

???:

Is that so?

Sherwin:

(whispering) There was an incident earlier tonight at the Helix Western Zone Court & Jailhouse. It seems that the Master Arbitrator had a fatal run-in with the

Aurora Blade... It was reported that what was left of his remains was a puddle of flesh.

???: "Puddle of flesh"? Interesting...

Sherwin: *(whispering)* Indeed.

???: There is no doubt in my mind now that he still has possession of the virus vial.

Sherwin: *(whispering)* But... to be certain. I will need to follow up on the toxicology results with my inside source before Zircon tries to have it disposed of. Once I have confirmation, the virus vial's whereabouts should be easy to pinpoint... From there, you'll have your chance to strike and claim it. Then, we'll move on to our next phase...

???: Yes... After all these years. Finally.

Sherwin: *(whispering)* Everything is coming to fruition as foreseen.

???: That it is... and It'll be so...

Sherwin: *(whispering)* Yes it will.

???: You've done well. Continue to maintain a low profile and get back to me as soon as you have confirmation.

Sherwin: *(whispering)* You can count on it.

???: Her return is imminent... and soon it will begin... "Ah-tishoo! Ah-tishoo! We all fall down."

Narrator: The deep and distorted voice then ends the call. Sherwin closes the flip phone and tucks it back into his blazer's inner pocket. With his lips slightly parted, Sherwin makes a subtle sucking sound with his teeth followed by a smirk before exiting the crockery room.

CHAPTER 6 – DOWN MEMORY LANE

- Narrator: Another hour passes, and the scene cuts back to the *Aurora Blade* compound within Festoon Forest. Dew and the gang, exhausted and disheveled from their escape and battles, enter the well-lit empty Canteen.
- Paca: ...What a night that was, huh?
- Lorenzo: Yeah. All that “fun” we were having was too close for comfort.
- Dew: At least we all made it back in one piece... *(then turns to face Rena)* Hey, Rena.
- Rena: *(then turns to face Dew)* Yes, Dew..?
- Dew: Besides being a great mentor of mine, you’re also an awesome getaway driver. If it wasn’t for you coming along, we would have been done for. Thank you again... you saved our hinds back there.
- Rena: Don’t mention it. I’m glad I was able to help. *(then cracks an appreciative smile)*
- Lorenzo: By the way Rena, sorry we had you ditch the car. But we couldn’t take any chances of being tracked back here.
- Rena: I totally understand. Got to cover those tracks... No worries. It was just a cheap rent-a-car anyway. It won’t be missed.
- Lorenzo: Right.
- Cooper: *(briefly looks around the room in awe)* Mmm. Mmm. Nice...
- Lorenzo: *(then turns to face Cooper)* W-what..?
- Cooper: I just noticed how clean this place is. Quite tidy.
- Lorenzo: Oh.
- Cooper: I tend to have an eye for things like that. It’s part of the profession, you know?
- Lorenzo: Ooh. Okay.
- Rena: *(thinking aloud to herself)* Cleaner than the motel I was staying at... that’s for sure...
- Paca: Yeah, the others did do a good job cleaning up in here tonight. Usually, it’s a mess... Also, by the looks of it... we’re the only ones here too.
- Dew: Well, it is kind of late... The others are likely asleep by now.
- Paca: Well. I don’t know about the rest of you... but I’m hungry...

Lorenzo: Shit. I. Am. Beat. And, it's late as hell to be eating. What do you have a tapeworm or something?! Are you okay..?

Paca: Yes, I am fine. I'm just in the mood to eat, that's all.

Lorenzo: Eh. Why not... a little late-night snack wouldn't hurt...

Narrator: Lorenzo then gestures to a nearby table in the corner of the Canteen. The group then makes their way to the table and takes a seat except for Dew who remains standing while leaning against the wall. There is a pitcher of water and packaged snacks and sandwiches sitting on the tabletop. The group then begins to eat silently enjoying their late-night snacking as Dew reflects to himself about the events that unfolded earlier. A few moments pass and Paca breaks the silence.

Paca: I just... can't... *(then sets her half-eaten sandwich down on the table)*

Lorenzo: *(turns to face Paca and raises an eyebrow)* What's wrong?

Paca: I just can't shake what we saw earlier back at the Court-house...

Lorenzo: *(pauses for a moment before realizing what Paca is referring to)* Oh. That... *(then nods his head)* Yeah. That was some weird shit.

Cooper: *(takes a sip of water from his cup and then places it down on the table)* I'm still not sure what to make of that either...

Rena: *(intrigued)* Make of what..?

Narrator: Dew continues leaning up against the wall thinking to himself and remains distant from the conversation.

Paca: ...If I tried explaining it, you probably wouldn't believe it.

Rena: Try me.

Paca: All right. So, there we were... we just defeated a bunch of SWAT TROOPERS and had the Master Arbitrator cornered until he injected himself with something...

Rena: Injected?

Paca: Yeah. Next thing you know, the guy has boils appearing all over his body, and starts transforming... I guess... into a monster...

Rena: Boils? Transformed? ...Into a monster..?

Paca: You heard me. It was like something out of a comic book. Unreal...

Lorenzo: After we wasted his ass, he then dissolves into a puddle of mush.

Rena: (surprised) Really?! A puddle you say?

Lorenzo: Yep. We didn't stay around for too long to figure out what was going on and high-tailed it out of there. Then we ran into you eventually...

Paca: It sounds insane, huh, Rena?

Rena: That it does... (then nervously adjusts her glasses) Interesting... Indeed weird... Hmm...

Lorenzo: Well, shit. I guess it's just as weird as you and Dew fighting some giant sewer leech. What was up with that?

Dew: (whispering to himself) SKT...

Rena: Huh? What was that, Dew..?

Dew: ...

Rena: Dew?

Narrator: Rena, Lorenzo, Cooper, and Paca then exchange concerned glances noticing the unresponsive Dew still deep in thought.

Lorenzo: Dew... Dew. Hey, Dew!

Narrator: Dew then suddenly snaps out of his train of thought and diverts his attention back to his friends.

Dew: What... what, what's going on?

Cooper: Hey, buddy. You were spacing out on us there.

Dew: Oh that. Yeah. Ha-ha...

Rena: Is everything okay, Dew?

Dew: I-I... I'm fine.

Lorenzo: You sure? It's not like you to be distant all of a sudden.

Dew: Yeah. I'm good... It's just been... a long night... that's all... Uh... yeah...

Narrator: Dew then gives a faint smile and abruptly exits the Canteen while the others watch on with confusion and concern.

Paca: ...Okay. What's going on with him now?

Lorenzo: I don't know. That's out of character.

Rena: Hmm...

Cooper: He has been pretty quiet I've noticed... and something seems to be bothering him.

Rena: (thinking to herself) Everything that has happened today has been too coincidental... I wonder... But no... it couldn't be that...

Cooper: ...I hope he's all right.

Lorenzo: Me too. But then again, like he said... It's been a long night... Maybe he just needed some fresh air or something.

Cooper: That likely is the case...

Lorenzo: He'll come back.

Cooper: Hm. So, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: Yeah?

Cooper: You know... I've been wondering about something ever since tagging along with you all.

Lorenzo: What's that, Cooper? Is it the neck tattoo?

Cooper: Hah. No. It's not that. Although it's very cool looking.

Lorenzo: Thanks, man.

Rena: That must have hurt getting that done. Any particular meaning behind the tattoo..?

Lorenzo: It just means, "I love taking risks". And yes, it did hurt a lot as it was being inked.

Rena: Ah. Okay.

Cooper: So, what I was going to ask initially was... what drove you and Paca to get involved with the *Aurora Blade*?

Paca: We all had different reasons for joining...

Rena: What was yours, Paca?

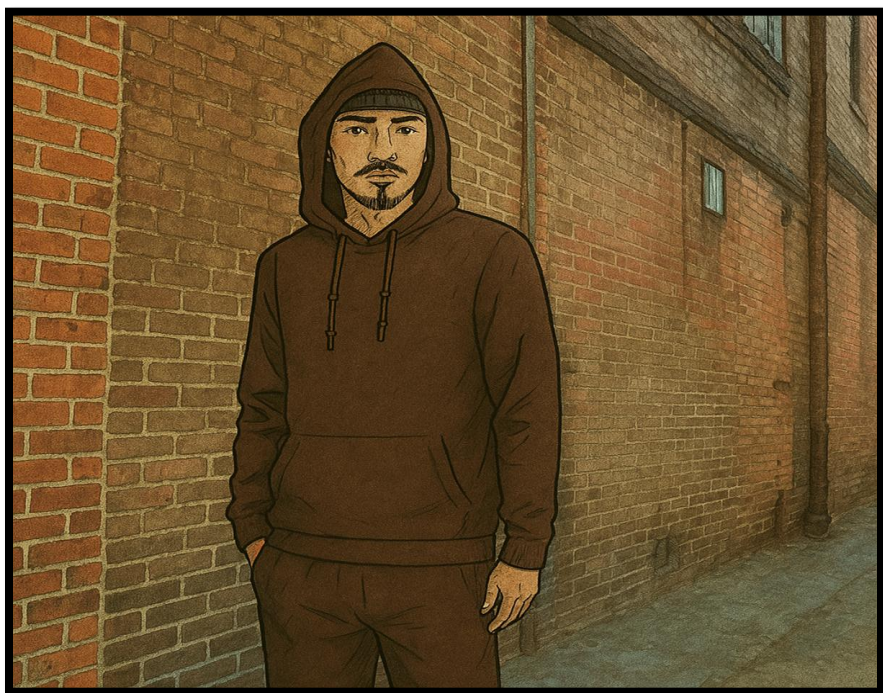
Paca: Before I had joined the *Aurora Blade* – I was living peacefully with my Pa, Uncle, and cousin on our family farm. My Ma passed away when I was very young. So, in her place, we all chipped in and helped with the chores. My life consisted of getting up at the crack of dawn, being homeschooled, and tending to the vegetables and livestock. It was tough work, but so fulfilling. Yeah... it was easy living. But trying to keep up with paying the property taxes was never enough. One day, Videl's government goons visited us. They came to eminent domain the farmland. My Pa and family weren't going to have any of that and would stand their ground. A shoot-out then broke out, and during the firefight, I got the butt end of a rifle to my face knocking me out cold. When I regained consciousness, I found the farmland set ablaze and the bloodied corpses of my Pa, Uncle, cousin, and a few of Videl's goons surrounding me. I was lucky to have lived... but I was left all alone and broken. Well, that is until I joined the *Aurora Blade*... I swore that Videl's tyranny would not go unchecked - and what had happened to me would never happen to another person again...

Rena: Ugh. I'm sorry you endured that, Paca. Those bastards...

Cooper: This government... they're despicable...

Lorenzo:

It's personal for me too... My brother, Estiven, and I were left orphaned and homeless after the death of our parents during the *Great Liberation*. Estiven was much older than I was - he practically raised me. Our only means of survival living out on those mean streets were dumpster diving for food, hustling, and pick-pocketing for whatever valuables we could get our hands on. It wasn't an ideal condition or even honest living, but we got by. However, all that would change for the worse on one summer night 23 years ago...



Narrator:

The scene then changes to Lorenzo's past; Estiven and a young Lorenzo is hiding in some bushes at Maycomb Park, watching the unsuspecting citizens pass by them. They both wait patiently until the right victim of choosing comes by for them to rob.

Estiven: *(whispering to himself)* This seems never-ending... I hate having to do this... but it's gotta be done... *(then turns to face Young Lorenzo)* ...How are you holding up, lil bro?

Young Lorenzo: I'm so hungry, Estiven. But I'm okay besides that, I guess...

Estiven: Don't worry lil bro; we'll get some money and fresh food soon.

Young Lorenzo: Okay, Estiven. Just please hurry.

Estiven: Have I ever let you down?

Young Lorenzo: No. You're the best bro.

Estiven: Hah.

Narrator: A well-dressed couple then passes by as they're talking amongst each other.

Estiven: Well, look at this. They look like they could spare some change and more... Time to work... Stay here, lil Bro. I'll be back...

Young Lorenzo: Be careful.

Narrator: As the couple continues to walk on, Estiven exits the bushes and begins to follow them. At first, Estiven maintains his distance from the couple as they walk on blissfully, unaware of his presence behind them. After walking for a bit, he gradually accelerates his pace closing the gap between himself and the couple. Once within arm's reach, Estiven snatches the woman's purse from off her shoulder and then makes a run for it darting past them.

Pedestrian 1: What the..? My purse?! Hey! He took my purse.

Pedestrian 2: That punk. Hey. COME BACK HERE! Someone help. Somebody, please stop him! HELP!!!

Narrator: As Estiven runs off with the woman's purse in hand, a SWAT TROOPER who is patrolling the area nearby hears the man's cries for help.

SWAT TROOPER 0: Hm... What's this? *(then he sees Estiven running)* I see... finally, some action. Oh, yea!

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 0 then begins his pursuit of Estiven, who is halfway across the Maycomb Park bridge.

SWAT TROOPER 0: *(running after Estiven)* You there. Stop! I said, STOP DAMMIT!

Estiven: *(still running)* ...Shit!

Narrator: SWAT TROOPER 0 chases after Estiven and eventually catches up to him. SWAT TROOPER 0 then tackles Estiven from behind, knocking him to the bridge deck. At the same time, the stolen woman's purse falls to the deck causing all the belongings inside to be scattered all over.

SWAT TROOPER 0: Are you deaf?! You...should have... stopped. *(pinning Estiven down with his knee on his chest)*

Estiven: *(struggling)* ...Get the fuck... off me, you pompous... PIG!

SWAT TROOPER 0: You have a smart mouth on you! That wasn't nice of you to run off with that woman's purse like that... Why you wanna inconvenience fine folk like that? *(still pinning down Estiven with his knee on his chest)*

Estiven: Arrggghh... I can't... I can't... breathe... *(trying to push off SWAT TROOPER 0 knee from his chest with his hand)*

SWAT TROOPER 0: ...You're under arrest. Stop struggling..! *(his knee is still on Estiven's chest)*

Estiven: Hey, pig... you forget something...

SWAT TROOPER 0: What's that..? *(pushing his knee deeper into Estiven's chest)*

Estiven: Aren't you... going to read me... my rights?

SWAT TROOPER 0: What rights?

Young Lorenzo: *(running towards them)* ...Estiven!

Estiven: *(still struggling to push off SWAT TROOPER 0 knee from his chest)* Lorenzo, stay... BACK!

SWAT TROOPER 0: *(turns his head to face Lorenzo)* You might want to listen to him, little boy.

Young Lorenzo: Fuck you. LEAVE MY BROTHER ALONE!

Narrator: Young Lorenzo runs toward SWAT TROOPER 0 and kicks him in his right thigh. SWAT TROOPER 0 loses his balance and rolls over on to his side. He then un-holsters his truncheon from his kit belt, quickly rises to his feet, and violently whacks Lorenzo in the chest with it knocking him to the ground.

Young Lorenzo: Ugh...

SWAT TROOPER 0: Punk ass kid! Don't interfere with official peacekeeping matters.

Estiven: *(getting up off the ground)* ...Lil bro!?! YOU FUCKER!!!

Narrator: Estiven rushes toward SWAT TROOPER 0 and jumps at him, causing SWAT TROOPER 0 to stagger back a bit. SWAT TROOPER 0 drops his truncheon and the two begin to grapple with one another. During the struggle, Estiven gets in a few punches and elbows to the face-mask of SWAT TROOPER 0, slightly damaging it. SWAT TROOPER 0 in haste pulls out his handgun and shoots Estiven in the chest three consecutive times. Estiven falls to the ground. A shocked Young Lorenzo gets up and runs over to Estiven, who lying on the ground coughing up blood.

Young Lorenzo: *(checking on him)* ...Estiven!?!
 Estiven: Bro... r-r-r-run...
 Young Lorenzo: No, I won't... I won't. Don't die! *(sobbing)*
 Estiven: Sorry... I couldn't get you dinner... lil bro... go... Ughhhhhhhhhhh... *(then dies)*

Young Lorenzo: STEVE!?! No. NO!!!
 SWAT TROOPER 0: *(re-holstering his handgun)* Damn guy... He had it coming... This just shows you, kid, that crime doesn't pay. You fuck around like your Brother there; you end up dead. "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

Young Lorenzo: What, what the fuck is wrong with you!?!
 SWAT TROOPER 0: I was just doing my job kid... try not to take it personally. That's one less bottom-feeder low

Young Lorenzo: life for society to worry about now.
 Bottom-feeder low life!?! He was... my
 BROTHER!
 SWAT TROOPER 0: What... yOu GoNna Cry?!
 Young Lorenzo: Arrrrrgggghhhhhh... YOU BASTARD!!!
 Narrator: An enraged Young Lorenzo pulls out a
 pocketknife and then jumps onto SWAT
 TROOPER 0, knocking them both to the
 ground. Lorenzo proceeds to stab SWAT
 TROOPER 0's facemask several times until the
 knife penetrates it, leaving a deep gash on the
 left side of his nose. SWAT TROOPER 0
 punches Lorenzo in the face, which dazes him
 temporarily, also causing him to drop the
 pocket knife. SWAT TROOPER 0 gets back
 onto his feet, grabs Lorenzo by the neck, and
 then hurls him off the bridge into the stream
 below.
 SWAT TROOPER 0: Fucking little shit..! *(pulls out his handgun and
 shoots several shots into the water)* Enjoy
 sleeping with the fishes kiddo... *(then quickly
 removes his facemask and begins feeling on
 the left side of his nose as blood drips from it)*
 ...My ...my nose ...Ooowwww ...goddammit
 ...stupid kid ...that's going to leave a mark...
 Ha-ha... Argh... *(then grabs his handheld radio
 from his kit belt while still covering the left
 side of his nose with his right hand as the
 blood continues to pour down from the gash.
 He clicks the transmission button on the
 handheld radio)* ...Dispatch. Emergency -
 SWAT 431- requesting immediate medical as-
 sistance. I've sustained a deep laceration on
 the left side of my nose, heavy bleeding... two
 robbery suspects down. Location - Maycomb
 Park Bridge, Eastern Zone. Over.
 Narrator: Radio chatter can be heard in the distance
 as young Lorenzo's unconscious body is car-
 ried off by the current downstream. Hours

later, we find his still unconscious body washed up on the shore nearby a landfill. An older bearded bald man walking by is alerted by Young Lorenzo's motionless body.

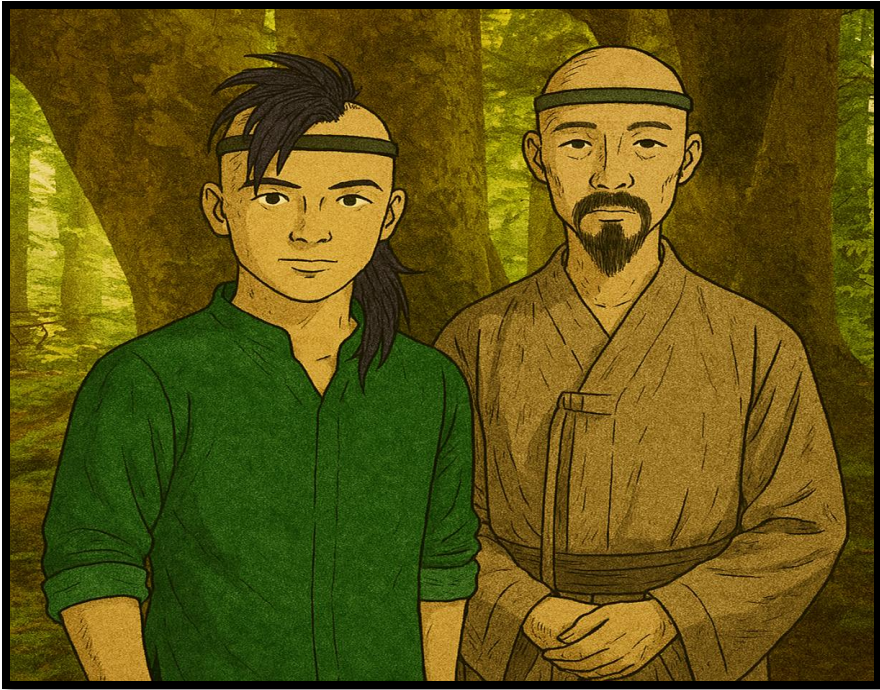
Aquagonla: ...What's this? Oh... *(then runs over to the direction of Young Lorenzo's unconscious body)* ...Not good... *(then kneels over and checks on Young Lorenzo's vitals)* ...Hmm. He's still alive... This boy needs medical treatment ASAP. Hang in there. I'm here for you...

Lorenzo's Narration: I was found unconscious lying in a garbage heap after I had washed up onto the shore. The man who saved me, his name was Aquagonla. He was a former Kenpo instructor and hermit. He took me in, caring for me as if I was his child. Although my desire for vengeance was still lingering, all I could ever think of was killing the man who took my brother's life. That one particular SWAT TROOPER, he had to suffer... no matter the cost... that SWAT TROOPER's name was, Zircon Videl. It was only because of Aquagonla, who helped to ease that pain... he gave me clarity and purpose through his guidance. Aquagonla and I would also go on to form the *Aurora Blade*. Our ranks grew, as those who had joined us were tired of the unjustified laws and oppression they were suffering under. Years went on, and my master was getting old and frail. I had returned to find him on his deathbed. He called me over to his side before... his passing...

Lorenzo: ...It hurts me to see you like this...

Aquagonla: Hah... "Life is a beautiful lie, and death is the painful truth". I... have lived... wisely... with nothing to fear...

Lorenzo: Master Aquagonla, I—



Aquagonla: Shhh... Say no more, my apprentice. You... make me proud... Even with my passing, our good deeds... will never be undone...

Lorenzo: And they never will be. I will see to that.

Aquagonla: *(smiles at Lorenzo)* ...You have conquered yourself... found your balance... your mind... is pacified... the virulent is gone... you... are... free... Uuuuggghhhh... *(then dies)*

Lorenzo: *(sigh)*... Master... *(then moves his hand over the deceased Aquagonla eyes and gently closes them)* ...be free...

Narrator: The scene then cuts back to the *Aurora Blade* forest compound – Canteen in the present time. Lorenzo momentarily stares down blankly at the table before turning his attention back to Rena, Cooper, and Paca.

Lorenzo: *(sigh)* Yeah...

Rena: *(thinking to herself) ...And I thought I had it rough all these years... (then shakes her head sorrowfully)*
Geez.

Cooper: Again... all this suffering was unneeded thanks to the actions of those scoundrels within our government. Argh... This angers me... I am so sorry for what has happened to you both... but thank you for what you do.

Lorenzo: *(nods his head in appreciation)* We do our best. All for the people...

Paca: That means a lot. Thank you, Cooper.

Lorenzo: So, after my master's death, any ounce of blinding rage that I had left was snuffed out. From there, I continued tirelessly to protect the innocent and fight against injustice. A few years later, I met and befriended Dew after we both had an encounter with some SWAT TROOPERS. I was impressed with the way he fought and then offered him an invitation to join us. He would accept. As time went on, he proved to be even more valuable to the cause not just because of the knowledge and training he obtained while serving with the SWAT TROOPER ELITE... but it was "something more". Hah. That "something more" propelled him to the point where we both became co-leaders of the *Aurora Blade*. It was probably because Dew had such a good teacher... *(then turns to face Rena)*

Rena: Oh?

Lorenzo: ...Before tonight, I didn't even know you existed Rena. Dew never really talks much about his past. But it all makes sense now... no one fights the way he does just because of some military training... Nah. The impact you left on Dew, has played such an integral part in the *Aurora Blades'* ongoing battle to restore our country's lost freedoms. I guess what I am trying to say is, thank you, Rena.

Rena: *(cracks a smile)* And thank you for the kind words, Lorenzo. It pleases me to know that my teachings have been put to good use for such a noble cause. I'm

honor to have contributed, and I am happy to have met all of you tonight... *(then does a standing bow)*

Cooper: What an interesting way we all did meet, huh..?

Paca: "Interesting" is putting it lightly.

Cooper: Yeah. Ha-ha... I break you guys out of jail, and then Dew's lady-friend came driving in to make the save. I'm happy we all met too.

Lorenzo: Same here.

Narrator: Amongst the rapport building between the four, Rena looks around the room and notices that Dew still hasn't returned.

Rena: Hmm... It seems that my pupil hasn't come back yet.

Paca: He must still be outside.

Cooper: I wonder what is troubling him..?

Rena: There's only one way to find out... Please excuse me while I go check up on him then.

Lorenzo: All right. We'll be here...

Narrator: Rena nods, then gets up from the table and exits the Canteen leaving Lorenzo, Paca, and Cooper behind as they begin conversing amongst one another. Meanwhile, outside the Canteen, Dew is seen leaning forward brushing up against a wooden railing looking visibly frazzled as he gazes outward into the late-night Festoon Forest landscape.

Dew: *(muttering to himself)* SKT... SKT... SKT virus... it can't be anything else, but that... Ugh... But... It's funny how this all happens on the same day I reunite with Sifu, and then Cooper... Is this all just one big coincidence? Or maybe, fate? Hmm...

Narrator: As Dew continues to struggle with the thoughts of the SKT virus re-emergence and the recent events, suddenly memories of his grandfather flood his mind bringing him some emotional reprieve. He begins to daze off thinking about the last time he saw his grandfather before leaving off to the SWAT TROOPER ELITE. The scene cuts back to his home in Twin Pines, 9 years ago. It's a tranquil evening at the Wilder residence, as a late teen version of Dew enters the living

room area where Grandpa Wilder is sitting on the sofa reading a book.

Dew:

...Grandpa, are you busy..?

Grandpa Wilder:

(looks over at Dew who is standing in front of him)

No, my boy. *(then gestures with the book in hand)* I was just doing some light reading... Is everything okay? *(then puts the book down on a table off to the side)* ...What's on your mind?

Dew:

Nothing much, really. I just wanted to see how you were doing... *(then sits down on the sofa next to him)*

Grandpa Wilder:

I'm all right... But, most importantly, how are you feeling about going into the service soon? You're excited, I bet.

Dew:

Just a little bit...

Grandpa Wilder:

You know it warms my heart to see you continuing the family tradition of serving.

Dew:

Well, I don't know what else I would be good at. The jobs here suck. So why not serve my country? I suppose the perks will be worth it...

Grandpa Wilder:

More than you can imagine... You have your entire life ahead of you. That military service will give you a completely new aspect on things - it will mature and discipline you too. Hah. Trust me, you're going to hate the training – but in the end, you'll appreciate it. When you make it past that, then it's all easy street from there. You're going to make a lot of new friendships that'll last a lifetime...

Dew:

...And a lifetime supply of government cheese too. I'm not looking forward to that.

Grandpa Wilder:

Oh, C'mon now. It's not that bad.

Dew:

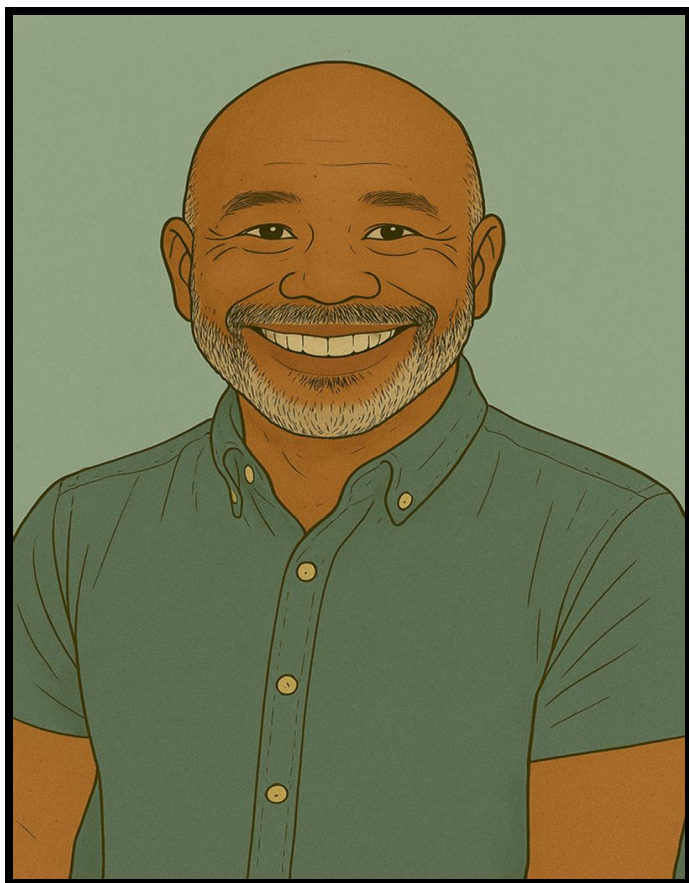
Tell that to my stomach.

Grandpa Wilder:

Ha-ha-ha... Okay. Do you know what another perk of you joining the military is?

Dew:

What? More cheese?!



- Grandpa Wilder: No, boy ...You may even meet a nice girl, end up settling down with her, and have some kids.
- Dew: ...And become another divorce statistic? I don't need any crumb snatchers either. Heck, no grandpa.
- Grandpa Wilder: Crumb snatchers? Ha-ha-ha... Maybe that's thinking too far ahead. Well, you're not ugly. Any Woman who was to fool around on you or dare overlook you; well, that's their loss.
- Dew: It's not a priority for me...
- Grandpa Wilder: I don't understand why you don't have a girlfriend now.
- Dew: It's better this way... If I did, it would just complicate things.

Grandpa Wilder: Your father thought that way at one time too, until he met your mother. But, you're right. You're still a young man with a lot of time. Plus, you'll have many girlfriends once you're in there... Ha-ha-ha...

Dew: Yeah... Hey, Grandpa.

Grandpa Wilder: Hmm?

Dew: Do you think... if they were both still here... that dad and mom would be proud of me?

Grandpa Wilder: Dew, you shouldn't even have to ask such a question. I know, in my heart, they would approve of the fine young man you've become, and be so proud of you.

Dew: Okay. You're right...

Grandpa Wilder: I'm going to miss you, Dew.

Dew: I will miss you too, Grandpa.

Grandpa Wilder: Are you sure you're ready for this? You don't have to do this if you don't want to.

Dew: Yes. I want this. I'm ready... and Grandpa, don't worry, I will be fine. I had a fantastic guardian to raise me.

Grandpa Wilder: Oh, yeah..? *(then smiles at Dew)* ...Well, it's easy when you have the best grandson in the world.

Dew: Ha-ha...

Grandpa Wilder: ...I love you, boy.

Dew: I love you too, Grandpa. *(with a determined expression)* And I will be back to see you as soon as I can. I'll make you proud ...I will.

Grandpa Wilder: You always have, and always will... *(then places his hand on Dew's right shoulder)* I know you'll make a difference in this world, no matter what life throws at you. You have the vigor and valor to overcome anything. I believe in you, Dew... never forget that...

Narrator: Grandson and Grandfather then embrace one another for a heartfelt hug. The scene then cuts back to the present time again, as Dew is seen still leaning forward against the wooden railing outside the Canteen. He then smiles faintly to himself as Rena approaches from behind noticing Dew still reminiscing.

Rena: ...Dew?

Dew: (startled) Hm?! (then turns to face Rena) Rena... Oh. Hey.

Rena: Am I interrupting anything?

Dew: Uh. No. Not at all.

Rena: I just came to check up on you. The others and I noticed you were gone for a while. Is everything okay?

Dew: Yeah. Of course. I'm just out here getting a breather... that's all.

Rena: Ooh. I thought as much... (then looks up at the late-night Festoon Forest sky) Beautiful night... although it was a chaotic and exciting one earlier...

Dew: Yeah. Ha-ha... that it was.

Rena: Mm-Hmm. And on nights just like this, I always find it therapeutic to get myself lost in contemplation when I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders too.

Dew: And I wonder who I picked up that habit from? Hmm?

Rena: Ha-ha... Do you still think of him? Your grandfather..?

Dew: You know me very well. And No. It has been a while, that is until tonight...

Rena: Ah. I miss him.

Dew: Yeah. Me too...

Rena: I find myself thinking about a great many things... some good... and some not so pleasant... But what helps me the most, is thinking about my adopted parents...

Dew: You never really talked much about them from what I recall. All I know about them is that your adopted father and mother were an older couple in their late 60s. He taught you Bōjutsu, which you in return taught me and the other students. She was a kind-hearted lady who was obsessed with tomato soup and took and collected pictures of random people's neck fat.

Rena: Ha-ha-ha... Yep. That's right. Ha-ha... She was kind of weird... But I miss them both... (sigh)

Dew: Hm. I remember when we would have a potluck and you would cook tomato soup for me and the other students... Damn, I hated that shit. You knew I hated tomatoes, but were insistent that I eat that soup. I

swear... Ha-ha... It was like you took pleasure in seeing me having to eat it only after my grandfather would make me do so, so your feelings weren't hurt.

Rena: I wasn't the only person who took pleasure in that. Your grandfather got a kick from it too.

Dew: Ugh. I knew it! You both were working against me.

Rena: Ha-ha-ha... And every time I saw your disgusted expression, it was priceless.

Dew: Pfft. Not funny! But those memories... Ha-ha... It reminds me of something that someone once told me, *"As is a tale, so is a life: Not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters."* (then smiles at Rena) Those were some good times, weren't they?

Rena: Yes, they were... (then smiles back at Dew and gives him a supportive pat on his back)

Dew: Hmm. I have been out here for a bit, huh..? Maybe I should come to join you all inside...

Rena: That would be nice.

Dew: All right. (then nods his head)

Narrator: Just as Dew is about to enter back into the Canteen with Rena, they suddenly hear footsteps approaching them from behind. They then turn around and see Lynch running toward the Canteen entrance. Seconds later, an exhausted Lynch comes to a stop a few feet away from the two.

Lynch: ...Dew, hey... (huff) (puff) (huff) (puff)

Dew: Lynch...

Lynch: I see... you're okay... (huff) (puff) I'm sorry about earlier... I did not mean to abandon you and the others like that...

Dew: But you did.

Lynch: Dew, I was being tailed by some SWAT TROOPERS. I tried waiting on you, but I had no other choice but to go...

Dew: Hmm...

Lynch: Are the others okay..?

Dew: Yes. They're fine... We did end up getting captured but made our escape and way back here.

Lynch: Thank Chosha for that. I'm so sorry again...

Dew: So, Lynch... Where have you been this entire time?

Lynch: Er... Trying to shake off those SWAT TROOPERS who were in pursuit of me. But thankfully, I did eventually lose them... Then I had to properly dispose of the food truck too... That took some time... (*then notices Rena*) Oh... Who's this..?

Narrator: Lorenzo then steps outside the Canteen.

Lorenzo: Dew. Rena. What's taking you two so long? (*then notices Lynch*) Ooh... Well, look who decided to show their face again. (*sarcastically*) "Welcome back." Thanks for leaving us hanging back there, BUDDY.

Lynch: Lorenzo, I was just telling Dew what happened.

Lorenzo: Were you now?

Lynch: I'm sorry...

Lorenzo: "Sorry," are you? (*then crosses his arms*) ...You know, "Mamie" would have been more reliable than you tonight. At least "she" wouldn't leave our asses hanging.

Lynch: Well, I don't know about that Lorenzo. "Mamie". "She" is an inanimate object - a book of stamps.

Lorenzo: "She's" more than that! You're a sorry piece of—

Dew: ...Lorenzo, that's enough! Just let it be.

Lorenzo: "Just let it be"?!

Dew: It's been a long night for all of us... Lynch had valid reasons for what he did. I'm not mad. The most important thing is, we all made it back safe and alive.

Lorenzo: Bah. (*then does a wave-off hand gesture to Dew*)

Narrator: Paca and Cooper then exit the Canteen. Paca is thrilled to see Lynch.

Paca: Lynch! You're back.

Cooper: I guess the party is out here now...

Dew: Speaking about our escape... we were only able to do that thanks to the help from my old war buddy Cooper and my Sifu, Rena. (*then gestures toward Cooper and Rena*)

Lynch: Did you say "seafood"?

Dew: Uh. No.

Rena: ...Nice to meet you, Lynch.

Cooper: So, you're the guy who Lorenzo was swearing up and down about.

Lynch: (*nervously*) Ha-ha... Yeah. Nice to meet you both too.

Dew: In any case, Lynch I would like for you to show our guests where they will be staying. There should be a few vacant spaces amongst the small housing units. They'll be here with us for a while.

Lynch: Sure thing.

Rena: I could use a shower, a change of clothes, and some rest.

Cooper: I think all of us could. Much appreciated.

Rena: Thank you, Dew.

Dew: I got you both covered...

Lorenzo: Yeah Rena, and Cooper. When Lynch does do that... make sure he doesn't desert you both like he did our asses tonight...

Lynch: I already explained why that happened and I was sorry for that.

Dew: That you did Lynch... Well. I guess I should be heading back inside. I am kinda hungry now all of a sudden.

Rena: (*sarcastically*) Sounds like you might want some tomato soup... Hmm? (*then smiles*)

Dew: Definitely not!

Rena: Ha-ha-ha.... Okay. Okay.

Cooper: What's wrong with tomato soup?

Dew: A lot actually...

Cooper: Wwwwwhat?! It's especially tasty when eating it along with some of that government cheese. Mmm...

Dew: Of course, you would say that Cooper. Ugh. Gross.

Rena: Hah. Anyway, Dew. Whenever you're ready to go back inside, I'll join you...

Dew: Right... (*then nods his head in agreement*)

Paca: Hey, Dew...

Dew: (*turns to face Paca*) Hm?

Paca: Before I go and deliver the sad news to the next of kin of those we lost tonight, I need to catch up with Lynch first. He'll come to get Cooper and Rena afterward. Is that alright?

Dew: Yeah, Paca. That's fine. And thank you for doing that as well.

Narrator: Dew, Rena, and Cooper then enter back into the Canteen. Lorenzo disappointedly glances over at Lynch before entering back into the Canteen. Now with Lynch and Paca being left alone, they momentarily embrace one another passionately with a hug and kiss.

Paca: I'm so happy you made it back. I was worried about you.

Lynch: Hah. I was worried when you ran off like that trying to barge up in that bank and save those two.

Paca: It's part of the job, you know.

Lynch: Oh... I know. I have never forgotten about that. I'm sorry I wasn't there to...

Paca: Don't worry about it. We all made it back in one piece. Just like you did... That's all that matters.

Lynch: Yeah.

Paca: You know, we still need to talk.

Lynch: We do. I need to get something off my chest...

Paca: (*curious*) Yes, Lynch..?

Lynch: I know I've been acting differently for a while, and apologize for that.

Paca: It's okay...

Lynch: No... It's not... You know, ever since I joined the *Aurora Blade*, I have... we've been giving back to the poor and all. Yet what have we gained out of this in return?

Paca: What we've gained? The satisfaction of helping the less fortunate, and standing up against corruption.

Lynch: Paca, can't you see? We haven't done anything for ourselves. Day in and day out, we help others, but what about us? I cannot do this forever... I want to provide a better living for us.

Paca: Lynch, this is a good thing we're doing.

Lynch: That's true, but we can't always be the ones to save the day. We're just people, ordinary people like everyone else. Paca, I don't want my children growing up living as we are. We deserve much better than this...

We deserve riches and better surroundings. I'm tired of being chased around like a rat. This place isn't a suitable living for anyone.

Paca: What do you think we've been fighting for this whole time?

Lynch: Is it getting us anywhere? ...Paca, I love you with all my heart. I don't think I can continue doing this.

Paca: Is it me?

Lynch: No. It's all the fighting for nothing. I just want a better life. I'm tired of all this fighting. Let's run away from it all.

Paca: What about the others?

Lynch: Forget about all of them; let's start fresh... a new life... a life where we won't have to worry about the government or the *Aurora Blade*.

Paca: We can't leave them all like this! I'm sorry. My family's death won't be in vain. I won't go yet.

Lynch: Dammit, Paca! We don't have to go through this. Why can't this be easy?

Paca: It never is.

Lynch: These people do not care if we live today or tomorrow. As long as the *Aurora Blade's* cause is fulfilled, that's all that matters to them. Sometimes I think I was better off being just a restaurant dishwasher than living like this... I can't do this any longer. I know where I stand, with you or not.

Paca: How can you say such things? Is it that way now?

Lynch: No, but I know you don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want to leave you; please don't make me do that.

Paca: *(then deeply inhales)* Lynch, I have something to tell you too...

Lynch: What?

Paca: *(then swallows nervously)* I don't know... how to say this...

Lynch: What's wrong..?

Paca: Do you remember earlier when you said I looked "overworked" or "sick"?

Lynch: Yeah?

Paca: I've been feeling like that for a while.
Lynch: *(concerned)* What do you mean? Is there wrong?! Are you okay..?
Paca: I am... *(then takes Lynch's hand and places it on her abdomen)* Lynch ...I'm ...I'm pregnant. I'm three months...
Lynch: *(pulls his hand back in shock)* What?! *(then stares at Paca in disbelief)* W-when did you find out about this..?
Paca: It was a week ago. I wanted to tell you sooner but... now was a good time. I haven't told anybody else yet...
Lynch: I'm going to be a father?! I-I... can't believe it... Paca come here...



Narrator: Overwhelmed with emotion, a smiling Lynch pulls Paca in for a tight hug. They both begin to cry tears of joy while not drawing any attention from anyone else around in the area. As Lynch and Paca continue embracing one another, he wipes the tears from her face.

Lynch: Relieved, huh?

Paca: Yes. I'm so glad you're okay with this.

Lynch: I am. Ha-ha... This is wonderful news. *(then kisses her for a moment before pulling back)* ...Paca, I'm sorry for the way I've been acting, again. Forgive me.

Paca: It's old news. We have more important things to focus on now.

Lynch: We do...

Paca: We're a team, we've always been. And we'll get past anything together. No matter what. All three of us...

Lynch: Yes. We will... *(then wipes his tears of joy away)* I love you, Paca.

Paca: I love you too, Lynch...

Narrator: The two lovers smile and chuckle while holding one another's hands intimately as the scene pans upward to the late-night Festoon Forest sky. The scene then fades to black.

CHAPTER 7 - QUIET BEFORE THE TEMPEST

Narrator: The scene cuts to the next morning as the sun rises over the *Aurora Blade* compound within Festoon Forest. The melodious tunes from the forest's ecosystem can be heard accompanied by a gentle breeze that rustles the leaves and carries an invigorating aroma of damp moss, pine needles, and the saccharinity of blossoming floras. Within the forest compound, the inhabitants start their day off by engaging in their usual daily activities. Meanwhile, Rena and Cooper after getting a well-deserved rest, shower, change of clothes, and breakfast would separately explore the forest compound and all its interiors, observe the ongoings of the inhabitants, and casually strike up conversations randomly with some of them before venturing to the outside surrounding area. During this exploration on the outside, Rena and Cooper run into one another and decide to join up to do further exploring before returning to the forest compound. As the day transitions to evening, a warm orange glow is cast across the horizon as the sun begins to set. Some of the inhabitants retire to their appointed housing units, others can be seen wandering about the compound, a few stargazing, or some enjoying the company of one another while eating and drinking at the Canteen. The scene then cuts to the interior of the forest compound Armory where we find Dew, Lorenzo, Paca, and Lynch gathered around a large metal table intensely looking over a map and several documents spread out on it. Before the mission briefing could begin, the door to the Armory suddenly swung open revealing Rena and Cooper who entered. This startles Dew and the other three.

Rena: Hey, Dew.

Dew: Cooper? Rena? What are you two doing here?



- Rena: I haven't seen you all day, and we were told you would be here in the Armory.
- Cooper: Yeah. We spent most of the day familiarizing ourselves with our surroundings and then after all that, we decided to come find you. So, we found you...
- Dew: Well, you both did. And, it has been quite a busy day for me. I'm sorry we couldn't connect earlier. I am happy to hear you two got out and did some exploring though. I assume the others have been accommodating?
- Cooper: Yes, they have been.
- Rena: They've been very kind.
- Dew: That's good to hear...
- Rena: Oh. *(then looks around the room and notices the map and documents on the table)* We're not interrupting anything, are we, Dew..?
- Dew: Actually, we were just about to start our mission briefing...
- Cooper: Mission briefing, huh?
- Rena: Can we join in too..?
- Lorenzo: Sorry, this is "official" *Aurora Blade* business. Members only...

Cooper: Oh? Well, you never know; you might need extra help. Me and Rena... we're fugitives now. Let us bask in the glory. Ha-ha...

Lorenzo: No thanks.

Cooper: What, you don't trust us?

Lorenzo: It's not that. But we've been working on this plan for months now. It would be a risk adding any one new to this mission further jeopardizing its success.

Cooper: Ah. It sounds like it's high-stakes.

Lorenzo: Because it is.

Cooper: High stakes are nothing new to me. I was once a member of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE after all. I'm sure I can be of some use. Sign me up.

Rena: Me too. *(then faces Dew)* I can't let you and your friends have all the fun. I am down to help in whatever way I can.

Lorenzo: *(glances at Dew and then faces Cooper and Rena)* Hey. I like that you two are eager to help with the cause and all... but it ain't gonna happen.

Rena: Why's that?

Lorenzo: We've already lost a lot of good people as it is... It's in your best interests not to get involved. We've got this handled.

Rena: I think after what happened last night, Cooper and I have proven ourselves capable.

Cooper: Yeah. That's right..! So, do you just expect us to sit around and do nothing?

Lorenzo: I expect you two to stay out of the way.

Rena: That's not going to happen. I won't take no for an answer. After last night, we're all in this together now, whether you like it or not. Right, Dew?

Narrator: Dew stares silently at Lorenzo and then at Cooper and Rena while contemplating the options. Lorenzo notices this and becomes slightly concerned.

Lorenzo: C'mon, Dew... Hah. You're not going to actually consider this, are you?

Lynch: ...Why not?

Lorenzo: *(then turns to face Lynch)* What did you say?

Lynch: Maybe, Lorenzo... maybe it would be a good idea that we consider Cooper and Rena to join us for the mission briefing. I wouldn't object to it if they did.

Lorenzo: You don't object?

Lynch: I don't.

Lorenzo: Why..?

Lynch: Well... they did show you guys how capable they can be, didn't they?

Lorenzo: (*irritated*) Yeah. But that's beside the point!

Lynch: And... (*sigh*) They did more to help than I did.

Lorenzo: (*skeptical*) W-why are you vouching for them? Where is this coming from all of a sudden..?

Lynch: I'm just trying to make up for letting you all down, that's all. Plus, the more help we have, the better. We do need all the help that we can get, right? (*then glances at Dew*)

Dew: Hmm...

Lynch: And if they were to join in on the mission, they wouldn't have to be directly involved either.

Paca: Lynch does have a point.

Lorenzo: No, he doesn't.

Lynch: What do you think Dew..?

Lorenzo: No... No. Dew, don't even...

Dew: Well... there's only one way we can resolve this. As we always do in situations like this, we'll put it to a vote. All in favor of allowing Cooper and Rena to join us for the mission briefing and further involvement afterward, raise your hand...

Narrator: Dew, Paca, and Lynch immediately raise their hands.

Lorenzo: (*surprised*) Oh, c'mon?!

Dew: There you have it. The vote is 3-1. Majority rules.

Lynch: Looks like Cooper and Rena will be joining us then. Ha-ha...

Lorenzo: Ugh. Unbelievable.

Cooper: Sweet.

Rena: Thanks for putting it to a vote. We won't let you down, Dew.

Paca: Welcome aboard.

Lorenzo: All right. All right. You both got your way. Happy? But don't forget, whatever we say, goes. No ifs, ands, or buts. Okay?

Cooper: (*nods his head in agreement*) Understood.

Rena: Whatever is needed of me.

Dew: Now, with that out of the way- we can start the mission briefing. Go ahead, Paca...

Narrator: Dew and the group side by side then gathered around the large metal table and began examining the map and documents spread out on it.

Paca: Okay. So... as it was mentioned before, we've been meticulously planning for this next mission for months now. Our target: the Mesovilla National Mint. Our objective: infiltrate the National Mint and retrieve as much of the silver and gold bullion that is stored in the main vault. As you all can imagine, a heist like this won't be a cakewalk due to the mint's nearly impenetrable security and SWAT TROOPERS everywhere. However... thanks to the intel collected by our scouts, there is a way inside. *(then gestures toward a spot lower on the map)* ...That way inside is through a nearby utility tunnel...

Narrator: Dew and the group continue to study the map intently.

Lorenzo: Hmm... Wouldn't there be some kind of security posted there..?

Paca: Good question, to which I have an answer for. There will be no guards or alarm systems of any kind to worry about. It is a possibility that a few maintenance workers will be making their rounds in the area. So, to not draw any unneeded attention, the scouts were able to snag us a few utility worker uniforms... *(then opens a folder revealing a single key card paper clipped to a document)* Oh, and this key card, which is still operational, that'll grant us access to the mint from there...

Narrator: Lorenzo nods his head approvingly.

Dew: Okay. And once we're inside, then what of the surveillance cameras?

Paca: I'm glad you asked. I have prepared a handheld device that'll jam the security feed and replace it with an endless loop of previously monitored footage as we make our way through. It'll also give us real-time updates on the SWAT TROOPERS movements.

Dew: That'll make it a bit easier to keep track of them...

Lorenzo: We could have used this in our previous missions.

Paca: Wouldn't that have been nice? But it's been something that I've been working on for a while. Anyway. If there is by any chance that we encounter any SWAT TROOPERS, they need to be dealt with quietly and efficiently.

Lorenzo: No fighting, unless we can't help it... That doesn't sound fun. But okay. Got it.

Paca: (*then gestures to another spot on the map*) This is the location of the main vault... to open it, our inside contact says that a ten-digit numeric code needs to be inputted on the keypad. But there is a catch. The vault's passcode resets and a new one is randomly generated every 18 to 32 hours.

Dew: Hmph. Of course, it does.

Paca: To counter that, the handheld device we'll be using doesn't just jam electronics or work as a tracker – it also is equipped to electronically decrypt any passcodes within a minute, tops.

Dew: (*impressed*) Paca you truly are a tech wiz.

Lorenzo: And we are always so grateful for your genius...

Paca: Thanks, guys. (*then cracks an appreciative smile*) Once we have the passcode, we'll gain access to the vault, and then all those precious metals will be ours for the taking. And the way we came in, is the way we leave out.

Dew: Right. Stick to the plan, and we'll be in and out before anyone realizes what hit them.

Lorenzo: Hopefully, this time around we won't run into any surprises.

Lynch: (*nervously*) Nope. None...

Narrator: Dew and the group review the map and documents lying on the table one last time before exchanging silent and determined glances.

Paca: Well... if there aren't any questions, then that concludes the mission briefing.

Cooper: I do have one.

Paca: Yes, Cooper?

Cooper: What will Rena and my role be?

Paca: Due to your sudden inclusion in this, I don't know yet.

Lorenzo: Yeah. It's not like we're doing this right away either.

Dew: It wouldn't be wise to just spring back into action right after hitting up the national bank.

Paca: The plan is we commence with the mission in two more days. Likely by tomorrow evening or the latest the day of the mission, we'll have something figured out for you two.

Cooper: Makes sense... Okay.

Rena: So, what now?

Dew: I have some things to do still. In the meantime, you two should go enjoy yourselves, and we'll catch up soon. Okay?

Cooper: Roger that. *(then salutes Dew)* ...Just like old times, huh?

Dew: Ha-ha... Yes, just like old times... *(then salutes Cooper back)*

Rena: All right, Dew. I will see you around.

Narrator: Dew nods his head in acknowledgment toward Rena. Rena and Cooper then exit the Armory. As the evening progresses, Rena and Cooper eventually retire for the night to their assigned housing unit. The next morning, a downpour of rain encompasses Festoon Forest and the *Aurora Blade* compound forcing the inhabitants, including Rena and Cooper, to stay inside their housing units for most of the day. By late afternoon, the heavy rainfall eventually comes to a stop leaving the tree's leaves glistening, and the soil soft and muddy giving off a pleasing petrichor scent. Some of the forest compound inhabitants exit from their housing units to enjoy what little is left of the day as it transitions to evening. As the night wore on, the scene cuts to Rena who is venturing alone outside the forest compound to a nearby riverbank. Under the moonlight, the river shimmers as its calm currents reflect the starlit sky. As she makes her way to the river's edge, she comes across a contemplating Dew who is sitting on a log. She quietly approaches him before breaking his train of thought.

Rena: ...It's nice that the rain finally let up, huh?

Dew: *(slightly startled and then turns to face Rena)* ...Rena?!

Rena: I do love that after-rain smell... *(then deeply inhales and exhales)* It's invigorating...

Dew: What are you doing here? *(then rises from the log to greet her)*

Rena: Oh. I'm just out on a stroll and enjoying nature. It was a drag being stuck inside for most of the day thanks to the rain. I thought it would never end.

Dew: It was quite the downpour...

Rena: So here you are, all alone. *(curious)* Got a lot on your mind?

Dew: You could say that...

Rena: When we feel the weight of the world on our shoulders, sometimes we need our moments of solitude. But a friend in need is a friend indeed. May I join you?

Dew: Sure. That would be nice...

Narrator: Dew and Rena then settle down on the log. They both then sit quietly for a moment observing the flowing sparkling waters in front of them. Dew then breaks the silence.

Dew: ...This is a favorite spot of mine to come and clear my head. I love getting lost in the rhythm of the waves as they crash and recede against the rocks... listening to the humming of the water... and feeling the soothing wind caressing my face...

Rena: Sounds salubrious...

Dew: Yeah. It is... Do you know what else also helps?

Rena: What's that?

Dew: Thinking of a "shining lighthouse" that will push all those worries away... *(then cracks a smile)*

Rena: *(smiles back at Dew)* You still remember.

Dew: I do.

Rena: I see that, and many other things...

Dew: *(then turns to face Rena)* Hey. I wanted to apologize for not having the time to catch up with you and Cooper. It's been so busy as you know with prepping for this mission and all...

Rena: No need to apologize. It's understandable when you're trying to make a difference in the world. Cooper and I are here for you.

Dew: Thanks. Hah. Yeah... "making a difference"... If you say so...

Rena: *(concerned)* What do you mean?

Dew: Oh. Never mind...

Rena: Hmm... You know if you hold in all your thoughts, your head is going to pop like a balloon. Ha-ha-ha... What's bothering you..?

Dew: *(sigh)* You know, it's just... *(fidgeting a leaf)* We've been fighting this battle against the Helix Capital for so long... some times I wonder if it'll ever end... Is it really all worth it..? I think about all the people who've joined our cause, the ones who have died for it... and the ones who are still here fighting... they've sacrificed so much... *(then stops fidgeting the leaf and lets it fall to the ground)* I don't know...

Rena: Dew, what you have been doing for these past few years is extraordinary and an honorable thing. Don't ever think of it as being thankless or meaningless. No. No. Get that out of your head right now. You bet there have been sacrifices. But that's the price to pay when fighting to liberate all of

Mesovilla from tyranny. For only being here a short while, I've heard how highly the others have spoken of you and Lorenzo. These people look up to both of you... and they would proudly stand by your side to the very end. That must account for something, don't you think?

Dew: It does...

Rena: We all can have our doubts sometimes. But remember why you are doing this in the first place. What was it...? Truth. Justice. Equality. Liberty. Love. And hope. Those are values worth fighting for... to ensure a better future, and for those who can't fight for themselves.

Dew: (*then nods agreeingly*) You always knew how to motivate a person... and you're right. I can't allow doubt to get in the way. It would be a disservice to those who sacrificed so much not to keep moving forward. I should know better than that... Thank you. I needed that.

Rena: (*then places a reassuring hand on Dew's shoulder*) I believe in you. And you're welcome.

Narrator: Dew smiles warmly at Rena. Rena then gently pulls her hand back from Dew's shoulder, and they both share a moment of silence sitting contently by the riverbank as the waves continue their dance with the rocks.

Dew: ...I didn't know how or when... but I knew we would see one another again.

Rena: I had a feeling we would too. Eight years is a long time... Must be fate...

Dew: Must be... Hah. After the mission tomorrow, You, me, and Cooper will have to get together and do some catching up.

Rena: Yes. That is needed. Speaking about the mission... Any word on what role Cooper and I will be serving in the mission tomorrow?

Dew: That's still being sorted out. We'll know for sure by tomorrow. We'll meet back at the Armory then.

Rena: All right. Sounds good... (*yawn*). Oh. I think that's my cue to head back in... (*then rises from the log*)

Dew: Yeah, it is getting late.

Rena: Don't be up too late, okay? Well, good night.

Dew: Good night, Rena... And see you in the morning.

Narrator: Rena nods appreciatively and then walks off heading back in

the direction of the forest compound. Dew watches her disappear into the night before turning his attention back to the river. Some time passes and as Dew sits there watching the tranquil water and stillness of the forest nighttime scenery, he begins to feel weary. His eyelids grow heavy, and slowly droops his head as he then slouches back onto the log looking up into the night sky before dozing off into slumber.

CHAPTER 8 – OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

INTO THE FIRE

Narrator: The scene cuts back to Dew's past, six years ago. An armored vehicle is seen driving up a narrow winding dirt road leading to Mount Darien's Biochemical Research Facility. The armored vehicle engine roars as it speeds upward driving over every rut and tree root on the road. Eventually, after making up a bit further, the armored vehicle begins to decelerate and then comes to a stop near a clearing in the jungle. As the armored vehicle sits idle, towering trees and thick foliage can be seen in the background along with some exotic birds and insects flying about. Then for a moment, everything becomes silent and still until the armored vehicle door forcefully pops open. Thornton, Dew, Hoplyn, and Cooper quickly exit the armored vehicle armed with rifles in hand. They take defensive positions around it and scan the area as General Landmore emerges last. Several seconds later after fully scanning their surroundings, the unit members one by one confirm that it is safe to proceed ahead.

Hoplyn: Clear.

Cooper: Clear on my end.

Dew: Clear over here as well.

Thornton: (*turns to General Landmore*) Sir. All is clear. We are ready to proceed forward on your command.

General Landmore: Roger that Sergeant. All right. This is it, everyone... Stay sharp. Now commencing *Operation Greased Wheels*... Move out!

Narrator: Dew then turns to face the armored vehicle driver as the unit with General Landmore in the lead walks on ahead.

Dew: Hey. Keep it running for us, okay?

Narrator: The driver then smiles and gives Dew a thumbs up. Dew raises his rifle and quickly catches up to the unit while the armored vehicle door automatically begins to shut. The unit then begins their venture cautiously through the massive jungle toward the biochemical research facility. After some time passes, as the unit gets closer to their objective, a horde of NH Minutemen appear out of nowhere and begin instantly firing on General Landmore and his unit, causing them to quickly take cover behind the trees. During their retreat, a bag that was being carried by Hoplyn containing some *Elementomes* was hit, spilling, and breaking all onto the ground. Hoplyn notices the bullet-ridden bag in dismay.

Hoplyn: (*frantic*) No. Sir, the *Elementomes*..!

General Landmore: Arlington. They're useless now... forget about them...

Dew: Shit...

Cooper: It's like they knew we were coming... But how?!

Thornton: What does it matter..? (*excited*) Ho, Ho... the fun and games have begun...

Narrator: The NH Minutemen continue firing on General Landmore and his unit as they remain hidden behind the trees. Thornton grows impatient.

Thornton: We'll be sitting ducks if we sit here forever ...We have to do something...

General Landmore: I concur. But continue to lay low... We don't know how many of them there are yet. ...Arlington, do you have any visuals on how many there are?

Narrator: Hoplyn quickly peers from behind the tree to observe the area for a brief moment. She moves her head back behind the tree after dodging an incoming bullet that zooms past her hitting another tree in the background.

Hoplyn: Sheesh... Uhhhh... that would be a negative, sir.

General Landmore: Dammit... All right. We have no other choice... RE-TURN FIRE!!!



Narrator: The guns continue blazing across the jungle terrain, hitting the trees as General Landmore and his unit begin firing back at the NH Minutemen while maintaining their cover.

Cooper: ...Are we even hitting them?!

Dew: Hell, if I know...

Cooper: ...Spray and pray...

Hoplyn: ...I'm running out of ammo... *(reloading her rifle)*

General Landmore: Fuckers... they've got us bunkered down here...

Hoplyn: Hey, Dew...

Dew: *(shooting at the NH minuteman, then turns to face Hoplyn)*... Yeah?

Hoplyn: Remember when we were younger when that mountain lion almost killed us?

Dew: Yeah. ...What about it?

Hoplyn: Do you remember how scared we were?

Dew: I remember... *(then he quickly returns fire to the NH minuteman)*

Hoplyn: I'm more afraid now than I was then. I'm glad your grandfather was there to save us...

Dew: He's not here now... but I feel you.

Thornton: *(sarcastically)* Aww... What a "tragic" childhood experience that was for both of you... Thanks for sharing as we're being shot at!

General Landmore: Hey! Less talking. More shooting.

Cooper: After this clip, I'll be out... *(reloading his rifle)*

Thornton: Argh. This is hopeless... I've... HAD enough of this...! *(then moves from behind the tree into the open)*

General Landmore: Sergeant, what are you doing?! Get back here! That's an order!!!

Thornton: Some orders... have to be ignored...

Cooper: ...Has he lost it?!

Dew: Sergeant, NO..!

Narrator: As Thornton runs right into the opening, the group of 8 NH Minutemen catches him in their sights and opens fire. Thornton opens rapid-fire back, then discards the rifle and quickly unsheathes his bastard sword to deflect the hailing bullets with ease while advancing toward them. To the dismay and shock of the NH Minutemen, they run out of ammunition. The NH Minutemen then drop their arms to engage Thornton in close-quarter combat. Thornton takes on 7 of the 8 NH Minutemen butchering every one of them as body parts, and blood is scattered all over the battlefield. After witnessing this, as Thornton sheathes his bastard sword, the remaining NH minuteman screams out in fear and turns around to attempt a retreat. Thornton unholsters his pistol shooting the retreating NH minuteman clean in the back of his head, killing him. As the last NH minuteman's body falls dead to the ground, Thornton holsters his pistol and then surveys his fallen foes at his feet.



Thornton: And this is why some call me, the “*Serrated Reckoner*” ... *(then cracks a satisfied smile)* Yep... That’s all eight of them... *(then turns and faces the nearby trees)* It’s fine... they’re all dead... you guys can come out now.

Narrator: General Landmore and the rest of the unit come out of hiding from behind the trees and are in awe and shock seeing the NH Minutemen's corpses laid out in front of them.

Cooper: ...Aghast!

Hoplyn: Impressive Sergeant.

Dew: This is unbelievable. How’s this even possible by the hands of one man..?

Thornton: That’s because I’m the best, small fry... and you’re welcome...

General Landmore: Dammit, Sergeant! Why didn’t you listen to me..? You could have gotten yourself killed.

Thornton: Well, I didn’t... And we’re all still alive... aren’t we, General?

General Landmore: *(agitatedly inhales, and then exhales)* I'll give you that Sergeant... You did clean up. But, do not disobey my orders again. Got it?

Thornton: Yes, sir... Understood, sir.

General Landmore: All right. Well... thanks to the Sergeant, we're done here. Let's keep it moving... *(then walks off)*

Narrator: The unit then continues venturing through the jungle until they reach the biochemical research facility. They come to a cautious stop as they notice the un-guarded entrance.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* ...Where are the guards?

Thornton: *(whispering)* It's looking like a trap... Stay alert!

Narrator: General Landmore then gives a hand signal to the group. They all then separate to investigate the surrounding outside area of the biochemical research facility. A few minutes later, the unit then regroups to report their findings, if any.

Dew: ...I don't see anyone around...

Hoplyn: Nothing... nothing at all...

Cooper: This is weird...

Hoplyn: ...Was our intel wrong?

Thornton: Hmm... It's like they're just letting us walk on in...

General Landmore: Or, perhaps they're limited in numbers after all... No matter... We must continue onward to complete the mission. Again, do not let your guard down...

Narrator: The unit nods their heads and then with General Landmore in the lead enters the biochemical research facility with their rifles drawn forward. Twenty-five minutes pass by as General Landmore and his unit are deep within the biochemical research facility without encountering any resistance. As they advance further, Cooper then begins to converse with Dew.

Cooper: *(whispering)* ...Dew.

Dew: *(whispering)* ...What's up?

Cooper: *(whispering)* So, what you were saying earlier about your grandfather is it true? You know, about the whole thing with the mountain lion?

Dew: *(whispering)* Yes.

Cooper: *(whispering)* He sounded like a fantastic guy. I envy you.

Dew: *(whispering)* He was. When he was younger, as I mentioned earlier, he was formerly with the SWAT TROOPER ELITE. He retired after 25 years...

Cooper: *(whispering)* He had to be trained pretty well to fend off a mountain lion. I know we sure didn't get that type of training.

Dew: *(whispering)* Yeah...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Did you ever see yourself doing this when you were younger?

Dew: *(whispering)* Not at first...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Oh.

Dew: *(whispering)* Hey, Cooper.

Cooper: *(whispering)* Yeah?

Dew: *(whispering)* ...Where is home for you?

Cooper: *(whispering)* ...I'm from Demmin...

Dew: *(whispering)* Oh. I know someone from there... a good friend of mine...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Okay...

Dew: *(whispering)* ...Do you have any family and friends waiting for you back home?

Cooper: *(whispering)* ...No... No one at all...

Dew: *(whispering)* ...Sorry.

Cooper: *(whispering)* It's all right... I guess surviving all this is all I got to look forward to...

Dew: *(whispering)* Hmm...

Cooper: *(whispering)* My pops... he served many years ago... He retired, and then depression hit him really hard. He started drinking a lot... but he was never abusive toward my mom and me... He just... let himself go badly... he kept drinking and drinking... and then the day came, he died...

Dew: *(whispering)* Damn... that's rough...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Yeah...

Dew: *(whispering)* I'm sorry...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Thanks...

Dew: *(whispering)* ...And what of your mother?

Cooper: *(whispering)* ...I rather not speak about her...



Dew: *(whispering)* Oh. Hmm...

Cooper: *(whispering)* May she rest in peace...

Dew: *(whispering)* I see. Okay. No need to go there then...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Right... *(then somberly focuses ahead)*

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* Dew...

Dew: *(turns to face Hoplyn and whispers)* ...What's on your mind?

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* I wonder what Emily is doing right now.

Dew: *(whispering)* She's thinking about you, her Big Sis most likely.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* She's supposed to be getting married soon. I wish I could be there to watch her on that altar in her wedding gown. Too bad my dad isn't around... I know he would have been happy to walk her down the aisle. He smoked like a chimney, and he died so young... It looks like we'll both be missing out on her wedding, huh? I hope she's all right.

Dew: *(whispering)* She's doing better than us right now; I know that. Once this war ends, you'll see your sis

again. No worries... Hey. Have you ever thought about what you want to do after all of this?

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* Not really. Whatever comes my way, I'll just go with the flow.

Dew: *(whispering)* Ha-ha... That's one way of doing it.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* Yea...

Dew: *(whispering)* What's that?

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* You know, Dew, you and her would have been a good match. You've always known how I felt about that guy she's with. They just don't seem right together... but whatever makes her happy.

Dew: *(whispering)* Hah... Perhaps we would have been. I can't change that now... When was the last time you heard from her? How's her son, Aspen doing?

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* I got a letter from her about two weeks ago. From what I read, she seemed excited about the wedding, and the baby... he's growing up so fast. He's already walking and talking...

Dew: *(whispering)* Hmm... It's only been two years. Wow...

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* 2 years from now, once we're back home in Twin Pines - You, Emily, and I will be reminiscing about all of this and having a good laugh.

Dew: *(whispering)* Yeah. I can't wait... just like old times.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* ...Just like old times. *(then smiles at Dew)* ...Dew, thanks for the talk... It really helps.

Dew: *(whispering)* No problem.

General Landmore: *(whispering)* ...That's enough of the yapping you two. Don't get distracted. The mission isn't over yet...

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* Sorry, sir.

Dew: *(whispering)* Yes, sir...

Narrator: The unit continues wandering through the facility for a while until they enter a cargo elevator loading area. The unit is greeted with a draft of wind coming up from the long-shaft lift. They continue to survey the area until the noise of the elevator ascending the shaft catches their attention.

Cooper: Huh?!

Dew: ...Is that the elevator..?

Hoplyn: It's coming up...

Narrator: Thornton notices a surveillance camera in the distance and then gestures to it. General Landmore sees this and nods his head in acknowledgment. Minutes later, the cargo elevator comes to a complete stop. Then the massive scissor car gate automatically opens horizontally.

Hoplyn: How "convenient" ...

Thornton: Someone knows we are on our way... Shall we take the bait..?

General Landmore: Seeing how the vial is being stored in a lab on the second-floor basement, we're gonna have to "bite" ...

Thornton: Very well, sir.

Narrator: General Landmore then signals to the rest of the unit to get onto the lift as he leads. They all follow, and the scissor car gate automatically closes behind them. The lift begins to descend into the shaft. As the lift traverses down to the second-floor basement, suddenly 12 armed NH Minutemen with rifles jump from above onto the lift confronting General Landmore and his unit. Thornton unsheathes his bastard sword as the others aim their rifles at the NH Minutemen.

Cooper: ...These motherfuckers came deep!

Thornton: Goody. Things were getting a little boring... Time for some more action..!

Narrator: The 12 NH Minutemen then begin to circle General Landmore's unit as the lift continues to descend.

NH Minuteman 1: You Helix dogs have come far enough.

Hoplyn: ...Says you?

NH Minuteman 3: You're finished...

General Landmore: It doesn't end here, only until the mission is completed.

NH Minuteman 2: Well the mission is over. You've already lost.

Thornton: Tch. I don't think so. Enough talking... let's do this.

General Landmore: This time, Sergeant, we all do it together...

Thornton: Yes, sir.

Dew: I'm ready...

NH Minuteman 1: Eager to die? Ha-ha-ha... Okay. Let's make quick work of them... ENGAGE..!

Narrator: General Landmore and his unit then engage the 12 NH Minutemen in battle. Thornton faces off against 5 of the 12 NH Minutemen whose bullets he easily deflects, and proceeds to swiftly decapitate them. Meanwhile, the other three NH Minutemen rush toward General Landmore and Hoplyn while firing, but are disarmed and then slammed to the lift floor. The two then unload their rifle clips into the laid-out three NH Minutemen, killing them instantly. Cooper ends up in a struggle with the two NH Minutemen who are trying to grab his rifle from him. He, in return, swings the butt end of the rifle violently smacking their faces and causing the two NH Minutemen to fall over the lift railing to their deaths below in the shaft. The remaining two NH Minutemen relentlessly fire at Dew, but he agilely flips over the two and dropkicks them aside toward Thornton, who skewers them with his bastard sword. As the remaining NH Minutemen's corpses fall to the lift floor, the lift continues to descend as General Landmore and his unit catch a breather and a sigh of relief.

Cooper: ...That was intense...

Dew: They weren't so difficult.

Hoplyn: Nor fearsome...

Thornton: Was that their best? Pathetic... No wonder why they're losing the war... Hah.

General Landmore: They definitely were not the cream of the crop. In the meantime, it looks like we can enjoy the ride down until we get to the bottom. It'll be enough time to prepare ourselves for whatever comes next...

Narrator: Seven minutes later, the cargo elevator finally reaches the second-floor basement. General Landmore and his unit exit the area to continue their infiltration through the biochemical research facility. Some time passes, and the unit makes its way undetected to the SKT viral research lab. They observe from a distance the lab entrance being guarded by two NH Minutemen. Dew and the others peek from behind the corner of the wall.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* ...Sir, it looks like there are only two of them there.

General Landmore: *(whispering)* Just two..?

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* Yes, sir.

Dew: *(whispering)* You would think by now they would have been alerted by our presence.

Thornton: *(whispering)* Well, small fry, it seems they haven't... after all, we did fuck up their comrades pretty good.

Cooper: *(whispering)* So... what's the plan to get past them..? *(then accidentally drops a rifle magazine)* ...Shit!

NH Minuteman 4: Huh?! What was that nose?

Hoplyn: *(looking down at the rifle magazine lying on the floor)* Well, I guess stealth is out of the question now.

Thornton: *(disappointedly shaking his head)* Ugh... *(sarcastically)* Good job, Tyler.

Cooper: I didn't mean to...

NH Minuteman 5: Go check it out will ya...

General Landmore: We have no other choice... It's time to go all in. Let's just take them out quickly before anyone else comes.

Thornton: On it, sir...

Narrator: General Landmore and his unit jump out from the corner to face the two NH Minutemen.

NH Minuteman 4: Oh. Intruders!?!

NH Minuteman 5: T-these must be the guys who are here for the vial... *(nervously raises his rifle)*

General Landmore: We're coming through. Get out of our way!

Thornton: Move it or lose it! ...Your choice.

NH Minuteman 4: Never.

NH Minuteman 5: You're not getting past this point. DIE YOU HELIX'S DOGS!!!

Narrator: General Landmore and his unit then battle the two NH Minutemen, but quickly and brutally dispose of them. Hoplyn then snatches a badge ID off one of the fallen NH Minutemen and uses it to open the lab door. Once the lab door is opened, the unit then cautiously enters the dim-lit lab with their rifles drawn ahead scoping out the room. The lab door shuts behind them a few moments later.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* ...It's eerily quiet in here...

Cooper: *(whispering)* Too quiet...

General Landmore: *(whispering)* Keep your eyes peeled. Be ready for anything...

Narrator: As the unit continues investigating the lab, suddenly, a figure is seen running to the other side of the room.

Hoplyn: *(whispering)* What was that?!

Cooper: *(whispering)* ...Something is over there.

Narrator: The lights turn on. Dr. Kenneth Voight, the lead Scientist of the SKT virus research team appears standing in front of a glass cabinet, clutching the virus vial protectively with his right hand while his left hand remains in his pocket. The unit quickly fan out, surround, and aim their rifles at Dr. Voight.

Dr. Voight: ...So, you're the ones who are here to steal my work from me. Hah. So much for the might of the New Havenport Minutemen...

General Landmore: Dr. Voight, I presume?

Dr. Voight: You may presume...

Hoplyn: Dr. Voight, hand over the vial, and we'll be on our way.

Dr. Voight: Hand it over?! As if I'll do that. You have no idea what this can do... I won't.

General Landmore: I assure you; you won't get hurt. Please. All we're here for is the vial.

Dr. Voight: You made that clear already... Here I am... all alone, and my entire team... fled like cowards...

Thornton: Hah. They sound smarter than you...

Dr. Voight: ...They never valued the research... this magnificent elixir... the lifeblood... my precious lifework... IT isn't going anywhere!

Hoplyn: Dr. Voight, please calm down.

Dr. Voight: You take me for a fool?! Stupid cannon fodder..!
...Following your orders blindly... leading us all willingly to damnation... false notions of patriotism and freedom... No, no, no... Your Premier will not be getting his grubby mitts on it. Never..!

Narrator: Tension in the lab then escalates as the unit and Dr. Voight exchange glares. Dr. Voight's left hand tightened around the remote concealed in the left pocket

of his lab coat. He then presses a button on the remote and a series of droning beeps echo throughout the lab indicating the activation of hidden miniature explosives attached to the lab walls. This momentarily confuses the unit until General Landmore realizes what is going on.

Hoplyn:

What did you do?!

General Landmore:

(shouting) Explosives. GET DOWN..!

Narrator:

Seconds later, the hidden miniature explosives then detonate. A blinding flash of light and a deafening blast rocked the lab as shrapnel and debris scattered like confetti slicing through the lab equipment and walls. During the chaos, as everyone else drops to the floor to take cover, Cooper jumps in front of Dew shielding him from the worst of the blast. But in return, Cooper takes the brunt of it as shrapnel becomes embedded in his right leg. He falls to the floor, grabs his wounded limb in pain, and begins to bleed out staining his uniform. As the smoke and dust clear, the unit regroups back onto their feet, and Dew and Hoplyn instantly notice the injured and bleeding Cooper on the floor.

Dew:

(frantic) Cooper! Shit...

Hoplyn:

Oh no!

Narrator:

General Landmore turns to see the injured and bleeding Cooper lying on the floor. He then turns to face and gestures to Dew and Hoplyn to go help Cooper.

General Landmore:

Arlington. Wilder. Help him...

Narrator:

Dew and Hoplyn immediately rush over to Cooper's side to assess and treat his injuries. Meanwhile, Thornton approaches the disoriented Dr. Voight who is still holding onto the virus vial while rising from off the floor. Thornton then pulls out his bastard sword and points it directly an inch away from Dr. Voight's jugular once he's back on his feet. Dr. Voight is caught off guard by this.

Dr. Voight:

?!

Thornton:

Nice try asshole. Looks like luck wasn't on your side today... Don't move..!

Narrator: As Thornton keeps his bastard sword trained on Dr. Voight, in the background Hoplyn takes Dew's black tactical beanie, tears it apart to create a tourniquet, and then wraps it around Cooper's right leg to stop the bleeding.

Hoplyn: There... that should do it for now...

Narrator: A kneeling Dew appreciatively grabs onto Cooper's hand while he remains lying on the floor.

Dew: Hey. Cooper. Everything is going to be okay... You saved my ass back there... You're a hero... Thank you... Thank you, man... I owe you big time...

Cooper: *(grits his teeth in pain then gives a weak smile)* No... pRoblEm... friend...

Narrator: Suddenly, from the other side of the lab, Dr. Voight's daughter, Elizabeth enters. General Landmore quickly draws his rifle and points it in Elizabeth's direction. Hoplyn turns, sees this, and then runs over with her rifle drawn to be at his side leaving Dew to tend to the injured Cooper who's still lying on the floor.

Elizabeth: Wait. I'm unarmed... *(slowly raises her hands over her head)* Don't shoot!

Narrator: Elizabeth then slowly lowers her hands and cautiously makes her way toward her father's side. Thornton then locks eyes with Elizabeth and is suddenly mesmerized by her.

Thornton: Huh?! W-who are you..?

Elizabeth: My name is Elizabeth... Elizabeth Voight. I am his daughter. Please don't hurt him... *(then comes to a stop and stands to the left side of Dr. Voight)*

Dr. Voight: *(concerned)* Elizabeth, stay back..!

Narrator: Thornton continues to be fixated on Elizabeth as he then feels an inexplicable rush of warmth and connection to her. Elizabeth slowly gets onto her knees seemingly ready to plea for her father's life.

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth, what are you doing?!

Narrator: General Landmore and Hoplyn still have their rifles pointed at the kneeling Elizabeth. Dew is off to the side watching as he is crouched near the injured Cooper.

Elizabeth: *(on her knees and looking up at Thornton)* Please, I beg of you... spare my father. Take what you have come for... But just don't kill him...

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth, no. I rather die, than hand it over to them...

Narrator: Elizabeth ignores her father's words and continues pleading.



Elizabeth: Hasn't there been enough bloodshed already..? Please.

Narrator: For a moment, time seemed to slow as Thornton and Elizabeth continued to exchange glances. It was as if their souls were communicating without the use of words and an undeniable spark was being ignited by the two fated lovers. Thornton then eyes Dr. Voight

while still pointing the tip of the bastard sword inches away from his jugular, and then he moves his eyes back down to the kneeling Elizabeth. Thornton takes a moment to consider Elizabeth's plea and decides to honor it.

Thornton: F-fine... *(then sheathes his sword)* Now please, get off your knees. There will be no more blood spilled here today... not in front of an innocent...

Narrator: General Landmore and Hoplyn are surprised by Thornton's sudden change in behavior while still aiming their rifles forward. Dew is also left confused by what he has seen but turns his attention back to the injured Cooper.

Elizabeth: *(rises off her knees)* Oh... Thank you... Thank you so much, sir.

Dr. Voight: *(surprised)* Elizabeth, why?!

Elizabeth: *(turns to face Dr. Voight)* Father, this has gone on for too long. It's over... Please give them the vial.

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth, if I do that—

Elizabeth: Father, PLEASE!

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth... *(then disapprovingly shakes his head)* This is a mistake, and you know it... Argh... *(then pulls out the SKT virus C vial from his front left lab coat pocket)* Here, take it... *(reluctantly giving the vial to Thornton)* You have what you want now... I hope you all can live with yourselves after this... Chosha help us...

Narrator: Elizabeth then tries to comfort her despondent father by placing a hand on his right shoulder. General Landmore with his rifle still aimed at Dr. Voight and Elizabeth, approaches Thornton from behind. Thornton with the virus vial in hand, slightly stretches his left arm backward handing it to General Landmore. General Landmore then takes the virus vial.

General Landmore: Thank you. And... *(curious)* Is everything okay, Sergeant..?

Thornton: Yes, sir...

General Landmore: Hmph. All right... *(then lowers his rifle, places the virus vial in his front vest pocket, grabs his tactical handheld radio from his vest, and pushes the*

transmission button to begin speaking into it) ...HQ, we have obtained the vial. I repeat, the vial is secured. Mission completed. We have one injured, requesting immediate medical assistance upon reinforcements arrival here. Do you copy?

Narrator:

As General Landmore walks off to the side awaiting a response on his tactical handheld radio, Hoplyn still has her rifle drawn and pointed at Dr. Voight and Elizabeth. Thornton continues watching Dr. Voight and Elizabeth and is touched by their familial bond. He conceals his emotions and maintains his composure. Meanwhile, continuous radio chatter can be heard in the background. Then the radio operator concludes by giving out the next set of orders to General Landmore via his tactical handheld radio.

General Landmore:

Roger that, HQ! ...Over and out. (then pushes the button on his tactical handheld radio to end transmission. He places it back into his vest, and approaches his unit) ...It looks like while we were busy, the other units arrived about nineteen minutes ago and are working their way down here to finish securing the rest of the facility. They should be joining us here shortly...

Narrator:

Seconds later, the reinforcements arrive and enter the lab. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers spread out and began securing the area.

Hoplyn:

That was fast...

Narrator:

A high-ranking SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier then approaches and salutes General Landmore as three medics, one with a gurney in hand, rush to the injured Cooper's side. Dew is still crouched near him and is visibly relieved to see the medics. Dew rises and then steps back making way for two of the medics who quickly go to work. The first medic examines the makeshift tourniquet still applied to Cooper's right leg and is impressed as the second medic checks Cooper for any other injuries. A few moments later, the first medic gestures to the third medic standing nearby to lay out the gurney on the floor next to

Cooper. The third medic nods his head in acknowledgment and prepares the gurney. Once positioned, Medic 1, 2, and 3 carefully lift Cooper onto the gurney, being considerate of his injured right leg. They then secure him onto it, making sure he's stable. Meanwhile, one of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers relieves Hoplyn from standing watch over Dr. Voight and Elizabeth. She lowers her rifle and salutes the soldier who salutes her back, he takes her place and then she walks off approaching General Landmore.

Hoplyn: Sir... What now?

General Landmore: Looks like we're done here... They'll handle the rest. We're heading back to camp. Debriefing will commence later in the evening. Inform the Sergeant and move out.

Hoplyn: Yes, sir!

Narrator: The medics start moving the gurney with Cooper safely secured on it toward the exit. A concerned Dew stays and walks beside them. Dew looks down at Cooper and gives him some reassuring words.

Dew: Hang in there, buddy. Once we get you back to camp, the medics will fix you up real good...

Narrator: Cooper still grimacing in pain looks up at Dew and gives him a thumbs up. Then the Medics with Cooper on the gurney and Dew exit the lab being followed by General Landmore. Hoplyn approaches Thornton from his left side and converses with him about his recent action.

Hoplyn: Sergeant. What you did back there was unexpected... What was all that about..?

Narrator: As if in a trance, Thornton remains silent for a moment shifting his eyes from side to side before responding to Hoplyn.

Thornton: Think nothing more of it, Arlington.

Hoplyn: I'm not sure what to think Sergeant...

Narrator: Thornton then arches one side of his upper lip and gives Hoplyn a sidelong glance deciding not to pay her any more attention. After a brief moment of

silence, Hoplyn then informs him of the General's orders.

Hoplyn:

Anyway. Sergeant, the General has ordered us to move out. We're heading back to camp now.

Thornton:

Understood, Corporal...

Hoplyn:

All right... Ehh...

Narrator:

Hoplyn for a moment is reluctant to leave and looks like she is about to say something, but she then nods her head, turns around, and heads toward the exit. Thornton then gazes in Elizabeth's direction. They both lock eyes again staring at one another with an unspoken fiery passion. Elizabeth gives Thornton a tender smile, and he reciprocates. Suddenly, two SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers approach Dr. Voight and Elizabeth, snapping the two out of their enamored trance. A few inaudible words between Dr. Voight and one of the soldiers are exchanged. Thornton and Elizabeth share one more lingering look and then a parting smile before Elizabeth and her father are escorted away by the two SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers. A lovestruck Thornton then turns around and exits the lab.

CHAPTER 9 – THE NEXT BIG SCORE

- Narrator: The scene cuts back to Festoon Forest, the next morning in the present day. Soft beams of sunlight delicately bathe the forest in its warm embrace. Near the river's edge, Dew remains resting peacefully with his back still slouched onto the log. Meanwhile, an *Aurora Blade* gang member is out and about in the area hurriedly searching for Dew, until stumbling across him. The *Aurora Blade* gang member breathes a sigh of relief and then pulls out a handheld radio from his side pocket, puts it to his mouth, and pushes the transmission button.
- AB Rebel 4: Cancel the search party. I found him. All is well. He's asleep near the river. I'm going to awaken him now... Over and out.
- Narrator: AB Rebel 4 releases the transmission button, then places the handheld radio back into his side pocket before approaching and waking Dew from his slumber.
- AB Rebel 4: (*whispering*) Hey, Boss. Boss. Boss. Boss!
- Narrator: Dew's eyelids then flutter open. After regaining focus, Dew looks up toward AB Rebel 4 who is standing over him.
- Dew: Uhh... Huh?!
- AB Rebel 4: Morning there Boss.
- Dew: (*confused*) Yeah. Good... morning.
- Narrator: AB Rebel 4 then extends a hand to Dew who takes it to slowly get back onto his feet.
- Dew: Thanks... (*yawn*) I must have dozed off. (*then rubs his eyes*)
- AB Rebel 4: It looked like you were sleeping well, Boss.
- Dew: Was I ever... (*then stretches out his arms*)
- AB Rebel 4: I'm glad I came across, you...
- Dew: Mmm... Why's that..?
- AB Rebel 4: The others have been looking for you.
- Dew: Looking for me..?
- AB Rebel 4: Yes, Boss. For the mission.
- Dew: (*panicked*) Oh. Oh, shit!! That's right.
- AB Rebel 4: When you didn't show up at the Armory, and you weren't in your housing unit, Lorenzo and the others got a little worried. So, a few of us were sent out to search the forest for you.

Your friend, Ms. Cullen had mentioned that she last saw you here...

Dew: Hmm. I must have overslept...

AB Rebel 4: You're only late about an hour, Boss.

Dew: Damn. Well. I apologize for any inconvenience I may have caused. Thank you, again, for awakening me.

AB Rebel 4: (*nods his head*) No problem Boss.

Dew: I'll be on my way back to the compound now.

AB Rebel 4: All right. (*then reaches back into his side pocket for the handheld radio*) I'll inform them that you'll be back there shortly...

Narrator: Dew nods his head and then gestures farewell to AB Rebel 4 before dashing off toward the forest compound. After some time passes, Dew eventually makes his way back to the forest compound and quickly enters the Armory. Inside, Lorenzo, Paca, and two *Aurora Blade* gang members are standing conversating with one another, Rena and Cooper are quietly sitting down at a table where a black duffle bag sits a top, and Lynch is leaning against a wall off to the side with his arms folded until the Armory door opens. This catches the group's attention as a panting Dew enters. Rena and Cooper rise from their seats at the table.

Cooper: There he is.

Rena: Dew, you made it.

Dew: Hey... (*huff*) (*puff*) guys... Heh, Heh... (*huff*) (*puff*)

Lorenzo: (*teasingly*) Well, good morning, sleepyhead. Did you forget we had the mission today?

Dew: Hah. Sorry about that. I didn't mean to hold things up. But I'm here now.

Paca: (*sarcastically*) Finally. We were about to go without you. Ha-ha...

Dew: Yeah. Yeah. As if.

Paca: Well. Better late than never. Anyway. We're all here now.

Lorenzo: And now we can go do this thing...

Cooper: Yes, we can. So, what are me and Rena's roles going to be in this?

Lorenzo: Oh. Yeah. That's right... (*then faces Dew*) What about that Dew?

Dew: Yeah. I didn't forget. Hmm...

Narrator: Lynch with a serious and worried look on his face interrupts Dew's train of thought.

Lynch: Before you figure that out... I like to have a quick word with Paca. Is that okay?

Narrator: Paca raises an eyebrow as Dew looks over at her and then back at Lynch.

Dew: Ah... sure.

Narrator: Lynch appreciatively nods his head, and then makes a gesture toward Paca to follow him off to the side. A concerned Paca follows him as the others patiently wait on them.

Paca: *(whispering) Lynch is everything okay?*

Lynch: *(whispering) Paca, I've been thinking. Maybe it's not a good idea for you to go on this mission.*

Paca: *(whispering) Why..? (then briefly rests her hand on her slightly swollen belly) Oh. Do you think I'll slow you all down because of the baby? I still haven't told them yet...*

Lynch: *(whispering) Yes. I just want to make sure you and the baby stay safe and unharmed.*

Paca: *(whispering) Lynch, thank you for your concern. But it'll be fine...*

Lynch: *(whispering) No. Please. Just stay behind. You've done enough already.*

Paca: *(whispering) Hmm.*

Lynch: *(whispering) And also... no matter what happens today, know that I love you.*

Paca: *(whispering) I love you too... But why are you talking like this? What do you mean..? You're kinda scaring me...*

Lynch: *(whispering) I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... Uhh... It's just that... Maybe I'm a little nervous about this mission... But I promise you we'll have a better life soon.*

Paca: *(whispering) Better life soon..?*

Lynch: *(whispering) Listen. Just trust me on this, and stay behind. Please..!*

Narrator: As tears glisten in Lynch's eyes, he then passionately grabs Paca's hand. She looks into his eyes seeing his concern.

Paca: *(whispering) Hmm... Okay, Lynch. You're just being protective. I understand. I'm probably not in the best condition anyway... I'll stay behind... for us. For the baby...*

Narrator: A relieved Lynch then gives Paca a brief warm smile before letting go of her hand. They both then rejoin the group. Lynch then addresses the group.

Lynch: Hey, guys. Paca has been working non-stop, and I think she should sit this one out.

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo look at one another puzzled hearing this.

Dew: Why? Is something wrong..?

Narrator: Lynch pauses for a moment trying to think of an excuse.

Lynch: She isn't feeling too well, and she needs the rest...

Lorenzo: Paca?

Paca: Uhh... Yes. I think... all the work I've been putting in lately has finally caught up to me. I wouldn't want to jeopardize the mission. I'm sorry...

Narrator: Lynch gives Paca a grateful glance.

Dew: Don't be. If you're not feeling well... then it's better you stay behind.

Lorenzo: You do a lot for us, Paca. It's okay.

Paca: Thanks...

Lynch: And, don't worry... If there are any issues with the tech, I can handle it. Paca showed me how to use it. You're in good hands.

Dew: I suppose.

Lorenzo: But now we're short a person.

Lynch: If I may make a suggestion.

Dew: Hm?

Lynch: I think either Rena or Cooper should go in her place.

Lorenzo: You want one of them to go on the mission with us? (*then turns to face Dew*) ...I know we voted on this already... But...

Lynch: Hold on. Hear me out... Whoever does end up going with us on the mission should be given a simple task. I dunno... something like staying behind in the utility tunnel to be our extra set of eyes while we infiltrate the National Mint.

Dew: Hmm...

Lynch: And the person who doesn't go on the mission can stay here at the compound to keep an eye on things. Pretty simple. What do you say?

Lorenzo: Euh. When you put it like that...

Dew: That does sound reasonable. You've thought this through... Hmm... All right. Fine. Then we'll do it that way.

Narrator: Lynch smiles and nods his head.

Lorenzo: So who we taking..?

Dew: Good question. Hmm... *(then faces Rena and Cooper)* Whoever I don't choose, please take no offense. I have to choose the person who will be best suited for this...

Cooper: No offense will be taken, my friend. This is a team effort. I trust your judgment. There's a lot on the line. I'm behind you either way.

Rena: This mission is crucial. You all have put a lot of planning into this for a while. "In the mission of achievement, each team member is a beacon; choose those whose light shines brightest." Whatever you decide, I too am here for you.

Dew: Thanks. I appreciate both of you and your willingness to further aid our cause. This isn't going to be an easy choice to make. Hmm... But it has to be done... *(thinking to himself)* Cooper, my brother-in-arms, or Rena, my Sifu? *(then deeply inhales and exhales)* I think... I've made a decision. It'll be me, Lorenzo, Lynch, the two others, and... Rena.

Lorenzo: That's our crew? Works for me.

Rena: You honor me with your selection, my pupil. Err... I mean, Dew. Force of habit. Ha-ha... Well, then. I'm ready to contribute further to the success of the mission ahead.

Dew: I know you are, Rena. And I'm happy that I can count on you.

Cooper: Ah. So, no action for me today it seems. Darn.

Dew: Sorry buddy.

Cooper: No worries, Dew. Having Rena with you out there, she'll teach any trouble you run into a thing or two.

Rena: You're too kind, Cooper.

Cooper: It's only the truth, Rena. But please, just be sure you all come back in one piece. Okay?

Dew: *(nods his head in acknowledgment)* That shouldn't be a problem.

Cooper: Aye. While you're out on the mission, I guess I could do some tidying up around the compound where it's needed. I could start in the housing units first.

Lorenzo: Oh. *(then faces Cooper)* By the way, Cooper... If you happen to come across a stamp album lying about, please don't trash it or touch it. It's taken me eight years to put that all together. "Mamie" is my little baby...

Cooper: "Mamie"?

Lorenzo: Yes, that's "her" name... Did I stutter?

Cooper: Uhh... No.

Lorenzo: ...And if you fuck with my stamp collection in any way, WE'RE GONNA TO HAVE SOME PROBLEMS!

Rena: Egads!

Cooper: *(surprised)* Whoa. Whoa. Hey man.

Narrator: Dew immediately steps in between Lorenzo and Cooper.

Dew: *(facing Lorenzo)* Easy now, Lorenzo. "Mamie" is going to be just fine. You have nothing to worry about... *(turns to Cooper)* Ha-ha... He's a little sensitive when it comes to his stamp collection.

Cooper: Yeah... I see that.

Rena: *(thinking to herself)* ...And here I thought my late Mother was passionate about her picture collection of random people's neck fat. This guy takes the cake.

Dew: ...If you do come across, "Mamie" just leave "her" untouched.

Cooper: Officially documented. No problem. You got it...

Narrator: Cooper then gives Dew and Lorenzo a thumbs up followed by a nervous chuckle. Lorenzo intimidatingly nods his head in response. The room momentarily falls into an uneasy hush until Dew speaks up again.

Dew: So... Yeah. Mmm... I guess we're all ready to go..?

Narrator: Lorenzo, Lynch, the other two *Aurora Blade* gang members, and Rena nod their heads.

Lorenzo: Been ready. To think, this will be our biggest score next to the time we blew up the Helix Provincial Student Debt Collection Agency. That was a "blast".

AB Rebel 7: Ha-ha-ha...

AB Rebel 8: Hah. A "blast" ... Good one boss.

Lorenzo: *(then turns to Lynch)* Hey, Lynch.

Lynch: *(faces Lorenzo)* Yeah?

Lorenzo: *(uncertain)* I know you apologized the other night for this... But you're not going to run off and leave us behind again if things were to go south for whatever reason? Because I SWEAR if you do, I will...

Lynch: ...No. That's not happening again... *(then briefly looks over at Paca before looking back at Lorenzo)* I'll be by your side, all

the way to the end... "You can take that to the bank." (*then smirks*)

Lorenzo: (*glares incredulously at Lynch*) Hmph. Let's hope so...

Dew: Now that everything is in order, we've got a mission to complete. Let's head on out.

Narrator: Dew then grabs the black duffle bag from off the table and heads toward the exit of the Armory. Lorenzo, the two *Aurora Blade* gang members, and Rena follow shortly after. Before leaving, Lynch goes up to Paca and kisses her softly on the cheek. She closes her eyes cherishing the moment.

Paca: (*whispering*) *You be careful out there, Lynch. Come back to us. Our child needs their father.*

Lynch: (*whispering*) *I will, Paca. And when this is all done... the three of us, as a family... can look forward to having a freer and more promising future...*

Paca: (*whispering*) *Freer..?*

Lynch: (*whispering*) *I love you both... I must go...*

Narrator: As Lynch pulls away from Paca, she notices a troubled expression on his face. But no other words are exchanged as he quickly heads toward the Armory's exit, leaving her alone there with Cooper. An hour passes by, and the scene cuts to the rooftop helipad of the Executive Mansion Estate. Zircon, who is flanked by Peoria to his left, jovially and purposefully strides toward a waiting helicopter while passing by the Executive Mansion Estate security detail that is standing at attention. Peoria gives Zircon an updated intel report, via her earpiece, for the upcoming *Aurora Blade* compound raid.

Peoria: Sir... *ISYP*A agents are en route. The ETA at the vicinity of the forest compound will be within the next 16 to 20 minutes. Once in position, they'll be on standby awaiting your command.

Zircon: Excellent. And what of the bomber jets? Are they loaded up and ready..?

Peoria: Stand by...

Narrator: Peoria then subtly gestures to her earpiece and intently listens into it for the next intel update. A few seconds pass by before she continues giving her report.

Peoria: ...Payload loading has just been completed. Fueling of the four bomber jets is in progress. Give it an hour, tops, and they'll be ready for take-off.

Zircon: Hm. Very well. Thank you, Peoria.

Narrator: Peoria nods her head, and the two continue toward the helicopter. As they get closer, Peoria begins to share her concerns about Zircon coming along.

Peoria: Sir.

Zircon: Yes..?

Peoria: With all due respect, I must express concern about you wanting to come in person to witness this unfold. Wouldn't it be safer for you to remain here? We could still provide you with real-time updates on the operation while you're in the safety of the Situation Room.

Zircon: And miss out on the show..? Hah. Nonsense.

Peoria: Sir, it's a risk to your well-being coming along.

Zircon: It's a risk I'm willing to take. Watching the *Aurora Blade* getting snuffed out firsthand will be a delight. This has been a long time in the making, and I will be there to see it in person.

Peoria: Hmm. Understood, sir. I'm just being cautious, that's all.

Zircon: It's your job to do so. And I appreciate you. You've always had my best interests in mind.

Narrator: Zircon then discreetly brushes his hand up against Peoria's in a silent acknowledgment of their unspoken romance. Peoria cracks a smile trying to maintain a professional demeanor.

Peoria: Of course, sir. It's my honor and pleasure to do so.

Zircon: Worry no further. Today's events will guarantee an unforgettable experience, which I will savor every minute of... *(then satisfyingly inhaling and exhaling, followed by an evil grin)* Mmm... I can't wait... We must not be late. *(then vivaciously gestures to the helicopter)* Off to the show we go..!

Narrator: As they reach the waiting helicopter, the pilot sitting in the cockpit greets Zircon with a salute. Zircon returns the gesture before boarding, followed by Peoria. Once they take their seats, the helicopter door closes with a solid thud as the rotors start to whirr. Moments later, the whine of the engine grows louder and louder as the helicopter lifts off from the helipad and begins its ascension into the sky leaving behind the Executive Mansion Estate.

CHAPTER 10 –A MINTED BETRAYAL

- Narrator: The scene cuts to Dew and the gang along with Rena who are now clad in their utility worker disguises walking through the dimly lit utility tunnel that stretches out before them. One of the accompanying *Aurora Blade* gang members is carrying a tool box. While traversing through the maze of concrete and pipes, they would often pass a few maintenance workers, exchanging nods and casual greetings. As they proceed through the winding tunnel, the echoes of rushing water emanate from nearby pipes, filling the cavernous space. After some time, they ultimately arrive at the entrance of the National Mint. Dew makes a gesture to Lynch who then walks over to the imposing metal door. Lynch produces the key card and smoothly swipes it through the electronic lock. Seconds later, the door creaks open.
- Lynch: *We're in... (then places the key card back into his pocket)*
- Narrator: Lorenzo walks toward the entrance of the mint and keeps the door open. Dew turns to Rena and then hands her an earpiece.
- Rena: This is where we part ways, huh..?
- Dew: For now.
- Rena: *(nods in acknowledgment and takes the earpiece from Dew)*
Okay. I'm prepared to play my role.
- Dew: Great. As discussed earlier, you and the other two will be our eyes and ears here... *(then gestures to his equipped earpiece)*
If you happen to see anything suspicious, report it to me immediately.
- Rena: Got it, Dew. *(then equips the earpiece)*
- Dew: Let's do a quick comms check.
- Rena: Sure.
- Dew: *(then initiates contact with Rena via his earpiece)* Testing.
One, two, three. Testing. Can you hear me..?
- Rena: *(then responds to Dew via her earpiece)* Clear as a bell. No issues here.
- Dew: Perfect. That takes care of that. Hmm. You know... I think it'll be best if I check in often to see how you all are holding up.

AB Rebel 8: Hey, boss. Don't worry about a thing. We've got it covered here.

AB Rebel 7: ...You can depend on us boss. Go do your thing.

Rena: Dew, if there are any issues I'll contact you right away. Stay focused on the mission ahead. Okay?

Narrator: Dew then gives the three a satisfactory nod. Meanwhile, Lynch pulls out the handheld device and activates it. It emits a subtle signal. He then reviews the functions of the handheld device to ensure it's operating correctly.

Lynch: Device online. Check. Security feed jammed and substituted with an endless loop of previously monitored footage. Check. Real-time monitoring of SWAT TROOPERS movement. Check. ...Looks like we're up and running. Ready to go..?

Narrator: Dew moves toward the entrance of the mint and gestures farewell to Rena and the two *Aurora Blade* members as he enters. Lynch then follows in tow, passing Lorenzo, who is holding the door open. Lorenzo gives Lynch a brief suspicious glance as he walks past. Lorenzo then turns to Rena and the two *Aurora Blade* members to address them.

Lorenzo: Catch y'all in a bit!

Narrator: Lorenzo turns away and then follows Dew and Lynch into the mint. The door closes behind them leaving Rena and the two *Aurora Blade* members to stand guard at the entrance. Now inside the National Mint, the trio begins their descent deeper into its depths. As they roam the mint's corridors with the handheld device in hand, they avoid detection by monitoring the movements of patrolling SWAT TROOPERS nearby. Periodically, the trio would encounter a few unsuspecting SWAT TROOPERS, jeopardizing their path forward. In response, they would swiftly dispatch the SWAT TROOPERS without raising alarms to continue ahead. Eventually, they would reach the main vault entrance, proceeding cautiously. Dew, Lorenzo, and Lynch then halt, briefly gazing in awe and excitement at the massive vault door, fully aware of the treasures awaiting them beyond it.

Lorenzo: *(whispering) Finally... we're here.*

Dew: *(whispering) Yes we are...*

Lorenzo: *(whispering) It felt like it took us forever to get here.*

Dew: *(whispering) That it did... but without any snags.*

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* Isn't that something for once..?

Lynch: *(whispering)* Looks like all is going as planned... *(then cracks a smile)*

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* Hmm. Right.

Dew: *(then faces Lynch)* *(whispering)* All right, Lynch. Let's get this door open...

Narrator: Lynch nods at Dew and then approaches the main vault door keypad with determination. As Lynch begins using the handheld device to decrypt the ten-digit numeric passcode, suddenly, Dew receives a call on his earpiece from Rena. As Dew walks away, he taps his earpiece to receive the incoming transmission.

Dew: *(whispering)* Rena. What's up..?

Narrator: As Dew waits for a response from Rena, all he can hear is crackling static noises and fragments of words making it through.

Rena: Dew... can... me..?

Dew: *(whispering)* Rena. I can barely make out what you're saying. What's going on..?

Narrator: A concerned Lorenzo looks over at Dew who is still struggling to get a response back from Rena on his earpiece, while Lynch concentrates on using the handheld device to decrypt the main vault passcode.

Rena: Dew... there was...

Dew: *(whispering)* Rena. The signal is still breaking apart. Can you hear me?

Rena: I... hear... We were...

Dew: *(whispering)* You were what? Come again..?

Rena: Be... careful... SWAT...

Narrator: Suddenly, the transmission ends, leaving Dew with a sense of frustration and unease.

Dew: *(whispering)* Rena? Rena? Rena, are you there..? Damn.

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* Dew, what happened?

Dew: *(turns to face Lorenzo)* *(whispering)* ...Rena tried calling me, but I suddenly lost the call.

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* What did she say?

Dew: *(whispering)* I don't know. The transmission was inaudible. I couldn't make most of it out.

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* Hmm. That doesn't sound good. I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about all this.

Dew: *(whispering)* Me too. We can't wait. Let's get this vault open, grab as much of the bullion as we can, and get back to Rena and the others ASAP.

Narrator: Just then, the handheld device gives off a triumphant bleep, displaying the decrypted passcode. Lynch grins and then immediately punches in the ten-digit passcode, **007-373-5963** to the main vault keypad. The vault door emits a soft click, and then a heavy thud resonates as the massive door begins to open.

Lynch: Open Sesame.

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo walk over to join Lynch as the massive vault door finishes opening, revealing its interior filled with silver and gold bullion ready to be taken. Before they can enter the main vault, suddenly six-armed SWAT TROOPERS emerge from out of nowhere, filling the room and surrounding them. Dew and Lorenzo immediately draw their weapons getting into a fighting stance. Lynch remains in place, pretending to be dumbfounded.

SWAT TROOPER 13: Don't move.

SWAT TROOPER 14: We have you surrounded, there's no way out.

SWAT TROOPER 15: Lower your weapons, now!

Narrator: The vault door then creaks shut behind Dew, Lorenzo, and Lynch. As tensions persist, the six-armed SWAT TROOPERS with their rifles pointed at the trio tighten their formation, ready for any sudden moves. Just as the standoff reaches a critical point, the scene abruptly cuts to a helicopter soaring through the afternoon Mesovillain sky. Inside, Zircon reclines confidently while Peoria, stationed at his side, receives another intel update through her earpiece. Seconds later, she relays the intel to Zircon.

Peoria: Sir. The *Aurora Blade* co-leaders have been engaged at the main vault entrance of the National Mint.

Zircon: Excellent news. (*then gives a satisfied grin*)
 And the rest will take care of itself. They're good as dead down there. Ha-ha... Now it is time to end these terrorists once and for all... Peoria, inform the *ISPYA* agents to commence with the raid on the forest compound.

Peoria: Understood, sir. Uh. And what of the informant's significant other? Is *ISPYA* to bring her in? Unharmd or harmed..?

Zircon: Don't concern yourself with that.

Peoria: Sir?

Zircon: She's inconsequential.

Peoria: But what about the deal with the informant?

Zircon: (*coldly*) Deals are like glass, they can shatter unexpectedly. While Mr. Arroyo has delivered on his end, and HE will be rewarded for such – I am in no way obligated to fully fulfill my part. It's my melody, and he is the one dancing. Our priority is the elimination of the *Aurora Blade* terrorists. Let's make it so.

Narrator: Peoria nods, and then relays the command via her earpiece to the *ISPYA* agents on standby as the helicopter continues its course. Meanwhile, back at the forest compound, high in the watchtower, the watchtower guard is basking in the warmth of the afternoon sun, accompanied by a soothing breeze and the cheerful chirping of birds. For a brief moment, the watchtower guard is immersed in a tranquil state until he takes note of the sudden unusual silence hanging in the air. He then hears a low rumbling from afar, prompting him to grab his binoculars to gaze off into the distance. As he focuses, he sees the advancing *ISPYA* agents in their menacing Humvees, followed by a tank, emerging from the treeline and heading toward the forest compound. As the panic-gripped watchtower

guard realizes the imminent threat approaching, he swiftly reaches for the alarm, sounding its urgent wail across the compound. At ground level, the alerting sound captures the attention of the compound's inhabitants, causing them to pause and wonder about the unfolding situation. In one part of the compound, Cooper exits one of the small housing units he just finished cleaning. He wipes sweat from his brow and then furrows it at the abrupt disturbance. Concurrently, not too far away, Paca jolts upright from a peaceful moment of rest; her eyes widen with a mix of confusion and exigency as her senses immediately attune to the disconcerting sound reverberating in her room. Back at the top of the watchtower, the watchtower guard seizes his handheld radio with determination, taps into the forest compound's broadcasting system, and urgently conveys his message.

AB Watchtower Guard:

Attention! This is not a drill. Government agents are inbound with a fleet of Humvees and a tank. Arm yourselves. I repeat, government agents are inbound. This is not a drill. Assume defensive positions immediately.

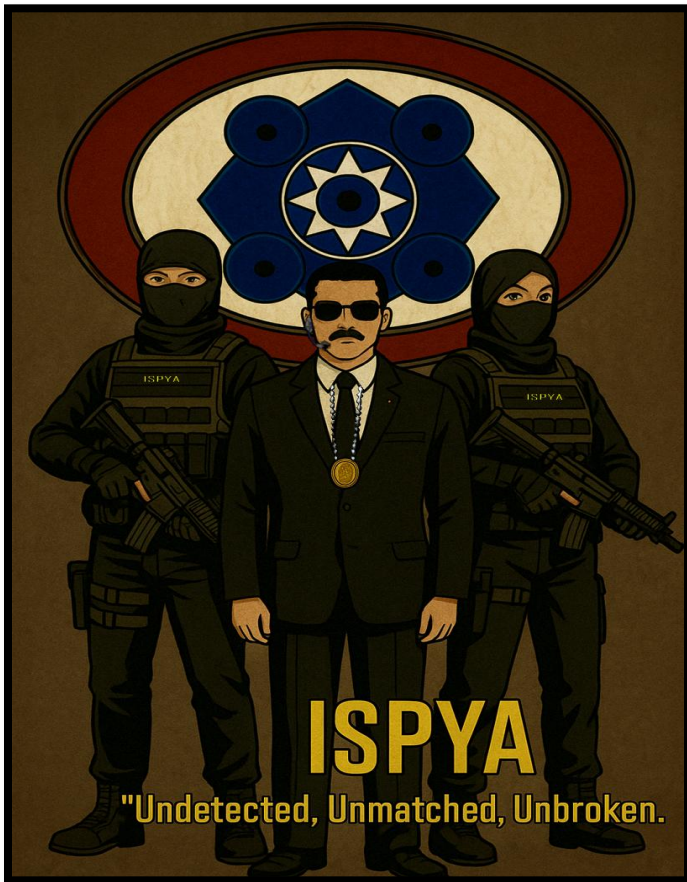
Narrator:

The watchtower guard repeats his announcement two more times as it echoes through the interiors and exterior of the forest compound, disrupting the once peaceful ambience and inciting a chaotic frenzy. The inhabitants abandoned their tasks, hastily mobilizing and arming themselves as they braced for the upcoming raid. The watchtower guard then ends the broadcast and prepares himself. Down below, as Cooper stands there uncertain about what to do next, an *Aurora Blade* gang member, armed with a rifle, approaches him. His eyes convey a silent plea for help. Cooper acknowledges this by

nodding, quickly grabs his mop, and rushes off with the gang member to provide further assistance. Meanwhile, Paca remains in her housing unit, sitting at the edge of her bed, and briefly glancing at a wall. As shock and disbelief wash over her, she can't rid herself of the lingering suspicion in her mind.

Paca:

(thinking to herself) Lynch... Was it you..? No... It just couldn't be...



Narrator:

Paca dispels her doubts, rises from the bed, and directs her focus toward aiding her comrades. Swiftly, she seizes her gear and firearm before exiting the housing unit. Outside, the

low growl of the Humvees and tank's engines intensifies as they approach the entrance of the compound. The *Aurora Blade* gang members, already in position behind makeshift barricades, begin unleashing a barrage of gunfire in an attempt to halt the relentless advance. Bullets whizzed through the air, tearing leaves and splintering wood, yet the tank and Humvees pressed on. One of the *Aurora Blade* gang members, armed with a rocket launcher, aims it at the advancing tank and fires. The rocket propels through the air, colliding with the tank in a burst of flame. For a fleeting moment, hope flickers among the *Aurora Blade* gang. However, the tank, its armor seemingly impervious, emerges from the smoke relatively unscathed, its tracks grinding forward relentlessly. Suddenly, the tank's cannon roared to life, sending shockwaves through the defenses of the *Aurora Blade*. Barricades crumble, bodies are sent flying, and the entrance to the forest compound is exposed. The tank then sits idle as the Humvees charge through the debris-strewn entrance, their tires crushing the remnants of the *Aurora Blade*'s defenses. Once inside, the *ISPYA* agents, clad in tactical gear, spilled out, forming a formidable line of assault. The forest descended into further chaos as the *Aurora Blade* gang members engaged in hand-to-hand combat and exchanged gunfire with the advancing *ISPYA* agents. The scene cuts back to the main vault entrance of the Mesovilla National Mint as the tense standoff between the six-armed SWAT TROOPERS and Dew, Lorenzo, and Lynch persists. Unexpectedly, Lynch steps forward, avoiding eye contact with Dew and Lorenzo, while facing the six-armed SWAT TROOPERS. Dew and Lorenzo

briefly exchange confused glances before Lynch's revelation.

Lynch: There's something I need to tell you guys...

Dew: Lynch, what's going on..?

Narrator: Lynch drops the handheld device at his feet and proceeds to stomp on it, breaking it into pieces. He then smugly turns to face Dew and Lorenzo, who still have their weapons drawn and are in their fighting stance.

Lynch: Isn't it obvious? This is a trap.

Dew: A trap?!

Lorenzo: Ugh. Why am I not shocked? So, it was you who snitched on us, causing our plans at the National Bank to go south.

Lynch: (*defiantly*) That's right.

Narrator: Lorenzo's eyes narrow, and then speaks with a tone of disappointment and vindication.

Lorenzo: You rat bastard. I knew something was off with you recently.

Dew: Since when did you turn, Lynch?

Lynch: It hasn't been that long, and trust me, it wasn't an easy choice to make at first. But it was the right choice.

Dew: "Right choice"..?

Lorenzo: What? Did you get promised a lot of money to sell us out like this?

Lynch: Hah. That, and another reason dear to my heart. Let me explain. Ever since I joined the *Aurora Blade*, I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to help those in need. Time after time, I assisted in liberating the countless oppressed, becoming one of their champions of justice and being their voice when needed... Our actions were making the world a better place, or so I thought. In some situations... when trying to do noble things, I found myself unwillingly compromising my morality for, "the greater good." After a while, I began questioning myself. "What am I getting from

this?" "Is this right?" "Is this necessary?" Fight after fight, I no longer felt any self-satisfaction with what I was doing. No matter how many people we were helping, I felt empty and trapped, knowing some other innocent person was suffering more due to the extreme measures we took, "for the greater good". This made us no better than the government we were fighting. Throughout my internal conflict, the only thing that kept me going... was Paca. She's so selfless and kind. She kept me sane. Dew, Lorenzo - you're both scam artists and not heroes! Do you think I want her and my child to live this type of life? Child..?

Dew: Child..?

Lorenzo: Whoa. Paca is pregnant?! ...Why didn't she tell us this?

Lynch: Because she didn't want to burden the cause.

Dew: What? That's nonsense.

Lynch: (*resentful*) Is it? You two barely notice anything else going on... Always fixated on the "next big score".

Lorenzo: Wait. Does Paca even know about this?

Lynch: No, she doesn't.

Lorenzo: Then Paca would be disgusted to know what you have done.

Lynch: Oh? Says you? I'm saving Paca from further wasting her life, giving her and our unborn child a chance at a normal life. We won't be at your disposal anymore!

Lorenzo: Tsk, tsk, tsk... (*then shakes his head in disappointment*) Lynch, you dumb sonofabitch. It didn't have to be this way. We could've helped you, her, and your unborn child.

Lynch: Ha-ha... Right.

Dew: What ever you've been promised, you know that the government won't deliver on.

Lynch: The Premier will do more than the *Aurora Blade* ever has. Luring you here will guarantee that fulfillment.

Lorenzo: The Premier? And you believe that fuck face will help you out? You truly have lost it.

Dew: Luring..?

Lynch: Not that it matters; soon, both of you will be dead, along with the others down in the utility tunnel...

Dew: The others. Rena. Sifu... No!

Lynch: (*sarcastically*) Yes, it's so sad, I know...

Narrator: Dew's eyes burned with a mix of anger and betrayal as he prepared to strike at Lynch with his bo staff, but the sight of the six-armed SWAT TROOPERS positioned strategically behind Lynch, stayed his hand.

Dew: Argh... Dammit.

Lynch: Also, so you know... as we speak, Premier Videll has ordered a full-scale assault by *ISPYA* agents on our compound. Bomber jets will be deployed shortly, and the compound, along with the rest of the gang, will be obliterated.

Lorenzo: LYNCH, YOU FUCKING TRAITOR!!! You're going to allow thousands of our friends to die today so that you can get your due?!

Lynch: Friends?! Ha-ha... Those people were never my friends!

Dew: But... Paca will die too.

Lynch: She'll be fine. She will be taken away to safety during the raid. Too bad we can't say the same thing about Lorenzo's stupid stamp album.

Lorenzo: "Mamie"!!!

Lynch: Ha-ha... I wish I could say this farewell would be bittersweet... but it's not. Here's to a freer and more promising future for me and my family. We are now unburdened... (*then makes a triumphant gesture*) Goodbye.

Narrator: Lynch then turns to face one of the armed SWAT TROOPERS, signaling to proceed with executing Dew and Lorenzo before exiting. Fueled by a mix of anger and determination, Dew and Lorenzo engage in a fierce battle, defeating not only the initial six but the additional wave of tenacious SWAT TROOPERS that came after. Breathing heavily, Dew and Lorenzo take a moment to regroup until Dew receives a call on his earpiece. A surprised Dew then taps his earpiece to receive the incoming transmission.

Rena: *Dew, are you there..?*

Dew: Rena?! Is it you?

Narrator: Lorenzo looks over at Dew who is elated and relieved to hear from an alive Rena.

Rena: *Yes it's me.*

Dew: Oh it is so good to hear your voice again. I'm glad you're okay.

Rena: *Likewise, Dew. I tried calling you earlier, but it seemed like there was some sort of issue with the earpiece. I was trying to tell you, we had a run-in with some SWAT TROOPERS down here, but we took care of them.*

Dew: You weren't the only ones who dealt with some trouble.

Rena: *Are you and Lorenzo, okay..?*

Dew: Yeah. We're fine. Tired. Angry. But fine. Rena, listen. You and the other two stay where you're at. We'll regroup with you soon. We have to get back to the Festoon Forest ASAP. Lynch betrayed us...

Rena: *Lynch betrayed you?! What the...*

Dew: Yeah, I'll fill you and the others in on the details once we meet up. Also, there's an imminent government raid that's about to take place.

Rena: *A government raid?! Oh dear. That's not good at all. Okay. Understood. We'll be waiting for you here, Dew.*

Narrator: Dew then taps his earpiece to end the transmission. He faces Lorenzo who is still seething with anger over Lynch's betrayal.

Lorenzo: Fuckin' Lynch... That lousy traitor won't get away with this..! Argh...

Dew: Hey. Hey. We'll deal with him later. Right now, we have to get back to the compound.

Lorenzo: Grr... You're right. Let's make sure our home is safe first.

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo, fueled by a new sense of urgency, exit the main vault entrance area to begin their trek back to the utility tunnel where Rena and the other two *Aurora Blade* gang members await.

CHAPTER 11 – AN EXPLOSIVE

SPECTACLE

Narrator:

The scene cuts back to the forest compound, 30 minutes later. The intense fighting rages on between the *ISPYA* agents and *Aurora Blade* gang members; bullets blaze through the air, piercing bodies and violently knocking combatants from both sides to the ground, painting the soil crimson with blood. Cries of agony fill the forest compound, and the scent of sulfur permeates the air. Suddenly, the once idle tank roars back to life, its massive treads crushing everything and everyone in its path as it enters the compound. Amidst the chaos, an injured *Aurora Blade* gang member, blood-soaked and determined, clutches the rocket launcher he retrieved from the ground with shaky hands. He aims it at the approaching tank. Time seemed to slow as the rocket streaked through the air, finding its mark with a deafening explosion. The tank erupts into flames, claiming the operator and others in its vicinity. The wounded *Aurora Blade* gang member sinks to his knees, succumbing to his injuries. Off in the distance, high above the forest compound, a helicopter hovers in place. Inside, Zircon peers through binoculars, a sly grin spreading across his face as he observes the unfolding fighting beneath him. Meanwhile, back down below, Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and the other two *Aurora Blade* gang members are seen sprinting through the forest towards the compound. The echo of their footsteps mingles with the distant sounds of

the ongoing compound raid. As they approach the compound, they witness chaos and destruction. The front gate is in ruins, with smoke billowing from various points within. They see the severity of the assault, with corpses of their comrades and *ISPYA* agents laid out everywhere, while shouts and gunfire echo in the distance.

Lorenzo: (*anxious*) Dew, no..! It's already started...
Dammit!

Narrator: Dew is suddenly swept into an induced PTSD flashback, where rapid images of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers lying lifeless on the ground replace his fallen *Aurora Blade* comrades. Lorenzo and Rena notice this and exchange worried glances before Rena calls out to Dew, successfully pulling him out of his trance.

Rena: Dew? Dew? What's wrong..?

Dew: (*regaining his composure*) Uh... (*then faces Rena*) Rena... Hey.

Rena: Dew, are you, okay?

Dew: Uhh... Yeah. I'm fine.

Lorenzo: You froze up on us there. Are you sure..? I've never seen you do that before...

Dew: (*then faces Lorenzo*) It's... It's nothing. Let's keep going. We have to help and evacuate the others...

Lorenzo: Yeah, man. Okay. I hope Paca and Cooper are all right.

Narrator: With a collective nod, they continue to press forward into the forest compound currently under raid. Moving forward, they engage in random skirmishes with *ISPYA* agents while assisting their exhausted and injured comrades. As they venture deeper into the compound, they come across Cooper and several other *Aurora Blade* gang members who have

taken cover behind a wall. Dew and the others sprint over to join them.

Dew: Cooper.

Cooper: Guys... You made it back.

Dew: Yeah. Sadly not in time, but it's good to see you're still alive, friend.

Cooper: Likewise. I can't say defending a compound against government agents was on my bingo card today.

Dew: None of us expected this, that's for certain.

Cooper: Hah. This so reminds me of Mount Darien...

Lorenzo: (*whispering to himself*) Mount Darien?

Cooper: How did things go at the National Mint..?

Dew: Not good...

Cooper: Oh..?

Lorenzo: And all thanks to that piece of shit Lynch.

Cooper: Lynch? What did he do..?

Dew: Cooper, we don't have much time to explain. Right now, I need you to get out of here with the others and head to the underground bomb shelter beneath the compound's entrance. They'll show you where it's at.

Cooper: Why there?

Dew: There are bomber jets en route.

Narrator: The other *Aurora Blade* gang members exchange alarmed glances, disbelief written on their faces.

AB Rebel 3: Bomber jets?

AB Rebel 6: Are you serious?!

Lorenzo: Yeah. Deadly serious. We can't stay here. You need to evacuate now. That's an order.

AB Rebel 3: Yes, boss. Understood.

Lorenzo: (*turns to Cooper*) Hey. Have you seen...

Cooper: "Mamie"? I haven't touched your old dusty stamp album. Not once. But "she's" okay.

Lorenzo: Stamp album, you mean... And "she's" not dusty! But I wasn't talking about "her". I meant Paca. Have you seen her?

Cooper: No. I haven't.

Lorenzo: Damn.

AB Rebel 6: Boss, I have.

Lorenzo: Where?

AB Rebel 6: The last spot I saw her and a few others was near the watchtower, fighting off some *ISPYA* agents.

Dew: Hmm. It looks like Lorenzo and I will head to the watchtower... *(then turns to face Rena and two other Aurora Blade gang members)* I need you three to go and scoop up any remaining survivors and direct them to the bomb shelter. Okay?

AB Rebel 8: We're on it.

Rena: You got it, Dew. Be safe.

Narrator: With no further words, Dew and Lorenzo dash toward the watchtower, while the others head in the opposite direction to fulfill their tasks. After some time, Dew and Lorenzo reach the base of the watchtower and approach it cautiously. Suddenly, an explosion occurs at the top, causing debris to fall. Several *ISPYA* agents, along with their *Aurora Blade* comrades, plummet to the ground, including Paca, who is gravely injured.

Lorenzo: *(shouting)* PACA! No...

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo immediately rush to Paca's side.

Dew: Paca, hold on. We're here...

Paca: *(weakly)* Dew... Lorenzo... you made it back... Did the mission... go well?

Lorenzo: Shh. Don't worry about that right now, Paca. What happened?

Paca: *(weakly)* ...Those *ISPYA* bastards... there were too many of them... came out of nowhere... but... I held them back... as long as I could... *(then grabs and holds onto Paca's hand as a piece of the damaged detonator controller falls from it)* You've done what you could... you were always a fighter...

Paca: I couldn't let them... have their way... this is our home...

Lorenzo: (*trying to maintain his composure*) Goddammit... Paca, hold on. We need to get you out of here...

Narrator: As Lorenzo motions to lift her, Paca then coughs up some blood that trickles down her lips.

Paca: (*weakly*) Lorenzo... you know... that won't do any good... now.

Lorenzo: Paca, don't say that. Please.

Paca: (*weakly*) Where... where is Lynch...?

Narrator: Lorenzo hesitates and is about to reveal the truth until Dew intervenes.

Dew: He's out there fighting with the others... Fighting with everything he's got... (*then forces a smile*)

Narrator: Paca faintly smiles, knowing deep down it's a comforting lie.

Paca: (*weakly*) Tell him... tell him that... I... no... we love him...

Lorenzo: (*voice crack*) We...

Narrator: Dew acknowledges with a nod. Paca's eyes flutter as she breathes her last. Lorenzo gently releases her hand and then rises from beside the fallen Paca. Dew and Lorenzo share a moment of grief before anger and resolute determination take over.

Lorenzo: Paca... No... No... Arrrggghhhh... Damn you, Lynch!!! This is all your fault... (*then gazes at Paca's corpse*) I'm sorry, Paca. I'm so sorry. I wish we had been here sooner... (*then somberly shaking his head*) Thank you for all you've done for the cause... You and the little one can rest easy now... We'll take it from here... (*then clenches his fist*) These fuckers will not be getting away with this..!

Dew: No, they won't... We'll see to that.

Lorenzo: Let's keep going... there may be others who need our help...

Narrator: Dew nods, and together they proceed into the watchtower. While ascending, Dew and Lorenzo randomly come across *ISPYA* agents at different junctures, engaging in intense battles with them. Eventually, they reach the top of the watchtower. The watchtower guard lies dead, the floor damaged earlier by the explosives set off by Paca.

Lorenzo: ...He's dead too... (*sigh*)

Dew: (*solemnly*) Yeah...

Lorenzo: Your death will be avenged, my friend. (*then faces Dew*) Well, there's no use sticking around here. Let's get back to the others down below.

Narrator: Dew nods, and just as they prepare to leave, a helicopter suddenly appears above them. A door opens, and Peoria jumps from it onto the watchtower deck. Dew and Lorenzo assume their fighting stances as Peoria slowly saunters toward them. She stops at a safe distance and then gestures to the handheld radio attached to her vest.

Peoria: There's someone who wants to speak to you two...

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo then give one another a brief, perplexed glance while remaining in their fighting stances. She removes the handheld radio from her vest and activates it. Zircon's voice comes over the radio.

Zircon: *Hello, hello. So, you're the co-leaders of the hooligans that have been causing me and this nation so much trouble. At last, we finally meet. Although I had expected both of you to have been taken care of at the National Mint. But, good help is so hard to find these days. The sheriff wasn't lying; you, Aurora Blade, truly are resilient... like goddamn cockroaches.*

I don't think there is any need for introductions. You know who I am.

Lorenzo: Zircon!

Zircon: *That's Premier Videl to you. Hmm... And I must say... there's something familiar about both of you... I just can't put my finger on it...*

Lorenzo: *(scornful)* You have no idea...

Dew: ...

Zircon: *Oh? My informant, your former associate, Mr. Arroyo—despite all the secrets he has revealed about the Aurora Blade—I still know very little about you two. What is your story? Hm?*

Dew: Cut the shit. Call off the raid.

Zircon: *No can do.*

Dew: You'll be murdering many innocent people.

Zircon: *Innocent people?! Where? Ha-ha-ha... They're all guilty, as you are.*

Dew: Stop this now, spare them, and we'll turn ourselves in.

Lorenzo: Yeah. That's what you want, isn't it, you up-pity fuck.

Zircon: *Aww... So noble. There was a time I had envisioned capturing you terrorists, locking you away with the homeless and disabled, and then having you all burned alive. But, no. The public will welcome their deaths and yours. Consider this a mercy kill by your Commander-in-Chief. Enough chitchat. Peoria. Waste them!*

Peoria: With great pleasure, sir...

Narrator: Peoria then turns off the radio and reveals a shock whip, activating it. She cracks the whip on the watchtower deck, causing it to give off an electric spark.

Lorenzo: *(yelling toward the helicopter)* ZIRCON. YOU COWARD! COME DOWN HERE AND FIGHT US YOURSELF!

Narrator:

The helicopter then takes off, ascending into the sky and circling the watchtower, leaving Dew and Lorenzo in a standoff against Peoria.



Peoria:

Lorenzo:

Peoria:

It's just the three of us now... Ready to die? You first, bitch.

Feisty. I like that. Know this, in the last moments you both draw breath, you'll be dying at the hands of one selected among the best of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, sworn to protect and serve our Premier's every need. Is that so..? Something tells me you go "far and beyond" with the services you provide for him.

Lorenzo:

Dew:

Peoria:

Hah. Burrnnnn....

Ha-ha-ha... You, *Aurora Blade*, have had a good run... Now it's time for the curtain call to your story.

Lorenzo: It ain't over until the fat lady sings.

Narrator: The battle then begins atop the watchtower; the two and Peoria exchange words and blows. As the battle ensues, Zircon, through his binoculars, continues to watch with sadistic glee from the helicopter. As time passes, a sudden blare from Peoria's wristwatch signals imminent danger as the alarm notifies her of the approaching bomber jets. Down below, the surviving *ISPYA* agents immediately begin retreating from the compound. Back above, Peoria withdraws from the fight, and gestures farewell to Dew and Lorenzo, before running toward the edge of the watchtower and leaping onto the helicopter, which then takes off. Dew and Lorenzo, realized that Peoria's abrupt retreat meant only one thing – the ominous roar of bomber jets drawing near, signaling imminent danger to the forest compound. With urgency, the two then hurriedly exit from atop the watchtower and descend to the surface to rejoin the others at the bomb shelter. The scene cuts to the front entrance of the forest compound as the surviving *Aurora Blade* gang members, battered and weary, quickly make their way to the underground bomb shelter. Cooper is waving them in frantically.

Cooper: (*shouting*) Come on, hurry!

Narrator: Then, other *Aurora Blade* gang members, along with Rena, scramble toward the entrance. The rest enter, but Rena stops before doing so herself to inquire with Cooper about the whereabouts of Dew and Lorenzo.

Rena: Cooper, where are Dew and Lorenzo? Are they here?

Narrator: Just as Rena finishes her question, Dew and Lorenzo run up to the entrance, breathless. Rena is relieved to see the two still alive. She

rushes up to Dew and gives him a quick comforting hug before pulling back.

Rena: Dew, Lorenzo, you made it. Thank Chosha.

Dew: ...Is everyone inside?

Cooper: (*checking around*) This is everyone... No. Wait. Where's Paca?

Narrator: As Dew and Lorenzo share a glance, their expressions darken.

Dew: (*somberly*) Cooper, she didn't make it...

Narrator: Rena and Cooper then share a silent moment to absorb the devastating news, their faces mirroring grief. Lorenzo inhales deeply, struggling to contain his tears.

Cooper: What?!

Rena: Oh, no... I'm so sorry...

Cooper: I can't believe it...

Lorenzo: (*resigned*) I know, I know... it's hard to believe. (*sigh*) But we have to go now. Quickly. Inside...

Narrator: The four of them enter the bomb shelter, and Lorenzo closes the door. As it shuts, the distant roar of four bomber jets fills the air. The ground shakes as the jets release their payload, striking the surface and sending shockwaves throughout the underground shelter. Dust falls from the ceiling, prompting everyone inside to brace for impact. Explosions light up the sky above, and debris rains down on the forest. In one fell swoop, the barrage of missiles disintegrates the forest compound, leaving part of Festoon Forest in a flaming heap. The four bomber jets then fly off into the distance after completing their mission. Meanwhile, still hovering above inside the helicopter, Zircon, satisfied with what he has seen, grins evilly and remarks to himself in awe.

Zircon: Now that's an explosive spectacle... Mmm... I do believe it's time for that cup of

Peoria: Peppermint cream-flavored tea I've been craving and my nap.

Narrator: Both well-deserved, sir.

Zircon: Zircon cracks a smile at Peoria before turning his attention to the Pilot.

Pilot: Pilot, we're done here. Take us back to the Executive Mansion.

Narrator: Roger that.

Narrator: The helicopter then flies off as distant opera music crescendos, coinciding with a high-pitched climax, echoing the destructive aftermath below. After what seemed like an eternity, Dew and the others emerged from the underground bomb shelter, blinking against the harsh fading sunlight as they surveyed the devastation – the once lush forest reduced to a smoldering wasteland. Overwhelmed with guilt and profound sorrow, Lorenzo is devastated by the loss of lives. He then screams in anguish, his cry echoing through the desolate remains of their once-thriving compound. Falling to his knees, Lorenzo punches at the soil, leaving the others unable to do anything but watch as he screams out again.

Lorenzo: Arrrggghhhh!!! It wasn't enough... Paca... the others... "Mamie"... they're all gone... They're ALL GONE! GONE!!! (*sigh*) ...NO MORE! Damn... (*then punches the ground again*) LYNCH! ...ZIRCCONNNN!!! BASTARDS..! (*then begins to sob*)

Narrator: Dew stands off to the side, distraught and burning quietly with vengeance. He shakes his head angrily about all that has happened.

Dew: (*thinking to himself*) Not again... I failed to stop him, twice... No... It's not ending like this... You'll pay for all the lives you took... Every single one... That I promise...

Narrator: As Dew and the others stand there quietly, a mixture of emotions enveloping them amidst

the forest destruction, a dense black smog blankets the devastated scenery. The scene then pans upward and fades out to black.

CHAPTER 12 - PICK YOURSELF UP AND TRY AGAIN

Narrator: Four days have passed. The scene cuts to Dew, his friends, and the remaining survivors who have set up camp on the outskirts of Festoon Forest near a riverbank. Since the incident, Lorenzo has turned to heavy drinking. Dew and Rena grow concerned about his condition and decide to check up on him. They find Lorenzo lying supine on a makeshift bed of leaves and branches, surrounded by empty alcohol bottles as he continues to chug one down.

Dew: Lorenzo...

Lorenzo: Huh..? Who... who is that calling me? (*hiccup*)

Rena: Lorenzo, it's us.

Lorenzo: Dew, Rena, is that ...you? Ah... Come here, my friends, and... h-have a... drink with me... (*then rises from off the ground*)

Rena: No, thank you.

Dew: Hey, Lorenzo...

Lorenzo: That is my name. What, you don't think I know my name..? (*hic-cup*) ...Ha-ha-ha. You know what? There... is nothing better than... good old vintage alcohol to wash away... your problems! (*burp*) Whew... that reeks. My new hobby... since "Mamie" is gone... (*begins to stagger and falls towards Dew who catches him*) Thanks, friend, you're always ...there... for me.

Dew: Yeah, I'm here for you. As all the others are.

Lorenzo: Okay... then let's have a drink.

Dew: That's not happening, buddy.

Lorenzo: Bah! You two are no fun... Ahh... It's a... lovely day, don't you ...t-think? Wait... I don't know what day it even... is. I'm so wasted. Heh-heh-heh...

Dew: I know it has been hard for you, as it has been for all of us... But drinking yourself into a stupor isn't going to bring them back. It hurts me to see you like this. C'mon, man... Put the bottle down. It's time to regroup and make our next move.

Lorenzo: Save your breath. No plan will bring them back. They're dead... Paca and the others... and "Mamie"... They're all dead... BECAUSE OF ME..!

Dew: We've been over this already. There was nothing more me or you could do. Yeah, they're dead. And they're not coming back. But we have to honor the loss of our friends by avenging them. Stop beating yourself up over this.

Lorenzo: (*angry*) You don't get it. It was my fault for trusting Lynch. Way before you even joined the *Aurora Blade*, I brought him into the fold. I'm responsible for this...

Dew: You know that isn't true. You couldn't have known he would have betrayed us.

Rena: Lorenzo, you're not psychic. None of us are. You took a chance with him and many others for the cause. Sometimes things go wrong in the pursuit of doing what's right. That happens in war.

Lorenzo: War? Is this war? Look around, Rena! Look at all the broken lives, the blood on our hands. This isn't a war; it's a goddamn massacre.

Dew: Lorenzo, you have no idea what war is. Listen. We can't change what has happened. But we can shape a better future. We have to keep fighting.

Lorenzo: (*mockingly*) Fighting? For what? More death, more pain? I'm done fighting...

Rena: But if you do that, then their deaths were for nothing.

Lorenzo: (*stubbornly*) I'm done, Rena. I'm not doing this anymore.

Dew: (*then sharply inhales and exhales*) That's it, huh? Fine then. If you're giving up, then go ahead and keep drowning your sorrows. But me and the others won't. We've stayed hidden long enough. It's time to strike back. (*then faces Rena*) ...Rena, let's go.

Narrator: Lorenzo watches Dew and Rena walk away as he takes a long, bitter swig from his drink before criticizing them.

Lorenzo: ...You're fools! You hear me? Wasting your time..!

Narrator: Lorenzo then stumbles back onto the ground in a supine position and slowly passes out. He begins to dream of a time when he was younger, training under his mentor, Aquagonla. The scene cuts to the snowy beach shore area of Festoon Forest 22 years ago, where he's approaching Aquagonla, who is seated in a meditative pose.

Young Lorenzo: Hmm...

Aquagonla: ...

Young Lorenzo: It's so cold out here... What are you doing?

Aquagonla: ...

Young Lorenzo: Hello..?

Narrator: Young Lorenzo then bends down, scoops up a handful of snow, and throws it at Aquagonla's face while he's meditating. Unfazed, Aquagonla allows the snow to slide down his body and hit the ground.

Young Lorenzo: Come on! What? Are you sleeping or something? *(then tries to touch him on the shoulders)*

Aquagonla: Don't. I'm meditating.

Young Lorenzo: Oh? *(then pulls his hand back)* My bad... For a minute there, I thought you were dead...

Aquagonla: Don't be silly... *(still meditating)* So tell me, what do you seek?

Young Lorenzo: Seek..? Uh. Nothing... I was just curious about what you were doing. That's all.

Aquagonla: Young minds are always so curious. In time, age will change all that. As they say, "Curiosity killed the cat." Hmm... I wonder... *(then opens his eyes, turns his head to face Lorenzo)* What more are you curious about?

Young Lorenzo: Well, since I've been in your care for a while, I've noticed that you know some martial arts. I like how it looks.

Aquagonla: My Kenpo?

Young Lorenzo: Yes... I would like to learn from you.

Aquagonla: Heh-heh-heh...

Young Lorenzo: What's so funny?

Aquagonla: So, you desire to be my apprentice, huh..?
(*speaking aloud to himself*) Well, at least this one doesn't speak like he's gargling marbles in his mouth.

Young Lorenzo: Huh?

Aquagonla: Sorry. I was just thinking out loud to myself. Why would you want me to teach you?

Young Lorenzo: ...I want to avenge my brother's death.

Aquagonla: Ahh, I see. At least you are honest about your intentions. I must decline your request.

Young Lorenzo: Why?!

Aquagonla: If I were to teach you these skills only for you to avenge your brother's death, what makes me believe that you won't go out and harm the innocent?

Young Lorenzo: I wouldn't do such a thing.

Aquagonla: Hah! You say that now, but how do you know for sure? The anger that inhabits your body will eventually consume you, turning into lust for power. I mean, if you want to do this out of retribution, you are no better than the man who murdered your brother.

Young Lorenzo: Hey!!! ...I am nothing like that person! Nah... I wouldn't do those things.

Aquagonla: But you were a common thief at one time, were you not?

Young Lorenzo: What?! It was only a matter of survival. I had no choice in the life I was born into.

Aquagonla: Hmm... Learn this, young one; fighting is not all about the glory of victory or something as trivial as revenge. It is about protecting those who need to be defended from injustice, protecting those whom you hold dear to your heart.

Young Lorenzo: My brother is dear to my heart, my mind has no peace. I beg you to train me in Kenpo. Give me your guidance and discipline; I need to put it to rest!

Aquagonla: ...I dunno.

Young Lorenzo:

Aquagonla:

Young Lorenzo:

Aquagonla:

Please!!!

Hmm... you're too small, and your arms are puny. You might quit on me.

No, I won't. I'll train my hardest. I will!

Determined, are we? Not many children your age possess such determination. Very well, then. I will train you. Through me, you will learn to quell your anger and discover your inner peace. During your training, there may be moments when you want to quit. It will be challenging. When that happens, remember this... Life is akin to the food we consume; sometimes bitter, spicy, sour, or sweet. Like the four seasons, it is beautiful and a necessary balance. This is why one should never give up, even in the bleakest situations. Appreciate the challenging moments, and use them to strengthen your resolve. The real failure lies in ceasing to try.

Young Lorenzo:

I won't forget that, and thank you for this opportunity. I will not let you down, Master Aquagonla...

Narrator:

The scene cuts back to the present time. Lorenzo awakens from his drunken stupor in a prone position, still lying on a bed of leaves and branches surrounded by empty alcohol bottles. He lies there quietly, thinking to himself aloud.

Lorenzo:

Have I given up? What am I doing? How could I do such a thing? I am letting the others down... All their sacrifice, and here I am, feeling sorry for myself. I can't do that. I will not stop here..! (*then clenches his fists and digs them into the soil, lifting his upper body off the ground*) I will keep fighting. FOR ALL THEM!!!

Narrator: Dew and Rena, who are still nearby, hear Lorenzo's triumphant exclamation. Turning around, they see an inebriated Lorenzo attempting to get back on his feet. They rush over to help him stand carefully.

Lorenzo: ...Thank you both.

Rena: Lorenzo... are you okay..?

Lorenzo: I am... And, hey, guys... I have something to tell you.

Dew: What's that?

Lorenzo: I'm sorry. It wasn't right of me to just give up like that. I'm done with my pity party. It hasn't accomplished much in these past few days. I know Paca and the others – even "Mamie" – would want me to continue fighting. Well, I will. I'll fight with everything I have. For them.

Narrator: Dew and Rena exchange glances, relieved and encouraged by Lorenzo's change of heart.

Rena: Thank Chosha. We need you now more than ever.

Dew: It's nice to have you back, my friend. *(then gives Lorenzo a supportive pat on the shoulder)*

Narrator: Lorenzo cracks a smile and gives Dew a reaffirming nod.

Lorenzo: So, speaking of taking action... What is the plan?

Dew: Yeah, about that. To be honest, we haven't got one drafted yet.

Lorenzo: Oh. Well... Once all this alcohol is out of my system, then we should get down to work. Heh-heh... Ugghhh...

Narrator: As the three share a moment of unity, Cooper approaches them, entering the riverbank encampment.

Cooper: ...Actually, you guys, I have an idea.

Narrator: The three turn around to face Cooper. Dew and Rena are pleasantly surprised to see him again.

Dew: Cooper?! ...I haven't seen you in a few days.

Rena: Welcome back. I thought you had left us.

Cooper: No. I wouldn't run off on all of you like that... I had to check up on some things.

Dew: Oh yeah? So, what's this plan you have in mind?

Cooper: While you all were hiding out here, I went back into the zones to do some reconnaissance and get supplies for us. I happened to overhear that the Premier is throwing a celebratory ball at the Executive Mansion Estate tomorrow night. That would be a good time to strike back. They won't

see it coming since they think we're dead.

Rena: How are we going to do that? Don't you think we'll be easily noticed? We just can't walk up in there.

Cooper: There's ways around that. While working as a custodial engineer at various government installations, I would often come across discarded former government employee ID cards. Instead of tossing them out, I kept a few and used them as coasters. In this situation, we can use the ID cards to get into the Executive Mansion Estate for tomorrow night's ball. Once we arrive, the security personnel will scan the cards to make sure they are valid.

Dew: Wouldn't you need to modify the ID cards for us to get in? Won't that take some time?

Cooper: No worries. That won't be a problem for me. It'll be done before tomorrow night's ball.

Dew: Really? That soon?

Cooper: Yes.

Rena: Where did you learn how to do this?

Cooper: Oh, I learned that from some friends while in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE. I'm just a jack of all trades, you could say.

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* Crafty and useful...

Dew: I wish someone would have taught me how to do that while I was in...

Lorenzo: Well, that handles the planning for that. I wouldn't have thought that one up. Not... that I can... with the current state... of mind that I'm in... Hmm... *(then nods his head approvingly)* Good stuff, Cooper.

Cooper: Thanks... *(then looks over at the empty alcohol bottles on the ground, and thinks to himself)* ...Drinking is so bad for you... Ugh... that smell... I always hated it... *(then subtly shakes his head in disgust)*

Dew: ...It would be wise for us to get some new clothes to disguise ourselves too.

Cooper: Yes... Correct.

Rena: Do you think we'll need any backup for this?

Lorenzo: Nah... The four of us got this. I'll have the others stay behind for this one. But Rena, I'll need your help with preparing our inventory for this.

Rena: Of course. Happy to help.

Dew: Thanks for the info and your help, Cooper. I'm glad you stuck around.

Cooper: Anything for a friend... *(then faces Lorenzo)* Hey, Lorenzo... This may be a little late, but I am sorry for what happened to "Mamie" also.

Lorenzo: Thank you... that means a lot. "She" will be avenged!

Dew: That's right. "Her," Paca, and the others.

Lorenzo: For all of them. Tomorrow night, we do this...

Narrator: The four come together with unwavering determination, huddling and placing their hands on top of one another, ready to enact their revenge at the upcoming celebratory ball at the executive mansion tomorrow night. The scene then cuts to the Executive Mansion Estate. Killbin enters the Premier's suite while Zircon sits at his desk, looking through a stack of documents, with Peoria standing behind him. Sherwin is sitting facing Zircon at his desk.

Killbin: ...Sir, the preparations for tomorrow night's ball are all set to go.

Zircon: *(lays the stack of documents on his desk)* ...That sounds like excellent news, Killbin. Tomorrow night will be splendid. It'll be a well-deserved celebration...

Killbin: Yes, it should be... Also, are you sure you don't want to invite Burgomaster Deilli and Seneschal Rahmer?

Zircon: I'm pretty sure I don't want them there. I can't stand hearing Deilli's stupid lewd dad jokes, and Rahmer's laugh is nauseating. It sounds like bubble wrap being violated by a leaky kitchen sink pipe at 3 AM. The other three burgomasters are welcome to attend.

Killbin: Right, sir. Hmm... I understand.

Zircon: Killbin, would you like to hear one of his crappy jokes?

Killbin: I'd rather not, sir...

Zircon: "Why didn't the skeleton cross the road?"

Killbin: I don't know...

Zircon: "Because he didn't have the guts to do it..."

Sherwin: Ha-ha-ha...

Killbin: That's pretty cringy, sir.

Zircon: I agree. But Uncle Sherwin seems to think otherwise. Hmm. I have another one you'll "like" ... "Why did they bury the fire man behind the hill?"

Killbin: W-why did they, sir..?

Zircon: ...“Because he was dead, DUMB ASS!”

Killbin: ...

Sherwin: Ha-ha-ha... That’s a funny one too. Ha-ha...

Zircon: You think so, huh? Okay, one more. This one is a doozy... “A woman and two brothers were having a threesome. The one brother wanted her to spit his brother's semen into his mouth. She asked, “Why?!” The brother replies, “Because some things are thicker than blood.”

Killbin: Ugh.

Peoria: Ha-ha-ha...

Sherwin: Nasty! Ha-ha-ha!!!

Zircon: Heh-heh-heh... To his credit, that last joke... Heh-heh... it was a good one.

Killbin: All jokes aside... Sir, may I ask you a question?

Zircon: Oh? Ask away, my friend...

Killbin: Does it bother you at all... a bit, that all those people died the way they did?

Zircon: The *Aurora Blade* terrorists..? Heh-heh-heh... I don't seem to give it a second thought. You have to expect a few casualties when you're at war with the likes of them. Now that they have been eliminated, it is time for peace and order to prevail again... It was for the best of the nation.

Killbin: ...For the "best," sir? For what it's worth, although your approval ratings have gone up 12%, there are still parts of the populace who don't believe our version of the story. The talks on the interweb chat forums have heightened since the *Aurora Blade* massacre. Shouldn't this be of concern to you, sir?

Zircon: As I have told you before, the people’s opinions don’t matter to me. Let them go wild with their “conspiracy theories” and conjectures... If any of them do even dare plan an uprising, they’ll be swiftly dealt with.

Killbin: Sir, I think—

Sherwin: ...Before you finish that thought, I have to ask about the security at the ball.

Peoria: ...The security will be doubled for extra precaution.

Sherwin: Outstanding... Well, at least we won't have to worry about the *Aurora Blade* crashing the party.

Zircon: No need to worry about them anymore, indeed. Heh-heh-heh...

Sherwin: I just want you to know, that the way you handled those terrorists was quite admirable. Your parents would be proud of the leader you have become.

Zircon: *(nods appreciatively)* Thank you, Uncle Sherwin. But I could have not done it without your guidance either.

Sherwin: It brings me honor to know I could help in doing that. *(sigh)* It's a shame, though, that your brother couldn't be here to witness this moment.

Zircon: *(then raises an eyebrow)* Is it?

Narrator: A fleeting silence hangs uncomfortably in the room for a moment. Those words trigger an uneasy expression in Zircon's eyes, prompting Sherwin to carefully select his next words.

Sherwin: Well, you know, family should always celebrate milestones like this together. *(then smirks)*

Zircon: Ah. Quite true, Uncle. But some things are better appreciated from a distance. Left in the past, as it should be. No? *(then smirks back)*

Narrator: Just then, the Premier's phone rings, slicing through the room's tension. Zircon glances at the caller ID, recognizing it from an Executive Mansion Estate switchboard operator. Zircon picks up the phone receiver to answer.

Zircon: Yes..?

EME Switchboard Operator: *Premier Videl, there is an urgent call from Mr. Arroyo. Should I patch it through?*

Zircon: *(leans back in his chair)* Oh, is that so? Yes, that is fine. Please connect the call.

Narrator: Zircon signals to Killbin and Sherwin to continue holding their thoughts as he awaits the

connection. The phone connects with Lynch, who is sitting alone in a safehouse.

Zircon: Mr. Arroyo, my man! Thank you for reaching out. I've been thinking of you. You did an excellent job helping us eradicate those *Aurora Blade* terrorists. We are grateful for your service to the country. How are things?

Lynch: *Thank you, Premier Vidal. Things... things haven't been easy...*

Zircon: Really? Why's that? You've got a second chance at life. I would think things would be much better now. After all, I did keep my end of the deal.

Lynch: *I'm not trying to sound ungrateful, sir... But, no, you didn't. The love of my life, who would have been the mother of my unborn child... (sigh) They didn't make it. They're dead... You promised she would have been safe.*

Zircon: *(nonchalant)* Mr. Arroyo, we tried to bring in Ms. Daffin, but it was already too late. I'm sorry for what happened to both of them. I mean that... But life does go on.

Lynch: *(emotionally shaken)* I trusted you, Premier Vidal..!

Zircon: *(coldly)* And you should always continue to trust me. Unfortunately, things don't always work out the way we want them to.

Narrator: On the other side of the phone, Lynch is at a loss for words. There are no words exchanged for a few more seconds until Zircon continues.

Zircon: Hello? Still there?

Lynch: ...Yes.

Zircon: Now, now. I think you'll feel much better if you come and attend tomorrow night's celebratory ball. You're invited...

Lynch: *(trying to compose himself)* I don't know if I can. I'm still dealing with...

Zircon: Nonsense. It'll be good for you. There will be a lot of women there—so many options. You'll forget about, what's her name, in no time.

Lynch: It was... Paca. Her name was Paca...

Zircon: Yes, that it was. Well. Anywho. I'll be seeing you tomorrow night. Wear your Sunday best. Buh-bye...

Narrator: Without waiting for a response, Zircon hangs up the phone, leaving Lynch alone and seething with anger in his safehouse. Zircon then turns his attention back to Killbin and Sherwin.

Zircon: Sorry about that. Heh. So, is there anything else that needs to be covered? If not, then you're both excused.

Narrator: Having indicated that they had nothing else to discuss, Killbin and Sherwin receive a nod from Zircon before leaving the Premier's suite, each heading in a separate direction. Nervously glancing over his shoulder, Sherwin briskly walks down the hallway of the Executive Mansion, constantly checking behind to ensure no one is tailing him. He continues until reaching the secluded crockery room, where he enters, quietly closes, and locks the door behind him. Sherwin then retrieves the same flip phone from his blazer's inner pocket and begins dialing numbers. Bringing the flip phone up to his face, it rings three times before the same deep and distorted voice answers again.

???: Yes..?

Sherwin: *(whispering) I'll make this brief. I was able to connect with my inside source, and the toxicology report on the Master Arbitrator's corpse confirms it—traces of the viral agent.*

???: Hmm.

Sherwin: *(whispering)* ...And those cases that the news media has been reporting about people mysteriously getting sick and disappearing, that's no coincidence either. That's been Zircon's doing. He's had the virus on him this entire time.

???: Of course, he has. I had no doubts otherwise. My suspicions have been confirmed. Thank you for your tireless efforts in getting us this far.

Sherwin: *(whispering)* Yes. Certainly!

???: The time to strike is nigh!

Sherwin: *(whispering)* Indeed, it is. And when could be a more opportune moment than at the celebratory ball tomorrow night at the Executive Mansion Estate? I'll arrange for your access to the grounds. Once you're inside, and at the right moment, make your move.

???: Say no more. It'll be so.

Sherwin: *(whispering)* Don't be late...

Narrator: Sherwin ends the call, closes the flip phone, tucks it back into his blazer's inner pocket, and prudently exits the crockery room. The scene cuts to Lorenzo standing by a riverbank, gazing pensively at the night sky. Dew approaches him.

Dew: Beautiful night...

Lorenzo: *(nods)* Yeah.

Dew: Are you feeling better?

Lorenzo: I'm getting there. Almost sobered up.

Dew: Hah. That's good to hear.

Lorenzo: The inventory is all set, and we're ready to go for tomorrow night.

Narrator: Dew nods, and Lorenzo continues to stare off into the night sky, looking in wonderment at the twinkling stars above, casting a soft glow.

Lorenzo: There's something magical about the night sky.

Dew: What's that?

Lorenzo: It's like a canvas sprinkled with hope, even in the darkest of times.

Dew: Sometimes, when life gets tough, it's easy to lose sight of that. But hope is always there...

Lorenzo: Always shining its brightest when we need it the most, eh?

Dew: True that.

Lorenzo: That's enough of the sentimental junk... (*then faces Dew*) What brings you out here?

Dew: I was just checking in on you. And... looking for a spot to get lost in my thoughts.

Lorenzo: Are you anxious about tomorrow night? To be honest, we've been in this fight for so long; I still get that way once in a while.

Dew: You and me both, then.

Lorenzo: Well, you're in the right place for that. Hmm. Hey, Dew...

Dew: Yeah..?

Lorenzo: By the way, I can't help but notice the bond between you and Rena.

Dew: What about it?

Lorenzo: Is there something more going on?

Dew: What? No, no! (*then blushes*)

Lorenzo: (*teasingly*) Oh, come on. I've seen the way you look at her and how protective you are around her too.

Dew: (*defensively*) I don't know what you're implying. She's my Sifu. That's all.

Lorenzo: You look pretty love-struck to me.

Dew: I think you're misreading it. It's not like that at all. I swear.

Lorenzo: Yeah, okay. Whatever you say. But I do find it to be adorable. (*then cracks a smile*)

Dew: Ugh.

Lorenzo: Ha-ha... Well, that's enough stargazing and shit for me tonight. Time for me to hit the sack. Enjoy the scenery. Night, night...

Narrator: Lorenzo exits, leaving Dew alone by the riverbank. Dew stands alone for several

minutes, becoming captivated by the night sky, lost in thoughts until Rena appears, a subtle smile playing on her lips.

Rena: (*playful*) Fancy meeting you here. It's like we've done this before.

Narrator: Dew turns around to face Rena, greeting her with a grin.

Dew: It's like déjà vu all over again.

Rena: Ha-ha...

Dew: You couldn't sleep, huh? Me neither. But I will soon.

Rena: Must be the excitement building up for tomorrow night. Mind if I join you?

Dew: Please do.

Narrator: Rena walks over and joins Dew at his side. They share a moment, gazing at the night sky before continuing their conversation.

Rena: Ah. This never gets old.

Dew: What? The stargazing.

Rena: That. Mmm...

Narrator: Dew briefly looks out of the corner of his eye at Rena, enamored with her.

Dew: Right. Never gets old. Just gorgeous...

Narrator: Silence envelops them until Dew, with a touch of vulnerability, steers the conversation.

Dew: Rena.

Rena: Yes, Dew?

Dew: I know this might sound rather random, and I'm struggling to find the right words... Ah, you know what, never mind..

Rena: What is it? What's on your mind?

Dew: Okay. Have you ever deeply loved someone, someone you'd do anything for?

Narrator: Rena hesitates before replying, a trace of pain crossing her face, but she nods.

Rena: I have. But that was ages ago.

Dew: Have you ever found yourself unable to express your true feelings to them?

Narrator: Rena is surprised by the unexpected question, oblivious to the fact that Dew is actually referring to her. Mistakenly, she assumes he's talking about someone else.

Rena: Dew, do you have a girlfriend? I thought you didn't.

Dew: Uh. No, I don't.

Rena: Oh... (*uncertain*) A boyfriend..?

Dew: What?! No way!

Rena: Wait... It's not some inanimate object, is it? Your friend Lorenzo didn't rub off on you too much, did he?

Dew: Not at all.

Rena: Whew. That's a relief...

Dew: You know what... Ha-ha... it doesn't matter... Forget I even brought this up.

Narrator: Recognizing the significance of Dew's question, Rena offers some advice.

Rena: Hmm. You're keeping something from me. Hah. You've always had a bit of shyness. Must be quite a lady... Well, Dew, whoever this person is, when the moment is right, express your feelings to them. No need to tiptoe around it. Life is too short for regrets. That's all I can tell you.

Dew: Thanks, Rena.

Rena: It's good to know at least one of us still has a personal life. I have to admit, I'm a little envious. I don't know how you can do it with all that responsibility you have. Well, I'm going to get some rest myself. Good night, Dew...

Narrator: Afterward, Rena strides away, and Dew gazes at her with intense passion.

Dew: Good night, Rena... (*then whispering under his breath*) My "*shining lighthouse*"...

Narrator: For a few more moments, Dew remains gazing into the night sky, immersed in contemplation, before eventually returning to the

encampment for rest, allowing the night to harbor their unspoken emotions.

CHAPTER 13 – A FORBIDDEN LOVE

- Narrator: As Dew lies asleep in his tent, the scene cuts back to six years ago during the *Great Civil War*. Two months have passed since General Landmore and his unit retrieved the SKT virus vial from the Mount Darien Biochemical Research Facility. It's evening, and Dew wanders around the makeshift encampment of the stationed SWAT TROOPER ELITE at the foot of Mount Darien. A mild breeze accompanies him as he approaches General Landmore's tent. Coming to a stop, he assumes a position of attention and requests permission before entering.
- Dew: (*saluting*) Sir, may I request permission to enter?
- General Landmore: Enter... (*saluting back as Dew drops his salute and enters*) What brings you here at this hour?
- Dew: I wanted to ask you something, sir.
- General Landmore: Go ahead.
- Dew: Have you heard anything about Cooper... I mean, Tyler?
- General Landmore: I see you're concerned about him. Well, after our mission to Mount Darien, as you know, he was MEDEVACed back to the mainland and had to undergo emergency surgery to remove all that shrapnel from his leg. He's doing fine and has been rehabbing ever since. But I doubt he'll be coming back to join us anytime soon.
- Dew: I see. It would have been nice if we had some *Elementomes* on us at the time...
- General Landmore: Even then, those things have their limits. You and Arlington thought quickly on your feet and saved his life. I'm sure he'll never forget that.
- Dew: Hm. You're right, sir.
- General Landmore: In such a short time, I've noticed that you two have become good friends. Be grateful you haven't had to experience losing a friend right in front of you.
- Dew: Yes, sir.

General Landmore: So, how are you holding up?

Dew: I'm alive...

General Landmore: Hah. And that's how I like to see it. You know, you remind me of your grandfather.

Dew: I do..?

General Landmore: Yes. He was a great person and a hell of a soldier too. He raised you well... I remember when the two of us last spoke just after you graduated from boot camp. I saw it then, and see it now – you're a remarkable soldier. I'm proud to have you as part of my unit.

Dew: Thank you, General. It's an honor serving under you.

General Landmore: ...Anything else?

Dew: That is all, sir.

General Landmore: Okay. Oh. Before you go... Have you seen that Sergeant of yours around lately?

Dew: No, sir...

General Landmore: He's been disappearing a lot and acting differently. Hmm... Carry on, Wilder.

Narrator: Dew nods and exits the tent and then takes a stroll down the murky lakeside. Walking for a bit, he finds Thornton sitting on a tree stump, talking aloud to himself as the water calmly flows down the stream. Dew approaches him.

Thornton: (*gazing at the rose petal*) Ah... Return to me, sweet and beloved lady.

Dew: Sergeant..?

Thornton: (*startled, then turns to Dew*) Wilder! ...I didn't expect to see you here.

Dew: I was just in the area. How long have you been here?

Thornton: Not that long...

Dew: The General has been looking for you...

Thornton: I'm quite certain he has... Thank you for informing me about that. Hmm... (*then places the rose petal on the ground*) I'm not usually one for small talk, but I'll make an exception. How about we have a chat for a bit?



Narrator: Dew is surprised by Thornton expressing a desire to speak with him.

Dew: You want to talk with me..?

Thornton: Who else is here right now?

Dew: All right.

Thornton: Let me ask you something, Dew.

Dew: Are we on a first-name basis now?

Narrator: Thornton breaks into a smile as he proceeds.

Thornton: Have you ever been in love..?

Dew: ...In love?

Thornton: Like unconditional love—the kind where you'd do anything, well, almost anything, for a person?

Dew: Um. I have.

Thornton: ...All my life, I lived only for myself. I realized there's always one person who makes another whole. I've never felt so alive until now. It's a nice feeling.

Narrator: Dew takes a moment to digest Thornton's words and then realizes who he is referring to.

Dew: You met someone?! Wait... It's that girl, the scientists' daughter?!

Narrator: Thornton smiles at Dew and nods in acknowledgment before continuing.

Thornton: Now you know, I'm not so much of a loner after all. Even I can feel love...

Dew: Wow. I didn't see that coming. I mean, that's pretty risky... Hmm. But we can't control who we fall in love with. I trust your judgment, I guess... Don't worry, Sergeant. Your secret is safe with me.

Thornton: I appreciate that, Dew. I really do. By the way, do you recall when I mentioned having another pleasure outside of fighting?

Dew: Uh, um, yeah?

Thornton: Well, there's nothing more satisfying than a good slice of pineapple pizza.

Dew: Yuck! You monster! ...Why?!

Thornton: Hah. It's not everyone's favorite. I know. Anyway. Thanks for listening. It helped to get that off my chest. *(then gets up and starts walking off)* If anyone asks, you didn't see me... *(then brushes his hand through his hair)* Hmph. I should probably get that haircut I've been putting off...

Narrator: Thornton exits, leaving Dew disgusted with the thought of pineapples on pizza.

Dew: Eww... Just thinking about pineapples on pizza makes me ill.

Narrator: The scene cuts to three nights later. Dew and another soldier stand watch, patrolling the area around the SWAT TROOPER ELITE encampment armed with M4 assault rifles. They continue their rounds until Dew veers off and decides to take a quick rest, leaning against the barracks wall. He places his rifle beside him and checks his wristwatch.

Dew: Hmm... two hours left. Good. Damn, my feet are sore from all this walking. I hope my relief comes on time. The last thing I need now is to be relieved late.

Narrator: As Dew takes a breather, he hears a woman's faint excited laughter emanating from the nearby jungle. Dew picks up his rifle and decides to investigate. As he walks deeper into the jungle, he discovers Thornton and Elizabeth sitting near a lake, holding hands. Dew hides in the nearby bushes, getting a closer view.

Elizabeth: My beloved, it feels so good to see you again...

Narrator: Thornton envelops Elizabeth in an embrace, and their lips meet in a kiss. Afterward, he withdraws, and they both share a lingering gaze into each other's eyes.

Thornton: I'm glad you made it out tonight.

Elizabeth: Me too...

Thornton: It may have been just a few days since we saw each other... But every time we get together is a moment I cherish.

Elizabeth: My gentle, loving man, with those passionate eyes - you steal my heart and soul away.

Thornton: Then, I've "completed my mission." (*then cracks a smile*)

Elizabeth: You have... I know meeting up like this is quite risky, and I don't want you to get in trouble...

Thornton: Shh. Don't worry about that. You're worth the risk. I'll be fine.

Elizabeth: Hm. Same here. It's crazy...

Thornton: What's that?

Elizabeth: It's only been two months, but it feels like we've known each other longer.

Thornton: It does... two months that I am cherishing so much.

Narrator: As Elizabeth lingers with her lover, a moment of hesitation flashes across her face, concealing the depths of her past beneath an apprehensive gaze. Thornton takes note of this.

Thornton: Elizabeth, what's wrong..?

Elizabeth: There... There are things you should know about me, things we should talk about. I wonder if I told you about my past, would you accept me?

Thornton: Elizabeth, let me stop you there. Your past, whatever that may entail, doesn't matter. I only care about you and what we have now, what we can have in the future.

Elizabeth: Those are nice words, but we come from different worlds. We're on opposite sides in this war. I worry about you getting hurt; I don't want to lose you.

Thornton: You won't.

Elizabeth: I haven't felt wanted by someone in so long.

Thornton: How so?

Elizabeth: When I was younger, my mother left us. She got tired of my father putting work first before the family. I don't blame her for leaving him; I just wish I could have gotten to know her more. I can still remember the lullaby she would sing to me, *"A ring, a ring o' roses, A bottle full of posy, cows in the meadows eating buttercups, all the girls in our town, a ring for little Elizabeth. A-tishoo! A-tishoo! We all jump up!"*

Thornton: I am sorry. I, too, understand how families can be complicated.

Elizabeth: My love, it is what it is.

Thornton: What was your mother's name..?

Elizabeth: Irene.

Thornton: Well, I will never leave your side or disappoint you.

Elizabeth: I do believe you, but I have been let down before by those whom I've loved the most. I also have a little brother, or, I should say, I had one. His name was Nathanael. He ran away from home and never looked back, just like my mom

Thornton: When was the last time you saw him?

Elizabeth: It's been five years. When he first came up missing, everyone was out searching for him. But as the weeks turned into months, he was never found. Who knows what became of him...

Thornton: Shit...

Elizabeth: (*sigh*) So, what about you and your family?

Thornton: My family? When I was younger, my parents died during the *Great Liberation*. My brother and I were taken in and raised by our uncle. Yeah, that's all...

Elizabeth: Oh, I didn't mean to bring up unpleasant memories for you. I apologize...

Thornton: Don't be silly; you did nothing wrong. We're sharing. I can't complain. I had a decent upbringing besides all of that happening. It is what it is like you said... *(then smiles at Elizabeth)*

Elizabeth: Do you still stay in contact with your relatives? Your brother?

Thornton: Well, it's complicated, as I said. I don't care much for him. We never did get along...

Elizabeth: I understand, my love...

Narrator: Thornton paused, a contemplative look crossing his face, as he carefully chose the words to express his next thoughts to Elizabeth.

Thornton: Elizabeth, I have to ask you something.

Elizabeth: Yes?

Thornton: I've been thinking about this for a while. Ever since we started spending time together, I've begun to see life a little differently. When I joined the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, I found purpose and even felt loved. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE was more of a family to me than my relatives. Being on the battlefield and witnessing pain and death was satisfying, knowing I was protecting my "family" from those who would harm them. But now, I don't feel that way as much.

Elizabeth: What are you saying?

Thornton: What I'm trying to say is, you, you've replaced them in my heart. I've never expressed my feelings to someone else like this before. Sure, I've had girlfriends and boyfriends before, but that was just for fun. You're different.

Elizabeth: Different?

Thornton: Yes, Elizabeth... I love you.

Elizabeth: ...

Thornton: Maybe I shouldn't have said that so soon, but this is how I feel. I don't care about the war; I care about us. I'm tired of fighting. I want you with me by my side. Let's run away from here and get married.

Elizabeth: *(giddy)* My love, are you serious about this?

Thornton: Yes, I am, with all my heart.

Elizabeth: Won't they come looking for you if you run off? Are you sure you want that? My father... he will never approve of us, and he won't stop until he finds me either.

Thornton: I don't care about all of that. I feel this is the right thing to do. Elizabeth, I want this with you. Only if you do too?

Elizabeth: Thornton, I do. Yes, I will marry you. I can't say no to you. I think of you every moment. When I stare into your eyes, I feel safe. You make me whole.

Thornton: Whole? Like one?

Elizabeth: Yes, one. Thornton, I love you too.

Narrator: Thornton and Elizabeth share another embrace and kiss, bathed in the gentle glow of moonlight. They pull back, savoring the moment that lingers between them.



Thornton: ...This feels like an eternity.

Elizabeth: Mmmm...

Narrator: Thornton and Elizabeth gaze into each other's eyes for a final moment, understanding that they must now part ways.

Thornton: ...Is it that time again?

Elizabeth: It is. But I don't want to go. (*sigh*) I wish I could stay a bit longer.

Thornton: We'll have more time together soon, my love.

Elizabeth: (*smiles at Thornton*) Yes, my love. I'll see you soon. Take care.

Narrator: Returning Elizabeth's smile, Thornton observes as she ventures deeper into the jungle. Shortly afterward, he begins to make his way toward the SWAT TROOPER ELITE encampment. Witnessing this, Dew returns to his post to resume standing watch. Shortly thereafter, three uniformed figures emerge from the shadows, having just observed the entire interaction between the two lovers. Three weeks have elapsed as the war persists. The scene cuts to Dew and Hoplyn, asleep in their racks, until loud arguing from outside the barracks rouses them. Both get up to investigate. Dew and Hoplyn exit the barracks and are stunned to see Thornton, striding away from General Landmore, seemingly ignoring him.

General Landmore: (*to Thornton*) I'm going to ask you again. Where have you been as of late..? Sergeant, answer me..!

Narrator: Thornton defiantly continues walking away from General Landmore. A vigilant SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier on watch immediately rushes towards Dew and Hoplyn, attempting to usher them back inside.

Dew: Hey, what's going on out here?

STE Soldier 1: Don't worry about it. Back to your barracks.

Narrator: More fellow SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers emerge from the barracks, their curiosity piqued by the unfolding events. They observe the surreal scene with a blend of disbelief and confusion.

General Landmore: (*to Thornton*) Is sleeping with the enemy really worth losing your honor over it..?

Narrator: Thornton halts in his tracks upon hearing General Landmore hint at his awareness of the secret romantic meetups with Elizabeth. The onlooking soldiers, marked by raised eyebrows and shared glances, display a blend of surprise and intrigue upon learning about their Sergeant's clandestine romantic rendezvous. Turning around, Thornton faces General Landmore as he approaches.

General Landmore: I know you've been sneaking out at night to visit Dr. Voight's daughter. What have you told her?

Thornton: I haven't told her anything of importance. How do you know about us?

Narrator: Thornton casts a suspicious glance in Dew's direction.

General Landmore: I had some of the men follow you. You've been reckless. I wonder, though, how close have you two gotten?

Narrator: Thornton, in his introspection, experiences a sense of relief upon realizing that Dew didn't rat him out. He then looks back at General Landmore.

Thornton: ...That's irrelevant.

General Landmore: It's not! We're at war with these people! Where's your mind at, son? I won't let you deceive yourself any longer and put us in jeopardy because of some girl.

Thornton: Deceiving myself?! No, we have all been deceived. No more lies... you and I both know why we are really here. This war is a sham!

General Landmore: What are you talking about..?

Thornton: Don't play dumb... You're well aware of what's truly unfolding... And I won't be a part of this any longer. I'm no longer going to be a pawn.

Narrator: Thornton then turns away and continues his stride.

General Landmore: What?! Insubordination! Sergeant, get back here. That's an order.

Narrator: A frustrated General Landmore approaches Thornton from behind and grabs his shoulder, but Thornton counters by twisting his hand, violently bringing him to the ground. A few of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers in the area rush over to restrain Thornton as Dew and Hoplyn stand behind, watching in shock. One of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers helps General Landmore back onto his feet, while two others pin Thornton face-first to the ground. Another soldier then handcuffs him. They lift the now-handcuffed Thornton to face the bruised General Landmore.

General Landmore: ...Unbelievable, Sergeant. You've really done it now. That's an account of striking a high-ranking member

and conspiring with the enemy. Your rear is heading to a court-martial for this. You will never see that woman again. I will make sure of that!

Thornton: I'd rather be locked away for not blindly following orders than be a disposable pawn for the government. *(then turns to Dew and the other soldiers)* You're all being played; you just don't know it..!

Narrator: Dew, Hoplyn, and the rest of the soldiers stand in a state of confusion and shock, unsettled by Thornton's words. Murmurs from other soldiers echo in the background.

General Landmore: You're brainwashed. How sad. *(then faces the two STE soldiers restraining Thornton)* Take this traitor away.

Narrator: The two SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers nod and then drag Thornton off to the brig. General Landmore looks around at the other SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers observing.

General Landmore: Nothing left to see here. Return to your barracks. That's an order! Move it.

Narrator: Dew, Hoplyn, and the other soldiers quickly scurry back into the barracks. Meanwhile, the scene cuts to outside the biochemical research facility on Mount Darien. Elizabeth is in the midst of making her exit until her father confronts her, emerging from behind a tree.

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth...

Narrator: Startled, Elizabeth turns around upon hearing her father's voice.

Elizabeth: Papa?!

Dr. Voight: I'm surprised you've gotten past the soldiers to get this far.

Elizabeth: And here you are too.

Dr. Voight: I just followed you and saw how it was done. Now, where are you going at this time of night?

Elizabeth: I needed... um, some... fresh air.

Dr. Voight: Really? You've been getting a lot of "fresh air" recently. You don't need to lie to me. I know what you have been up to as of late.

Elizabeth: I don't know what you mean.

Dr. Voight: You were going to meet with that soldier, weren't you?

Elizabeth: I don't know what you're talking about...

Dr. Voight: Tsk, tsk, tsk. I didn't raise you to be gullible. What are you thinking?! We are at war with these people. Your boyfriend is the enemy!

Elizabeth: You're wrong, Papa. They are our fellow compatriots. We are at war with our government, not them.

Dr. Voight: Tch. Confused child, don't you see they are the same as that Premier? They serve under him; they aren't our countrymen.

Elizabeth: I do not care about any of that. I love him. He is different from them.

Dr. Voight: (*surprised*) You love him?! Ha-ha-ha...

Elizabeth: Why are you laughing?

Dr. Voight: What do you know about love? I would have never thought that you would delude yourself like this. The mere thought of you lying to me and being with HIM sickens me.

Elizabeth: I'm happy for once in my life, and you don't see that. All this time, you kept me sheltered from the world, saying it was for my own good. You said you wanted to protect me from getting hurt because I was different. I see none of that was true. You didn't do it out of love; you did it because you wanted to protect your research.

Dr. Voight: W-what?! No, Elizabeth. I'm doing all this to prevent you from making a mistake. You are different from most people, and you know this. This world doesn't deserve you... You're far better than them... If they only knew of the power you had, they would take advantage of you and it...

Elizabeth: Why's that? Is it because you think of me as a test tube freak? Your research? Do you think I'm stupid? That I can't make my own decisions?

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth, stop it..! I never said any of that. I can't allow you to deceive yourself by lusting over some man you barely know.

Elizabeth: No, you stop it! We do know each other. I love him, and he loves me. Why can't you see that?

Dr. Voight: Hah. It's just infatuation... You don't think he's had other girls before you? You're just another conquest in his eyes.

Elizabeth: You're wrong!

Narrator: Dr. Voight breathes in and out sharply, becoming increasingly frustrated with Elizabeth.

Dr. Voight: I've had enough of this! Elizabeth, you are prohibited from ever seeing that man again. You will keep your distance from him. Do I make myself clear to you?

Elizabeth: No, Papa... I refuse to let you stand in the way of my happiness. I see now that you don't really love me. This is why Mom left you.

Dr. Voight: WHAT..?!

Narrator: In the heat of the moment, Dr. Voight slaps Elizabeth. Instinctively, she places her right hand on her cheek where her father struck her. After a brief moment of rubbing, her anger intensifies. Dr. Voight, realizing the gravity of his mistake, is consumed with remorse for his actions.

Dr. Voight: Elizabeth... I'm... I'm sorry. I- I didn't mean to...

Elizabeth: No! No, you're not... HOW WOULD YOU KNOW WHAT LOVE IS?! All you do is stay here in this place and work. All you have ever loved was your work, not Mom, not Nathanael, or even ME! Just your stupid work...

Narrator: In a storm of fury, Elizabeth flees from her father, tears cascading like a torrent as she descends the nearby mountain trail. The echoes of her anguished sobs reverberate through the desolate surroundings. Dr. Voight stands in solitary silence, consumed by the bitter taste of regret, haunted by the gravity of his actions.

CHAPTER 14 – FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Narrator: Two days have passed; the scene cuts to the brig within the encampment. Thornton sits on a cot in his cell, immersed in quiet contemplation, as STE Soldier 2 keeps a vigilant watch. Dew enters the brig and approaches Thornton's cell. STE Soldier 2 then interjects, preventing him from proceeding any further.

STE Soldier 2: Why are you here?

Dew: ...I've come for a visit.

STE Soldier 2: Do you have permission? The general ordered that no one be allowed to speak to this traitor. But... maybe I can make an exception... that is if you have something for me?

Narrator: STE Soldier 2 subtly raised an eyebrow, tacitly suggesting that if Dew offered something valuable, he might permit a private conversation with Thornton. Dew nods and reaches into his pocket to produce a pack of cigarettes, which he then hands to STE Soldier 2.

STE Soldier 2: It's like you read my mind. I know these weren't easy to get. Okay. I'm going to take a break... You have three minutes...

Narrator: STE Soldier 2 exits the brig briefly, excited about the chance for a smoke break. Left alone, Dew shifts his focus to Thornton, who is surprised to find him there.

Thornton: Dew, I would have never thought that you, of all people, would come and see me. Why are you here?

Dew: I just came by to see if you're all right.

Thornton: Yeah? Thanks. It was getting a little boring being cooped up in here. So... what have I been missing out on?

Dew: Well, 3000 of our troops have already been withdrawn or are in the process of being withdrawn back to the mainland since it looks like we have New Havenport pretty much secured.

Thornton: They're withdrawing that many already?

Dew: Yeah.

Thornton: Hmm...

Dew: ...I overheard that we lost 37 more men yesterday. Those New Havenport Minutemen booby traps are deadly...

Thornton: And evidently more effective than the Minutemen themselves. May the fallen find peace in the hereafter. Here I am, alive and stuck in this dump... I consider them lucky in my book.

Dew: Also, the Premier is visiting today—in a few hours, to be exact. I don't know why, but it makes sense why we were rushed last minute to prepare everything.

Thornton: He's coming here, huh? Ha-ha-ha... Of course, he is... It's always been about "that"...

Dew: ...Sergeant, are you going to be okay?

Thornton: Will I? I'll probably be kept locked up like some kind of animal for the rest of my life... three-course meals, but no pineapple pizza ever again...

Dew: Are you afraid you won't see Elizabeth again?

Thornton: Hmph.

Dew: Oh. Sorry, I asked... Hey, Sergeant. What did you mean when you said that this war was a sham?

Narrator: Thornton gazes at Dew in silence for a moment, his eyes cautiously surveying the room before he speaks.

Thornton: The walls have ears...

Narrator: Dew stares blankly at Thornton, who signals for him to come closer to the cell upon spotting STE Soldier 2 approaching in the distance, returning to the brig. Thornton promptly whispers something to Dew.

Thornton: *(whispering) Our enemies aren't always the ones abroad. They're closer to home than you think. Always question everything, exercise caution in trusting anyone, and don't allow the Premier to acquire the virus vial.*

Narrator: Upon receiving Thornton's warning, Dew's eyes widen, recognizing the sincerity in his words. At that moment, STE Soldier 2 reenters the brig, wearing a satisfied expression on his face after returning from his smoke break.

STE Soldier 2: All right. Time's up.

Narrator: Dew turns around and nods in the direction of STE Soldier 2. As he prepares to leave, Thornton shares one final thought.

Thornton: By the way, Dew.

Dew: Yeah?

Thornton: Thanks for not ratting me out.

Dew: No problem, Thornton.

Thornton: (*cracks a smile*) Oh. Are we now on a first-name basis?

Narrator: Dew smiles back and subtly nods at Thornton, signaling that he'll take into account what was whispered to him. He then exits the brig. Several hours pass and the scene cuts to the rhythmic thud of helicopter blades echoing through the air. It then transitions to Thornton, confined to his cell, immersed in a calisthenic routine of push-ups. Following that, the scene returns to SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers standing in disciplined formation, encircling the landing zone. Subsequently, the focus shifts back to Thornton in his cell, now performing abdominal crunches. Finally, the scene concludes with dust swirls as the Executive helicopter descends, touching down with precision. Premier Videl, accompanied by his two stern Guardsmen, emerges from the aircraft. The soldiers snap to attention, their eyes fixed forward. General Landmore steps forward, offering a sharp salute.

General Landmore: Welcome to our encampment, Premier Videl. It's an honor to have you here.

Zircon: (*nodding*) As you were, General.

Narrator: General Landmore lowers his salute. Zircon and General Landmore then commence their walk through the ranks of soldiers, with the Guardsmen trailing behind. The soldiers maintain their stoic composure, their gaze fixed straight ahead.

General Landmore: I apologize for the delay in securing a safe passage for your arrival, sir.

Zircon: It's understandable, General. However, you and all these dedicated SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers have

done an exceptional job pushing back the New Havenport Minutemen, occupying most of the northern zone, permanently shutting down the entire New Havenport energy shield grid—rendering them defenseless, and successfully retrieving the vial. It was well worth the wait. I'm sure none of that was easy, but you got it done. Our nation is grateful to every one of you.

General Landmore: Thank you, sir. Duty is our honor.

Narrator: Continuing their stroll, the Guardsmen stay watchful, scrutinizing the surroundings with sharp eyes. Recalling the cautionary advice from Thornton, Dew briefly eyes Zircon who passes by with mistrust before turning his gaze straight ahead.

Zircon: How's morale?

General Landmore: Outside of a few deserters and a turncoat, they're all in good spirits.

Zircon: Very good. With the confirmed deaths of Burgomasters Ison, Bysh, Huber, and Triunfo, along with the capture of the New Havenport financiers, this war can conclude sooner than expected. Mhm... Burgomaster Triunfo was quite the trolling expert with those memes taunting me on the chat forums. But what can make you laugh can also make you cry. Rest in peace, my "keyboard warrior." Ha-ha-ha... General, have there been any new sightings of Seneschal Ligo of New Havenport?

General Landmore: No, sir.

Narrator: As the soldiers stand in a disciplined line, in the background, a lone soldier breaks away from the ranks and stealthily navigates the encampment's outskirts.

Zircon: ...I see. Whether he's alive or dead, it makes no difference now. The remaining New Havenport forces won't hold out much longer. They conspired to keep me from getting elected, failed to overthrow me all those years ago, and now their rebellion is crushed. Mmm...

Narrator: General Landmore acknowledges with a nod before expressing the desire to disclose the identity of the turncoat.

General Landmore: Oh. Speaking of turncoats. The person we have in custody may be of some interest to you, Premier.

Zircon: Really? I'm intrigued. Who is he..?

Narrator: Before General Landmore can disclose the name of the turncoat, Zircon abruptly interrupts.

Zircon: ...On second thought, it will have to wait. First things first. The vial.

General Landmore: Of course, sir. This way...

Narrator: While the entourage advances through the encampment, the scene cuts back to the brig. Thornton is staring out of his cell window, and STE Soldier 2 stands guard with his back to the entrance, keeping an eye on him. Moments later, Thornton turns his attention toward STE Soldier 2 and notices the silhouette of another soldier approaching. The soldier, still in the approach, begins to remove a baton from their belt. Swiftly, they strike STE Soldier 2 on the back of his head with the baton, rendering him unconscious. Thornton stands in his cell, initially shocked by what has transpired. The soldier then removes their helmet, revealing Elizabeth, disguised in SWAT TROOPER ELITE attire.

Thornton: Elizabeth..?

Elizabeth: Hey, love. Surprised?

Narrator: Thornton hurries to the cell door to welcome Elizabeth. They share a romantic embrace, holding each other's hands briefly before releasing their grip.

Thornton: I am, but I'm so glad to see you again. I've missed you.

Elizabeth: Me too.

Thornton: How did you know where I was..?

Elizabeth: When you didn't show up to meet, I knew something was wrong. That same night, my father and I had a falling out...

Thornton: (*concerned*) Falling out? Are you okay?

Elizabeth: Yes, my love. I am. Since then, I've been hiding out and happened to overhear two soldiers discussing your imprisonment. I knew then I had to do something. I wasn't going to let them keep us apart like that.

Narrator: With amazement, Thornton gazes at the unconscious STE Soldier 2 lying face-first on the brig floor before turning his attention back to Elizabeth.

Thornton: I have to say, Elizabeth, you did quite a number on him.

Elizabeth: I did learn how to do that from you, my love. (*then cracks a smile*)

Thornton: It paid off clearly. Hey, where did you get that uniform from?

Elizabeth: Oh this..? (*then gives a sly grin*) I borrowed it from your guys' laundry line. Hold on. I'm going to get you out of there...

Narrator: Elizabeth moves away from the cell, bends down to retrieve the cell key from the unconscious STE Soldier 2, then returns to the cell door to unlock it. Thornton emerges, and the two lovers exchange a brief, passionate kiss.

Thornton: Wait. Before we go, I need to get my bastard sword back. Also, the briefcase holding the SKT virus vial... Both are stored in the nearby armory. And it's just our luck; the Premier is visiting today, and you know why. We can't allow him to get his hands on that...

Narrator: Thornton receives a nod from Elizabeth. Thornton seizes the M4 Assault rifle from the unconscious STE Soldier 2. They both then leave the brig, hurrying towards the armory. The scene cuts back to Zircon and General Landmore, flanked by the two Guardsmen, continuing their walk through the bustling soldiers' encampment while still engaged in conversation.

General Landmore: Sir, if I may ask, what is the timetable looking like for us to withdraw from here?

Narrator: Zircon hesitates briefly before responding in a vaguely ominous manner, concealing hidden intent.

Zircon: ...Soon, General. Very soon.

Narrator: Before their conversation can proceed, an abrupt eruption of multiple gunshots shatters the night air. Zircon, General Landmore, and the guardsmen come to an immediate stop, scanning their surroundings, as nearby soldiers instinctively take cover.

Zircon: (*concerned*) What was that?

General Landmore: Gunshots! ...It sounds like it came from the armory.

Narrator: General Landmore shifts his focus to two nearby soldiers, gesturing with his head to signal them to investigate the disturbance. Nodding in acknowledgment, they swiftly move out. Moments later, a disoriented STE Soldier 2 is observed stumbling out of the brig.

STE Soldier 2: He... he... got away... Ugh...

Narrator: STE Soldier 2 then passes out again right in front of Zircon and General Landmore, who are left in shock. Other soldiers run over and attempt to revive him.

Zircon: Who got away? (*then faces General Landmore*) The prisoner you spoke of, General..?

Narrator: Right before General Landmore can reply, the two STE Soldiers return from the armory, wearing grim expressions.

STE Soldier 3: Sir, two are dead... and the briefcase... (*briefly eyes Zircon before turning his attention back to General Landmore*) ...is missing.

General Landmore: Missing?!

STE Soldier 4: Yes, sir. Also, one of the trucks is gone.

General Landmore: (*then realizing*) The Sergeant... He must have taken it with him.

Zircon: General, where is the vial?

Narrator: With an alarmed expression, General Landmore then turns to face Zircon to respond.

General Landmore: It was in the briefcase...

Zircon: What?! ...Who took it..?

General Landmore: (*embarrassed*) Thornton...

Narrator: The gravity of the situation weighs on Zircon, his expression taking on a somber tone.

Zircon: Him?! It was him you were referring to earlier?

General Landmore: Yes, sir.

Zircon: I see... Hah. I should have known he would pull something like this. I wasn't even aware he was here... General, we need to locate that vial ASAP. Secure the encampment and initiate a lockdown.

General Landmore: Yes, sir. Right away.

Narrator: Zircon is escorted away by the two Guardsmen, while the soldiers attending to the unconscious STE Soldier 2 carry him away for medical assistance. Meanwhile, General Landmore starts barking orders as the nearby soldiers come into formation. Dew and Hoplyn hurriedly join the ranks, unaware of what has fully transpired.

General Landmore: (*shouting*): Listen up. We've got a renegade! Sergeant... No, Thornton, the traitor, has escaped with the virus vial. It's crucial that we locate him, dead or alive, and ensure the virus vial is returned intact. That's all. MOVE IT! MOVE IT! MOVE IT!

Dew: (*thinking to himself*) *Shit. Sergeant...*

Narrator: The soldiers then disperse, tension gripping them as they hurry to gather their weapons and commence securing the encampment. Meanwhile, Hoplyn observes that something is troubling Dew as he stands there in contemplation.

Hoplyn: Hey, Dew, what's wrong..?

Narrator: Dew briefly glances around before turning his attention back to Hoplyn, fully aware of what he has to do.

Dew: Hoplyn... there's something I need to do... I have to go...

Hoplyn: What? What do you mean?

Dew: I know where the Sergeant is going. He's in trouble. I have to go help him.

Hoplyn: (*bewildered*) You know where he is? Help him? Hold on.

Dew: Hoplyn, everything that has happened in this war isn't right. There's more going on than what we've been told.

Hoplyn: Dew, you're starting to sound as crazy as him. I can't let you just run off.

Dew: You've known me for a long time. Trust me, please!

Narrator: Confronted with a moment of uncertainty and torn between her loyalty to her childhood friend and the commitment to upholding her military oath, Hoplyn observes the sincerity and conviction in Dew's eyes, prompting her to relent.

Hoplyn: I don't know why, but something is telling me to let you do this. Okay, Dew. If anyone asks, I didn't see you. Be careful.

Narrator: Dew nods, and the two exchange an embracing handshake before Dew swiftly runs off, attempting to stay out of sight amidst the jungle backdrop. As the unfolding crisis plunges the encampment into chaos, one of the Premier's Guardsmen notices Dew's departure and alerts Zircon to Dew running toward the trail leading to Mount Darien within the jungle clearing.

Premier Guardman 1: Sir, over there!

Zircon: *(looking in the direction where Dew is running)* Who is that? And where does he think he's going?

Narrator: Nearby, STE Soldier 4 interjects with STE Soldier 3.

STE Soldier 4: Sir, it seems to be Corporal Wilder.

Zircon: Corporal Wilder...

STE Soldier 3: Yes, sir. He appears to be heading towards the biochemical research facility up Mount Darien.

Zircon: *(thinking to himself)* Why would he be going there..? *(then faces STE Soldier 3 and 4)* I'll assume control from here. Disregard any orders from the General.

STE Soldier 3: Understood, sir.

STE Soldier 4: Sir, should we pursue him?

Zircon: Hmm... Yes, let's do that. *(then turns to face STE Soldier 3)* Gather a convoy and take a jeep to follow him.

STE Soldier 3: Yes, sir!

Narrator: STE Soldier 3 hurries away to organize the convoy, and Zircon redirects his attention toward STE Soldier 4.

Zircon: Son, I'm going to need your help. Gather whoever you can and bring them to me to receive further

Narrator: instructions. There's something special I'll need all of you to do, and it's in the interest of national security. Zircon then gives a determined and malevolent grin. The scene cuts to two hours later. Dew, out of breath, finally arrives at the biochemical research facility. Upon reaching the entrance, he comes across a truck and jeep in ruins, engulfed in flames. The lifeless bodies of four SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers, marked by bullet wounds, lie on the ground. Dew quickly shakes off what he has just witnessed and enters the biochemical research facility. As he navigates through the complex in pursuit of Thornton, he encounters additional fallen SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers, intensifying his worry. Dew eventually reaches Voight's lab and enters. Inside, he finds Dr. Voight lying in a puddle of blood, trembling. Dew hurries to his side.

Dew: Dr. Voight?!

Narrator: A dying Dr. Voight turns his head to look at Dew and instantly recognizes him.

Dr. Voight: Ugh... Ah... I remember you... Long time no see...

Dew: What happened here..? Who did this to you?

Dr. Voight: The SWAT TROOPER ELITES' did this...

Dew: *(thinking aloud to himself)* ...So it wasn't Thornton then...

Dr. Voight: No... He and my daughter came back here to convince me to leave with them... Then we were attacked by the other soldiers... But he and another soldier—the woman you were with when we first met...

Dew: *(then realizing)* Hoplyn...

Dr. Voight: ...They tried to save me, but my daughter's safety was more important... Listen to me; we don't have a lot of time left.

Dew: What is it..?

Dr. Voight: By now, it's pretty obvious that Premier Vidal... used all of you. The only reason he wanted the virus vial retrieved was to... misuse it against the world. We never had any intention of using it on our people... We'll be in dire peril if he gets this in his possession.

Do you see... why we turned against him? He's a monster; he must not be allowed to get it... and the other three...

Dew: Other three..?

Narrator: Dr. Voight then shifts his head to the side, his eyes glossing over as he looks into the distance with a regretful expression.

Dr. Voight: Forgive me, Irene... I wish I had left with you... all those years... ago...

Dew: ...Irene? Who's that? What are you talking about..?

Dr. Voight: Uuuuggggghhhhh... (*then dies*)

Narrator: Dew checks Dr. Voight for a pulse, only to realize he's deceased. Shaking his head, Dew determinedly stands up from Dr. Voight's side, resolved to venture deeper into the facility. Now, his goal is not only to find Thornton and Elizabeth but also Hoplyn. Eventually, Dew comes across Hoplyn, who is gravely injured and propped against a wall. Dew promptly moves toward her.

Dew: Hoplyn! Are you—

Hoplyn: Dew... (*then turns her head to face him*) You made it late to the party... Ha-ha... (*then coughs up some blood*)

Narrator: Dread fills Dew's face as he then notices the bullet-ridden chest of the wounded Hoplyn.

Dew: Oh no...

Hoplyn: Yeah. I know... It's not looking too good for me.

Dew: Dammit.

Hoplyn: Not even those *Elementomes* can prevent what's about to happen...

Dew: Hey. Don't talk like that. I've got to get you out of here...

Narrator: Shaking her head, Hoplyn acknowledges that Dew's efforts to help her would be in vain.

Hoplyn: ...You were right... We should have listened to the Sergeant... But it's too late for that now. After you ran off, Premier Videl had... some of the others, including me, follow you here. They knew... you would lead them to the Sergeant... We arrived a little earlier than

you. We found the Sergeant, but... I couldn't allow them to kill him. I fought them off as best as I could, giving those... two the time to escape.

Dew: Hoplyn...

Hoplyn: I also overheard that the Premier... had ordered the execution of our unit and the others back at camp.

Dew: Execution?!

Hoplyn: ...General Landmore, everyone... they're dead...

Dew: (*disbelief*) What the fuck?!

Hoplyn: It's crazy, right..? Looks like we were just disposable pawns after all... Hey. Do me a favor... When this is all over, go back home and take care of Emily for me... Big Sis can't keep her promise...

Narrator: Dew grimaces as Hoplyn speaks about her inevitable demise.

Hoplyn: ...Tell Emily... I'm sorry... and I will always love her...

Dew, you have to live... E-Emily... Ugghghghhhh...

(*then falls to the floor lifeless*)

Dew: Hoplyn... Hoplyn... HOPLYN!!!

Narrator: A heartbroken and angry Dew vents his emotions by punching the wall. After taking a moment to process the tragic event, he looks down at Hoplyn's lifeless body, muttering to himself.

Dew: I can't believe this is happening... Goddamn... (*sigh*)

Don't worry, Hoplyn... I'll tell Emily for you...

Narrator: Dew kneels beside Hoplyn's lifeless body, softly closing her eyes before moving on. Navigating through the biochemical research facility, he follows a trail of fallen soldiers leading to the rooftop. Along the way, he spots an escape pod room, takes a mental note, and proceeds toward the rooftop. Meanwhile, the scene cuts to the biochemical research facility rooftop, where Thornton faces off with Zircon. One Guardsman holds Elizabeth hostage, while the other points his shotgun at Thornton.

Thornton: Let her go..!

Zircon: It's funny how we meet again like this, huh, brother?

Elizabeth: (*surprised*) Brother?!

Zircon: That's correct. Hmm, it seems my younger brother here is still ashamed to associate himself with me. Hah. The feeling is mutual.

Thornton: I said, let her go!

Zircon: So, you finally fell for some girl. *(then sniffs her hair)* She's pretty... good taste you have. Our parents would have approved.

Thornton: Those dissidents did us a favor... it's good; they're not here to see that their son turned out to be a rotten bastard.

Zircon: I think that trait comes from our father. You were always their "little favorite"...they literally died because of you! They should have left you with those kidnappers... but here we are, and look at you now. Not so big and bad as you whimper over some "skirt."

Thornton: Zircon, don't...

Zircon: You tried to run off with my prize, but now I have yours. Maybe we can make a trade. You were never the one for sharing when we were younger... What about it..?

Elizabeth: Thornton, no! Don't do it...

Zircon: ...Give me the SKT virus in exchange for your woman's life. What's it going to be?

Narrator: Thornton considers his options before ultimately choosing to surrender the SKT virus vial in exchange for Elizabeth's safety.

Thornton: Don't hurt her, or I promise you will suffer... *(then takes the vial from his pocket, raising it to show Zircon)* Here...

Zircon: Slide it to me. Now.

Narrator: Thornton leans down, places the virus vial on the ground, and slides it toward Zircon. Zircon promptly picks it up, firmly gripping the vial in his hand.

Zircon: At last... Oh, the trouble I went through to get this... Ha-ha... Thank you, brother. *(then faces Premier Guardsman 1)* ...Release the girl.

Narrator: Premier Guardsman 1 releases Elizabeth's arm. She hurries over to Thornton, while Premier Guardsman 2

lowers his shotgun. Thornton and Elizabeth then embrace each other in a hug.

Thornton: Are you okay?

Elizabeth: Yes...

Narrator: Amidst the embrace of the two lovers, a helicopter approaches in the distance. Zircon turns towards it, a smile playing on his face. He then redirects his gaze back to Thornton, who is still embracing Elizabeth.

Zircon: Ah, it seems my ride is almost here. This "family reunion" has been amusing, brother, but I must take my leave now. Before I go... *(then retrieves a handgun from his dress suit's inner breast pocket and aims it at Thornton)* ...You can die, brother..!

Narrator: Thornton's eyes widen as Zircon prepares to fire the handgun. Witnessing this imminent danger, Elizabeth swiftly pushes Thornton aside. Zircon, without hesitation, pulls the trigger, unleashing seven rapid shots. These bullets ruthlessly find their mark in Elizabeth's chest, right shoulder, and abdomen, causing blood to splatter in all directions. Subsequently, she crumples onto the rooftop surface.

Elizabeth: ...Oouuufffff...

Zircon: Ah, damn... I shot the wrong one! Ugh... I just wasted some good bullets there. Grrrr... *(then places the handgun back into the inner breast pocket of his dress suit)*

Narrator: Thornton quickly rises back to his feet, realizing what has just happened. He rushes over to the fallen Elizabeth, kneels beside her, and frantically cradles her in his arms

Thornton: Elizabeth! Oh no... No, no, no... Why?!

Narrator: Bleeding in Thornton's arms, Elizabeth gazes up at him with satisfaction, reassured of his well-being. Despite her struggle, she attempts to speak.

Elizabeth: Good... you're... safe...

Thornton: No... that was meant for me, not you. Elizabeth, I'm so sorry. It wasn't supposed to be like this!

Elizabeth: ...No regrets, never... I, at least, met you... You were the only happiness... *(then grabs Thornton's hand)* ...!

had in my life. You were... well worth it... even in the end...

Thornton: *(then hugs her tightly)* Elizabeth... Don't leave me... Please...

Elizabeth: Hah... it is... what it is... But don't be sad... We... we... we will... always... be one... my... my love... Uuuuuuughhhhhhhh... *(then dies)*

Narrator: Thornton shakes her, hoping for signs of life, only to realize she has already passed away. In anguish, he screams her name.

Thornton: ELIZABETHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

Narrator: Thornton, overwhelmed with grief for the departed Elizabeth, is seen sobbing. In the background, Zircon and the two Guardsmen stand, silently observing. He tenderly kisses her on the forehead, carefully placing her lifeless form on the damp rooftop surface. As he stands up, he gazes briefly at his fallen lover. The initial sorrow in his eyes gives way to a growing anger.

Thornton: *(then turns to face Zircon and the two Guardsmen)* ...YOU!!! *(then unsheathes his bastard sword and rushes toward Zircon)* Arrrrgggghhhhhh!!!!!!

Narrator: With swift ferocity, Thornton slashes Zircon's left forearm, carving a deep gash. Zircon stumbles back, screaming in pain as blood pours from the wound. Thornton then turns and fatally drives his blade into the neck of one of the Premier's Guardsmen—who, in the same moment, fires a shotgun blast into Thornton's chest. The impact sends Thornton hurtling off the rooftop and into the water below, just as Dew steps onto the roof and witnesses the unfolding scene.

Dew: Noooooooooo!!!!

Narrator: An enraged Dew unloads his rifle on the unsuspecting Premier's Guardsman, finishing him off. The other collapses to the floor, succumbing to the fatal neck injury inflicted by Thornton's bastard sword. Zircon gets back up, clutching his arm in pain as he tries to stop the bleeding. Dew steps forward, aiming his rifle squarely at Zircon.

Dew: WHY?!
Zircon: *(then looks in Dew's direction)* ...Oh... it's you, the Corporal.
Dew: Give me a reason why I shouldn't kill you.



Zircon: With what bullets? You used them all up when you riddled my Guardsman there.
Narrator: Dew inspects the rifle chamber and confirms its emptiness. Disposing of the rifle by tossing it to the floor, he retrieves a combat knife.
Dew: ...I don't need that to kill you.
Zircon: Ha-ha... Are you threatening me, your Commander-in-chief? You have some spunk. Keep that up, and you won't be getting your lifetime supply of government cheese.
Dew: Forget you and the cheese!
Zircon: Oh?! Well, be that way then. But none of that will matter soon for you anyway. Heh-heh-heh...
Dew: What's so funny?

Zircon: Hah. I've ordered a nuclear strike on this place. After that 50-megaton *Miasma* nuke is dropped, nothing will be left here.

Dew: What? *Miasma*..?

Zircon: That's right. But the question now is: will you have enough time to kill me before the blast? Or perhaps escape and fight another day? Not that you'll make it out of here alive.

Dew: Trying to tie up loose ends, huh?

Zircon: Indeed. The public must never know the truth of what transpired here. They will be led to believe that the viral threat was "eliminated" once and for all after the bomb has been dropped. And everything will return to the way it was... It's all, "for the greater good".

Dew: If the plan was to drop a bomb on this place, why kill General Landmore and the others at the camp?

Zircon: They needed to be punished. I do not tolerate failure!

Dew: (*shaking his head in disapproval*) You sadistic bastard.

Zircon: Is that how you feel? Ha-ha... Before I came along, there were far worse than me running our government. I'm probably the nicest of them all.

Narrator: Suddenly, their conversation is interrupted as a helicopter approaches the rooftop of the biochemical research facility, unleashing gunfire on Dew. He runs to take cover behind a nearby wall, evading the barrage of bullets raining down on him. The helicopter begins its descent, and Zircon boards it. Moments later, Dew cautiously peeks from behind the wall, observing Zircon securely on board. With a smile, Zircon turns to Dew and offers a mocking farewell. The helicopter ascends, disappearing into the distance. Dew, mindful of the imminent bombing of New Havenport, recalls the Escape Pod room from earlier. Before departing, he notices that Elizabeth's body is missing. Perplexed by her disappearance, he quickly dismisses the thought and leaves the rooftop. As the aircraft carrying the 50-megaton nuke nears the countryside, Dew

hurriedly makes his way to the Escape Pod room—an upper-level emergency chamber built into the side of the mountain facility, just two levels below the rooftop. Inside, several compact, pressure-sealed escape pod subs rest on magnetic launch rails angled downward toward the coastline. He climbs into one of the pods and seals the hatch. The chamber around him pressurizes with a rising mechanical hum as indicator lights glow green. Then, with a sudden jolt, the pod is fired through a concealed underwater shaft—cutting through solid rock and launching him into the cold, dark depths of the Mesovillain Ocean. Moments later, the aircraft enters New Havenport airspace, releasing its devastating payload. In an instant, the explosion engulfs the province, reducing all its zones and residents to ash. A towering, reddish-brown mushroom cloud billows into the sky, casting an ominous shadow over the ruins below and sealing the fate of the province in a haze of annihilation.

CHAPTER 15 – PARTY CRASHERS

Narrator:

The scene cuts back to the present time, the next night at the Executive Mansion Estate. As the celebratory ball unfolds, the distinguished guests patiently line up outside the mansion, each moment steeped in anticipation. The evening breeze carries the subtle fragrance of blooming flowers, enveloping the meticulously landscaped surroundings and imparting a natural grace to the atmosphere. Bathed in the gentle glow of moonlight, the grand mansion serves as a beacon of architectural splendor, its intricate details illuminated, casting captivating shadows over the well-tended gardens. Adorned in opulent attire, the invited attendees exude an air of regality that harmonizes seamlessly with the grandeur of the occasion. Laughter and animated conversations weave together, forming a melodious symphony that resonates with the opulence of the night. This diverse assembly of guests, representing a myriad of backgrounds and styles, collectively embodies sophistication, eagerly anticipating entry into the splendid celebration within. The Security team at the Executive Mansion Estate conducts meticulous checks, adding a touch of formality to ensure the event's exclusivity. Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper, adeptly disguised, effortlessly meld into the grand tapestry of regality as they await in line. Eventually, the line shortens, and the four move with graceful precision toward the three security personnel stationed at the entrance to the Executive Mansion Estate. The disguised quartet then checks their pockets, each handing over their ID card to the attentive security personnel. The cards are scanned for verification, and moments later, a validating beep resonates through the air. With a welcoming gesture from the security personnel, the quartet proceeds to enter. Once inside, the four

make their way from the main hall to the sumptuous ballroom. The space is adorned with elegant chandeliers casting a warm glow over the scene. Government employees and distinguished guests are scattered throughout, immersed in lively conversations, clinking glasses, savoring delectable dishes, and gracefully moving to the rhythm of the music on the dance floor. The atmosphere is filled with laughter and the tinkling of glasses, creating a harmonious backdrop to the soothing classical music performed by the orchestra. As the quartet navigates the vibrant crowd, they catch glimpses of intricate decorations, ornate furnishings, and the occasional flash of a camera capturing the grandeur of the event. The conductor directs the orchestra with precision, adding a touch of sophistication to the overall ambiance of the majestic ballroom.

Lorenzo: Would you look at that? It worked like a charm.
Cooper: See, I told you guys. I had it all taken care of.
Dew: I never doubted you for a moment, my friend.
Rena: This place is enormous...
Cooper: We can see where those tax dollars have been going.
Lorenzo: Certainly not toward the people in need...
Cooper: With all these people around, finding Premier Videl will seem impossible.
Rena: Hmm. Dew, any ideas..?
Dew: I'm thinking we should split up into two groups for now.
Lorenzo: Good idea. In a place like this, it's easy to get lost.
Cooper: Sounds like a plan. And if anything happens, we can regroup here in the ball room.
Dew: Right.
Cooper: So, who's going with whom?
Lorenzo: I think it'll be best if Dew and I were to team up. You two can work together.
Cooper: Then, Rena and I, it is.



Rena: *(teasingly)* Oh? And here I was looking forward to having a dance with you, Dew.

Narrator: Dew blushes, attempting to keep his composure, while Lorenzo glances over and breaks into a smile.

Dew: Oh, Rena... Ha-ha... that sounds nice... We'll have to do that, definitely. Save me a dance. All right?

Rena: Certainly.

Narrator: A brief smile crosses Dew's face as he awkwardly gazes at Rena, a moment interrupted by Lorenzo's intervention.

Lorenzo: Yeah. Anyway... *(then faces Rena and Cooper)* You two, mingle in and get a better scope of things.

Cooper: Got it. We won't have too much fun.

Rena: *(to Dew and Lorenzo)* Hey, guys, please don't get into any unnecessary trouble just yet, okay?

Lorenzo: *(grinning mischievously)* I can't make any promises.

Dew: *(reassuringly)* ...I'll try to make sure he doesn't.

Narrator: Rena nods, and subsequently, she and Cooper set off, blending seamlessly into the lively and festive ballroom crowd.

Dew: *(then faces Lorenzo)* Ready to party?

Lorenzo: I'm always down for a good party. I even brought along the "fireworks".

Dew: Hah. Okay. Come on, let's go.

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo then proceed in the opposite direction to discreetly explore the interior of the Executive Mansion Estate beyond the ballroom, avoiding undue attention. Meanwhile, the scene cuts to the lavishly decorated Premier chamber upstairs. The air is thick with anticipation as Zircon, dressed in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, meticulously adjusts his tie. Completing his ensemble, Peoria enters the room.

Zircon: *(then turns around to face Peoria)* How's everything going downstairs with the celebratory ball?

Peoria: Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves, and there are no security issues to report, sir.

Zircon: Good to hear. Then the rest of the evening should go without a hitch. By the way, has Mr. Arroyo arrived yet?

Peoria: Yes, he's been here for a while now.

Zircon: Has he now? Hmph.

Peoria: What's on your mind, sir?

Zircon: Now that the *Aurora Blade* is no longer an issue... I wonder if keeping Mr. Arroyo around would be detrimental.

Peoria: He did play his part. But what more use do you have for him now?

Zircon: Hmm. Not much. Frankly, while I am grateful for his aid in helping us rid our nation of those terrorists, he has fulfilled his purpose. Plus, with his significant other and unborn child dead, keeping him under my sway probably won't last. I imagine he would divulge everything if the right incentive came along for a story.

Peoria: What do you need to be done?

Zircon: It's like you can read my mind. You know me so well, Peoria. Hmm. Instruct some of the security detail to handle him discreetly.

Peoria: Understood. It will be taken care of, shortly, sir.

Zircon: Good. Good... Oh. And have you seen Killbin?

Peoria: No, sir, I haven't.

Zircon: Then that means he hasn't arrived and is late...

Narrator: Zircon, momentarily bothered by the tardiness of Killbin, undergoes a shift in demeanor upon sensing an opportune moment. He subtly advances romantically towards Peoria, with his movements embodying a thoughtful and tender approach.

Zircon: Bah. Forget about him. I'll deal with him later. Now, about us... Looks like we're all alone, and nobody is around to see us.

Narrator: Peoria responds with a coy smile, gently caressing his chest.

Peoria: It's just the two of us... But do we have time for this right now, sir? What about the guests? They'll be expecting you soon...

Zircon: They can wait a little bit longer. I'm the Premier of Mesovilla; time bends to my will.

Narrator: In the lively reverberations of celebration below, Zircon and Peoria, captivated by the enchantment of the moment, exchange a secretive and intimate kiss, accompanied by an intimate moment. Elsewhere on the Executive Mansion Estate, the scene cuts to a dimly lit security control room with multiple monitors displaying different camera feeds. The room is silent, except for the low hum of electronic equipment. An assigned Security Guard is neglecting his duties, engrossed in reading adult magazines and indulging in a donut. Suddenly, Sherwin abruptly enters the control room, surveying the monitors. The security guard, sharply noticing Sherwin's arrival, stands up.

EME Security 1: Sir.

Sherwin: ...I need you to clear the room for a few minutes. There's something I need to check. Official orders from the Premier.

EME Security 1: *(nervously)* Sir, is everything okay..?
Sherwin: Just do as you're told.



Narrator: EME Security 1 complies and quickly exits the control room. Sherwin walks up to the control panel, furtively checking his surroundings. After entering a code, he grants access to the side entrance of the mansion. On the monitor, a shadowy figure slips through the entrance. Sherwin smirks at the sight before shifting his gaze to another screen displaying the lively ballroom. From the crowd, he notices a familiar woman, Rena.

Sherwin: *(thinking to himself)* ...Hmm. Where do I know her from?

Narrator: Sherwin stays fixated on Rena in the ballroom, while the shadowy figure smoothly infiltrates the mansion on the adjacent monitor. Ignoring the presence of the familiar figure, Sherwin then moves on to erase the security footage capturing the shadowy figure's movements throughout the mansion. After finishing

this task, Sherwin heads towards the exit, leaving the control room, while Rena stays oblivious to the fact that she was being observed. After forty-five minutes, the scene transitions to Dew and Lorenzo, who continue their exploration of the Executive Mansion Estate. Having traversed the kitchen and explored various intricately decorated rooms, they finally arrive at the Mansion Estate greenhouse and step inside. As they enter the verdant sanctuary enveloped in vibrant foliage, Lorenzo pauses to admire the intricate details of the floral surroundings. He immerses himself in the beauty of the diverse plant life that adorns the greenhouse.

Lorenzo: Oooh. All these flowers and plants here... it's like a jungle.

Dew: Yep. There are a lot of them.

Lorenzo: They're so pretty... Wow.

Narrator: Dew looks at Lorenzo, perplexed by his enthralment with the flowers and plants.

Dew: Really?

Lorenzo: *(then faces Dew)* What..?

Dew: We live in a forest... You're acting as if you've never seen vegetation before.

Lorenzo: It's not that, man... Have you ever noticed that there are barely any flowers or plants in the metropolitan parts of the Zones?

Dew: Hmm. You know, that's a good observation. I never really noticed until you mentioned it.

Lorenzo: The very least that jamoke, Zircon, could do is beautify those areas. But, no... he's too busy with his cronies hoarding the tax money for his benefit. Those crooked pieces of shit and their lack of priorities... Ugh, it's pissing me off thinking about it...

Dew: Okay, okay. Calm down, Captain Planet. Save all your grievances for later when we do find him.

Lorenzo: He clearly ain't here... I guess we should check upstairs next.

Dew: Looks like that's our next move...

Narrator: Suddenly, the tranquil atmosphere in the greenhouse is shattered by the sounds of heated arguments emanating from the other side. Dew and Lorenzo exchange glances, silently nodding to convey their joint decision to investigate the source of the commotion. As they come around the corner and remain hidden, they are surprised to find Lynch engaged in a verbal exchange with two EME Security Guards.

EME Security 2: Mr. Arroyo, your services to Premier Videl are no longer required.

Lynch: ...So this is what it has come down to. Use me up and throw me out, huh? Is this how my loyalties are being repaid?

EME Security 3: Don't take this personally. We're just doing our job.

Narrator: The two EME Security Guards attempt to rush and subdue Lynch, but he swiftly evades and overpowers them, showcasing his combat skills by incapacitating both. Lynch fatally stomps on the head of EME Security 2 before advancing toward EME Security 3, seizing his left arm and stretching it out. Placing the heel of his shoe into EME Security 3's armpit, Lynch applies pressure, causing the guard to wince in pain.

Lynch: You know, I didn't have to attend this ball tonight. I could've left Helix and started over, but with what? Everything I loved is gone now. I bet you have a family that loves you, right? I had a family once. But just like me, you won't be seeing yours ever again!

Narrator: Before Lynch can finish him, Dew and Lorenzo intervene.

Lorenzo: Lynch...!

Narrator: Upon catching Lorenzo's voice, Lynch is taken aback and bewildered to find both Dew and Lorenzo alive and well. He releases his grip on EME Security 3's arm and pivots to confront the two.

Lynch: You're alive?! Impossible. But, how..?

Dew: You're not seeing things. It's us.

Lorenzo: We're alive, you traitorous pussy. But most of the others are dead, all thanks to you. Especially... Paca.

Narrator: Upon the mention of Paca's name, a wave of regret washes over Lynch's face, evident in the furrowed lines on his forehead and the somber cast in his eyes. He lets out a heavy sigh, a poignant expression of the weight on his conscience, before redirecting his emotions, transitioning from remorse to a fiery anger aimed squarely at Lorenzo.

Lynch: Keep her name out of your mouth! ...It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Lorenzo: Well, it is... It's all your damn fault. None of them are coming back because of you, you stupid fuck.

Dew: We trusted you, Lynch. We were family.

Lynch: You don't think I'm sorry for what I have done?! I lost her because I sold my soul. I wanted what I thought would be the best for us, but I was deceived.

Lorenzo: No shit you were. But that doesn't change a thing. You're going to pay for what you have done.

Lynch: Yes. Nothing can change that... But maybe there's one thing I can do to make things right...

Lorenzo: (*cautiously*) ...Make things right? What the fuck are you talkin' about?

Lynch: With... my death..!

Narrator: Dew and Lorenzo find themselves taken by surprise when Lynch charges at them with suicidal intent. A fierce fight ensues as Lynch attempts to provoke the two into fatally striking him down. Despite his attempts, Dew and Lorenzo manage to subdue Lynch, employing non-lethal tactics that eventually bring him to the floor in defeat.

Lynch: Damn, you two! Why?! Finish me. Finish me!

Dew: No, Lynch. Not like this.

Lynch: What?!

Lorenzo: Yeah, Dew is right. As much as I would like to end your life, killing you won't bring her or anyone else back. You're going to live with what you have done – that's punishment enough. And when we're done here, we're taking you back with us, and the others will decide your fate.

Narrator: Rising from the floor, Lynch faces Dew and Lorenzo, visibly expressing regret for his betrayal and the loss of Paca.

Lynch: ...I wish I could turn back time... and take it all back... Paca was so beautiful... our child would have been a blessing... It hurts so much... I deserve this...

Narrator: While Lynch somberly reflects, EME Security 3 regains consciousness, rises, and points a gun at Lorenzo. In an instant, Lynch leaps in front of Lorenzo, absorbing three bullets aimed at him. Dew, wielding his bo staff, confronts EME Security 3 and delivers a fatal blow. Lorenzo rushes to Lynch's side, kneeling beside him as he grapples with his final breaths. Shortly after, Dew walks over to join Lorenzo at Lynch's side.

Lynch: I'm sorry for all of it, Lorenzo...

Lorenzo: Lynch, why did you..?

Lynch: I made a choice... to save a friend... *(then cracks a smile)* I'd rather... have it end like this than be a dirty traitor... It makes me happy... to have known you both survived... You guys were like family to me... you were good to me, even when I didn't... deserve it... *(then looks at Dew)* 'It's better to die standing than living in captivity bowing.' ...What a bittersweet revelation...

Lorenzo: *(then sorrowfully shakes his head)* Goddammit, Lynch... *(pauses, then deeply inhales and exhales)* So you know, before Paca passed on, she told me to tell you... She loves you.

Lynch: *(to Lorenzo)* Did she..? Hah... *(then briefly looks up at the greenhouse ceiling)* Paca, I'll be seeing you... and the others soon, my love... *(then looks back at Lorenzo)* And Lorenzo, I'll... I'll tell "Mamie" you said 'Hi' when I see 'her'... Uggghhhh... *(then dies)*

Narrator: After Lynch's passing, Dew and Lorenzo look on, conflicted by the complex emotions of betrayal and sacrifice. While briefly mourning Lynch's passing, Dew suddenly realizes with a macabre undertone that they'll need to find a place to hide the bodies.

Dew: Hey...

Lorenzo: Yeah?

Dew: You know we just can't leave their bodies out in the open like this, right?

Lorenzo: I know. I know...

Narrator: Lorenzo surveys the greenhouse surroundings, responding with dark humor.

Lorenzo: I sure don't spot any shovels lying around... *(then curls his upper lip while producing a suction sound with his teeth)* Hmm. Looks like a green burial will have to do.

Narrator: With a sense of urgency, Dew and Lorenzo carefully tuck away the corpses of Lynch and the two EME Security Guards amidst the foliage of a flowerbed, shrouding the grim aftermath within the greenery. Only then do they quietly exit the greenhouse, leaving behind the concealed evidence of their grim encounter.

CHAPTER 16 – A RECKONING SHADOW

Narrator: Sometime later, the scene cuts to Dew and Lorenzo returning to the lively and bustling ballroom. They reunite with Rena and Cooper, who are savoring drinks near the bar. Rena greets the approaching duo with a smile.

Rena: Hey, guys.

Dew: Hey.

Rena: Any luck finding him..?

Dew: Not yet.

Cooper: Yeah, we haven't seen him either.

Narrator: Rena's attention is then drawn to the condition of Dew and Lorenzo's clothing, as she keenly observes the presence of dirt, noticeable wrinkles, and discernible signs of stress on their attire.

Rena: Did you two encounter any issues?

Lorenzo: ...Lynch...

Rena: ...Really?!

Cooper: He's here? What happened..?

Lorenzo: He went to join Paca and the others...

Narrator: Rena and Cooper share a meaningful glance, both acknowledging that Lynch is no longer alive. Rena proceeds to respond thoughtfully to Lorenzo.

Rena: Oh, I see. ...Was it worth killing him?

Dew: We didn't...

Rena: Huh?

Lorenzo: Let's just say he redeemed himself by saving my life...

Rena: He did that?!



Narrator: An anxious Cooper then interrupts with a question.

Cooper: ...Okay. I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Did you two hide his body at least..?

Rena: *(then faces Cooper)* Cooper! Shh!

Cooper: *(to Rena and then faces Lorenzo)* I'm not trying to be insensitive, but he would literally be sticking out like a sore thumb if his body was discovered.

Lorenzo: Yeah... his and the two security guards. We took care of it.

Narrator: In a silent exchange, Rena and Cooper lock eyes, a shared understanding passing between them as they both tacitly agree not to delve deeper into the matter.

Rena: Hmm. Say no more...

Narrator: Then, as a subtle click resonates through the air, the PA system activates, ushering in a voice that resonates through the speakers, capturing the attention of everyone in the ballroom.

Announcer: *"All attendees, please gather at the front and center. Premier Videl will be delivering his speech in 5 minutes. That is all..."*

Narrator: Then, the PA system is abruptly silenced.

Dew: It looks like it won't take long to find him now. He'll be coming to us instead.

Lorenzo: Here's our chance...

Dew: Lorenzo, let's hold off on any commotion until the opportune moment, alright?

Lorenzo: Gotcha. No need for the reminder... *(then cracks a smile)*

Narrator: The quartet proceeds to join the gathering near the staging area. Amidst the crowd, Dew and Lorenzo find themselves slightly separated from Rena and Cooper, with other attendees standing between them. A minute passes and the PA system reactivates once again, capturing everyone's attention as a voice speaks out.

Announcer: *"Ladies and gentlemen, please remain standing for our national anthem..."*

Narrator: As everyone anticipates the commencement of the Mesovilla national anthem, Lorenzo quietly expresses his irritation at being required to participate.

Lorenzo: Here we go with this public spirit bullshit.

Socialite 1: Shh...

Lorenzo: *(then faces Socialite 1)* You, hush. I'd rather take a knee during this than stand for that flag.

Debutante 1: So ungrateful...

Socialite 2: Who invited this guy?

Socialite 1: Sir, there are people who died for that flag. Show some respect for the fallen at least!

Lorenzo: ...And what about the people who are dying out there on the streets daily because of law enforcement brutality?!

Narrator: Wide-eyed, Dew stands nearby, absorbing Lorenzo's rant attentively, and subtly signaling for him to cease.

Lorenzo: ...What about the people who are starving or being jailed for unjust laws?! Huh?!

Socialite 1: Well...

Lorenzo: Answer that.

Socialite 2: Unpatriotic.

Debutante 1: You're a joke.

Lorenzo: *(to Debutante 1)* Butt out, you boujee bitch..!

Debutante 1: *(with offense)* Well, I never!

Narrator: Having heard enough, Dew nervously chuckles and steps in to prevent Lorenzo from jeopardizing their cover.

Dew: Hey, buddy. Calm down there... I'm so sorry. My friend, he's just... Umm... had too many drinks.

Lorenzo: Drinks my...

Dew: I apologize again.

Narrator: Socialite 1 then scrutinizes Lorenzo from head to toe before accepting Dew's explanation about his intoxication, and not taking offense at his words.

Socialite 1: Yeah. He's clearly drunk... Watch your friend here, pal. *(then gestures to Socialite 2 and Debutante 1)* Come on, guys, let's go elsewhere.

Narrator: The two Socialites and Debutante then quickly depart to another part of the crowd, distancing themselves from Lorenzo and Dew.

Lorenzo: ...Yeah, forget you too...

Narrator: Dew then gazes at Lorenzo, expressing disappointment.

Dew: Lorenzo, was all that necessary..?

Lorenzo: I know. I know. I wasn't trying to blow our cover or anything. I just can't with this bull-shit. My bad.

Narrator: The lights in the entire room momentarily fade to black. Then, a single dim blue and white spotlight illuminates the orchestra pit in front of the stage. The conductor, positioned on a raised podium with a large music stand, has his back to the audience. He slowly raises his baton, casting a glance over the different sections of the orchestra. Subsequently, he signals to the pianist and three violinists to commence playing the instrumental score of the Mesovilla national anthem. Every attendee stands with their hands over their hearts as the music plays. Twenty seconds into the score, the conductor cues the two drummers, 2 cello players, and 3 trombone players to start. As the tempo picks up, the conductor passionately signals to the eight choir members to join in singing in unison with the instrumental score.

Choir: *"Mesovilla - our ensorcelled nation.
 Mesovilla - our dearest country.
 A robust resolve,
 grandiose splendor –
 that will be everlasting!
 From the days of the six kingdoms of old,
 Always be triumphant,
 Our liberated land,
 Our people exalted,
 Our heart's content!
 Radiant our country be!*

*The Lelepon Ocean to the West of us.
The Jujo Ocean to the East of us.
Centered of the world Mesovilla be!
From the sandy shores to our snowy mountains.
Our sui generis forest and plains are supreme –
Blessed and guided by Chosha we be!
Limitless hopes and dreams for years to come.
Adherence to our homeland is unwavering.
What it was, what it is, and forever it will be!"*

Narrator:

The conductor then lowers his baton, and the orchestra band and chorus bring the anthem to a conclusion. The attendees applaud and whistle. Lorenzo folds his arms in disgust, glancing around. The conductor turns to face the crowd, joining the orchestra ensemble and choir in taking a bow. A minute later, after the cheering subsides, the conductor, along with the orchestra ensemble and choir, begins to leave the area. The PA system resumes, and once more, the announcer's voice echoes through the venue.

Announcer:

"Thank you, Helix Philharmonic, for that beautiful rendition of our national anthem. We're going to get right into this Ladies and Gentlemen... Now, please help me give a warm welcome to our Premier of Mesovilla, the Honorable Zircon Videl..."

Narrator:

As the PA system goes silent, the crowd erupts in cheers and applause as Zircon, accompanied by Peoria, steps onto the stage. Waving at the enthusiastic crowd, he proceeds toward the podium. Taking the microphone from the stand, Zircon signals for silence, and the crowd hushes down.

Zircon:

Good evening. I extend my gratitude to our distinguished guests, my cabinet, government workers, and fellow citizens for joining us at

this ball tonight. I aim to remain humble with my words, and I'll keep this brief. I must start by expressing my gratitude to all of you. I've had the honor of serving as your 21st Premier of Mesovilla for 16 years now. We've faced economic depression and warfare during those challenging times, yet we remained united and stronger in our resolve. I thank you all for your support and efforts in assisting your government in the war against domestic terrorism. It was nearly six years ago that the *Aurora Blade* began its campaign of terror against our way of life. They threatened to dismantle our social stability with the promise of "peace" and "liberty," but only aimed to bring anarchy and strife in its place. The terrorist group took their own lives in the end, feeling the pressure of justice finally closing in on them. If it weren't for the efforts of our outstanding citizens in the Helix Capital and our fallen peacekeepers, this day would not have come...

Narrator:

The crowd then breaks into applause, interrupting him. Lorenzo briefly glances at Dew and then looks around in disgust at the crowd's delusions.

Zircon:

...The *Aurora Blade* is dead. With this new chapter beginning for our society, we will no longer be vulnerable to attacks or live in constant fear and intimidation due to the actions of criminal cowards. We will now grow stronger and flourish into a safer, more hopeful, and secure nation. This, my people, is the future—not just for Helix, but soon for all of Mesovilla. Just like the founding of our

country 120 years ago, we will be UNITED as one again..!



Narrator:

As the crowd starts chanting Zircon's name and erupts into thunderous applause, once again interrupting him, he cracks a smile in response to their adoration. Just before he can finish his speech, Peoria receives urgent news through her earpiece. Approaching Zircon from behind, she leans in and whispers something into his ear.

Peoria:

(whispering) Sir, there's been a situation.

Narrator: Zircon raises an eyebrow and stays silent while Peoria continues whispering into his ear. His gaze remains fixed on the crowd in front of him, who are still cheering him on.

Peoria: *(whispering) Lynch and two other security guards have been found dead in the greenhouse. After reviewing the surveillance footage, Security has discovered that it appears some uninvited guests may have been involved.*

Narrator: Troubled by Peoria's revelation, Zircon sets the microphone back in its stand and turns to face her. The cheers from the crowd gradually fade, leaving them curious about the unfolding events on stage.

Zircon: *(whispering) An uninvited guest...? Wait... The Aurora Blade!?! Could it be..?*

Peoria: *(whispering) It's a possibility... We have to get you out of here now.*

Narrator: Amidst the bewildered and inquisitive crowd, Peoria abruptly guides Zircon off the stage into the back. An EME Security Guard signals to other guards stationed near the doorway, prompting them to swiftly exit. Simultaneously, in the crowd, Dew and Lorenzo regroup with Rena and Cooper, acknowledging that their cover has been compromised.

Rena: He seems bothered by something.

Dew: He's aware that we're here...

Cooper: Lynch's dead body was probably a dead giveaway... Right?

Rena: Cooper, seriously?!

Lorenzo: Ignore all that... The real party is about to begin. Hah...

Narrator: A brief moment later, the PA system comes back to life, and the voice issues instructions to the attendees.

Announcer: *"...Ladies and gentlemen, the Premier is currently feeling unwell. As a result, we'll be concluding the ball a bit earlier tonight. Kindly gather your belongings and exit the premises promptly. We appreciate your understanding. We apologize for any inconvenience and wish you all a safe and pleasant night."*

Narrator: Within a few minutes, the ballroom empties as attendees leave, making their way to the main hall, collecting their belongings, and being escorted outside by EME Security Guards. With everyone gone and all exits automatically secured, Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper find themselves standing in the deserted ballroom. Soon after, ten armed EME Security Guards enter the ballroom to confront the four. Dew and the others remove their disguises and then draw their weapons, assuming a fighting stance.

EME Security 4: Looks like we have some trespassers.

EME Security 5: ...And ones who are supposed to be dead!

Dew: Sorry to disappoint you.

EME Security 4: I'm glad you terrorists aren't dead. We'll take much pleasure in getting the job done right. There's nowhere to run now... The party is over!

Narrator: Rapidly advancing, the ten-armed EME Security Guards charge at Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper, plunging them into a fierce battle. Demonstrating exceptional efficiency and seamless teamwork, Dew and his friends skillfully prevail, overcoming and defeating every member of the security team. Lorenzo then

observes from a distance as Peoria, accompanied by an EME Security Guard, escorts Zircon up the stairs in the main hall. Lorenzo departs, making his way toward the main hall. This action captures Rena's attention.

Rena:

Lorenzo, where are you going?

Lorenzo:

There's something I need to do alone. I'm heading upstairs...

Rena:

What? Hold on.

Narrator:

While Rena attempts to move, six additional armed EME Security Guards enter through a side door, confronting Dew, Rena, and Cooper. The trio redirects their focus and swiftly enters into battle. After a few minutes, they successfully defeat the six security guards. Taking a moment to catch their breath, they survey the aftermath of their handiwork laid out in front of them.

Rena:

(huff) (puff) ...Is that all of them?

Dew:

Looks like it.

Cooper:

(huff) (puff) You could say... *(huff) (puff)* ...we "swept them off their feet."

Rena:

Hah. *(huff) (puff)*

Dew:

Hmm. Lorenzo... *(then starts walking off)*

Rena:

Dew, where are you going..?

Dew:

Rena, you, and Cooper, stay here and take a break. I'm going after Lorenzo...

Narrator:

A determined Dew then speedily exits the ballroom, the echo of his footsteps fading into the distance before Rena can get a word out. Rena and Cooper find themselves in a brief pause, still catching their breath and surrounded by the lingering tension of the recent battle. Silent glances are exchanged between them, their eyes reflecting the uncertainty of the moment. The decision hangs in the air—whether to follow Dew or remain in the relative safety of the ballroom.

Rena: So, how are you feeling? Should we stay put or follow suit?

Cooper: I'm ready for some more "partying." Let's go after them.

Rena: You read my mind, Cooper.

Narrator: Rena and Cooper then sprint out of the ball-room in pursuit of Dew and Lorenzo. Meanwhile, the scene cuts to Lorenzo as he relentlessly pursues Zircon, encountering and effortlessly overcoming several EME Security Guards along the way. Lorenzo ultimately arrives on the rooftop of the Executive Mansion Estate, approaching from behind as he confronts Zircon, Peoria, and an EME Security Guard making their way toward the distant helipad.

Lorenzo: *(shouting)* ...ZIRCON!!!

Narrator: Startled by the shout of his name, Zircon turns around to find Lorenzo boldly standing before him. Zircon looks at Peoria and the EME Security Guard, signaling them to handle Lorenzo. Peoria nods, and the two approach Lorenzo as Zircon continues to flee.

Lorenzo: Get. Out. Of. My. Way. Now!!!

Peoria: No can do, gutter trash...

Lorenzo: *(sarcastically)* Okay. You can't say I didn't ask nicely.

Peoria: It's impressive that you and your terrorist friends are still alive, but you've come quite far, and I won't let you proceed any further.

Narrator: Peoria then pulls out her shock whip, activating it, while the EME Security Guard raises his rifle, aiming it at Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: I guess you want to get roughed up again, huh? Is protecting that clown really worth it..? He's got to be kicking you down good...

Peoria: You'll never find out because when I'm done with you, I'm going to slice you into many pieces and scatter your remains like confetti.

Lorenzo: Oh yeah?

Peoria: ...There will be no more continues for you, my friend. You should have stayed hidden. You're going to regret ever coming here. This is the end for you.

Lorenzo: I hate to break it to you. I have no more fucks to give... Bring it skag..!

Narrator: Lorenzo, with his brass knuckles clenched tightly, engages in a fierce one-man battle against Peoria and the EME Security Guard. Fueled by unwavering determination, Lorenzo skillfully maneuvers through the confrontation, strategically countering each move from his adversaries. In this intense clash, Lorenzo overwhelms them with a combination of agility and raw strength, securing a decisive victory. As the dust settles, Lorenzo locks eyes on Zircon, who comes to a halt—far from the idle helicopter—realizing escape is futile without the keys. Meanwhile, Dew ascends from behind, stepping onto the rooftop and taking his place beside Lorenzo.

Dew: Lorenzo. I finally caught up... You, all right?

Lorenzo: Yeah, man. I'm good...

Narrator: With a smug expression, Zircon turns around to applaud Dew and Lorenzo for making it so far.

Zircon: You *Aurora Blade* thugs never cease to impress or entertain me. Ha-ha...

Lorenzo: It's been a long time...

Zircon: Hmm... Have we met before?

Lorenzo: ...Twenty-three years ago, to be exact. My name is Lorenzo Arana. You killed my brother. Prepare to die!

Zircon: Whoa, "so serious." You know, if you keep repeating that, it would sound really intimidating. Ha-ha... to be honest, I've killed so many. After a while, it's hard to remember their faces and names.

Dew: You're not getting away this time... I've got you cornered, again.

Zircon: ...Again? Do I know you too?

Narrator: Intrigued, Lorenzo briefly looks at Dew upon hearing his words.

Dew: Let me refresh your memory, Premier. During the *Great Civil War*, I was once a member of a SWAT TROOPER ELITE unit attached to New Havenport. You had my entire unit killed off, and then, along with all those innocent civilians, you ordered the place to be nuked to conceal the real reason we were there. All that for a certain vial we retrieved... Do you remember me now?

Narrator: Zircon starts recalling the identities of Dew and Lorenzo, and a smile slowly spreads across his face.

Zircon: Ha-ha... I knew it... I knew you two looked familiar. *(to Dew)* Corporal, it was you six years ago who confronted me in New Havenport. And let me guess... *(then feels the scar on the left side of his nose, and gazes at Lorenzo)* You were the little shit who gave me this scar... Ha-ha... I thought you would have been sleeping with the fishes by now. Oops. ...Apparently, not.

Lorenzo: A mistake you're going to regret..!

Zircon: Hmph. You entertain me with your threats, and we'll see about that. But I do recall our fateful encounter. Your brother had it coming, like all the other despicable parasites that I put down back in the day. I went far beyond my duties to do society a favor. Sure, it came at the cost of some lives, but it helped in keeping those streets safe and clean. I maintained societal stability when it was threatened!

Lorenzo: Murderer! Who the hell do you think you are? You're not the Most High!

Zircon: Oh? I might as well be. The people would agree too.

Dew: Get over yourself!

Zircon: Why? After all, this is what the people would want from their beloved Premier.

Dew: That's what you think. They only go along with your tyranny out of fear and ignorance, not admiration.

Zircon: Ha-ha-ha... Tell that to the people who trusted me back then for my outstanding service as a peacekeeper. Tell that to the people who keep re-electing me to be the Premier of our glorious country! Tell that to the people whom I have provided abundant economic opportunities and security for.

Lorenzo: ...Only because of rigged elections, you authoritarian piece of shit!

Zircon: Ooh. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." You both came all this way, fueled by hatred and vengeance to kill me. Look at you two... but your plans may have to be put on hold... *(then pull out the SKT virus C vial)* See this.

Dew: *(surprised)* SKT?! ...But how?!

Lorenzo: SKT? What's that?

Dew: It's a long story.

Zircon: Indeed, it is.

Dew: How could you have the remaining sample if Master Arbitrator Clymer used it on himself?

Zircon: Oh, that. I gave him a derivative of the SKT virus sample. After obtaining the original strain six years ago, I had my scientists engineer numerous duplicates. As you all witnessed, Master Arbitrator Clymer completely lost control once he mutated. Oh yes, those rabid creatures roaming Helix that you've only caught glimpses of through the news media... *(turns to Dew)* Even my Sewage Leech—the one you and that woman killed just over a week ago—was a byproduct of the virus derivative. His name was Philmore, by the way. *(then briefly frowns)* ...Poor guy never stood a chance. *(sigh)*

Dew: That explains the increase in mutated wildlife as of late...

Lorenzo: Then that means... all those innocent people were also...

Zircon: *(smirking darkly)* Yes. A bunch of runaways and homeless—people no one would miss. They served their purpose well.

Lorenzo: YOU fuckin' evil sonofabitch.

Zircon: ...But, sometimes... it seems like all of this has been a waste. It's been so vexing trying to bri-
dle the virus mechanism in an attempt to con-
trol its effects... if only I could harness its raw
potential... Ha-ha... If you have the power to
run a country, the next logical step is - to rule
over all humanity. To be revered as a God!
...To have ABSOLUTE CONTROL!

Lorenzo: You believe that?! You're bat-shit crazy!

Dew: We are the *Aurora Blade*, and we fight for -
truth, justice, equality, liberty, love, and hope.
Your grandiose delusions will end here...

Zircon: Truth? Justice? Love? Ha-ha-ha... Such heroic
foolishness! You imbeciles still do not get it.
Do you know what it was like during the old
days? People ran rampant disobeying laws
and causing havoc. There was no order, noth-
ing but pure destruction. The people of those
days abused their rights to the point where
they no longer deserved them. If it weren't
for the police state, there would be no law
and order.

Dew: ...Law and order?! You mean subjugation! The
downfall of this country in the past was be-
cause of despots like you. Free will and free-
dom are no illusion.

Zircon: Such profound words fall on ears indifferent
and apathetic... Here we are, fate bringing us
together again. Do you two think you can
stop me?

Lorenzo: Believe me, I will. You're going to pay for kill-
ing my brother and all the lives you have ru-
ined! Especially for taking my "Mamie" away
from me!

Zircon: ...Who?

Lorenzo: My eight years' worth of fuckin' stamp col-
lecting, that's who!

Zircon: (to Dew) Seriously?!

Dew: Yeah, he really was serious about that stamp album...

Zircon: Oh. Ha-ha... It's déjà vu all over again. This time, though, it'll be... a little different... There won't be any running away now... If I'm going down, then you're both coming along with me..! *(then injects himself with the SKT virus C vial)* ...To hell WITH individual freedoms, ABSOLUTE control... *(drops the ¼ filled vial onto the rooftop surface)* ...Is ALL... *(black boils begin to form all over his body)* ...the power one could... EVER neeeeeeeeeDDDDDD ...ARRRRRRRRRRGGGG HHHHH... *(four protruding tentacles emerge from his rib cage, ripping his clothes off as he gradually mutates into a giant falcon-serpent hybrid monstrosity)* Ha-ha-HA... BEHOLD THE...power... *(two more tentacles form from both sides of his skull temple)* ...ALL will glimpse at ME in AWE... All will... KNEEL And... DIE before... ME! ...MUHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!

Narrator: Recognizing the gravity of the threat posed by the grotesque form before them, Dew and Lorenzo quickly draw their weapons, assume fighting stances, and brace themselves for the impending battle against the mutated Zircon. The ensuing battle is arduous, testing their strength and resolve. As the battle reaches its climax, the resilience of Dew and Lorenzo prevails. Through strategic collaboration and unwavering resolve, they manage to overcome the mutated Zircon. In a final act of defiance, Zircon releases a harrowing shriek, echoing the defeat he couldn't escape. The once menacing figure collapses to the ground, marking the conclusion of a relentless and hard-fought encounter. Dew and Lorenzo silently stand over the defeated mutated Zircon, savoring the moment of finally bringing

down the Premier and remembering those close to them who have fallen.



Lorenzo:

Fuck you, Zircon! ...Rest in peace, Estiven... and "Mamie".

Dew:

The mighty Premier and his reign of terror are over... the fallen have been avenged.

Lorenzo:

Yeah. At last. It's finished.

Narrator:

Dew and Lorenzo, their expressions hardened by the battle, turn their backs on the defeated mutated Zircon, leaving the scene of their hard-fought victory. Unbeknownst to them, the mutated Zircon's eyes slowly open, a sinister glint illuminating its gaze. With an unexpected burst of energy, the creature swiftly rises from the ground, determined to claim its revenge. As Dew and Lorenzo continue their path, the mutated Zircon

silently slithers behind them, its movements shrouded in malice. The duo remains oblivious to the imminent danger, focused on the aftermath of their confrontation. Unseen, unheard, the mutated Zircon inches closer, preparing to launch a surprise attack. However, fate takes an unforeseen turn. A mysterious force, swift and precise, intervenes just as the mutated Zircon readies itself to strike. In an instant, a blade slices through the air, severing the creature's head from its twisted form. The decapitated head of the mutated Zircon tumbles to the ground, its malevolent gaze, frozen in a final moment of defiance, while the rest of its body collapses with a thud. Dew and Lorenzo, now alerted by the sudden turn of events, turn around to witness the aftermath of the intervention, puzzled by the unknown force that spared them from the lurking danger. Dew and Lorenzo then hastily return to the fallen mutated Zircon, where they face a man concealed in the shadows, brandishing a bastard sword. At that precise moment, Rena and Cooper make their entrance.

Rena: Dew... *(then turns to look at Zircon's slain corpse)* ...Whoa?! What happened here?

Narrator: Cooper gazes down at the severed head of mutated Zircon, observing the precision and accuracy of the cut.

Cooper: *(thinking to himself)* The head was cleanly severed. This method of execution seems oddly familiar...

Narrator: Dew cautiously approaches the shadowy figure, eyes narrowed with curiosity. He stops at a safe distance, heart pounding.

Dew: Who are you..?

???: ...It's been a minute, hasn't it?

Narrator: Dew and Cooper freeze—the voice hits them like a jolt from the past.

Cooper: ...That voice.

Dew: No. It can't be...

Narrator: Lorenzo and Rena exchange confused glances, then look to Dew for answers.

Lorenzo: It can't be—who?

Rena: Dew, do you know him?

Narrator: The enigmatic figure steps into the light, revealing none other than Thornton. His long, dark brown hair flows loosely past his shoulders, partially obscured by a facemask that conceals his expression. He wears a dark beige trench coat over forest green pants, black gloves, and combat boots. In one hand, he wields a Bastard sword, its tip angled slightly to the side. A mysterious aura envelops him—calm, yet unnerving. Dew stands frozen in disbelief. Cooper takes a half-step back, posture tense. Rena and Lorenzo remain silent, their eyes locked on the masked figure—studying every detail, instinctively sensing that whoever he is, he isn't just passing through.

Dew: Thornton?!

Thornton: In the flesh...

Dew: You're alive! But how..?

Cooper: *(then looks at Dew with confusion)* ...Alive?

Thornton: ...In the shadows of oblivion, my essence endures unbroken. Now the moment is ripe for things to commence their course.

Dew: What..?

Thornton: I have come for the "Elixir of life"... *(then bends down to pick up the remaining sample of the SKT virus C vial from the rooftop surface)* You won't be needing this any longer, brother...

Dew & Cooper: Brother?!

Lorenzo: Zircon has a brother?! What's going on..?

Narrator: Just then, the mutated Zircon's corpse rapidly decomposes, morphing into a puddle of flesh. The five of them silently observe for a moment before resuming their dialogue.

Thornton: ...I never did tell you, Dew, that Zircon and I were family. I guess the last name didn't make it obvious.

Cooper: I don't see the resemblance. And... what's with your getup?

Thornton: *(to Cooper)* Ah, Cooper... you're here too. It's been a while. It's good to see you again too... Still standing on your two feet, I see. *(then turns his gaze back to the SKT virus C vial in his hand before putting it away in his inner trench coat pocket)* ...I've got what I came for, and soon I will have the other three virus vials.

Narrator: Upon hearing this, Rena's interest is piqued, her eyes widening with curiosity. The revelation triggers a cascade of thoughts and memories, casting a contemplative shadow across her expression.

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* ...SKT viruses?!

Dew: There are three more..?

Thornton: Yes, the SKT virus C, G, T, and A. No matter... Soon, the Renascence of the Söl Congruum will begin. All will suffer the unimaginable. *"Ring a ring o'roses, a pocket full of posies. Ah-tishoo! Ah-tishoo! We all fall down."*

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* ...That lullaby...

Dew: Huh? I don't get it... What are you talking about?

Thornton: To find the answer to your question, Dew, follow me on a peregrination across all of Mesovilla. Witness the Renascence. Chaos, order, and bliss will soon be upon us... *(then starts walking off)*

Dew: ...Renascence? What do you mean?
...Thornton, wait..!

Narrator: As Thornton continues walking away from Dew and the others, a blanket of fog engulfs his body, and he vanishes within its ethereal embrace.



TO BE CONTINUED IN, VALOR TALE: PEREGRINATION, VOLUME II...