

VALOR TALE

PEREGRINATION

VOLUME II

DAVID EARL WILLIAMS III

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MAP OF MESOVILLA: EASTERN REGION



CHAPTER 1 – JOURNEY BOUND

Narrator: Our chapter begins two weeks later as Dew prepares to depart onto a cruise ship from Helix wharf. A black stretch limo in the distance pulls up onto the sunlit wharf and comes to a stop. Killbin exits out of the rear passenger door and approaches Dew.

Killbin: Dew. Dew. Dew Wilder, hold up.

Dew: ...Huh? Killbin Janerio?! Zircon's right-hand man...

Killbin: Formerly his right-hand man, and I believe this is the first time we've met. *(then smiles and then extends his right hand out to Dew)*

Dew: *(looks at Killbin's hand for a moment and ignores his gesture to shake it)* It is...

Killbin: Oh... *(then withdraws his handshake)*

Dew: So, you know my full name...

Killbin: I do. I read your file. You've been pretty active these past six years for a "dead man." It all makes sense now. Your skills... the stealth... the training at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy paid off...

Dew: That's all behind me now...

Killbin: Is it..? What actually happened in New Havenport? Does the SKT virus have something to do with it?

Dew: What, you don't know? Your buddy didn't keep you in the loop?

Killbin: I was never his friend... and...

Dew: Why are you here? Have you come to take me in?

Killbin: No. I'm here to see you off.

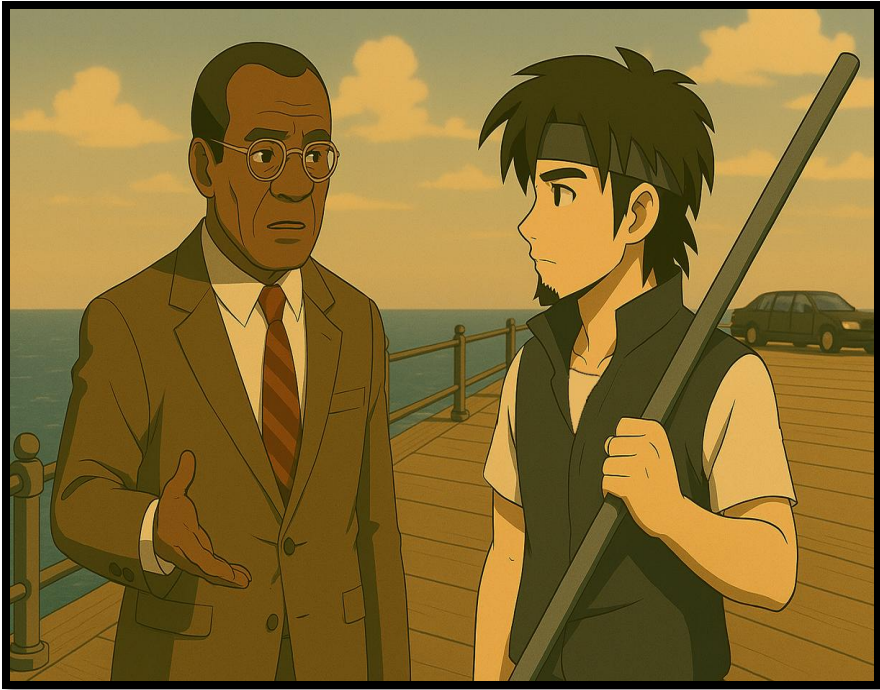
Dew: I don't need a going-away party.

Killbin: Funny... but I'm glad you haven't left yet. I wanted to inform you that as of today, the *Aurora Blade* has been given a full pardon of all criminal charges against them. Think of it as a token of appreciation for ending Zircon's rule.

Dew: Is that so? Well, we were never "criminals" in the first place. Thanks. I guess...

Killbin: Before you go... I need a favor from you.

Dew: ...A favor?



- Killbin: *(then pulls an envelope out of his pocket)* I need you to give this letter to the Seneschal of Llivisaca since you're heading in that direction.
- Dew: Why?
- Killbin: Since Zircon is dead and no longer in control, I've taken his role as the interim premier of Mesovilla until we re-establish our national government infrastructure. *(handing Dew the letter)* ...There will be "fair & equal" elections, due process, freedom of the press, and speech once more.
- Dew: Okay... So... you can't e-mail the seneschal the good news?
- Killbin: During Zircons' premiership, all external and internal communications to Llivisaca were limited due to their opposition toward the Helix Capital during the civil war. Also, as of a week ago, we haven't been able to reach out to them. It's peculiar... I can only assume their communication hub is down. In any case, with this letter getting to the seneschal, we can fully re-establish relations with that province again. Will you do this?
- Dew: Sure... *(then takes the letter)*

Killbin: By the way, you'll find the directions to the Seneschal's house on the back of the envelope.

Dew: That'll come in handy for sure. ...Your government propagandists know how to spin a story, by the way. Telling the public that Zircon died an untimely death from an unknown illness... they bought into it.

Killbin: No one should ever know what really happened that night. It'll help us move forward as a nation...

Dew: The truth... it can be "complicated," huh?

Killbin: I can promise you... that things will be different from here on out.

Dew: Hmm...

Killbin: You don't trust me? I can see why... I mean, I was once Zircon's Chief of staff. Ha... But if you must know... you and your friends didn't get into the Executive mansion estate because of some fake id cards you had... No, no. Nice attempt, though...

Dew: What?!

Killbin: Surprised? Yes... That was because of me.

Dew: You?! Unbelievable...

Killbin: For the past three years, I've been keeping tabs on the *Aurora Blade* with help from an insider... even going so far as to help cover up your tracks.

Dew: An Insider?! ...Who?

Killbin: That doesn't matter now. You didn't think it was because of luck, or your group was that skilled to evade us this entire time? Everything from having access to the *Elementomes* through the black market and your successful acts of undermining Zircon was because of me. The *Aurora Blade's* success was my success.

Dew: But at what cost? Sacrificing the lives of my comrades for your gain..? You purposely allowed THEM ALL to be slaughtered by Zircon. You fuck..!

Killbin: No. You're wrong. I apologize for what Zircon did to your friends. His course of action caught me by surprise... I tried to convince him otherwise not to do what he did. But I couldn't do anything more about it... not even give a timely warning... The deaths of all those innocents lay heavy on my conscience...

Dew: Yeah... may their deaths haunt you. Too bad your apology won't bring them back!

Killbin: Unfortunately, no...

Dew: Using us to take out Zircon was quite the gamble, I have to say. Congratulations. You got all the power you could ever want.

Killbin: You would be incorrect about your assumption. I don't seek power. I simply wanted to restore the freedoms we once had as a nation.

Dew: Bullshit.

Killbin: You think so? Believe what you want. But now you know. Another thing that I have done as interim premier; is I took the liberty to dissolve my predecessor's cabinet. Those who were high-ranking officials during Zircon's administration have been jailed and await trial for corruption charges.

Dew: I'm shocked that you're not giving those bastards leniency.

Killbin: ...Also, every citizen who was unfairly imprisoned for lesser crimes will receive full pardons and restitution. In addition to that, I have ceased all of Zircons' secret productions and research into the SKT virus C variant. Any remaining infected wildlife that is discovered will be humanely euthanized. By taking action now, at least we've averted any potential future public outbreaks.

Dew: So, the public scare is over... the government has everything under control... everyone can rest easy... for now...

Killbin: I honestly had no idea Zircon was the reason why all this was going on. Like so many others, I was made to believe that the virus was destroyed in the New Havenport bombing six years ago. I never thought in my wildest dreams it would have gotten this bad... our government... being responsible for these revolting acts...

Dew: Right... if only you knew the rest of the story...

Killbin: Care to share? Hmm... Speaking of pandemics, I remember the stories my grandmother used to tell me about the Suggz virus outbreak of 1921.

Dew: Yeah, same year the stonk market crashed. I've heard the tales...

Killbin: Hmm. Terrible times. Losing your life savings, no jobs, and a future full of uncertainty... that kind of despair could drive

anyone to drink. Thankfully, my grandmother's family was among the lucky few who didn't suffer the worst of it. Compared to this SKT virus, the Suggz outbreak almost seems like a joke. Then again... constant farting, sneezing, and coughing at the same time? Dreadful way to go.



Dew: Yeah... and I thought "No Nut November" was horrible.
Killbin: Well, at least there's always "Wank Week" right after.
Dew: True that...
Killbin: Seven hundred thirty-nine dead, another 126 sick over five months... all because of several contaminated batch. And in the end? Turned out all you needed was Vapor rub and Ginger Ale. Something that simple fixed a disaster that big. That, plus the rollout of regulatory oversight to make sure it never

happened again. You'd think the Elementomes would've solved it faster, but nope—just goes to show, not everything in life has a quick fix.

Dew: All because of some Suggz Beer. Crazy how that stuff's still around after all these years.

Killbin: Yeah, it is. Hell, it gives you the runs after two sips, and people still buy it. Ha-ha...Anyway... once the Plenum is restored and our Charter revived, Mesovilla will rise from its mistakes. We'll be better. Stronger. Wiser.

Dew: That all sounds good... But it also sounds like another broken promise from a politician.

Killbin: You're still owed your lifetime supply of government cheese...

Dew: I'm not interested. You can keep that junk.

Killbin: Well... there will still be unlimited access to porn, and the dankest of dank memes will not be censored. Plus, I'm bringing back our space exploration program!

Dew: Mhm... Sounds promising to me. But you know what would really help me about now?

Killbin: Hmm?

Dew: Traveling by plane. It surely would speed things up!

Killbin: As you know, commercial air travel has been banned since the *Great Liberation* due to the series of aircraft piracy. But yes, I plan on relaxing those restrictions soon.

Dew: Okay. Now we're talking... And by the way, if you were going to help us take on the government secretly, you could have at least been a little more generous with the *Elementomes*. Trying to keep the lights and heat running depending on natural gas alone wasn't a stable energy source. So many random power outages... that shit was so annoying...

Killbin: I'm sorry. I did what I could...

Dew: Did you..? Ugh... I suppose. All right... apology accepted. For everything...

Killbin: Thank you... thank you for trusting me, Dew. So... are you sure you want to do this..? What makes you think you'll find Thornton?

Dew: Just a hunch I have...

Killbin: Really? According to our intel, there haven't been any recent sightings of him. Not even in the Eastern Region. This situation is a sensitive matter. If there is any knowledge of his activities

getting out, especially involving the existence of these three virus variants... it may not just undermine public safety but the reunification process entirely.

Dew: I can handle it. After all, I was trained by the best military in the world.

Killbin: He's a national security threat! This isn't your problem. Let us deal with it.

Dew: But it is my problem... Do what you must, but whatever he's up to, I will stop him.

Killbin: Fine. You can never say I didn't try reasoning with you. All right. Just so you know, I can't support you in any official capacity.

Dew: I wasn't expecting it...

Killbin: Well, then good luck to you... and your friends.

Dew: My friends..?

Narrator: Killbin nods his head in acknowledgment to Dew and then turns away from him, beginning to walk down the wharf to his limo. He opens the rear passenger door entering it. The door closes, and then the limo drives away. Dew then proceeds toward the moored cruise liner. Moments later, Rena can be seen in the distance running down the wharf toward Dew.

Rena: *(shouting)* Dew! Hey, Dew! Wait!

Dew: *(stops walking, and then turns to face Rena)* ...Rena?!

Rena: *(ceases running and begins to walk)* ...I'm glad you... haven't left... *(then stops walking)* ...yet.

Dew: Rena. I wasn't expecting to see you here... I was about to go...

Rena: Where are you off to? The fight is over.

Dew: That may be true, but it's only the beginning for me. I have to find Thornton.

Lorenzo: *(walking up)* ...Hold your horses.

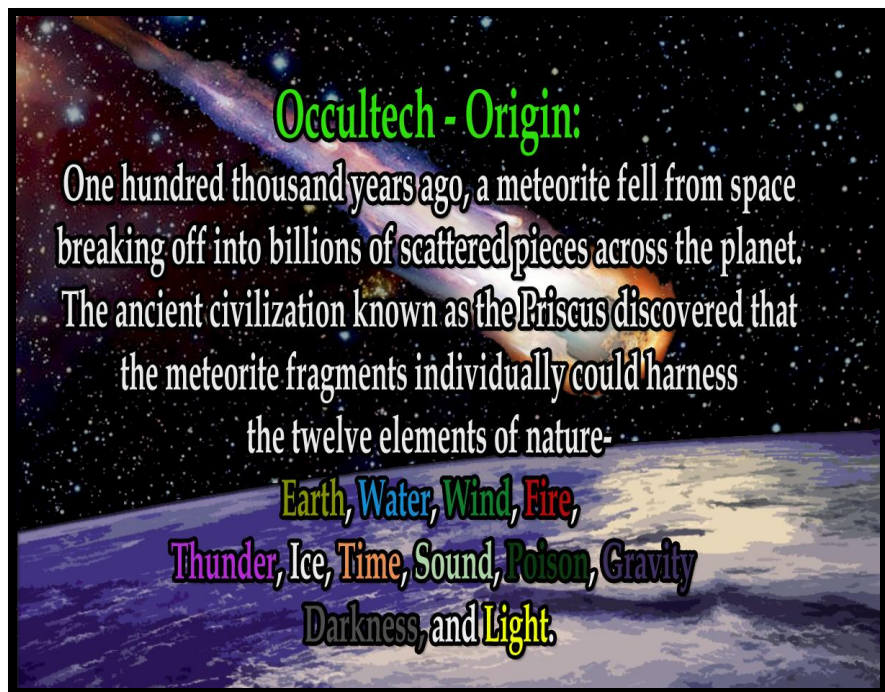
Dew: Lorenzo?!

Lorenzo: You can't just walk off without saying goodbye to your friends like that. Ha-ha...

Dew: This is something personal I have to deal with. I'm going to find Thornton and put a stop to his plans of finding those vials.

Lorenzo: I've been thinking about that... Since Zircon is dead, we've freed Helix. But the entire world needs our help now. I can't let you go at it alone. I'm coming with you.

Dew: Yeah?



- Cooper: (walking up) Sign me up too.
- Dew: ...You too, huh?
- Cooper: You had my back during the war, and I'm forever indebted to you. That's just how it is... Plus, you just can't leave without me tagging along, too now.
- Rena: I will be coming along as well, my pupil.
- Dew: Are you all sure of this?
- Cooper: Most definitely, my friend...
- Lorenzo: I mean, Killbin did offer me a sweet-ass gig... But I can't see myself working as a government agent. Fuck that shit. And what else am I going to do now, take up stamp collecting again? That hobby of mine can wait... I wouldn't have it any other way.
- Dew: It'll be dangerous. But then, when has it ever been safe? Ha-ha-ha... What about the rest of the gang?
- Lorenzo: Our fight is done here in Helix, as I said... They've done enough for us... let them enjoy having everyday lives now.
- Dew: Yeah... if anything, that's only fair. Wait. How are you all coming along with me? You don't have tickets for the cruise.

Rena: Yes, we do. Courtesy of Killbin.
Dew: Oh... It looks like I won't be traveling alone after all.
Rena: Nope.
Cooper: I am curious about something, Dew.
Dew: Yeah?



Cooper: Why were you shocked to see Thornton again? Did something happen after my medical leave from New Havenport?
Dew: Cooper... I... I just... can't...
Narrator: Dew begins to have an induced PTSD flashback about his time in New Havenport, remembering the littered corpses of Hoplyn and several SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers.
Cooper: What is it? ...Dew?
Dew: ...I...
Rena: Dew..?
Dew: (*regaining his composure*) ...Sorry about that... I spaced out there for a moment... Ha-ha...
Cooper: Hmm...

Lorenzo: You sure have been spacing out a lot recently. That shit ain't normal. You haven't been smoking those funny cigarettes? At least you could have shared if you were.

Dew: Pfft. Hah. You're funny... no, no—nothing to worry about.

Lorenzo: Don't hold out on me. Ah, I'm just joking with you. If you say you're okay, then you're okay.

Cooper: Right...

Rena: Will we be leaving now?

Dew: Yeah. It looks like it. Also, guys... Thank you. This means a lot.

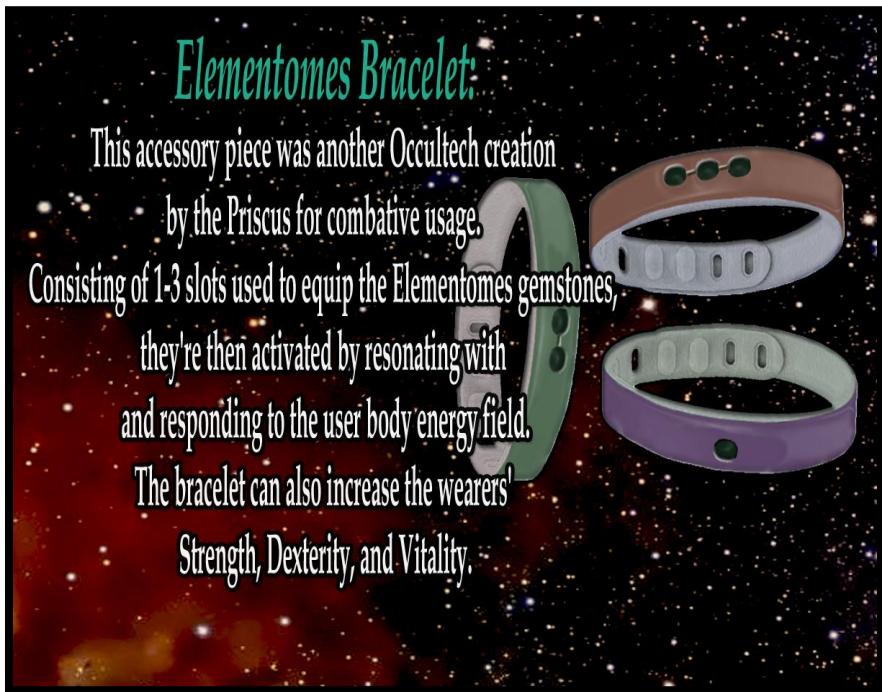
Cooper: Sure thing, buddy.

Lorenzo: Well, let's get going...

Narrator: After that, the four then head toward the cruise liner meeting the other waiting passengers in line to board it. The scene then cuts to 4 hours later; the cruise liner is smoothly sailing along the serene and glistening Mesovillain ocean. We find Dew on the ship's fantail leaning on the taffrail, looking off into the sky. He notices a small colony of seagulls overhead, quickly flying by as they gull excitedly. With a smile, he then turns his attention to the ocean horizon. Dew begins to think back to when he was 18 years old, visiting his grandfather's grave at the Twin Pines Cemetery right before leaving for the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy to begin basic training.

Dew: *(walking up to his grandfather's tombstone) ...Grandpa. (then kneels) . . . You were just here a week ago. All of this seems unreal... first, I lost my parents to that car accident all those years ago, and... now you to a house fire... (sigh) Why?! I just don't understand... All that there was left of you was a heap of ashes... I should have been there... maybe... maybe I could have prevented it..? Maybe you would... still be here? (then takes out his grandfather's talisman necklace from his front jacket pocket. He then stares at it for a moment as it lies in his right-hand palm) This . . . this is all I have left of you now... but... you would want me to press on, and do my best... I will... for you... (then puts the talisman necklace back into his pocket) After the war ends, I'll come back and visit as I had promised... I have to go... I guess . . . this is good-bye, for now... I love you, Grandpa... (sigh)*

Narrator: Dew then gets up off his knees and briefly eyes his parents' graves before walking toward the cemetery exit. The scene cuts back to the present time. Dew finishes contemplating, then exits the fantail, starting his walk around the cruise liner decks. Some time passes. Dew sees Rena sitting alone at a bar in the swimming pool area. As he approaches her from behind, she mutters something to herself while looking down at her empty glass. Meanwhile, other passengers can be seen frolicking, swimming, chatting, laughing, and drinking with their friends and loved ones in the background as upbeat calypso music plays from the cruise liner's outdoor speakers.



Rena: *(whispering to herself)* "...Ah-tishoo! Ah-tishoo! We all... fall down." ...It just couldn't be... but... maybe...

Narrator: For a brief moment, everything around Rena becomes inaudible except a faint ethereal, feminine laugh from afar. Rena then suddenly feels a hand being placed on her right shoulder.

Dew: Hey...

Narrator: As Rena is startled, she comes back to her senses, quickly rising from the bar stool and turning to face Dew as his hand drops.

Rena: Dew!?!
Dew: Shit. Whoa. Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.
Rena: Ha-ha... that you did.
Dew: I see those reflexes are still good. It looks like you were in deep thought there... and drinking?
Rena: No... I haven't had a drink. Not one... I was just thinking. That's all.
Dew: ...About what?
Rena: Nothing much, really.
Dew: It doesn't look like much fun, to be honest. Being over here alone... all that thinking...
Rena: You would know.
Dew: Ha-ha... touché.
Rena: Never mind all that. What's up?
Dew: I was just walking around and happened to come across my "favorite" Sifu.
Rena: I'm the only Sifu you've ever had... you're in a silly mood...
Dew: Maybe it's this ocean air and being around friends that's doing it.
Rena: Oh, is that why? You know, it's been a while since we've had a chance to talk alone.
Dew: Yeah... and here we are. Perfect time to do that.
Rena: Hah... Do you remember the night before you left for boot camp?
Dew: I do.
Rena: I only bring that up because all this reminds me of that time...
Dew: Just minus being on a cruise liner, swimming pool, and bar?
Rena: Well, duh! As I was saying...
Narrator: The scene cuts to Twin Pines again as young Dew and Rena meet up at the harbor before his departure to the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy.
Rena: ...Look at you. I can't believe you're leaving home already. Time goes by so fast; you're all grown up now. It seemed just like yesterday when we had first met.
Dew: ...It's been only seven years since then. Wow.

Rena: It has ... I know you'll do well in the military. It's a big sacrifice, and thank you for wanting to keep us all safe... I'm proud of you. Your Grandfather would be too.

Dew: Yes... he would.

Rena: I'm... sorry. I didn't mean to invoke him...

Dew: There's no need to be... Thank you, Sifu.

Rena: You no longer have to call me that. Your training is complete, and we are equals now.

Dew: Rena, it is then. I have something for you, by the way...

Rena: Yes, Dew?

Dew: Before I leave, I want you to have this. (*digging around in his front right pant pocket*) Here you go... (*gives Rena the talisman necklace*)

Rena: What's this? Dew, you shouldn't have... (*holding the talisman necklace*) But, this was your grandfather's, no? Why are you giving this to me?

Dew: Yes. It was his... It was his most prized possession and a good luck charm. It's all I have left of him... He was going to give this to me someday. He told me when the time came - when I wanted to, I should give this to someone special... So, I want you to have it. See it as a token of appreciation from me for everything.

Rena: I see. That's kind of you... Are you sure?

Dew: Please take it...

Rena: All right. Thank you, Dew. I will always wear this... (*then puts on the talisman necklace*) Ah. It fits nicely...

Dew: It looks beautiful on you... (*then smiles at Rena*)

Rena: I will miss you very much, Dew.

Dew: I will miss you too. I will come back and visit when I can.

Rena: Do what you can... Also, Dew, remember the lessons that I have taught you. They will come in handy when needed the most. If you ever feel down or doubt yourself, think of someone you love dearly the person that gives you hope and happiness – the “shining lighthouse” that will push all those worries away... (*then smiles at Dew*)

Dew: (*smiles back at Rena*) I will never forget... Sifu... I mean, Rena.

Rena: Force of habit, huh?

Dew: Yeah. Ha-ha... Rena, I... I just wanted to say... I, uh...

Rena: Yes, Dew?

Dew: Never mind... It's nothing. Until we meet again... Good-bye.

Narrator: Dew then does a standing bow to Rena, and she returns the bow. Dew with his seabag in hand, then turns around and walks off towards the ship. A joyful teary-eyed Rena watches on as Dew eventually walks up the brow, boarding the ship. Minutes pass by; Dew is seen being greeted by two SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers. They then enter the quarterdeck. The boatswains at different spots on the harbor, in unison, begin to cast off the lines as the boatswains on the deck of the ship pull them onboard. The ship then shoves off the harbor and slowly departs out to sea. Rena continues watching on until the ship fades away into the horizon. The scene cuts back to the present time.

Rena: ...Hmm

Dew: ...What's that?

Rena: When you were gone, I did worry a lot about you at times. However, I kept telling myself that you would be fine... and you were.

Dew: Yeah... I thought of you too... I did make a promise to you, Sifu, that we would see one another again.

Rena: That you did. How we reconnected was unexpected... However, I am happy we're together again.

Dew: And... everything you taught me... it did come in handy... Like you told me, during the most adverse situations, think of the "shining lighthouse." It helped... it kept me strong... you... kept me strong...

Rena: Dew... I kept you strong?! What do you mean?

Dew: My love for you... it kept me going...

Rena: Love?! Dew... I...

Dew: Rena, I've always loved you.

Rena: I-I... I never knew you felt like this. Dew, I...

Dew: It's always been like this, ever since I was a teen... It was hard to come out back then and tell you how I felt...

Rena: Dew, you felt... you, love me? I...

Narrator: Lorenzo then approaches, interrupting the two.

Lorenzo: ...Hey, Dew.

Dew: (*turns to face Lorenzo*) ...Yeah?

Lorenzo: ...Did I interrupt something? I'm not trying to cockblock you there, Dew. Ha-ha...



Rena: No, not at all.

Lorenzo: Good. I wanted to let you both know; that it's almost dinner time.

Rena: Thank you, Lorenzo... *(then looks at Dew uncomfortably)*
Umm... pardon me... *(then walks off)*

Dew: Rena... Ugh.

Lorenzo: Bro. I had such a good workout. The gym facilities on this cruise liner are top-notch. It beats working out with crappy old milk crates and bags of sand...

Dew: That sounds good, my man... I'm glad you're enjoying yourself... yeah... *(then turns to look out at the ocean horizon)*

Lorenzo: ...You okay, buddy?

Dew: *(continuing to stare out into the ocean horizon)* I'm cool...

Lorenzo: I heard that Lychee boba tea is one of the beverage options. Also, turtle soup is on the menu.

Dew: Turtle soup..? Eww... *(then turns his head to face Lorenzo)*
...Have you ever had that before?

Lorenzo: No. But tonight, I DINE on turtle soup! Make it snappy..!

Dew: Shell shock... *(then turns his head back to look out at the ocean horizon)* I'm not hungry at the moment...

Lorenzo: You don't have to eat the turtle soup. There will be other choices.

Dew: No, it's not because of that... If there are any leftovers, I'll get them later. Thanks for letting me know, though.

Lorenzo: You sure?

Dew: Yeah...

Lorenzo: All right. Catch you later dude... *(then walks off)*

Dew: ...Rena... Dammit... Fuck...

Narrator: The scene cuts to Cooper in his cabin as he lies in his bed, thinking to himself.

Cooper: If only you were all here now... Pops... How long has it been since I was last on the water..? Ha-ha-ha... not seasick this time... Mom...

Narrator: Cooper then begins to reminisce about his past, the day he went on leave to visit his family in Demmin. He enters the living room of the Tyler house.

Cooper: *(shouting)* Mom. Mom ...Mom, I'm home!

Mrs. Tyler: *(walking into the living room)* Cooper?! Cooper, you're back... Welcome home, son!

Narrator: Cooper and his mother embrace one another with a hug.

Cooper: Thanks, mom. I missed you a lot.

Mrs. Tyler: Me too. Look at you, you've grown so much, and it hasn't been that long.

Cooper: I'm still your little boy.

Mrs. Tyler: You always will be.

Cooper: Although I'm only here for three days, we'll make the best of the time.

Narrator: Cooper and his mother then pull back from their embrace.

Mrs. Tyler: Yes, we will. You're here now, and that's what matters. My little boy... *(then smiles)*

Cooper: How have things been?

Mrs. Tyler: Well, terrible. I was told by the locals that the Helix Capital plans on mass evacuating all of us here from our homes a month from now. Is that true?

Cooper: Yes, it is. There have been talks about the New Havenport minutemen trying to occupy this zone. I'm not sure how long

they'll be held off... They've made advances elsewhere in Demmin...

Mrs. Tyler: I'm not going to some refugee camp.

Cooper: I'm pretty sure it'll be safer there than here.

Mrs. Tyler: ...I just can't leave.

Cooper: Well, you have to, Mom.

Mrs. Tyler: No, I won't... All our family history is here in this house. I won't leave all that behind.

Cooper: What?! ...You may become a memory if you don't. This is just a house. It can always be replaced.

Mrs. Tyler: No, son...

Cooper: Mom, listen. I'll help you pack your things. I'll even find you a place to stay and pay for the lodging until something permanent comes around.

Mrs. Tyler: You don't have to do that.

Cooper: Mom, don't be stubborn. Please. This is serious. I don't want to lose you like we did, Pops.

Mrs. Tyler: I'm not him. I'm not a drunk!

Cooper: Mom.

Mrs. Tyler: I'm sorry... that was wrong of me. Bless his soul. You know I would never end up like him.

Cooper: And you know I didn't mean it like that...

Mrs. Tyler: ...Everything will be fine. You're worried about nothing. Let's just enjoy our time together.

Cooper: Mom, please...

Mrs. Tyler: I am not leaving! That is that...

Narrator: The scene cuts back to the present time as someone repeatedly knocks on the cabin door.

Cooper: Mom ... (*sigh*)

Narrator: The knocking on the cabin door continues.

Cooper: ?! (*then rising to his feet*) ...Who is it?

Rena: (*on the opposite side of the cabin door*) ...It's me, Rena.

Cooper: Oh. The door is unlocked. Please come in.

Rena: (*then turns the doorknob and enters the cabin*) ...Cooper. I wanted to tell you that it's time to eat.

Cooper: Already? I lost track of time; it seems. Thanks for letting me know...

Rena: Caught a good nap?

Cooper: You could say that...

Rena: I see. I apologize for interrupting you...

Cooper: No apology needed. Is that all Rena?

Rena: ...

Cooper: Rena..?

Rena: ...Dew... Oh... Dew...

Cooper: ...What about him? Is he okay..?

Rena: Yes... Uh... H-he's fine...

Cooper: You're not getting seasick, are you? I know what that feels like. It sucks. This is why I made sure I got this cabin mid-ship and near the waterline. Plus, fresh air helps... Being seasick is worse than blowing your nose into tissue paper that you already wiped your ass with.

Rena: Whaaat?! ...I can only imagine... Yep... Mmmkay... but I'm fine. ...No seasickness here.

Cooper: That's great... Hey, Rena. I have a question. It's about Dew.

Rena: Yes?

Cooper: You were his childhood mentor. You know him better than the rest of us. He doesn't seem to be himself ever since we had the run-in with Thornton. Do you have any idea what's up with that?

Rena: I'm not sure what history he's had with that Thornton guy. Knowing Dew, whatever that entails, he seems focused on finding him. Especially if it involves those SKT virus vials he's searching for. Do you happen to know anything about that? Didn't you serve alongside both of them?

Cooper: I did... but I had to take a leave of absence due to an injury I sustained on one of our missions.

Rena: ...A mission?

Cooper: What, Dew, never told you about it?

Rena: No... I still have a lot of catching up to do with him.

Cooper: You and me both. It's a long story, to be honest.

Rena: For another time then... Anyway, you should hurry. Before you know it, all the food will be gone.

Cooper: You're right. Well... I'll be off to get me some grub... By the way, it is nice to meet someone else from Demmin. Ever since the end of the war, I haven't run into too many people from there.

Rena: How'd you know I was from Demmin?

Cooper: I remember Dew mentioning he had a “good friend” from there. So, I kinda figured it had to be you.

Rena: Ah. Excellent deduction. Yes. It’s been a long time since I’ve been back there myself, Cooper. Since the day I graduated from college...

Cooper: It’s rude to ask a lady how old she is. But I’ll take your word on that. It’s not like you’re missing out on much... there’s nothing to go back to anyway...

Rena: Sad, but true... I’m happy to know someone else from Demmin too. Thank you for coming along also and being a good friend to Dew.

Cooper: Yeah. Anyway... I’ll see you at the chow hall, Dew’s lady friend... *(then exits the cabin)*

Rena: *(thinking to herself) ...I am loved... We know how that went last time... Can I love another again? ...Can I risk being heart-broken and disappointed, again..? Oh, Dew ...*

Narrator: After a brief pause, the emotionally uncertain Rena then exits the cabin. As the cruise liner continues to sail off into the Mesovillain ocean horizon steadily, the ship's horn gives off two short blasts. The sun then gradually sets.

CHAPTER 2 – WELCOME TO LLIVISACA

- Narrator: Twelve hours elapse. The cruise liner is seen pulling up to Llivisaca pier as the ship's horn gives off one prolonged blast. The line handlers are assembled on the pier, as are the ones on the forecastle and fantail of the ship. Eventually, the cruise liner gets into position to be docked; then, the line handlers begin mooring the vessel and setting up the brow. Once fully docked, several minutes pass and the cruise liner's PA system turns on.
- Cruise Liner Captain: *"Good morning, Ladies and gentlemen; this is your captain speaking once again. On behalf of Tropic Cannonade cruise lines, we would like to welcome you to Llivisaca- Southern Zone. Please enjoy your visit, and may the memories you make along the way be pleasant... Always remember to wash your hands for 10 to 15 seconds, cover your mouth before sneezing and coughing, 'please' and 'thank you' are magic words, and importantly never rub another man's rhubarb... Thank you for once again riding with Tropic Cannonade cruise lines. Have a fun and safe trip..!"*
- Narrator: The cruise liner's PA system then turns off. The scene cuts to Dew and friends along with the eager crew passengers departing the ship. Once off the cruise liner, Dew and his friends go to a less crowded side of the pier to talk.
- Dew: So, this is Llivisaca... what a pretty-looking place...
- Cooper: This will be my first visit.
- Dew: Me too.
- Lorenzo: Goddamn. We just got here, and I feel like I ran a marathon.
- Dew: It's probably that nasty turtle soup you had catching up to you.
- Lorenzo: Nah, that happened several hours ago. And boy, did I ever wreck that toilet good... not sure why corn was in my stool, though... Uggh... It's so hot out here!

Rena: Oh, come on. It's not that hot.

Lorenzo: You're kidding, right?!

Cooper: This weather doesn't beat where I come from. This is nothing.

Lorenzo: *(wiping off the sweat from his forehead)* ...Whew!
You two are insane. This heat..!

Rena: So, what now, guys..?

Dew: First, I have to deliver this letter for Killbin to the seneschal, and then...

Cooper: Dew, I have an idea.

Dew: Shoot.

Cooper: How dare you. I would never shoot a friend. Never...

Dew: I didn't mean it like that, jackass. What'd you got on your mind?

Cooper: Ha-ha... I know. But I was thinking, while you go do that, the rest of us could do a little mingling and take in the sights that this place has to offer.

Dew: Sure. I have no objections to that. I don't see why not.

Lorenzo: Sweet. The sooner we get moving, the better. I think I've gotta adjust myself down in my "southern regions" ... I'm getting the case of the bubblegum balls just standing here!

Dew: Hey. Let's all try to meet back here 4 hours from now. Then we'll be off on our way to start looking for Thornton.

Cooper: You got it, friend.

Lorenzo: We need to find some shade ASAP.

Cooper: ...Oh, Rena. Would you like to join us?

Rena: No. I think I'll accompany Dew instead.

Dew: ...

Cooper: Understood.

Lorenzo: Oooohhh. Somebody wants some alone time. *(wink)* *(wink)* Heh-Heh-Heh... Say no more.

Dew: Really now?

Lorenzo: You two enjoy yourselves. Come on Cooper... *(then walks off)*

Cooper: We'll meet up soon... *(then walks off following Lorenzo)*

Narrator: With Lorenzo and Cooper departing, Dew turns to face Rena. They both then stare at each other awkwardly for an instant.

Dew: ...It's just you and I now.

Rena: It is...

Dew: Rena, I...

Rena: Do you know where we're going?

Dew: Ah, yes. Killbin gave me directions. They're on the back of the envelope.

Rena: We should get going to deliver that letter.

Dew: Yeah... let's do that...

Narrator: Dew and Rena then begin their walk to the Seneschal's house departing from the pier. As the two travel through Llivisaca's vibrant Southern Zone cityscape, they pass by multiple pascal-colored buildings and opulent palm trees on almost every corner. Eventually, they find their way to the Seneschal's house and approach the front door.

Rena: Is this the right place..?

Dew: According to the directions, yes...

Rena: It's just a regular house.

Dew: ...You would think for a seneschal, it would be a bit fancier and secure...

Narrator: Dew then rings the doorbell once, knocks four times on the door, and stops. Dew and Rena then wait patiently for about 10 seconds until the door opens.

Butler: (*opening door*) ...Good morning. How may I help both of you?

Dew: Hi. I'm Dew Wilder, and she's Rena Cullen. We've come to see the seneschal.

Butler: Is he expecting you?

Dew: No. Interim Premier Janerio sent us. We have a letter for the seneschal from him... (*handing the envelope to the butler*)

Butler: Hmm ... I see. (*holding the letter*) Come in then. Please...

Narrator: Dew and Rena enter the Seneschal's house as the Butler closes the door behind them.

Butler: I will inform Seneschal Corot of your presence. In the meantime, please wait here in the main hall... *(then walks off)*

Dew: You got it...

Narrator: Rena with her side turned to Dew and being 6 feet away, gawkily turns her head, observing the main hall while trying to avoid eye contact with him. Meanwhile, Dew is looking down at the floor, slightly brushing the toe of his right boot against the Mahogany-colored contemporary runner rug.

Dew: ...Hmm... pretty...

Rena: W-what... is?!

Dew: This rug...

Rena: Oh... Okay...

Dew: What did you think I was referring to?

Rena: Nothing...

Dew: Rena, how long are we going to keep this up?

Rena: What are you talking about, Dew?

Dew: You being closed-lipped.

Rena: I... I have nothing to say.

Dew: Is something bothering you? Something I said to you..?

Rena: No.

Dew: Rena, I...

Corot: *(walking up)* ...Sorry to keep you both waiting...

Dew: Huh..? *(then turns to face Corot)*

Corot: So Killbin sent you two, huh?

Dew: Yeah. But actually, there are four of us. The other two are out taking in the sights.

Corot: As they should. I already got your names, and I'm glad to meet you, folks. Welcome to Llivisaca. I am Seneschal Endel Corot.

Rena: Nice to meet you.

Dew: Seneschal, this place here... it's...

Corot: Yes, it's pretty tiny. I know. You would think the Seneschal of Llivisaca would be living in something a bit more "fitting." But I'm a man of the People, and I choose not to live extravagantly.

Dew: Humble... but where are the SWAT TROOPERS?!

Corot: They're nearby, always watching... hiding... I'm always safe...

Dew: Hmm...

Corot: But where are my manners? Did my butler happen to ask if you both needed anything? A refreshing Lychee boba tea? A place to take a seat?

Rena: No, it's fine. Thank you.

Dew: We should be on our way soon...

Corot: Yes, yes. I understand. I won't keep you both long. I have read the letter. I'm happy to see that our interim premier is ready to move forward with re-establishing the national charter and Plenum and total reunification. Hah! Times are changing for the better. This is good news.

Dew: It is.

Corot: From what I also read, he wants me to aid you in finding a man named Thornton.

Dew: What? He wrote that?!

Corot: Yes, he did.

Dew: So, will you help us with that?

Corot: It's the tourist season now. We've had many people come and go through here... But I can tell you, nobody fitting his description detailed in the letter has been seen in any of the two zones of Llivisaca.

Dew: Well, that doesn't help at all...

Corot: ...But maybe I can be of further assistance to you both.

Rena: How?

Corot: I assume this is your first time visiting here, so you'll need a tour guide.

Dew: ...Tour guide?

Corot: Yes. The tour guide agency is just north of here. It sticks out pretty well. You should have no problem finding it.

Dew: All right. So, that's it?



Corot: ...I'll prepare a letter for you. (*walks over to a table, grabs a pen, and begins writing on a sheet of paper*) ...I should also inform you of some trouble we've been having here in the region for a while. The *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*, they're a highly organized crime syndicate... you have to be careful if you come across them... (*continues writing*)

Dew: We've faced worse.

Corot: Oh, I'm sure you have. The tales of the *Aurora Blade's* exploits are far known beyond the Helix Capital... But please, don't take the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* lightly. I can tell you, ever since becoming Seneschal of Llivisaca... they seem to have greater control over the region than I do. Also, they were the reason why our communications hub is still temporarily disabled. But give it two more days; it'll be up and running again.

Rena: What have the burgomasters done to help combat them? The Sheriff of Llivisaca? What about law enforcement? ...Anything?

Corot: Unfortunately, we have had five different sheriffs, and they were all gunned down by the *Mantid Oscuro* scourge. That position is currently vacant, and I don't see it being filled for a while. Unless one of you is interested...? The Northern Zone Burgomaster has been useless. I can only assume that his lack of action is either because of incompetence, being threatened, or being bribed. Don't even get me started on the local elected officials. They're even worse... (*continues writing*) The Southern Zone Burgomaster has been the only reliable one... There are only a few members left in law enforcement that I can trust... Ever since the end of the *Great Civil War*, this beautiful province fell into those criminals' hands... nobody knows who their head boss is... total mystery... all that is known about "him," or "her" ... is a name... or, rather, a title.

Dew: Hm?

Corot: ..." Scion." With all the previous arrests that were made and interrogations, none of those *Mantid Oscuro* thugs would spill the beans. Most of the time, they would meet bail and have all pending charges against them dropped... or, on a few occasions- they ended up committing "suicide" while still in custody... this is what I have been dealing with... these pests are clever in covering their tracks...

Rena: It sounds like a huge problem...

Corot: Indeed. But we have been chipping away at them as best as we can with the limited resources available.

Rena: What about funding from the national government?

Corot: That... oh please. It's barely enough. As I mentioned before, it's tourist season, and this province relies heavily on domestic and foreign income. Annually in the past six years, we've made 162 billion *Wertes*. We get to keep 10% of that after the national government collects its share. It is our punishment for siding with New Havenport... Well... it's finished. Here's the letter... (*then gives Dew the letter*) You'll need to give it to the agency boss. His name is Mr. Rainer. The directions to get there are on the back of the envelope.

Dew: I guess playing carrier boy is my job all of a sudden. I'll do it... If we run into those *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*, we'll take care of them for you too.

Corot: That would be appreciated. If you *Aurora Blade* gave that coot, Zircon trouble, I have no doubt you can handle the likes of the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. One more thing... (*digs around in his back pant pocket, and then hands Dew a business card*) If for any reason you need to get into contact with me, here is my information...

Dew: This will be useful, I'm sure... (*then takes the business card from Seneschal Corot*)

Corot: Good luck, and please be careful... I can't wait until Llivisaca is finally unified.

Dew: All right.

Rena: It was nice meeting you. Thank you for the help, Seneschal Corot. Shall we be going, Dew?

Dew: Yes, let's go.

Narrator: Dew and Rena then exit the Seneschal's house and head toward the tour guide agency. After some time passes, the two eventually find the tour guide agency. As they approach, they notice several colorful posters featuring exotic locales being displayed in the window. Before entering, they both look up at the awning over the entrance to read the text written on it, "*Earhart Tours & Travel, 'Adventure is worthwhile itself... even if you get lost and never come back!'*" They enter the agency and are greeted by a wandering travel agent.

Travel Agent: Welcome! Thank you both for coming in today. Interested in our tours? Looking for a good deal to travel? Hmm... Perhaps you're new to Llivisaca?

Rena: Yes. It's our first time here.

Travel Agent: Ah. First time. Well, you'll both be in for a treat. So, tell me how can I be of service?

Dew: Well... We just came from seeing the Seneschal, and he sent us here to give this letter to your boss, Mr. Rainer... (*then hands the letter to the Travel Agent*)

Travel Agent: ...That's right; the Seneschal had called us a while ago, letting us know that you two would be on your way here. Mr. Rainer has been waiting for you. This way, please...

Narrator: Dew and Rena follow the Travel Agent down the hallway to Mr. Rainer's office. All three then come to a stop.

Travel Agent: ...Straight ahead through that door is his office.

Rena: Thank you.

Dew: Thanks.

Narrator: The Travel Agent walks off as Dew and Rena enter Mr. Rainer's office.

Mr. Rainer: (*chair turned to the window*) Bunch of quitters! I can't believe them...

Dew: (*whispering*) ... *We must have caught him at a bad time.*

Rena: (*whispering*) *It looks like it...*

Mr. Rainer: "*Oh, Mr. Rainer, I need a raise.*" "*I need more hours.*" Damn, babies..! I should have listened to Mother and become a culinary chef!

Rena: ...Uh, excuse us.

Mr. Rainer: (*startled*) ...Huh?! (*then turns his chair to face Dew and Rena*) Oh, I thought I was alone... W-who are you two? ...And what are you doing in my office?

Dew: Mr. Rainer, we were sent by the Seneschal.

Mr. Rainer: Oh yes. That's right; I've been expecting you two. Seneschal Corot told me everything over the phone about your situation.

Dew: If he did all that, then what's this letter for..? (*then hands Mr. Rainer the letter*)

Mr. Rainer: (*takes the letter from Dew*) ...Payment. It's for the tour guide that'll be assigned to you. Also, Seneschal Corot loves writing long letters.

Rena: That was nice of the Seneschal to do that for us.

Mr. Rainer: Well, I think it may have been a waste, though.

Dew: Why's that?

Mr. Rainer: At the moment, we have no personnel available. It's the tourist season, and we're all booked.

Dew: Just great...

Mr. Rainer: I'm really sorry, folks. But you're gonna have to wait around until one becomes available.

Dew: Listen. We don't have time—

Narrator: Suddenly, a flustered young tour guide bursts into Mr. Rainer's office, interrupting Dew. She's dressed in a pale yellow collared shirt tucked neatly into forest green shorts,

cinched with a dark belt. A satchel hangs over one shoulder, and a straw sunhat with a black ribbon crowns her short blonde hair, a few loose strands falling across her tense face. A tour guide badge dangles from her neck, catching the light as she steps forward. Jaw set and eyes sharp, she locks onto Mr. Rainer—completely unaware that Dew and Rena are also in the room.

Krista: Mr. Rainer!

Mr. Rainer: Oh. Back already, Krista?!

Krista: I've had ENOUGH of this!

Mr. Rainer: What happened now, Krista..?

Krista: Those tourists are disrespectful. The children left trash on the bus, gum under the chairs, and some drunk puked all over the place and passed out.

Mr. Rainer: Well, it does happen...

Krista: And there was this guy who was wearing a cloak talking to himself non-stop! ...In this hot weather. Who does that?

Mr. Rainer: Foreign tourist... What do you expect?

Krista: This is so frustrating! I don't get paid enough to deal with this.

Mr. Rainer: Calm down, Krista... You know we're short of staff at the moment. So, we have to manage our wages carefully.

Krista: Manage the wages?! You've been saying that ever since I've been working here... You know what? I quit! Quit! Quit!

Mr. Rainer: Now you want to give up on me too, eh? Fine, go ahead, then—wait. Wait. Wait. Wait.

Krista: What..?

Mr. Rainer: I'm glad you stopped by. I have a new assignment for you.

Krista: What now?

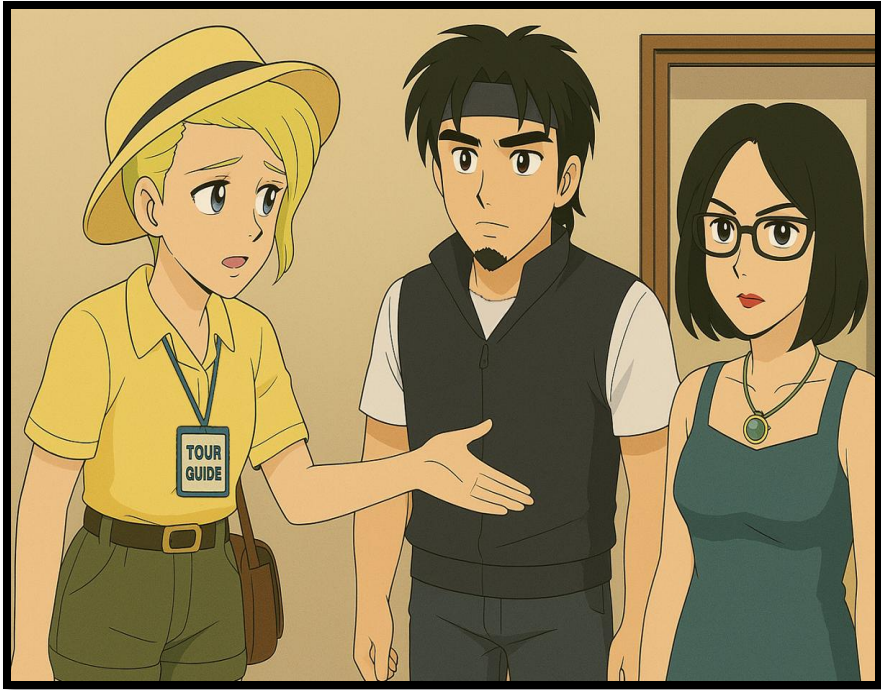
Mr. Rainer: These fine folks here just so happened to need our help getting around town.

Krista: (*then notices Dew and Rena, who then gives her a friendly wave*) ...Get someone else to do it. I'm not playing babysitter anymore. I'm done with this job!

Mr. Rainer: Hold on Krista. Don't go. I have no one else to do this. I need you for this one. You're the best employee I have, don't quit on me now!

Krista: Best employee?! Me..?

Mr. Rainer: That's right. Do this, and I'll ... I'll double your salary. No, better yet, triple it!



Krista: Really?!

Mr. Rainer: Yes. I wouldn't lie to you. You know me... *(then gives Krista a huge smile)* Well?

Krista: Hmm... I'll need that in writing. And how long will this assignment be for?

Mr. Rainer: Indefinitely.

Krista: Eh... Yeah... I'll do it. They seem like decent folks.

Mr. Rainer: Oh, thank you so much, Krista. You're a lifesaver.

Rena: Hi.

Krista: Hello.

Dew: The name is Krista, right?

Krista: ...Sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to air my workplace grievance like that. Ah-ha-ha...

Dew: No worries.

Krista: Yes. My name is Krista Naples, and it looks like I'm your official tour guide. What are your names? Where are you two visiting from?

Rena: I'm Rena, and this is Dew.

Dew: ...We're visiting from the Helix Capital.

Krista: It's nice to meet both of you. Oh, Helix Capital... It's been a while since anyone has been allowed to visit from there. The times are changing with the reunification talks and all. Welcome to Llivisaca, and I think you'll enjoy my tours. Many do... well, except for the ingrates.

Dew: I don't know if we have time for—

Rena: Yes, we're looking forward to your tour.

Dew: ?!

Narrator: Dew then pulls Rena to the side.

Dew: Rena, what are you doing..? We have to meet up with the others... Plus, I'm not trying to sit through some boring-ass tour.

Rena: Oh, come on, Dew. Let's just have a little fun before we start our search for Thornton. They'll be fine, and we'll make it back in time to meet up with them.

Dew: Yeah... I guess so. Why not...

Narrator: Dew and Rena then turn to face Krista.

Krista: Everything okay..?

Rena: Yes, it is.

Krista: Well, off we go then?

Dew: *(reluctantly)* Sure...

Rena: Absolutely, dear.

Mr. Rainer: Have fun...

Narrator: The three then exit Mr. Rainer's office. As they're walking, Krista walks in the middle of Dew and Rena and puts her arms around their shoulders.

Krista: I promise you, we're all going to have the best time EVER!

Dew: *(sarcastically)* Oh joy...

Narrator: The scene cuts to an hour later as Dew and Rena are seen sitting in the back of the tour bus. Krista continues to speak over the bus's megaphone system as her assistant Bob drives.

Krista: *(speaking into the bus's megaphone system)* "...Llivisaca-Southern Zone like the North is beautiful yet bubbly. As you can see to our right, one of Llivisaca's many wonderful landmarks— Vercetti Beach Park... There you can relax and enjoy a nice Lychee boba tea. If you happen to be in the mood for a swim, go for it. The soothing waters from the Mesovillain Ocean have been said to be "therapeutic." But if you see the water turning yellow, that's because someone peed in that

spot. And if you see brown coloring, probably don't go in at all... Now to your left..."

Dew: *(whispering sarcastically) ..."Wonderful tour this is, Rena."
"I'm having the time of my life"...*

Rena: *(whispering) ...Oh hush. It's not that bad.*

Dew: *(whispering) Pfft... I hate sitting around doing nothing. Fuck this sucks...*

Rena: *Ha-ha...*

Dew: *(whispering) I'm glad you find this funny...*

Rena: *(whispering) Not just that. I almost forgot how cute you look when you get pouty.*

Dew: *(whispering) Yeah..? Hmm... You know, I was hoping we could venture around town ourselves... instead of being here.*

Rena: *(whispering) Oh?*

Dew: *(whispering) Rena, I have to say something...*

Krista: *Excuse me... Are you guys paying attention? You don't want to miss out on this next landmark.*

Rena: *Of course, we are, dear.*

Dew: *Go on...*

Narrator: *Then Krista continues to speak.*

Dew: *(whispering) ...As I was saying—*

Rena: *(whispering) Dew, what do you find so attractive about me?*

Dew: *(whispering) ?! Well... I mean... you're beautiful, intelligent, kind... and dauntless... but a little mysterious at the same time... It's kinda hot...*

Rena: *(whispering) Oh... I see... Hmm... You do know how to make a lady feel wanted...*

Dew: *(whispering) Hah. Yeah. I'm just being honest. When I'm around you... I want more of you.*

Rena: *(whispering) Ah. Honesty is the best policy, they say... Okay.*

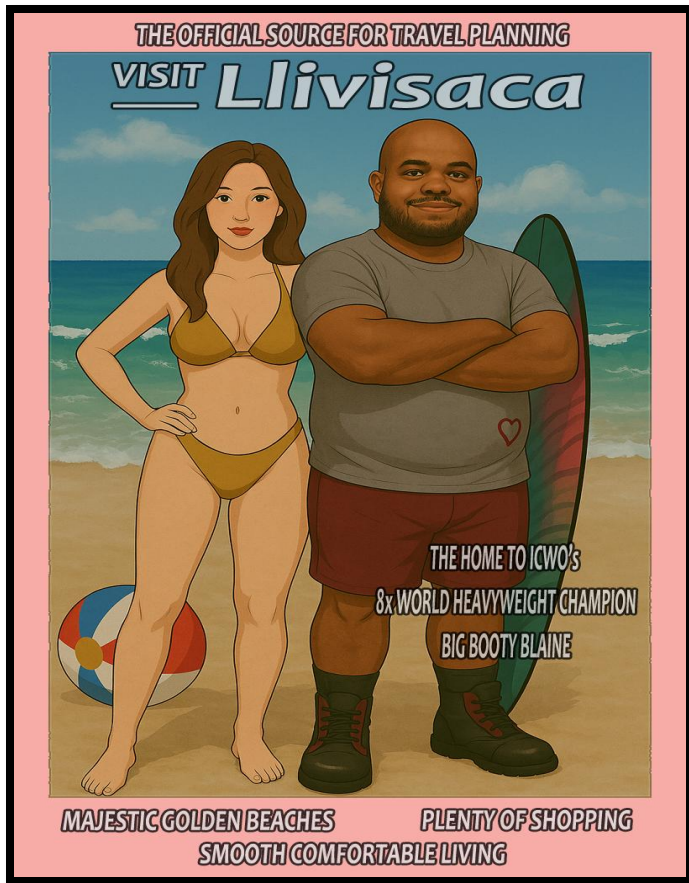
Dew: *(whispering) Well...yeah. I'm afraid to ask how you feel about me...*

Rena: *(whispering) I'll tell you soon, but not here. ...I have an idea.*

Dew: *(whispering) ...What's that?*

Rena: *(whispering) ...Let's get out of here and find something fun to do. We do have a lot to catch up on...*

Dew: *(whispering) Yeah... but wait, you want to ditch out on her?*



- Rena: *(whispering)* I doubt you want to stay here any longer and sit through this... this is boring. I was just humoring that girl. ...Wanna go?
- Dew: *(whispering)* It's kinda rude if we do that...
- Rena: *(whispering)* Let's leave her a note before we go... Got a piece of paper and a pen..?
- Dew: *(whispering)* Uhh... Yeah, I do...
- Narrator: As Krista continues to speak, Dew looks down and sees a leaflet lying on the tour bus floor turned over on its blank side. He reaches down to grab it. Dew rises and gives Rena the leaflet blank side up. Dew then digs around in his vest pockets, finds a pen, and hands it to Rena. Rena quickly writes a note, finishes it, and folds it up, leaving it in her seat. With Krista still distracted by her own babbling, Dew and Rena jump out from

the back of the bus. Once on the ground, they both run off into the cityscape of Llivisaca's Southern Zone.

Krista: ...You, guys, are going to enjoy this next attraction... I have never had a well-behaved clientele such as you two... So quiet, and... *(then turns around)* What!?!

Bob: *(driving)* ...What's wrong?

Krista: Where'd they go?! ...They left..?

Narrator: Krista runs to the back of the bus and notices a folded-up note lying on the chair. She picks it up, unfolds it, and begins to read it.

Krista: *(reading the note to herself)*

"Krista,

Thank you so much for the tour. Really. Unfortunately, Dew

and I have a few... sudden personal matters to catch up on.

We'll be sure to meet you back at the tour guide agency once

we're done — wouldn't want to miss more of the excitement.

Thanks again!

XOXOXO,

Rena & Dew."

Narrator: Krista then crumbles up the note and tosses it to the floor.

Bob: Everything okay back there..?

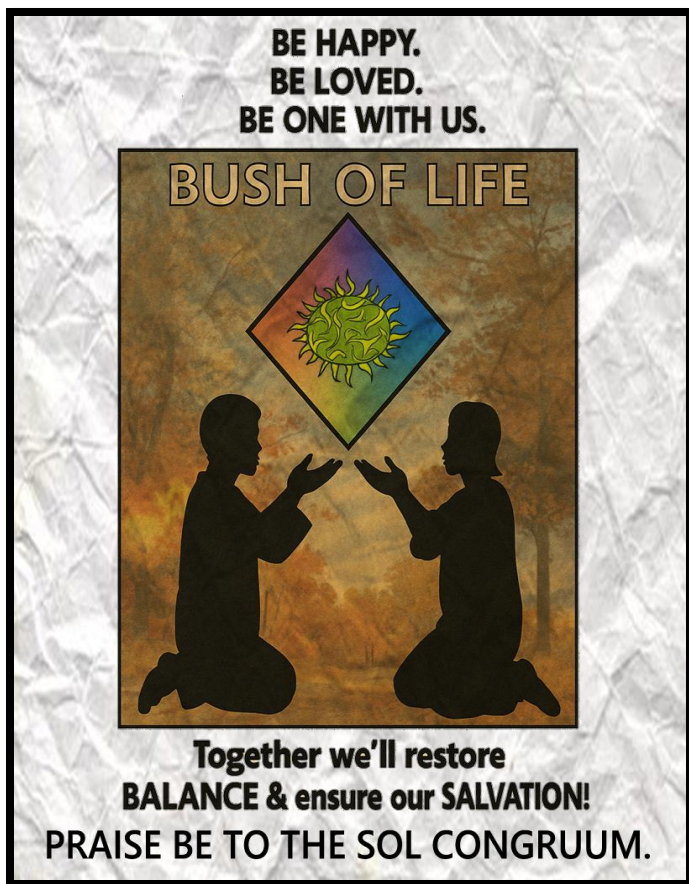
Krista: At least they left a note... unlike the others... but, but ... that's just not going to cut it... Argh... That's it. No one is going to ditch me and think they'll get away with it. ...Bob, stop the bus...

Bob: Why?

Krista: BOB, STOP THE BUS!!!

Bob: All right, all right... I'm doing it.

Narrator: The tour bus begins to decelerate, and then comes to a halt.



Bob: Geez, Krista, you, okay? Hey. What happened to those two tourists..?

Krista: Bob. Can you get off the bus...

Bob: ...What now?

Krista: I think we might have gotten a flat tire... Please go check it out.

Bob: You think? I'll go check it out... (*getting up from the driver's seat and then exit the bus*)

Narrator: Bob checks around the tour bus investigating the wheels for damage, and notices none.

Bob: ...Things look good here...

Narrator: Krista then gets into the driver's seat and shuts the bus door on Bob.

Bob: Krista?! What are you doing..? Hey!!!

Narrator: Krista fires up the engine and slams her foot down on the accelerator, sending the tour bus lurching forward with a screech. She speeds off down the street, leaving a stunned and helpless Bob behind, coughing in the trail of dust and exhaust.

Bob: Kristaaaaa!!!

Narrator: Meanwhile, inside the cramped and cluttered interior of the tour bus, Krista clenches the steering wheel with white-knuckled fury. Her eyes are wild as she mutters bitterly to herself, the bus swerving slightly as her anger builds.

Krista: ...Oh, so they think they can just run off because my tour was 'too boring,' huh? That's why they really left... No, no, no... Not again! I hate it when this happens... I'll find them, even if it's the last thing I do!!! *(then punches the dashboard, wincing slightly)* ...Urrgh!

Narrator: Fueled by a bruised ego and simmering rage, Krista barrels recklessly down the street, her eyes scanning for any sign of Dew and Rena — determined to reclaim her runaway audience, whether they liked it or not.

CHAPTER 3 – MAKING UP FOR LOST

TIME

Narrator: The scene cuts to Dew and Rena as they make their way to the entrance of a nearby mega shopping mall named *Polychrome Emporium*. It's one of Llivisaca's finest attractions and the biggest mall in Mesovilla.

Dew: ...Wow. I have never seen a mall this big...

Rena: Mm-hmm... This place... it'll do...

Dew: Here? What, do we need any more provisions? I think we have enough already.

Rena: Ha-ha... No. We're not here for that. Don't be so uptight. Relax, okay..? *(then grabs Dew's right hand)* Let's go have some fun together...

Dew: Okay... *(then smiles at Rena)*



Narrator: The two then begin to walk around the shopping mall enjoying the attractions such as riding an indoor rollercoaster, ice skating, sliding down a seven-story super slide, unwinding in a massage chair, attending a concert hall performance and fashion show, and finally stopping to eat an order of chilidogs, fries with gravy and vanilla milkshakes. Noticing that 4 hours have passed by Dew and Rena make their way to the mall exit, but Rena stops Dew pointing to the photographer.

Rena: Dew, let's take a picture...

Dew: Okay.

Photographer: Good evening to both of you. Did you both have a fine day..?

Rena: Yes, we did.

Dew: It's been exceptional.

Photographer: That's wonderful to hear. By any chance, would you like me to take a picture of you two together, or separately? It's a free photoshoot.

Dew: Uhhh...

Rena: *(smiles)* ...Together.

Dew: What she said...

Photographer: All right... Now, sir, you and the missus get close together... *(aiming the camera at Dew and Rena)*

Rena: Missus..? Hah.

Photographer: Say cheese!

Dew & Rena: CHEESE!!!

Narrator: Rena quickly leans over to kiss Dew on the cheek as the picture is taken.

Photographer: Okay, folks... here you go... *(gives the photo to Rena)* ...It turned out well, don't you think?

Rena: *(looking at the picture)* ...It did. See, Dew. What do you think? *(then shows him the photo)*

Dew: *(looks at the picture)* ...Nice.

Rena: *(turns to the photographer)* Thank you very much for doing this.

Photographer: You're quite welcome.

Dew: Have a good evening... *(then gives the photographer a small tip)*

Photographer: Oh, sir, thank you... *(takes the tip from Dew)* Thank you both again...

Narrator: As Dew and Rena begin to walk off, they hear a large crash coming from outside.

Dew: ...What was that?!

Rena: Who knows... I wouldn't worry about it.

Dew: Yeah...

Rena: ...I had a lot of fun today, Dew.

Dew: I did too... This made up for all that lost time now.

Rena: It did...

Dew: Not too many people can say they went out on a date with their former teacher. I've fulfilled every teenage boy's dream.

Rena: Oh?

Dew: But I still need to be hunted down and stepped on by a 9-foot, 6-inch big-breasted Victorian-era style vampiress.

Rena: Yeahhh... I hope someday you're able to check that off your bucket list. Ha-ha...

Dew: A man can always dream...

Rena: Thank you, Dew. Thank you for everything... We should do this again...

Dew: I would like that.

Rena: Good.

Dew: Rena... *(stops and looks at Rena in the eyes)*

Rena: ...Yes, Dew? *(grabs his hand and looks him in his eyes)*

Narrator: At that moment, time seemed to slow down as the two continued to hold each other hands while deeply looking into one another eyes. Rena lightly bites her lower lip, and Dew's heart begins to beat faster. Dew grabs Rena by her waist and gently pulls her in closer to him. As their arms touch, Rena's face comes up to his. Then he kisses her. They lock lips for half a minute until Rena slowly eases her head out of the kiss while holding Dew's hand. They both then look at one another in the eyes again and smile.

Rena: Mmm... That was nice. Wow.

Dew: Yes... Ha-ha... It was good...
Rena: You know how to make this old lady feel young again.
Dew: Ohh... Well, there are other ways to do that...
Rena: Yeah..?



Narrator: Out of nowhere, Krista appears in the distance, arms flailing wildly as she sprints toward them like an angry tornado in hiking boots.

Krista: HEY! HEY..! (*gasping for breath, wheezing*) I've... I finally... FOUND you guys!"

Narrator: Dew and Rena, still holding hands, freeze like deer caught in headlights. They slowly turn around, quickly letting go of each other's hands, trying — and failing — to look casual.

Rena: Krista?!

Dew: You... came looking for us?

Krista: (*breathing heavily*) Yes..! That was QUITE rude... trying to ditch me... Why'd you... why... (*then bends over, hands on knees, gulping air*) Give me a second... (*inhales loudly, coughs violently*) WHY'D YOU DO THAT?!

Dew: *(sheepishly)* We're sorry about that. You're right — that was rude of us. But... uh, did you get the note?

Rena: We just needed a little alone time. Sorry again... Do you need, like, water? An ambulance? Maybe a stretcher..?

Krista: *(straightening up, swaying slightly)* No... I'm fine... *(then waves it off while wobbling)* So, alone time, huh..? *(then coughs into her shirt)* Hmm... You two must be dating.

Rena: *(stammering, cheeks turn bright red)* N-not at all!

Krista: *(squinting suspiciously)* Yeah, right. You like 'em young — I see what's happening here.

Rena: *(facepalming)* Geez...

Krista: *(grinning mischievously)* Hey, whatever floats your boat. MILFs need love too!

Dew: *(offended, defensive)* It's not like that!

Rena: *(blushing furiously)* We're just... good friends!

Krista: Sure you are. *(then makes exaggerated air-quotes)* "Friends." *(then pauses, pretending to think deeply)* Hmm... You know, if you two had just asked, we could've taken a little detour. I would've let you two do your thing... I would've waited... *(sigh)* Then again... I don't really blame you for bailing. Maybe... just maybe... my tours are a teensy bit... plain after-all.

Dew: *(muttering under his breath)* Try boring.

Narrator: Rena then jabs Dew in the chest with her elbow. Dew stumbles back a step, clutching his chest like he's been shot.

Krista: *(peering at him with concern)* You okay there..?

Dew: *(grimacing)* Yeah... Probably just heartburn from the food we ate earlier...

Krista: *(brightly, cluelessly)* Oh, okay. Anyway... now that I've tracked you both down... let's get moving!

Dew: *(reluctantly)* Might as well... *(then pauses, eyes widening)* Oh. Crap!

Krista: *(alarmed)* What's wrong now?!

Dew: Cooper! Lorenzo!

Rena: *(slapping her forehead)* Oh no... Darn it!

Krista: Who..?

Dew: Our friends! We were supposed to meet them — totally forgot! Hey Krista, can we swing by the pier? They should be there waiting.

Rena: *(glancing at her watch, groaning)* Yeah... if they didn't already leave. We are so late...

Photographer: *(yelling frantically from somewhere nearby)* HELP!!!

Dew: *(ears perking up, looking around)* Where did that come from?! Hold on! *(then bolts toward the sound)*

Rena: *(alarmed)* Uh-oh... Dew, wait up! *(then chases after him)*

Krista: *(throwing her arms up dramatically)* RUNNING OFF AGAIN?! Seriously?! I still haven't shown you all of Llivisaca! Dammit... Wait for me..!

Narrator: Krista then follows Dew and Rena. Meanwhile, near the water fountain area, the photographer is being mugged by four masked hoodie-wearing street thugs. Three of them are wielding machetes, and the female has dual daggers.

Thuggish girl: Give us your money..! *(pointing one of her dual daggers at the photographer's neck)*

Photographer: Why don't you... believe me? I-I don't have any money on m-m-me at all.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 1: He's lying!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: I say we beat it out of him. Some loose change will fall out then. Ha-ha-ha...

Photographer: I told you already. L-I-let me go!!!

Thuggish Girl: I agree. Let's beat the hell out of this old coot.

Dew: *(walking up)* I wouldn't do that if I were you...

Narrator: The thuggish girl and the *Mantid Oscuro* goons turn their attention to Dew. The photographer runs off.

Thuggish Girl: ...Who are you now?

Dew: Don't worry about that. Just worry about what I'm capable of.

Thuggish Girl: Huh? Ha-ha-ha ... Oh, "so scary." Sod off!

Narrator: Rena comes running up, joining Dew at his side just a few seconds before Krista catches up.

Krista: Hey. Hey! I told you two to hold up... You can't keep leaving me behind like that. Hey, what's going on here..?

Thuggish Girl: *(then eyes Krista with disdain)* ...You?!

Krista: *(crossing her arms)* Ohh. I see...

Dew: *(raising an eyebrow)* Do you know her, Krista?

Krista: *(scoffing)* No... I don't associate with low-lives like this.

Thuggish Girl: *(offended, stepping forward)* ...Low-lives?! Listen to 'Straight Arrow' over here... *(then faces Dew and Rena)* So... you two must be new around here. Let's cut to the chase — we're the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*.



Mantid Oscuro Goon 3: ...We run these streets. Law enforcement, politicians, and people - they all fear us!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 1: Nobody dares to get in our way. We own this joint...

Dew: Oh, you're those punks we heard about earlier.

Thuggish Girl: What?! Who do you think you are? You have some balls talking like that to us!

Dew: ...That man you were trying to mug was clearly poorer than you are. That's lowdown and shameful. What are you proving by doing such things?

Thuggish Girl: Ha-ha-ha... look at this, boys, we've got a goody two shoes here... and his MILF.

Rena: It really isn't like that...

Krista: Oh, you're not fooling anyone, Rena. There's no need to be ashamed. Dew is a nice-looking young fellow... but no worries, he's not of my sexual preference. I'm just saying that as a compliment.

Dew: Well, thank you, Krista, for the kind compliment and observation.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: The lady I don't know and have never met — and I emphasize 'never met' — is correct.

Krista: That's right. We have never met. I don't know you... Yep.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: (*grinning*) You have a nice young-looking boyfriend there, ma'am.

Rena: (*blushing*) Oh... Ha-ha...

Thuggish Girl: (*getting annoyed*) Hey, hey, hey — hello! I'm talking here! What the fuck?!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: (*shrugging*) Hey, he's nice-looking — she's not wrong. Also... (then eyeballs Dew) He's got a nice donk on him — gawd dayummmm.

Dew: (*playing along*) Well... Ha-ha... thank you. I do my best to keep it firm.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: (*flirty*) You're welcome. I bet that shower rod you're holding isn't the only long thing on you.

Thuggish Girl: (*shouting*) WHAT THE?!

Dew: (*smirking*) It's not a shower rod — it's a bo staff. But... you're correct about the length of my—

Elvir: *(cutting in, exasperated)* "Oh my goodness... C'mon. Just stop it!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 1: *(impatient)* Elvir, are we fucking them up or not?

Elvir: *(snapping)* You dick!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: *(licking his lips)* Mmmmmm...

Elvir: ...Now they know my name.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 1: *(awkward)* Oops. Shit. Sorry.

Elvir: *(rolling her eyes)* Doesn't matter. They're not gonna live long enough to remember it anyway. Now, strangers... get ready for a quick tutorial... on pain.

Dew: Oh, yeah? Well... I'm a fast learner.

Rena: *(supportively)* This is true.

Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... Okay. *(then raises her dual daggers and pointing at Dew)* We're about to show you some *Mantid Oscuro* 'hospitality.' I'm gonna gut you good!

Dew: *(taunting)* Let me know when you're ready to try.

Elvir: *(frustrated)* Stop sassing me!

Rena: *(dryly)* What a way to end a date...

Krista: *(raising her hands)* Wait. Wait. Can't we all talk about this?

Dew: So you want to make me feel at home..? All right...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 2: *(purring)* Mmmmm... I know I do.

Elvir: *(whipping around to glare at him, then shoving him hard on the shoulder)* Dammit, Gaz! Focus!

Gaz: *(rubbing his shoulder)* Ouch! That smarts...

Elvir: All right, that's it. Enough of this — you three are finished!

Narrator: Dew, Rena, and Krista draw their weapons as Elvir, brandishing her dual daggers, and her *Mantid Oscuro* comrades, swinging machetes gleaming under the flickering fluorescent lights, charge at them. The battle erupts in a heartbeat: Dew knocks one *Mantid Oscuro*

thug aside with a swift spin of his bo staff before locking into a fierce clash with Elvir; Rena deftly sweeps another off his feet with a graceful arc of her scythe; and Krista's wild boomerang toss smacks Gaz square in the head, sending him staggering backward. As the fight nears its climax, Dew strikes Elvir across the face with his staff, cracking her mask and sending it flying.

Beneath it, she's revealed to be a slender young woman with a full reddish afro, styled with two neat braids hanging down the front. Beaten and dazed, Elvir slumps to the ground as the three battered *Mantid Oscuro* thugs panic and flee.

Gaz: *(shouting as he runs away)* ...You still have a nice ass!

Krista: Going so soon? *(yelling)* ...You sissies!!!

Elvir: *Ow... my head. (rubbing her forehead)* ...Stupid jerk off!

Dew: Thanks for the "warm welcome."

Elvir: *Shit! Shit! (quickly gets up onto her feet and backs up into a corner)* ...Well, I guess you, guys, taught me a lesson... Ha-ha. Okay, I was wrong for trying to rob the guy. I promise... I'll never do it again... Yoink!

Narrator: Elvir, with her quickness, springs up from the ground and flips over Dew. Landing in front of a stunned Rena, Elvir, with a quick slash from one of her dual daggers, rips off Rena's talisman necklace, grabs it, and then jumps back far enough, putting distance between herself and the trio.

Elvir: *(taunting)* Yoo-hoo... Look what I got now. *(then looks at the talisman necklace)* Eh. Something... *(then whispers to herself while examining the talisman necklace)* ...seems familiar about this... Hmm...

Krista: Hey! Stop!

Narrator: Krista then hurls her boomerang at Elvir, who is momentarily distracted, gawking over the talisman necklace. Elvir then quickly turns her attention to the incoming boomerang. She deflects it with her dual daggers sending it back in Krista's direction. A sneering Krista catches the returning boomerang.

Elvir: Nice try... *(then puts the talisman necklace in her pocket)*
Maybe I'll see you all again—not! Later, losers ... Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... *(then runs off)*

Rena: Dew, the necklace?!

Dew: Damn. She got away...

Krista: That little bugger...

Dew: *(thinking to himself)* For some reason, though... their fighting style seemed familiar...

Narrator: Lorenzo and Cooper are then seen running up from afar, approaching Dew, Rena, and Krista.

Lorenzo: ...Dew, there you are.

Dew: Hey..! Lorenzo, Cooper.

Lorenzo: Glad we found you...

Cooper: When you didn't come back to the pier, we got a little worried and decided to go find you guys.

Dew: I'm so sorry for that. We got a little caught up.

Lorenzo: No problem, bud... We found you now.

Dew: Did you happen to see a girl run by just now?

Lorenzo: ...A girl? Oh yeah.

Cooper: Who? That cute girl? Why do you ask?

Dew: That girl and her friends were trying to mug a photographer. We stepped in and stopped them. Although, during the scuffle, she took off with Rena's necklace.

Cooper: That's not good.

Lorenzo: We heard something about a fight going on over here while we were looking for you.

Rena: Word travels fast...

Lorenzo: We were just down the street. So, we hurried as fast as we could. I figured if there was some fighting going on, you couldn't be too far away, Dew.

Cooper: We would have been here sooner if it wasn't for that wrecked bus outside the mall. Somebody obviously can't park.

Krista: Ha-ha... I guess you all won't probably leave until you get that necklace back, huh?

Rena: No.

Dew: ...We must get it back.

Krista: *(whispering to herself)* Of all the people, they had to mug these folks... Ugh.

Rena: Huh? Did you say something, Krista?

Krista: Oh. I... I was just thinking aloud to myself... Yes. I know what... There is an inn nearby. The Overlook Inn... They know me there, so you'll be able to stay there free of charge until this issue is resolved. It's the best I can do for ya'll.

Rena: Krista, that is kind of you. It'll help us out on the lodging for sure.

Lorenzo: Excuse me. Who is she?

Dew: Our tour guide...

Krista: Hello there, friends of Dew and Rena.

Cooper: Hi, tour guide woman.

Krista: Yes, I am their tour guide, and by default, I'm yours too. My name is Krista. Krista Naples. It is nice to meet both of you... Your names are..?

Lorenzo: 'Sup. My name is Lorenzo.

Cooper: ...And I am Cooper.

Lorenzo: ...Tour guide, eh? How much did that cost us?

Dew: Don't worry about it. The Seneschal of Llivisaca is covering the cost of her services.

Lorenzo: Oh, okay. I guess that's another person coming along for the ride...

Cooper: What about our pursuit of Thornton?

Dew: That will have to wait... For now, we're stuck here until we get Rena's necklace back. I won't be leaving here without it.

Cooper: If you insist. I understand, my friend.

Lorenzo: I have a question about lodging. What are the amenities?

Krista: You all get two complimentary newspapers, 24-hour room service, a massage, and unlimited porn.

Lorenzo: Hot damn!

Krista: ...But, no swimming pool, though. I forgot to mention; you also can have all the Lychee boba tea you can ever want.

Rena: What is with this place and Lychee boba tea?!

Lorenzo: Aw... I can live without a swimming pool. Everything else, I'm sold on. Especially the Lychee boba tea. I'm down. Let's go.

Krista: Great! It looks like we're all ready to go. I'll show you the way to the inn. Follow me... *(then walks off)*

Rena: I could use a nice hot shower. It's getting late.

Cooper: Let's head over to the inn, Dew.

Dew: Let's do that...

Lorenzo: More Lychee boba tea. Yay..!

Narrator: Dew and the group then walk off, following Krista to the inn. An hour has passed; the scene switches over to a salvage yard located in Llivisaca's Northern Zone. A single-story dilapidated building sits in the middle of the salvage yard. Inside, a bowler hat-wearing hulking man in business attire named Mauvais Gantulga, underboss of the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* enters a small throne room with accent lighting. The criminal organization's seal can be seen on a large grey silk drape hanging from behind the throne as he continues approaching it. A total of Eight *Mantid Oscuro* thugs are lined up, with four on each side of the throne. Mauvais then comes to a stop.

Mauvais: Scion...

Narrator: A young man wearing a brown checkered suit is sitting on the throne looking down, smiling at a crumbled photograph until he notices Mauvais. His demeanor changes to a serious one as he stuffs the photo away in the left side pocket of his suit jacket.

Scion: ...Report.

Mauvais: Emergency meeting with all Capos is set up at the Pendragon.

Scion: Good. Any other updates..?

Mauvais: After shootout, we had last week with SWAT TROOPERS, our ranks have taken a hit. 27 dead, 11 jailed—

Scion: ...11 failures who will continue to rot in jail. No bail for them! If any of them starts snitching, you know what happens next...

Mauvais: Yes, Scion.

Scion: Continue.

Mauvais: ...9 vehicles destroyed, and dozens of arms along with 140 million *Wertes* of drugs were seized.

Scion: Ugh... That's not a loss of small change at all... Damn that seneschal! He and his loyal "little piggies" are becoming increasingly annoying and trying to slow down our operations... You would think with all the bribes, threats, and deaths they would get it by now... There will be retaliation for this

outrage..! At least... the other task was a success. What is the status of the scientist?

Mauvais: He's on his way for delivery as instructed.

Scion: The *Grey Éminence* will be pleased then.

Mauvais: Yes, Scion. But all that trouble to find one man... why *Grey Éminence* want him..?

Scion: I don't know. But whatever the reason is, he must be of value. It's no longer our concern... *(then pulls out from his front blazer pocket a tiny white powered-filled capsule, places it on his tongue, and lets it sit there for a few seconds before swallowing it whole. He begins to feel an overwhelming sense of Euphoria)* Mhhhhmm... That is some good *Coca-flake*... Yes...

Mauvais: Scion, we have other problem.

Scion: Other problem..?

Mauvais: Scion. It's Krista.

Scion: *(aroused with intrigued)* Krista?! What about her..?

Mauvais: I was told, she roughed up Elvir and her crew at the *Poly-chrome Emporium* earlier.

Scion: Really? Ha-ha-ha... That little scamp... did that?

Mauvais: Busted them up.

Scion: She still got it in her... Ha-ha... But, why..?

Mauvais: She protecting friends.

Scion: Friends?!

Mauvais: Yes. One man. One woman. Elvir did steal talisman necklace from lady-friend of Krista.

Scion: ...And who are these new "friends" of hers?

Mauvais: Ketcy, they come from the Helix Capital...

Ketcy: Ketcy?!

Mauvais: I sorry, Scion.

Ketcy: Helix Capital..? Is that right? Oh... The reunification of Meso-villa... it's all I've heard about lately... even then, when that occurs, we will still own this joint. So... Krista has made some new friends... and she will likely come to retrieve this talisman necklace that belongs to her friend too. Oh, Krista, I know you too well. You won't be able to resist doing such... Ha-ha-ha...

Mauvais: Why laugh?

Ketcy: Why do you care? ...Push the emergency meeting with the Capos back four hours.

Mauvais: Yes, Scion.

Ketcy: We'll be expecting her soon. I wouldn't miss this for anything else in the world... Is that all?

Mauvais: Yes, Scion. No other news.

Ketcy: You can go then...

Narrator: Mauvais nods his head in acknowledgment and then turns around, exiting the throne room. Ketcy then again pulls out the crumbled photograph looking at. It's a picture of Krista and him when they were younger.

Ketcy: Oh Krista, Krista... the "family" awaits you... see you soon, dear sister...



CHAPTER 4 – FINDERS KEEPERS,

LOSERS WEEPERS

Narrator: Meanwhile, after getting settled in at the Overlook Inn, Dew and the others—now joined by Krista in a change of clothes—reminisce on the day’s events in the front lobby.

Krista: ...Things are all set up here for you guys. Free of charge as I promised. Here are the keys to your rooms... *(then starts handing Dew and the others their keys)* Lorenzo, here you go...

Lorenzo: *(takes the key from Krista)* ...I appreciate it.

Krista: No problem. Here you go, Rena... *(hands Rena her key)*

Rena: Thank you. *(takes the key from Krista)*

Krista: Oh, Cooper... Lorenzo and you will have to share a room. There weren’t many vacancies left. I’m sorry.

Cooper: As they say, “Never look a gift horse in the mouth”... I haven’t had it good like this since I was in the military.

Lorenzo: We’re going to be roomies, eh? Good thing you’re not sloppy.

Krista: Thank you for understanding, Cooper. And Dew here is yours... *(handing Dew his room key)*

Dew: The free lodging and traveling remind me a lot of those times... *(then takes the key from Krista and puts it in his pocket)* Thanks, Krista.

Krista: ...Since I’m your assigned tour guide, I will also be staying at the inn.

Dew: That’ll be convenient.

Rena: ...Krista.

Krista: Yes, Rena?

Rena: I’ve been wondering about something...

Krista: Yeah..?

Rena: Can you tell us anything more about the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*? When we met with the seneschal, he did mention some tidbits about them.

Krista: What would you like to know? ...They’re a shady group of characters if that isn’t obvious.



- Rena: That girl we were fighting, the one who stole my talisman necklace; she seemed to know you.
- Krista: The funny thing is, I don't know that person. Maybe she has seen my face around from somewhere... I don't know really...
- Rena: Hmm...
- Krista: Anyway... during the *Great Civil War*, Llivisaca supported the New Havenport war effort against the Helix Capital, as you all may remember. All this from - smuggling weapons, tactical espionage, sabotage, and providing extra personnel to the New Havenport forces. When the Helix Capital had finally won the war, Llivisaca was ostracized. This also included national fiscal support being severely limited to us. When that all happened, the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* rose to power soon after. Llivisaca has been a failed state ever since then... All I can tell you about those thugs is, that they're one big family of social outcasts and sadists... doing what they must to survive... to hold onto the power they have... to put the society that was unkind to them in an unrelenting stranglehold... "Eat the rich."

Lorenzo: ...They sound like how I could have turned out if it wasn't for Aquagonlas' mentoring.

Krista: Aquagonla..?!

Lorenzo: Yeah. You've heard of him..?

Krista: No. (*nervous*) Ha-ha... What's an "Aquagonla"?

Dew: So that's all you know..?

Krista: Pretty much...

Rena: Hmm... Well, thanks for the extra info...

Dew: We're gonna have to figure out how to get back that necklace.

Krista: If you don't mind me asking, what's the fuss over it? Can't you just buy a new one?

Rena: No. It's special to me...

Krista: But guys, going up against the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* isn't worth it.

Dew: From what I saw earlier, they don't seem like much of a threat.

Krista: We could have been just lucky in that instance. The good thing is that the reunification will happen, and we won't have to worry about the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* for much longer. I'm just saying this out of concern...

Dew: Krista, I appreciate the concern for our well-being... but we've faced worse odds before coming here. We're going to do what's needed to get that talisman back.

Krista: I see. I guess I can't convince you all otherwise... It clearly means a lot to Rena... I get it... (*then yawns*)

Lorenzo: Time sure does fly by... (*yawn*) I'm feeling a little tired myself...

Cooper: Me too... Maybe we should call it a night?

Dew: That sounds like a good idea. We'll start our search for them first thing in the morning.

Krista: Of course. I'll be happy to assist...

Lorenzo: Don't worry, Rena. We'll find those creeps, make them pay, and get that necklace back in no time.

Rena: I know we will.

Krista: Have a good rest, everybody... and if you need anything else from me, please don't hesitate to ask.

Dew: We appreciate this again, Krista. Okay, everyone... night, night.

Narrator: Everyone exits the inn lobby, departing to their separate rooms. Several hours later, the scene cuts to Rena's room, where she lies in bed, sound asleep. Moments later, she is awakened by a rustling noise coming from the bushes outside her window.

Rena: ...Huh?! What's that..? *(then rises, gets out of bed, and walks toward the window)*

Narrator: Rena peers out the window and sees Krista climbing out of her own room and descending to the streets below. Krista is seen running off into the sultry, pastel-colored night scenery of Llivisaca...

Rena: That's weird... I wonder what she's up to..?

Narrator: Rena quickly grabs her clothes and changes out of her nightwear into her normal attire. Afterward, she opens the window, climbs out, and begins following Krista. Some time passes before Rena eventually catches up to Krista, though she maintains her distance. She watches Krista walking through a crowded street as a festival is underway. Rena continues to follow, wading through the crowd. As she exits the throng of people, she spots Krista and several other partygoers boarding a trolley. Rena hurries to catch up and slips inside just before the door closes. She keeps her distance, blending in among the lively, intoxicated passengers at the front of the packed tram, while an oblivious Krista stands near the back. Forty-five minutes pass before the trolley comes to a stop in Llivisaca's Northern Zone. All the chatty, drunken, laughing passengers exit through both the front and back doors. Krista walks away from the trolley toward an alleyway, and Rena continues to follow. After passing through several alleyways and residential areas, Rena finds

herself approaching a salvage yard as Krista nears a single-story, dilapidated building.

Rena: This girl can walk forever... Sheesh. Hmm... This is a strange place to go for a nightly stroll.

Narrator: Rena speeds up a bit and then runs over to hide behind a wrecked, rusted automobile. A man comes outside of the building to meet Krista. Rena goes in closer, hiding behind a pile of scrap metal to listen in to the conversation.

Mantid Oscuro Goon: Look who we have here... Long time no see.

Krista: Why so welcoming all of a sudden? Miss me..?

Mantid Oscuro Goon: Maybe I do... But no hello back? That's a little cold. If I were someone else, maybe you'd be a bit friendlier.

Krista: What does that have to do with anything? Are you still holding a grudge because I turned you down? After all these years? Sorry, you're just not my type.

Mantid Oscuro Goon: Heh. You always did know how to break a guy's heart. Ah.

Krista: I can break something else if you like. Enough of the small talk... I'm here to see your boss.

Mantid Oscuro Goon: Of course, you are. ...Well, the boss isn't here at the moment. He is out attending to other matters. Try coming again later.

Krista: Liar! I know he's here.

Narrator: Then another *Mantid Oscuro* goon enters.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 4: What's going on here..?

Mantid Oscuro Goon: Krista wants to see the boss.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 4: (*turns to look at Krista*) ...Really?! Are you coming home to us again?

Krista: No. That's never going to happen. I'm just here for a brief visit...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 4: Sure, you are... The boss will be happy to see you again.

Krista: I'm pretty sure he will be...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 4:

Narrator:

Let her pass...

Krista and the two *Mantid Oscuro* goons then go inside the building. Rena runs over and tries to catch the door as it's closing, but it shuts on her.

Rena:

Darn it...

Narrator:

Rena looks around the area and then notices an uncovered ventilation shaft. She decides to crawl inside the duct to continue following Krista. Sometime later, as Rena crawls her way through the building's ventilation system, she follows the voices of the *Mantid Oscuro* goons and Krista. She then sees them coming to a stop in front of a door. Seconds later, Krista enters a room, and the two *Mantid Oscuro* goons walk off. Rena crawls further through the vent, entering a small throne room. Once inside, Rena goes in for a closer look peering through the air-vent cover.

Krista:

Ketcy...

Ketcy:

That voice... so you've come... it's been a while... (*sitting on the throne*)

Krista:

I'm here...

Ketcy:

I thought I would never see you again, sister... (*rises from the throne and begins to walk around it casually*)

Rena:

(*whispering to herself*) Sister?!

Krista:

Surprises happen.

Ketcy:

Oh, do they now? How has the world been treating you..?

Krista:

I've been doing well, until now.

Ketcy:

Oh?

Krista:

Yeah, recently, your goons and I haven't been getting along.

Ketcy:

Really..? Were they too rough? No. I heard it was the other way around ...Speaking about surprises, you made some new friends, have you? Now knowing you, you were never the type to hang around strangers.

Krista: As I said, surprises happen. You then know why I am here. Let's cut the act, Ketcy.

Ketcy: Ha-ha-ha... Maybe I do. Please remember who is running all of this. We, the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*, do as we please. We regulate order around here.

Krista: Yeah, I know - your so-called "order."

Ketcy: You had your chance a long time ago to stay within the "family." We didn't kick you out; you left us. You wanted to do things the "honest way," so we let you do that. What has that "honest living" gotten you these days anyway?

Krista: A better life than what you're living.

Ketcy: I'm not complaining! So... you're here for that necklace. It must be valuable... Why come all this way for a total stranger? Why would you risk your life? I could kill you right here and now.

Krista: You wouldn't kill me, not your sister. Yes, the necklace is of value to her.

Ketcy: You sound so confident about that. But your new friend should have been more careful of her possessions.

Krista: I'm not here to fight you. All I'm asking is for you to give it back... Please.

Ketcy: Why should I? How about, nooooo.

Krista: I kept my oath, left you all alone... never ratted you guys out once. Why are you being difficult..?

Ketcy: Because I can be. I owe you nothing.

Krista: Okay, it's like that... I will get it back from you if push comes to shove.

Ketcy: How so?

Krista: My new friends are from the Helix Capital. They are the same ones who helped me give your goons the beating today.

Ketcy: I know that too... It would be a shame if all FOUR of them were to meet a bloody demise...

Krista: ...

Ketcy: Where is it that you have them staying..? Oh yes, the Overlook Inn...

Krista: How the..?!

Ketcy: Your face tells me what I need to know. Plus, that's where you always bring your clients. You really should learn how to change up your routine.

Krista: Ketcy... don't test me!

Narrator: Eight *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* thugs then enter the throne room surrounding Krista. Krista draws her boomerang and gets into a fighting stance.

Rena: (*whispering to herself*) Oh no. Not good... I have to get back to Dew and the others...

Narrator: Rena then quickly starts crawling back through the ventilation shaft. But as she's moving through it, parts of the suspended ventilation shaft suddenly begin to collapse, ejecting Rena from it. Rena lands flat on her bottom right in front of a surprised Krista. Ketcy is standing behind the throne as the eight *Mantid Oscuro* thugs run over to his side.

Krista: Rena?! Wh-hat are you doing here?!

Ketcy: What is this?!

Rena: Hey... Krista, fancy seeing you here... Hee-hee...

Narrator: The eight bewildered *Mantid Oscuro* thugs look at Ketcy.

Ketcy: Don't just stand there... NAB THEM!

Narrator: Three of the eight *Mantid Oscuro* thugs run over to restrain Rena and Krista.

Ketcy: Well, well, well... I would have never thought you would resort to this... This was a sorry attempt to ambush me for the throne, Sister. You have broken my heart again Krista..! (*then turn to one of the thugs*) Put them in the holding cells.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 5: Yes, Scion.

Ketcy: Also... DO NOT lay one finger on them. If anyone does, there will be severe consequences.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 5: Understood, Scion. Not one finger will be laid on them.

Narrator: The three *Mantid Oscuro* thugs then exit the room with the restrained and resisting Rena and Krista. A few moments later, Mauvais enters the room.

Ketcy: Mauvais, thank you for joining us.

Mauvais: Scion, meeting is starting soon...

Ketcy: Yes. I almost forgot. Thank you for reminding me. I got a little caught up in entertaining Krista and our uninvited guest there... But before we go, I need something done...

Mauvais: Yes, Scion.

Ketcy: First, get someone in here to clean up this mess.

Mauvais: You heard Scion. Clean up.

Narrator: Two of the *Mantid Oscuro* thugs rush over to start removing the ventilation shaft debris from the room.

Ketcy: ...Secondly, I think it's time to nip this in the bud before it gets out of hand with Krista's new friends. We've had enough setbacks to deal with as it is. They're staying over at the Overlook Inn... send a crew over to deal with them. They'll be perfect examples to be made of...

Mauvais: Scion, it be done...

Narrator: Mauvais then signals to the remaining three *Mantid Oscuro* thugs, who acknowledge him and then exit the throne room out of a back door.

Ketcy: Now. We have a meeting to attend. Let's go Mauvais...

Narrator: Ketcy and Mauvais then exit the throne room. An hour passes, and the scene switches back to the Overlook inn. As Dew lies asleep, he is then instantly awakened by a crashing sound. Dew rises from his bed, still groggy. He then hears a thud followed by what sounds like

people arguing coming from the Inn's lobby. Dew puts on his normal attire and grabs his bo staff, then exits the room to investigate the disturbance below with caution. The other inn guests can be seen frantically running out of the inn's lobby through the busted entry into the streets. At the same time, the sound of locking doors can be heard from the nearby rooms. As Dew descends to the lobby, the Innkeeper is seen being roughed up by three *Mantid Oscuro* thugs.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: *(holding the innkeeper up by the collar of his shirt) ...Where are the three out-of-towners? The ones from Helix? Which room? (then smacks the innkeeper's face consecutively)*

Innkeeper: Ack...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 8: TELL US!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: You better listen to him old man, or we're gonna keep fucking you up! Protecting them isn't worth it.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: Spit IT OUT! *(then punches the innkeeper in his stomach)*

Innkeeper: *(cough)...* I ain't telling... *(cough)...* you shit..! *(then spits phlegm in the face of Mantid Oscuro Goon 6)*

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: Ah... fuck! *(releases the innkeeper, and then throws him to the floor)*

Innkeeper: Ugh...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: It's all over my facemask..!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 8: Whoa. Ha-ha... That was a good loogie if I have ever seen one. Ha-ha-ha...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: ...NASTY BASTARD! How disrespectful...

Narrator: The three *Mantid Oscuro* thugs gang up on the Innkeeper, viciously stomping and kicking him while on the floor. Dew then jumps into the fray clobbering two *Mantid Oscuro* thugs with his bo staff, knocking them violently into the check-in counter.

Dew: ...I assume you're looking for me?

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: (turning to face Dew) MOTHERFUCKER..!
Narrator: The *Mantid Oscuro* thug pulls out his machete and attempts to rush at Dew. Suddenly, he is smacked across the head by a mop and punched in the face by a brass knuckle-equipped fist simultaneously. This causes the *Mantid Oscuro* thug to stumble sideways, falling to the floor.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Ugghh...
Cooper: Are we late to the party..?
Dew: What took you two so long?
Cooper: ...Sorry to keep you waiting. I usually sleep with earplugs in. If it weren't for Lorenzo, I probably wouldn't have gotten up.

Lorenzo: I was still up bleeding my guts out in the toilet... First, that turtle soup upset my stomach, now the Lychee boba tea... (then helps the innkeeper up off the floor to his feet) ...You okay there?

Innkeeper: A little bruised, but okay. Thank you...
Narrator: The three beaten-down *Mantid Oscuro* thugs get back onto their feet, confronting Dew and the others.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: My... fuckin' tooth... you knocked it out...
Lorenzo: Thank my chef. Who else could have taught me how to deliver a knuckle sandwich..? (then cracks his knuckles)

Mantid Oscuro Goon 8: Cheeky fuckers.
Dew: You care for another beating?
Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: I-It's not over yet, assholes..!
Narrator: Then four more *Mantid Oscuro* thugs enter the lobby wielding machetes.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 8: Re-enforcements have arrived...
Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: It's seven against three... not looking good for you...
Lorenzo: Yo, Innkeeper. You may want to step aside. We'll handle this.

Innkeeper: No need to tell me twice... *(then partially limps off to his office behind the check-in counter and locks the door behind him)*

Cooper: Hey, where's Rena and Krista ..?

Dew: I don't know. I haven't seen them either...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: Ha-ha... Those two... Ha-ha-ha...

Lorenzo: What the hell is so funny?

Mantid Oscuro Goon 6: Ain't telling ya... Ha-ha-ha...

Dew: Where are they?!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 8: It doesn't matter... You three, you'll never see them again!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: No more games... let's finish what we came to do. The Scion demands it.

Dew: Scion?!

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper then battle the seven-machete-wielding *Mantid Oscuro* thugs. During the brawl, Lorenzo takes notice of their fighting style and easily counters their moves. After defeating the thugs, six of them are rendered unconscious, and some are left slumping over the lobby furniture and check-in counter. The remaining thug is left writhing in pain, lying face down on the floor.

Lorenzo: I can't put my finger on it... but there was something familiar about their fighting style...

Dew: You noticed that too, huh?

Lorenzo: Hmm...

Narrator: As the Innkeeper exits his office back to the lobby, Dew is about to walk over to the semi-conscious *Mantid Oscuro* thug until Lorenzo intervenes.

Lorenzo: I got this...

Narrator: Lorenzo walks over and grabs the thug by the back of his head, lifting it slightly off the floor.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Huh!?!

Lorenzo: Let's make this as painless as possible. Okay..? Where are our friends? Where'd you learn that fighting style from?!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Fuck... you, man..!

Narrator: Lorenzo aggressively slams *Mantid Oscuro Goon 7's* face into the concrete Inn lobby floor, shattering his facemask and breaking his nose. Lorenzo then lifts his head again.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Arrrrghhh... MY NOSE... fuck..!

Lorenzo: I knocked out your tooth, broke your nose... what next?

Narrator: Lorenzo again slams *Mantid Oscuro Goon 7's* face continuously into the floor until he relents. *Mantid Oscuro Goon 7 is bleeding profusely from his facial orifices.*

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Gaaaauuuhhhh...

Lorenzo: I'm gonna make your face into mashed potatoes! Last chance. Speak up!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Okay... Okay... Okay... stop. STOP! (*cough*) (*cough*) I'll talk... fucckk...

Lorenzo: Well?

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Krista... and your friend... the Scion has them... at the Pendragon... Mauvais...

Lorenzo: Mauvais?

Dew: ...Pendragon? What's that?

Mantid Oscuro Goon 7: Uuggghhhh... (*then passes out*)

Lorenzo: Ah. Piece of shit... (*then releases Mantid Oscuro Goon 7's head, letting it hit the lobby floor*)

Cooper: You know, all that he was saying could have been fluff... probably leading us into a trap.

Lorenzo: It could be. It could be reliable too. But what else do we have to work with?

Dew: The Pendragon. Hmm... Must be a place...

Innkeeper: It's a restaurant-slash-night club... (*then slowly begins limping toward Dew and the others*) ...it's not too far from here. About twelve blocks. I'll write down the directions... hold on... (*still limping slightly, heading towards the check-in counter, shoves one of the unconscious Mantid Oscuro thugs off of it, grabs a pen and a piece of note paper, and begins writing*)

Dew: Thanks... and sorry about the property damage here.

Narrator: Meanwhile, Cooper is in the background, seen restraining all seven unconscious *Mantid Oscuro* thugs with zip ties.

Innkeeper: Yeah... it's going to suck cleaning up this mess... (*continues writing*) ...But those bullies getting their asses handed to them... it was worth it...

Lorenzo: Hey, Innkeeper. Why'd you risk your life for us? You could have easily ratted us out. I don't get it. To you, we should just be some random visitors.

Innkeeper: (*continuing writing*) Any friends of Krista are friends of mine...

Lorenzo: You're okay in my book.

Cooper: (*walking over to Dew, Lorenzo, and the Innkeeper*) ...Our "napping" friends aren't going anywhere anytime soon...

Innkeeper: Here you go... (*then hands Dew the note with directions on it*)

Narrator: Dew takes the notepaper from the Innkeeper.

Cooper: No rest for the wicked tonight...

Lorenzo: There goes that well-needed massage I was looking forward to...

Narrator: Dew looks down at his feet and notices a tape recorder with a cassette in it. He picks it up.

Dew: Hmm... Hey, Innkeeper. Is this yours?

Innkeeper: Yeah.

Dew: You wouldn't mind if I borrow this?

Innkeeper: That old beat-up thing. Sure. Have at it.

Dew: Thanks. I think this will come in handy... (*then places the tape recorder in his front right pant pocket*) Also, can you do us another favor?

Innkeeper: Yes?

Dew: I need you to get in contact with Seneschal Corot. Tell him we'll need backup—any law enforcement he can spare. Have them meet us at the Pendragon. (*then hands the innkeeper Seneschal Corot's business card*)

Innkeeper: (*takes the business card from Dew*) ...I will do that right away. I can't wait until they get rid of this "trash" lying here too...

Dew: Thank you. You've been a big help.

Innkeeper: You're welcome. Please, be careful. Give them hell.

Lorenzo: We will.

Cooper: We're out then?

Dew: Let's go. We don't have any more time to spare...

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper then head out toward the Pen-dragon.

CHAPTER 5 – THANKS FOR

DROPPING BY

Narrator: Meanwhile, back at the depilated building in the salvage yard, Rena and Krista are in a jail cell. Rena sits on the single-cell bed, as Krista, with her back turned to the cell door, leans up against it. Their belongings are sitting outside on a table close to the exit of the holding cell area.

Krista: ...We're not going anywhere, anytime soon...

Rena: By the looks of it, we aren't.

Krista: At least I get to share a cell with some good company... Haha... So, Rena, why'd you follow me?

Rena: I had a nagging feeling about you. I didn't really trust you... but it turns out my intuition was wrong...

Krista: So, you overheard all that, huh?

Rena: Yeah...

Krista: It's true... Ketcy is my brother. He is also the reason why Llivisaca is in a state of ruin... no, it's not all his fault... I'm responsible for making that happen too...

Rena: What do you mean..?

Krista: Since we have time to kill, we might as well take a trip down memory lane... It all started ten years ago for us. We were living in poverty with our drug-addict mother... the times were hard for us growing up, and she was barely around to raise us. When she was, she was usually too doped up to cook or keep the house clean... What made it worse was when she would violently lash out at us, physically and verbally... she would even go so far as to blame Ketcy and me for her problems... wishing we never existed...

Rena: Oh geez...

Krista: ...I would just run away from home... I wouldn't come back for days at times... to escape that hell... I'm not proud to admit this, but sometimes I turned to prostitution and thievery just to make a quick buck to eat...

Rena: Krista...

Krista: You have to do what you have to do to survive... but during all that, I couldn't leave him behind... I couldn't forget about Ketcy...

Rena: ...He was like your "shining lighthouse"?

Krista: Yes, you could say that... He was the only person who loved me in this dark world. Four years later, the day came after all her long-term drug abuse; our mother had finally died from respiratory failure... amazingly, she didn't contract any other diseases with all her dirty needle usage... We couldn't afford to throw her a funeral, so the government just took her body away and claimed to have later cremated it... With no other family to turn to, we were left on our own to raise one another... not a surprise there...

Rena: What happened to your father?

Krista: He died from a drug overdose himself... way before I was born.

Rena: I'm sorry...

Krista: Yeah... so, anyway... After the passing of our mother, Ketcy went looking for work wherever it was possible, I helped as much as I could too, minus the prostitution... We made enough to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads for a while... On one fateful day, a group of thugs was recruiting some new faces for their gang. This was our chance to be free from the streets and accepted into a new "family". So, we both did it; we took our chance... We had passed all their initiations and were eventually inducted into the ranks of the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. As time went on, our benefactors taught us the jack of trades of stealing and hustling. Things were looking good... for once in our lives, we had a place called home, a family, and financial security... but I began to notice a dark veil surrounding us. The corruption was eating away at me... Ketcy did not see this; he grew apathetic, and his thirst for more power grew as he rose in rank... Ketcy eventually became the leader after challenging and killing the former for the title of Scion. I then became my brother's advisor. Things were moving so fast... It felt unreal... but things would take another surprising turn of events for us... We started to receive funding from a mysterious third party... this person took an interest in the gang and wanted to help expand it.

Rena: Why? ...Do you know who that third party was?

Krista:

I don't know. I never met the person. All I know is that they go by the name of "*Grey Éminence*"... It's not like Ketcy and I cared at that time... So, the *Mantid Oscuro* went from a two-bit gang to a criminal syndicate that dwelled in petty theft and hustling to drug trafficking, prostitution, money laundering, bribery, extortion, and murder. All the other criminal outfits stood no chance... They either merged with the *Mantid Oscuro* or got wiped out... Nobody was left to oppose us. We were on top of the world at that point... and finally, we got our revenge against the world that turned a blind eye to our suffering... the world that shunned and laughed at us for existing... we were in charge... we were untouchable... it felt good at that time... after a while though, I could no longer stand living like that... The fact of depriving others- total strangers, all to satisfy our needs made me sicker as each day went on. I learned that regardless of how much power you have or obtain, it means nothing if you aren't happy... if you can't be true to yourself... It didn't make me a good person. It made me worse than the society I held a grudge against... So, it was decided two years ago; that I would leave Ketcy and the gang to start a new life, on the right foot... and here we are now...

Rena:

(then whispers to herself) A new life... I can relate...

Krista:

Hm?

Rena:

Nothing. You went through a lot... I-I totally had you figured all wrong.

Krista:

Now you know me a little bit better now...

Narrator:

An unmasked female *Mantid Oscuro* jailer enters the holding cell area and approaches the cell door.

Mantid Oscuro Jailer:

Welcome back, Krista... It's been a while...

Krista: That voice... (then turns around facing the *Mantid Oscuro Jailer*)

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: So, you do remember me...

Krista: Why would I ever forget? Yes, it has... been a bit... Of all the people, why are you here..? To taunt me?

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: No, Krista... It's good to see your face again. I've missed you... Why haven't you written me back? I've sent you so many letters...

Krista: I've been busy...

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Busy enough to forget about me like you did your brother? ...Like you did the others...

Krista: That's in the past for me...

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Is that how you truly feel..? Hmm... (*then looks jealously at Rena*) ...So, making new friends...

Krista: She has nothing to do with you and me...

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Hah... I didn't think so. That's good to hear... I would say consider yourselves lucky to be locked up here. Now, in the case of your other new friends, they won't be so much soon...

Krista: What are you talking about?

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: The Scion and the others have sent a crew out to the Overlook Inn to deal with them. You know how that usually goes... It'll be a painless death for them ...not too messy.

Rena: What?! ...Oh, no.

Krista: Ketcy is still using cowardly tactics to take people on, I see. Just so you know, my new friends aren't the push over's you're all accustomed to.

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: We'll see about that. Anyway, as directed by the Scion, you both have to be fed... (*then pulls out two rations from her pocket and places them on the ground. She then slides them into the cell*) Tsk, tsk, tsk... He could have had you both executed so easily. But keeping you here and torturing you with the

news of your friends' eventual demise is punishment enough... He still loves you... Ah, Krista... we used to have so much fun together...

Krista: (smiles) Yes, we did... those were good times... one of my fondest memories...

Narrator: Rena looks at both Krista and the female *Mantid Oscuro* jailer, as there is a brief moment of silence.

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Yeah... Do you remember when we went to the carnival, and I won you that pink stuffed plush elephant?

Krista: Our special spot—how could I forget? The milk bottle toss... it took you all three tries.

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Yeah, and I made those bottles explode too.

Krista: ...And then I recall you and the attendant started to argue.

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Well, he said I wasn't behind the line, and the last shot didn't count.

Krista: And then you said, "Bullshit. Are you freakin' blind?! I was right behind the line". He then retorted, saying, "Not at all".

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: ...I clearly was behind the line.

Krista: ...Oh, but you wouldn't back down. I was trying to pull you away, but you were adamant about getting me that plush toy.

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: I sure was... that asshole then had the nerve to put his grimy fingers in my face...

Krista: And what did you do next... you broke them, and yeeted him into the air...

Krista & Mantid Oscuro Jailer: Ha-ha-ha...

Mantid Oscuro Jailer: I did get the plush toy for you, didn't I?

Krista: Yes, you did... I still have it too...

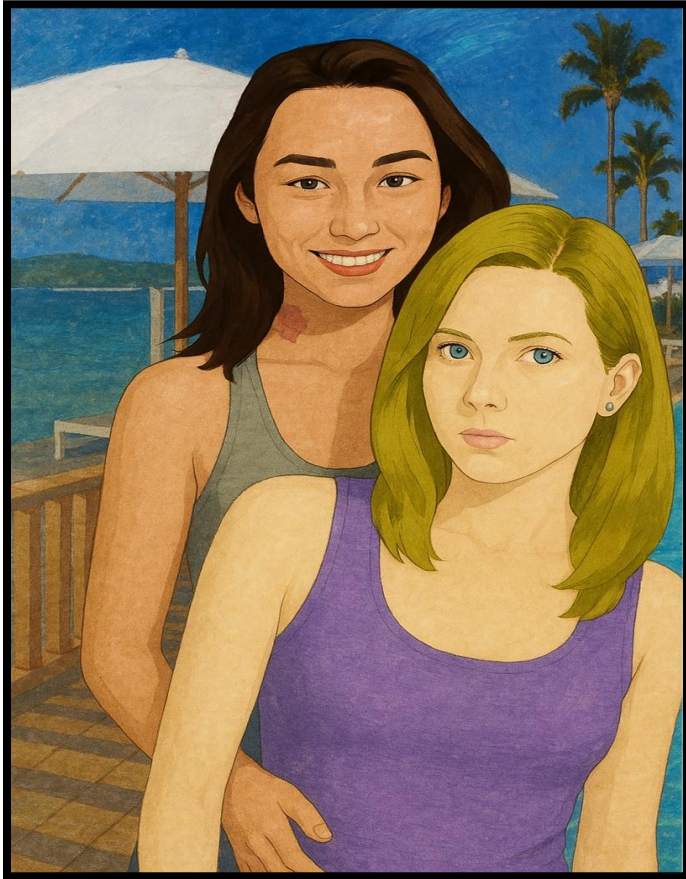
Mantid Oscuro Jailer: (surprised) Oh yeah?! Ha-ha...

Krista: Yeah...

Narrator: Krista and the *Mantid Oscuro* Jailer again continue to look at one another lovingly in silence.

Mantid Ocsuro Jailer:

Maybe... just maybe, luck will come your way.
Well, enjoy your meal... *(then winks at Krista)*



Narrator: The jailer then walks off; she purposely drops the keys to the cell and exits.

Rena: Huh?! Look at this... *(pointing at the cell keys lying on the floor)* What luck we have.

Krista: Yeah, "luck." *(then gets on her knees and starts reaching for the key)* I almost got it... *(then grabs the key)* ... Got it!

Rena: Excellent.

Krista: *(stands up then unlocks the cell door)* ...We're home free now.
(whispering to herself) ...thank you, Lainy...

Rena: Lainy..?

Krista: Uh, nobody... never mind that. We've got to make it back to the Inn before it's too late.

Rena: Yeah. But that'll take some time to do that don't you think?

Krista: I know. But I'll find us a quicker way back there. Just follow me...

Narrator: Rena nods her head in agreement. The two begin to collect their belongings and then exit the holding cell area. As they sneak their way through the building, they evade multiple *Mantid Oscuro* thugs on patrol. Finally making their way to a small garage, they come across a single motorbike with the key still in the ignition.

Rena: Somebody left the key in?!

Krista: They sure did. Ha-ha...

Narrator: Krista walks over to the garage door shutter and presses a button to activate it. The shutter then begins to open gradually. Krista grabs two motorbike helmets and then tosses one to Rena.

Rena: (*catching the motorbike helmet*) I don't know how I'll feel about this... motorbikes, and I don't have the best relationship. They're so fast and dangerous!

Krista: Well, you wanted fast; we're going to get it... (*then gets onto the motorbike*) Just hold onto my waist, and don't let go. Stay calm... I'll do the rest. Okay?

Rena: Errr... all right. Darn it..!

Narrator: Rena hops onto the motorbike, sitting behind Krista, and tightly wraps her arms around her waist. Krista switches on the choke lever, turns the key to ignite the motorbike engine, and uses her left foot to kick up the kickstand. Meanwhile, the garage door shutter finishes opening. Krista revs the engine and speeds off from the dilapidated building's garage. Moments later, the motorbike departs from the salvage yard, still unnoticed. The scene cuts to the back of the Pendragon establishment. A *Mantid Oscuro* bouncer exits the restaurant into the lukewarm alleyway, the muffled ambiance of electronic dance music filling the air. He walks over to a garbage dumpster and stops. Removing his face mask, he places it on top of a nearby smaller trash can. The thug then pulls out a cigarette and lighter. As his right thumb rolls the metal spark

wheel, attempting to ignite the gas, he suddenly feels an object being pressed against the back of his head.



Mantid Oscuro Bouncer:

?! (then slowly raises his hands)

Dew:

Don't move.

Narrator:

Dew has his bo staff pressed against the back of the *Mantid Oscuro* bouncer's head as Lorenzo and Cooper are standing by his side.

Mantid Oscuro Bouncer:

(hands still raised, then looking out the corner of his left and right eye rapidly) ...What is this?! W-what do y-you want..?

Lorenzo:

Take us to your boss.

Mantid Oscuro Bouncer:

(hands still raised) What!?! My boss?

Cooper:

That's right. The Scion.

Mantid Oscuro Bouncer:

(hands still raised) I-I can't do that... Are... you insane?! Listen. You don't k-know... who you're messing with-

Dew: I think we have an idea already... *(then slightly nudges his bo staff into the back of the Mantid Oscuro bouncer head)*

Mantid Oscuro Bouncer: *(hands still raised)* Ouch...

Dew: This is what's going to happen... you're going to drop the cigarette and lighter, slowly walk toward that door, open it, and lead us inside to him. No tricks. Got it..?

Lorenzo: That is unless you want your brain scattered all over the alley here..?

Mantid Oscuro Bouncer: *(hands still raised)* Fuck me..!

Narrator: With some hesitation, the *Mantid Oscuro* bouncer complies by dropping the cigarette and lighter on the alley ground. Then the bouncer begins to lead Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper through the back entrance of the Pen-dragon restaurant as Dew still holds the bo staff to the back of his head. Meanwhile, up on the 3rd-floor penthouse suite; Ketcy and the three capos: Hookium Gasparian, Fischetto Ylleta, and Marquette Maloney are sitting at a large roundtable talking. Mauvais is seen standing directly behind the sitting Ketcy. Eight other *Mantid Oscuro thugs* are also seen in the background lined up against the wall.

Fischetto: ...Our stranglehold over Llivisaca is loosening. That seneschal has become a huge problem...

Marquette: He's been a problem for the past two years... A few members of my crew just the other day got their prostitution ring busted. Trying to pay law enforcement and judges off isn't working like it used to.

Hookium: Luckily for me, we haven't been bothered so much... all thanks to the Burgomaster of the Northern Zone. Ha-ha-ha...

Fischetto: Don't feel so haughty. At this rate, they'll start coming down on you too...

Marquette: Scion, they're even arresting my crew for jaywalking now....Jaywalking!?!
 Fischetto: We're not being respected as we should be. Scion, we need to take swift action... to set an example.
 Ketcy: I couldn't agree more...
 Fischetto: Then what do we do, Scion..?
 Ketcy: I know things look bleak. We've had many setbacks this month thanks to the amped-up actions by the seneschal. For that, he must pay with his life...
 Marquette: Yes.
 Ketcy: ...And that includes anyone close to him, professionally or in his personal life also. Leave no stone unturned!
 Fischetto: I like that.
 Hookium: We'll bump off that bum for good. ...Paint the joint red...
 Marquette: Scion, I heard a story about some out-of-towners recently giving us a problem...
 Ketcy: Yes, them... Ha-ha ...they should no longer be of any concern to us soon.
 Fischetto: Wasn't Krista somewhat involved in that?
 Hookium: Krista?! That's a name I haven't heard in a while... Ugh...
 Fischetto: If you don't mind me asking, Scion... what are we going to do about her?
 Ketcy: Once the three nuisances from Helix Capital are confirmed dead, then we'll chop up her new female friend into pieces. Yes, she'll make good compost for my rooftop garden here... As for Krista, we'll let her rot away in that jail cell unless she comes to her senses about rejoining us...
 Hookium: Why..? Scion, Krista is not worth the trouble keeping her around-
 Ketcy: Don't!
 Hookium: I mean no disrespect, Scion. I'm just saying...
 Ketcy: If you wish to keep your tongue intact, you'll say no more. Be sure to accomplish those hits successfully. Failure is not an option...
 Fischetto: (*then nods head in acknowledgment*) ...We'll get to handling those tasks right away, Scion...
 Ketcy: See to it that you three do...
 Narrator: The elevator to the penthouse suite suddenly opens, and the still-conscious *Mantid Oscuro* bouncer is flung out, landing

hard on the floor in front of the roundtable. He is knocked unconscious. Startled, the three *Mantid Oscuro* Capos jump up from their chairs as all eight *Mantid Oscuro* thugs draw their machetes. Ketcy remains seated, while Mauvais stands behind him, unmoved. Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper exit the elevator and approach the roundtable with weapons in hand.



Cooper: Sorry. Did we interrupt anything..?
Fischetto: And who the hell are you guys?!
Narrator: As Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper come to a stop, Dew then activates the tape recorder he has tucked away in his front right pant pocket.
Lorenzo: The ones you failed to get rid of...
Ketcy: ...And you three are the out-of-towners from Helix Capital, I presume?
Dew: You would be correct.
Ketcy: Then, welcome to my humble abode. Thank you for joining us... not that it was expected...
Dew: Save your pleasantries. Where are they?

Ketcy: Oooh. Straight to the point, we are. I like that... My sister has a fiery friend here...

Cooper: Your sister?

Ketcy: You don't know? That's just like Krista keeping her new friends in the dark. I am her brother and the boss of the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. Krista was formerly a member of our "family" until she wanted to go all straight arrow on us.

Lorenzo: (*sarcastically*) "Geez, I wonder why she would do that?" Something tells me that you're not the best brother in the world.

Ketcy: And this one is witty... Is that what you think? Ha-ha... It's quite rare that I meet with others like this face-to-face. Seeing how you three survived the hit, consider this an honor.

Narrator: The *Mantid Oscuro* bouncer awakens and can be seen trying to pull himself up off the floor. He then comically collapses onto it again.

Dew: ...For the last time, where are Krista and Rena?

Ketcy: Yes, about them... I'm sorry to inform you, but they're not here...

Narrator: Six more *Mantid Oscuro* thugs enter the room along with Elvir.

Elvir: (*sarcastically*) Uh-oh...

Cooper: See. I told you. It was a trap.

Ketcy: You three are brazened to show up here... or stupid. No matter. Elvir. Take care of the human waste that stands before me...

Elvir: Soitenly..!

Narrator: Mauvais then signals to the eight *Mantid Oscuro* thugs to join in the ranks with the other six. Elvir and fourteen *Mantid Oscuro* thugs then circle Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper, surrounding them. Cooper becomes fixated on Elvir.

Elvir: (*facing Dew*) ...Hello, fucker! I see you brought some new friends with ya.

Cooper: You're that girl from earlier... Wow! You're... beautiful...

Elvir: ?!

Dew: What..?!

Elvir: Oh..? Do I mesmerize you?

Cooper: Just a little...

Lorenzo: Hey, man, I don't think this is the time to be thinking with the wrong head.

Elvir: Mmm... That's kind of cute and a slight turn-on. But flattery will get you nowhere. Showing up here was a big mistake!

Dew: I want that necklace back!

Elvir: I haven't forgotten about our fight from earlier... You and your friends really want that necklace back, huh? *(then pulls the talisman necklace from her hoodie pocket, taunting them with it before putting it away)* ...Nope!

Dew: I have no problem taking it back from you then... *(then raises his bo staff, pointing it at Elvir)*

Elvir: Like I'd just hand it over. Ha-ha... Three of you against all of us? The odds aren't exactly in your favor, mate.

Dew: I like those odds. Ready for another beating?

Elvir: Pfft. You're bloody stupid! Boys, get 'em..!

Narrator: Elvir and the fourteen Mantid Oscuro thugs charge at Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper. Ketcy watches amusedly, along with Mauvais and the three Capos, as the trio takes on the thugs. Despite being outnumbered, Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper manage to injure a few and knock out the rest until only Elvir remains. She proves to be a tougher opponent but is eventually defeated. Stumbling backward, she falls hard onto her rear.

Elvir: Awh... Dammit. Not again! Ugghghhhh... *(sitting on the floor, dumbfounded and dazed)*

Narrator: Dew walks toward Elvir, he removes the talisman necklace from her pocket.

Dew: ...Thanks.

Ketcy: *(begins to clap sarcastically)* Bravo. Bravo. Encore! Ha-ha-ha... *(then stops sarcastically clapping)* Wonderful..!

Lorenzo: Looks like your posse weren't strong enough for us after all. See, in the *Aurora Blade*, we pick quality over quantity...

Ketcy: *Aurora Blade*?! So, you're that famous gang from up north I've always heard about growing up. It all makes so much sense now... Ha-ha... No wonder why you've given me so much trouble. Most impressive. IT IS an honor to have you HERE in Llivisaca. You know, I'm having a change of heart all of a sudden. Maybe we can work together. I'll release your friend and my sister... and we'll run this province and Helix, TOGETHER. What'd you say?

Dew: I've seen what your rule has done to this place. I'll pass.

Lorenzo: Fuck that shit, man.

Cooper: I'm not interested either.

Ketcy: Oh... Ha-ha... So, you rather be a puppet doing the dirty work for the seneschal then?

Dew: We're not for sale, for him or you. We just happen to be passing through and willing to help clean up.

Narrator: Meanwhile, Elvir recovers from her dazed state and quietly drags herself away, slipping out of the penthouse suite unnoticed by the others through the stairway. The injured and unconscious *Mantid Oscuro* thugs remain sprawled across the suite floor.

Ketcy: ...You're not like those crooked judges, law enforcement officials, and politicians like the Burgomaster of the Llivisaca Northern Zone... the same ones we have in the palm of our hands... you've got standards, huh..? Maybe, we can have a good old-fashioned gang war instead? We haven't had fun like this in quite some time. Unlike those beltway pansies in the Helix Capital that you're accustomed to, here in Llivisaca – this is a whole new playing field. You're not going to get far here...

Lorenzo: Your gang is not much of a challenge for us, as you can see...

Narrator: Ketcy slowly creeps his right hand toward a button on the underside of his right armchair.

Dew: You should be helping the people of Llivisaca, not oppressing them! You're no different than the government dregs we fought against in the Helix Capital.

Ketcy: Really?! ...And who are you to tell me how this joint should be run? Bah..! Such improper etiquette, and here I am trying to be a good host. Well, I think that's that. I did offer... Thanks for "dropping" by...

Narrator: Ketcy then pushes the button on the underside of his right armchair that opens a trap door underneath Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper. All three fall into the dungeon below the restaurant. The trap door closes. Marquette faces the injured *Mantid Oscuro* thugs who have gotten back onto their feet.

Marquette: Get them up..! No sleeping on the job...

Narrator: The injured thugs comply and start reviving the still-unconscious ones.

Ketcy: ...Mauvais. Go inform the staff that we'll be closing a little early tonight. Things are about to get a little messy, and we don't need any witnesses lounging around... Also, be a pal and make sure those three are taken care of.

Mauvais: Right away, Scion... *(then looks over at the weakened bouncer still struggling to pull himself up from the floor)* What about him..?

Ketcy: Take him downstairs...

Narrator: Mauvais then bends down, scoops up the bouncer's body, lifts back up with him over his shoulder, and proceeds to walk toward the elevator.

Fischetto: What do you want us to do, Scion?

Ketcy: You three, remain here...

Narrator: All fourteen *Mantid Oscuro* thugs are then standing back on their feet. Some are collecting themselves.

Hookium: Hey..! What are you standing around for?! You heard the man... *(then gestures toward the elevator)* Go take care of business.

Narrator: The fourteen subservient *Mantid Oscuro* thugs then scurry behind Mauvais, who's still carrying the bouncer over his shoulder as he enters the elevator. Once inside, the elevator door closes, leaving Ketcy and the three Capos alone in the penthouse suite.

CHAPTER 6 – EAT THE RICH

Narrator: Some time passes, and Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper regain consciousness finding themselves in a dungeon area. Sore but not deterred, they slowly get back onto their feet.

Lorenzo: (*getting up*) Argh... “Dropping by” ... Hah!

Dew: He got us with that zinger for sure... What an asshole...

Cooper: Speaking of which... my hole is a little sore from that fall... Argh...

Dew: You’re gonna have to shake it off, buddy... we got to find a way out of here.

Narrator: Dew then checks on the tape recorder and is pleased to see it undamaged and still working.

Cooper: Why did you bring that tape recorder?

Dew: For evidence... for the seneschal...

Cooper: You’re always thinking ahead.

Lorenzo: This place looks massive...

Dew: Once we find an exit, we’ll head back to that third-floor suite...

Lorenzo: We’ll find out where Rena and Krista are at... Don’t worry.

Dew: With the best interrogator at my side, I don’t doubt that.

Lorenzo: Hey... my methods work...

Dew: Ha-ha... Let’s go...

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper then begin their search for an exit throughout the dungeon. After encountering several more *Mantid Oscuro thugs* who attempted to jump them, the three easily repel them. As they get closer to the exit, suddenly loud footsteps can be heard that vibrate throughout the dungeon room. The footsteps continue to get louder as they approach the three.

Cooper: ...What the?!

Dew: Be on guard...

Narrator: Then the medieval-style dungeon room door opens. Mauvais enters the room.

Cooper: ?! ...How’s the weather up there?

Lorenzo: This big ass motherfucker...

Mauvais: I not “motherfucker”. I, Mauvais...

Lorenzo: Mauvais? So, you’re him...

Mauvais: Yes. Heh-heh-heh... It's playtime!

Lorenzo: The fuck?!

Dew: I don't like the sound of that at all.

Lorenzo: ...Sounding kind of creepy there. What type of kinky shit are you into?!

Mauvais: Who you think you are?

Cooper: You meant to say, "Who do you think you are?"

Mauvais: You mock me?!

Cooper: No. More of a correction.

Dew: I think I don't want to play whatever games you have in mind... Now let us pass.

Mauvais: No pass ...I'm gonna stain fist with your blood. CRUNCH!!!

Lorenzo: Nah motherfucker, with the limited vocabulary, we're not some cereal you're going to crunch down on. I'm about to "snap," "crackle," and "POP" YOUR ASS, though!

Mauvais: Man not funny with lame comebacks and puns... Man and friends DIE NOW!!!

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper then draw their weapons and battle the brass knuckle-equipped Mauvais. During the fight, Lorenzo takes note of Mauvais' familiar fighting style, further raising his suspicions. The three eventually wear out Mauvais, causing him to come crashing down to the dungeon floor.

Mauvais: Ugghhhhhh... *(then passes out)*

Cooper: Playtime ended too fast for me...

Narrator: Lorenzo walks over to the unconscious Mauvais as Dew and Cooper head toward the exit.

Lorenzo: ...His fighting style... it's all too familiar... this is no coincidence...

Narrator: Dew stops and turns around to catch Lorenzo's attention.

Dew: Lorenzo. He's down for the count... Let's get out of here before he recovers...

Lorenzo: Yeah... I'm coming...

Narrator: Dew and the two then exit the dungeon area into a stairway. As they ascend the stairway, the three encounter a few more *Mantid Oscuro* thugs and easily defeat them. Meanwhile, Rena and Krista reach the third-floor penthouse suite. They both exit the elevator and walk mid-way into the suite only to then be confronted by the three Capos. A visibly frustrated

and shocked Ketcy is in the background near the exit of the suite to the rooftop garden.

Krista: Ketcy...

Ketcy: Whhhhhaat!?! You've escaped! H-how did you get up here?!

Krista: Easy. We beat your goon's asses.

Ketcy: Krista, you...

Fischetto: We got this boss.

Narrator: The three Capos then approach Krista and Rena.

Marquette: Well, looks who's back...

Hookium: ...The Scion should have let me deal with you years ago, deserter!

Krista: ...So you could only end up disappointing him?

Hookium: Fuckin' smart mouth bitch. I don't miss taking orders from you.

Fischetto: You always had tenacity, Krista... Your Helix friends weren't bad either. All of you would have made great additions to our "family," ...but they like you went with the latter.

Krista: Where are they?

Hookium: Busy. Maybe dead by now...

Rena: Dew...

Krista: You know, you can still turn yourselves in. Make it easy for you all. You don't have to do Ketcy's dirty work anymore... do your time, and get a fresh start on life again... as I did...

Fischetto: ...And, where's the fun in that?

Marquette: Sounds boring.

Hookium: What a square...

Marquette: It's time we end this... *(then grabs his push dagger from his back left pocket)* ...What do you both say?

Fischetto: *(pulls out her bladed tonfa's)* ...Let's do that.

Hookium: I was wondering when you were going to ask... *(then pulls out a steel baseball bat from his pants)* I've got a "hard-on" for you, Krista... Ha-ha...

Krista: Oh, please. From what I remember hearing, you could never "get it up".

Fischetto: Oooohhh... Ha-ha-ha...

Marquette: Damn. Ha-ha... She got you there with that one Hookium.

Hookium: Argh... enough banter..! *(pointing the steel baseball bat at Krista)* ...When we're done beating you Krista and your friend

there to a pulp, I can't wait to slap those cement shoes on you...

Krista: I'm warning all three of you... *(then draws her boomerang)*
Don't try it...

Hookium: *(strikes the steel baseball bat hard onto the suite floor)*
...They're going to look fabulous, ON YOUR CORPSE!!!

Narrator: The fight begins as the three Capos — Hookium, Fischetto, and Marquette — rush toward Krista and Rena with their weapons drawn. Rena wields her signature scythe with swift, precise movements, while Krista expertly maneuvers her razor-edged boomerang, keeping her distance and striking with deadly precision. Hookium charges with a heavy steel baseball bat, swinging with brute force, while Fischetto attacks aggressively, her bladed tonfa flashing in the light. Marquette, quick and deadly, attempts to close the gap, striking with a concealed push dagger. Fischetto, agile and relentless, strikes first, slashing at Krista with her tonfa. Marquette follows close behind, darting forward with swift, lethal jabs toward Rena. Hookium, towering over the others, hangs back momentarily, gripping his steel bat tightly, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. After a fierce exchange lasting several minutes, Krista and Rena begin to turn the tide. Rena knocks Marquette unconscious with a sweeping arc of her scythe, sending him crashing to the ground. Krista expertly disarms Fischetto with a well-placed throw of her boomerang, striking her hard and leaving her sprawled out and unconscious. Now alone, Hookium charges with a roar, swinging his steel bat with reckless strength. Krista and Rena coordinate their movements, dodging his heavy strikes. After a brutal back-and-forth, Rena lands a powerful blow with her scythe, knocking the bat from his hands, and Krista finishes him with a sharp throw of her boomerang to his chest. Hookium stumbles back and collapses, defeated. From afar, Ketcy watches the entire battle unfold with a mixture of disgust and disappointment, shaking his head at the failure of his Capos. Without saying a word, he calmly rises and exits the penthouse suite, heading for the rooftop garden. Wasting no time, Krista and Rena immediately pursue him, stepping out into the cool night air to confront him.

Krista: ...Ketcy. It's over. Time to give it up.

Ketcy: *(stops walking, and then turns around to face Krista and Rena)*
Ha-ha... That is not in my vocabulary, as you know. You may have given them a beating, but sister, I'm a different game than they are...

Narrator: Moments later, Mauvais enters the rooftop garden approaching Ketcy while dragging his injured left leg.

Mauvais: ...Scion.

Ketcy: Mauvais, what are you doing here?! Did you get rid of those three?

Mauvais: They got away... Mauvais fail...

Ketcy: Idiot! ...Well, forget about that. We have to finish off the present pest here.

Krista: Pest?! I'm your sister! Listen to what you are saying. Ketcy, stop this now before someone else gets hurt.

Ketcy: Sister...? We had it all, and then you went soft. You deserted me when I needed you!

Krista: You could have left along with me...

Ketcy: Right... And give up this power...? No way! I would never go back to being impoverished!

Krista: Sad... *(then shakes her head in disapproval)*

Ketcy: Are you kidding me?! Have you forgotten how hard we had it before all of this? Or... wait, this is a trick. You never loved me at all... You want the power I have. I see now... I've been too merciful... blinded... You will NOT TAKE it from me!

Krista: All those *Coca-flakes* you've been doping up on over the years have finally taken their toll. I was living my life peacefully, free from all this regret - until your goons decided to mug some photographer and then steal my friend's necklace. I have no interest in your so-called "power." That's the last thing I want... Look at yourself... you've lost it.

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper then enter the rooftop garden after exiting the penthouse suite. The three run-up to confront Ketcy and the injured Mauvais.

Cooper: Surprise...

Lorenzo: ...You couldn't keep us down!

Dew: Now where were we..?

Ketcy: You're becoming an annoyance now...

Dew: And you're going down for all your crimes.

Ketcy: Oh? Ha-ha-ha... How do you plan on doing that? Nobody will believe you. WE RUN THIS JOINT! We're untouchable...

Narrator: Dew then pulls out the tape recorder from his front right pant pocket, and then plays back Ketcy incriminating himself on it. Ketcy becomes flush-faced.

Ketcy: ...You cheeky little monkey!

Narrator: The three then notice Krista and Rena off to the side.

Dew: Rena!

Rena: There you are, Dew.

Dew: *(placing the tape recorder back into his front right pant pocket)* ...Are you okay?

Rena: I am. Dew, I'm so glad to see you again...

Narrator: Dew and Rena then embrace for a short passionate hug. Moments later, they pull back from hugging.

Dew: You two went missing... and we found our way here thinking we would find you both.

Rena: Krista was nice enough to try to get back my necklace... I followed her, and that didn't turn out so well. We were somewhere else, but here we are... safe and sound.

Dew: I'm glad you're both safe.

Rena: Likewise, Dew.

Dew: How did you know where we were at?

Rena: After Krista and I escaped from our imprisonment, we made it back to the inn... You guys really tore that place up. I can only imagine how pricey those repairs are going to be. Anyway, the innkeeper told us you had headed here, so we got here as soon as we could. By the looks of it, you three handled business pretty well...

Lorenzo: Naturally...

Cooper: By the way, Krista, your brother here is a dick.

Krista: My brother?! Oh... so you know about that... I...

Lorenzo: Yeah, we do.

Krista: I should've mentioned it earlier... I'm sorry. But it's not like I anticipated everything happening the way it did tonight.

Lorenzo: No judgment here...

Dew: Rena, I have something for you...

Narrator: Dew digs into the front right pocket of his pants, pulls out the talisman necklace, and hands it to Rena. She smiles softly and places it back around her neck.

Rena: ...Dew, you're always my hero. Thank you.

Ketcy: Ahem... Helloooo. We're still here.

Narrator: Dew and the others turn their attention to Ketcy and Mauvais.

Mauvais: I held back before... Me student of Aquagonla doesn't go down easily...

Lorenzo: "Student of Aquagonla"?! The fighting style... there's no other way these thugs could have learned that... you... you're him... his first... student...

Mauvais: ...Way you fight... you learn from Aquagonla too?

Lorenzo: I did, and he passed away years ago.

Mauvais: Aquagonla rest in peace...

Lorenzo: How did you two meet?

Mauvais: I bastard child of Aquagonla... he said I dishonored teachings when I killed a man... killed man... killed many others for sport... for money... Father... Aquagonla shunned me... abandoned Mauvais at twenty-three... I not wrong... he was wrong..! Mauvais strong! Mauvais survivor..!

Lorenzo: No. You're wrong. This is not the way our master wanted his teachings to be used. You're dishonoring his legacy!

Mauvais: Me will honor him, with your death! You won't beat up me, like last time. CRUNCH!

Lorenzo: Don't bet on it! I feel a repeat coming on...

Ketcy: To think that six years of my hard work is to be undone by you sister... and you, *Aurora Blade* scum in a single day... *(then points at Dew and Cooper)* ... by two assholes armed with a shower rod and a mop beating up on my goons... It's laughable... yet so infuriating!!!

Krista: Ha-ha... Gosh Ketcy, what an embarrassing way to go out. And here I am now, just noticing my friends with a mop and shower rod as their weapons.

Dew: It's not a shower rod. It's a bo staff...

Ketcy: IT DOESN'T MATTER! Fuck you! Fuck you all and this WORLD..! I won't allow it... *(then draws his boomerang)*

Krista: Ketcy, you brought this on yourself. But it doesn't have to be like this...

Ketcy: My sister, you're right... it doesn't... but it will. *(then faces Dew and the others)* For your information, Krista here is just as bad as I am. Dousing vendor carts with kerosene, beating

up honest, hard-working vendors for being late with their protection payments... you took so much joy in it. I remember that. You even held up a convenience store clerk with a ketchup bottle... Ha-ha... Crazy as a bedbug, you are!

Krista: First off, it was a mustard bottle. And—

Rena: No. Stop... I may not have known Krista for long, but whatever more her past entails, it's irrelevant now. She's no longer the person you speak of. Unlike you, Ketcy, she's moved on. My father used to tell me, "*Exculpate your past, revel in your present, and yield and entrust yourself to the future.*" She may not want to be part of your so-called "family" of miscreants, but we'll happily be hers — if she wants that — with open, non-judgmental, and loving arms.

Krista: Rena... wow... that's so nice of you...

Dew: She's right, Krista. I'm here for you too.

Lorenzo: Me too.

Cooper: Yep. All of us...

Rena: I meant every single word. I'm sorry you got dragged into this mess, but thank you again for going out of your way to try to get my necklace back...

Krista: I'm not sorry. Things happen for a reason. And you're welcome. Anytime for you, my... friend. *(then cracks a smile)*

Ketcy: Ha-ha-ha... *(sarcastically)* "How touching." *(then gestures with two fingers toward his slightly opened mouth)* Gag me with a spoon... *(then drops his hand)* Fine, Krista. You can be with them. I never needed you anyway. It's time to put the past behind me too... and there's only one way to do that for good. Only one of us is walking away from this tonight. You've overstayed your welcome, *Aurora Blade*. Eat the rich. Let's do this shit.

Narrator: With the full moon and the shimmering cityscape lights of Llivisaca's Southern Zone gleaming in the background, Dew, Krista, and the others draw their weapons, readying themselves for battle against Ketcy and Mauvais. Several *Mantid Oscuro* thugs attempt to interfere, but they are swiftly and decisively dispatched by Dew and his team. The fight intensifies. After a fierce exchange, Mauvais is worn down and eventually knocked unconscious by a crushing blow from Lorenzo. Realizing the battle is turning against him, Ketcy digs

into the front pocket of his blazer, pulls out a Coca-flake capsule, flicks it into his mouth, and swallows it whole. Instantly, a surge of raw power and speed courses through him, amplifying his strength and reflexes. Now faster and more aggressive, Ketcy brandishes his own boomerang, using it with brutal skill as he fights off Dew, Rena, Cooper, and Lorenzo all at once. For a moment, it seems like the tide could shift. But Krista steps forward, boomerang in hand. Timing her strike perfectly, she clashes against Ketcy mid-throw, her boomerang colliding with his in midair before curving back and striking him squarely in the chest. Ketcy stumbles backward, dropping his weapon, before collapsing to the ground — defeated.

Ketcy: ...My ...p-p-power ...Guaaaaah!!!

Narrator: Ketcy, still on the ground, drags himself toward a nearby railing on the rooftop garden, struggling to pull himself upright. Meanwhile, Lorenzo stands over the unconscious Mauvais, a look of pity mixed with quiet satisfaction on his face.

Lorenzo: That's two times now... There will be no defiling of our master's teachings — not today, not ever!

Narrator: Krista rushes over to check on her fallen brother, who now lies sprawled across the rooftop garden floor, his head partially propped against one of the vertical railing bars. She quickly kneels beside him, concern etched across her face.

Krista: Ketcy, you bugged out... you sure it wasn't the *Coca-flakes* or what..?

Ketcy: Ah... Ha-ha... a little bit of that, and... bitterness... (*exhales deeply*)

Krista: I always told you, taking those things was never good for you... Save your strength.

Ketcy: This is... how the ride ends..? (*cough*) (*cough*) ...Shit.... You got me good...

Krista: Ketcy, you'll be fine. I'll get you medical attention... don't worry.

Ketcy: All those memories... all the bad... and all the good times we had... together... We really did drift apart, huh?

Krista: Yeah.

Narrator: Sirens from multiple approaching SWAT TROOPER patrol cars can then be heard from afar.



- Ketcy: Look at... what I have become... all the power ...the money ...the drugs... it deluded me... (cough) (cough) made me just like our parents... but worse...
- Krista: Don't say that... you're still here, aren't you?
- Ketcy: I'm not so sure about that anymore...
- Krista: Hey. Even after I left, and we were apart, I still loved you Ketcy. That never changed... and I won't be losing you like we did our parents.
- Ketcy: You still loved... your big brother, after all of this..? (cough) (cough)
- Narrator: The SWAT TROOPER patrol car's sirens grow louder as they approach the Pendragon. Ketcy slightly tilts his head in their direction.
- Ketcy: I guess... I'll be... going away for... (cough) a long time...

Krista: It looks like it... it's the only right thing to do now... but I'll be here for you always... waiting for you to return... no matter how long that takes... through thick and thin... that's what family does for one another... *(then smiles)*

Ketcy: Krista... I'm... I'm looking... forward to that... and thanks again, for... stopping by... Uggghh...

Narrator: Ketcy loses consciousness just as a group of SWAT TROOPER patrol vehicles arrive and pull up to the Pendragon. The scene pans up into the midnight sky and fades to black. The scene cuts to the next afternoon, Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper are seen walking toward the Northern Zone gate exit of Llivi-saca. As they walk, they converse amongst themselves.

Cooper: After last night, I barely got any sleep...

Rena: I'm exhausted too...

Dew: After all that excitement, it was a night to remember for sure.

Rena: ...Then again... the day wasn't so bad either, huh, Dew?

Dew: *(while still walking, he turns his head to face Rena with a smile)* ...No it wasn't bad at all. It was my favorite part, actually...

Lorenzo: Ohhh, yeah... that's right... Sooooo... Did you two fuck?

Narrator: Rena then blushes.

Dew: Wow... Really, Lorenzo?!

Cooper: Ha-ha-ha... you are a blunt one...

Lorenzo: What..? What'd I say wrong? We're all adults here... Care to share the details? Hmm..? Hmm?

Rena: Some things aren't meant to be spoken of... a lady can have her secrets.

Dew: Sorry, buddy. My lips are sealed...

Lorenzo: Ahhh... I tried. You two are no fun!

Rena: Ha-ha...

Lorenzo: Anyway... I wish we had more time here... I would have loved to see more of the place...

Cooper: Although it was a short stay, we did a lot of good here.

Dew: Yes, we did. Now, with the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* out of commission and getting the talisman necklace back, we can start our pursuit of Thornton.

Cooper: Yes. That's critical... our monetary reward for our efforts from the seneschal will come in handy...

Lorenzo: We got money... but no ride... ain't nothing wrong with walking, I guess...

Cooper: It's good exercise... and fresh air...

Rena: ...I'm going to miss Krista...

Lorenzo: You know what I won't miss?

Rena: What's that..?

Lorenzo: That damn Lychee boba tea! Fuck, it was soooo delicious... but wrecked my guts.

Narrator: Dew, Rena, and Cooper then break out in laughter at Lorenzo's expense. Meanwhile, Krista appears running up from behind, trying to catch up to the four.

Krista: (*running up*) ...Hey, guys! Hey, wait! Wait up...

Dew: Huh?! (*then turns around and stops walking*)

Rena: (*turns around and stops walking as Lorenzo and Cooper do*) Krista, it's you..?! What are you doing here?

Krista: I'm glad you didn't leave yet...

Dew: What's up?

Krista: Has anyone ever told you all, you walk fast? Goddamn... So, long story short, I want to come along with you, guys.

Lorenzo: Really?!

Krista: Yeah.

Dew: What about your job?

Krista: Mr. Rainer has no problems with this. Seeing how I've been paid in full and still indefinitely assigned to you guys, where you go, I go. You'll need a tour guide. My knowledge extends way beyond Llivisaca's borders.

Dew: Krista, I appreciate the interest. But you've done enough, and it'll be dangerous.

Krista: You're so considerate to have concerns. But don't worry about me. I can take care of myself pretty well, as you have seen. Now with Ketcy, the Northern Zone Burgomaster, and most of the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* members rounded up, and behind bars, the seneschal has regained control of the province again. While there are a few of them still on the loose, I'm sure in time, they'll all be caught too... Plus, this journey you're all going on, I see it also as a well-deserved break for myself from Llivisaca.

Dew: This journey of ours is a little more than a "vacation."
...There's no telling when you'll be back home here. But, hey,

why not? If you insist... After all, you did go out of your way to help us out when you didn't have to.

Rena: Yes, she did. I'm forever grateful for that, Krista.

Krista: Ah, don't mention it.

Dew: Okay. Well, let's put this to a group vote... So, are there any objections to Krista joining us?

Lorenzo: I'm cool with her tagging along.

Cooper: Having a tour guide will be helpful on our journey. She should come.

Dew: ...And Rena. What do you say?

Rena: Absolutely. We did kick a lot of asses together, huh, Krista?

Krista: It's the most fun I've had in a long time.

Rena: ...And it'll be nice to have another female around.

Krista: That's always good to have... your group was kind of looking like a huge sausage fest. The more diverse, the better, I say.

Dew: I guess that settles it then. 4 "yeas" and 0 "nays." Welcome aboard, Krista.

Krista: Awesome!

Cooper: It's nice to have you join us, officially.

Krista: Thanks for having me ya'll. By the way, Dew, I'll try not to talk your heads off into boredom.

Dew & Rena: Please no..!

Krista: Goodness?! Ha-ha... Very well, then. Hmm... *(then turns around to stare off into the distant cityscape of Llivisaca's Northern Zone)* ... Goodbye, sweet home, Llivisaca. I'll be gone for a while... you'll always be in my heart... no matter how far away I am... I'll think of you... I'll think of Ketcy... that sweet ass Lychee boba tea... Mmmm...

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* I won't... fuck that boba tea...

Krista: ...and all the others... I'll be back when I can...

Narrator: Krista then blows a kiss at the distant Llivisaca's Northern Zone cityscape. She shuts her eyes, inhales, and smiles briefly. After that, she opens her eyes and turns around to face Dew and the others.

Dew: Ready to go?

Krista: Yes.

Dew: All right then. Off we'll go...

Krista: But... we're not walking the entire way, are we?

Dew: Uh. That was kind of the plan...

Krista: Ha-ha... You guys are hardcore... Tsk, tsk, tsk... What would you guys do without me? Hold on... I'll be back... (*then turns around and runs off*)

Lorenzo: Where is she going..?

Rena: I don't know...

Cooper: What now?

Dew: I guess we'll wait for her to come back...

Narrator: As the confused four patiently wait, moments later, an RV can be seen in the distance driving toward them as the air horn blows three consecutive times. The RV then begins to decelerate as it comes into range. It then comes to a complete stop six feet away from Dew and the others. The engine is still running as the shift gears to "Park."

Lorenzo: Who's this?

Dew: I don't know...

Narrator: Dew and the others curiously approach the RV, walking toward the entrance door. The RV entrance door then flies open, with Krista standing in the doorway.

Rena: Krista..?

Krista: ...Need a lift?

Dew: Where'd you get this from?

Krista: What do you mean? It's my home. Welcome to the *Tor*.

Cooper: The *Tor*? ...You live in an RV?

Krista: Yea. You try living in Llivisaca. It's ungodly expensive.

Rena: Talk about "taking your work home with you..."

Dew: Is this going to fit all of us?

Krista: Don't let the looks fool you. The *Tor* has a capacity of twelve people maximum. It's got a full-sized kitchen including a booth dinette that converts to extra sleeping space, the bunkhouse, a living room, and a washroom with a shower.

Lorenzo: All that in there!?! No way...

Krista: Yes, way... I'll take care of the driving. Just tell me where you want to go.

Dew: To be honest, I don't know where IS. We're just kinda winging this.

Krista: Winging it, huh? That's more of the adventure, then. I recalled overhearing you guys earlier, saying you were looking for someone named Thornton. He must be a bad dude, huh?

Dew: You can say that.

Krista: ...When we get close to civilization, we'll make a stop and check out those areas. We might run into this Thornton guy that you're looking for in one of those places. Sound good?

Dew: Sounds about right.

Krista: Good. In the meantime, you all just make yourselves at home... tv dinners are thawing out in the fridge... Well, are you guys just going to stand out there, or what? Come on in... *(then walks away from the open entrance door to the cockpit)*

Lorenzo: Well, it may not be an airship, but... it's better than walking... *(then enters through the RV entrance door, steps inside, and looks around)* Oh shit... Krista wasn't lying... it's nice in here... Oh, and that AC... feeling gooooooooddd...

Cooper: Hmm... Traveling in comfort, it is... *(then enters through the RV entrance door)*

Krista: *(shouting)* Last person on, shut the door..! Also, please buckle up! The ride is gonna be a little bumpy...

Rena: It's a little shabby looking... but it'll be a fun ride. You're ready, Dew?

Dew: More than ever.

Rena: See you inside... *(then enters through the RV entrance door)*

Dew: Time to do this...

Narrator: Dew enters through the RV entrance door and then shuts and locks it behind him. Krista sitting in the cockpit buckled in, then shifts the RV gear to “Drive” and proceeds to speed off, exiting Llivisaca and beginning their journey through the Mesovilla Eastern region landscape.



CHAPTER 7 -A LEAP OF FAITH

- Narrator: The scene starts as Dew dreams of his first day of training at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy. He is standing at attention in a line formation with several other recruits in a hangar. A SWAT TROOPER ELITE drill instructor and two high-ranking SWAT TROOPER ELITE Soldiers enter the hangar. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE drill instructor then begins talking as he eyes the four rows of recruits that he walks past.
- STE Drill Instructor: Welcome ... Welcome, Recruits. Welcome to the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy... You have chosen selflessly to give up your comfort and rights as a civilian to represent our great country... you've been bestowed with the honor of protecting our nation when called on... Discipline, Essence, and Vigor- are the hallmarks of a SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier... Your training will be harsh - mentally and physically... but through those upcoming trials, your resolve will be strengthened, and an unstoppable force of justice you will become... Forget what you've been taught... what you may think is "right" and "wrong"... From this point onward, we are your "guiding light"... your family... United in our cause... to maintain global stability and order... always upholding moral integrity through the most adverse situations... completing the mission at hand no matter the risk, only for the "greater good"... and, as a family... we're always there for one another... and never leaving a person behind...
- Narrator: The scene then cuts back to the present time. It's evening, and Dew is seen asleep in the booth dinette area, still sitting upright with his head leaning against the RV's windowpane. Rena, who's sleeping, also has her head resting on his shoulders. The two are holding hands. Dew then begins to slowly awaken to blue

grass music playing on the RV radio and the sounds of the engine humming.

Dew: Mmm...

Narrator: Dew turns his head and briefly looks over at Rena. His slight body movement then awakens her.

Rena: ...Mmm... Dew...

Dew: ...Hey there....

Rena: ...Hi... (*yawn*)...

Dew: Don't do that... it's contagious... (*then yawns*)...

Rena: Sorry...

Dew: What a rest that... was... it felt like I slept forever. Did you sleep well..?

Narrator: Dew continues to hold onto Rena's hand as she still has her head resting on his shoulder. He leans his head against hers.

Rena: Yes... Dew, you look so at peace... when you're sleeping.

Dew: Well, you might be the reason for that...

Rena: Ha-ha... Oh? So, did you have any good dreams..?

Dew: It wasn't anything of importance... I wish it were of you...

Rena: (*smiles*) Oh... well, the real-life version of me is better anyway.

Dew: I believe that... I wouldn't have it any other way...

Narrator: The scene pans over the booth dinette as Cooper stares at the two from the RV's kitchen area while standing and eating a grilled cheese sandwich quietly.

Rena: Ha-ha... Oh, Dew...

Dew: We've... must have... passed out... How long have we been asleep..?

Cooper: It's been seven hours...

Narrator: Dew and Rena are startled, letting go of each other hands, and both then rise from the booth dinette.

Rena: Cooper?!

Cooper: Wakey, wakey... (*continues to snack on the grilled cheese sandwich*)

Dew: ...Really, man?!

Cooper: What..? Oh, don't mind me. I'm just here enjoying this grilled cheese sandwich... (*snacking on the grilled cheese sandwich*)

Dew: It seems like you were enjoying more than that sandwich...

Rena: H-How long... have you been standing there watching us?

Cooper: Only for five minutes. And yes, Rena, he does look so at peace when he's asleep. It reminds me of when we were in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE together...

Dew: What?! You know... I'm not even going to ask...

Rena: That is so creepy.

Cooper: Nonsense. Just pretend I'm not even here... it's okay... *(still snacking on the grilled cheese sandwich)*

Dew: Kinda hard to do that when you're right there snacking away...

Cooper: Who are you talking to, Dew? You must be talking to this floating grilled cheese sandwich... because I'm invisible... *(then waves his right hand, palm side in front of his eyes three times)* "Can't see me" ...

Dew: This clown...

Rena: We can see you...

Cooper: Un-uhh.

Dew: Yep.

Cooper: Just use your imagination... you gotta believe...

Dew: ...Maybe take the grilled cheese sandwich and go elsewhere?

Cooper: *(then closes his eyes)* See, I'm totally "not here" ...

Narrator: Lorenzo then enters the RV kitchen area, walking past Cooper to the refrigerator.

Lorenzo: Hey Cooper, what ya got there..? A grilled cheese sandwich..?

Cooper: Aah! *(then opens his eyes)* ...He can see me. Goddammit... *(then finishes eating the grilled cheese sandwich feeling defeated)*

Narrator: As Lorenzo digs around in the refrigerator, the RV begins to decelerate and then comes to a stop.

Lorenzo: Huh?! Why'd we stop..? *(then closes the refrigerator door with nothing in hand)*

Cooper: Beats me...

Narrator: Krista shifts gears to "Park," clicks off the radio, turns the key to the off position, removes it from the ignition, puts away the small keychain that holds the RV key and entrance door key in her right-side pocket, and then exits the RV's cockpit to the kitchen area.

Dew: Everything okay, Krista?

Krista: Yeah... I just need a little break... I've been driving for nearly nine hours...

Rena: It's been nine hours already?!

Krista: Yep.

Dew: You know Krista, we could take turns driving, so it's not all on you...

Krista: Kind of you to offer that Dew. But I'm at all your service.

Rena: Have you eaten yet? I feel bad for asking since we've been eating up your food.

Krista: Oh, don't feel bad. I'm glad to share. I ate about two hours ago... had some fruit snacks and grilled cheese sandwiches Cooper made. He's a good cook.

Cooper: Thank you kindly.

Lorenzo: ...When did you make grilled cheese sandwiches?

Cooper: As you were asleep, drooling in the recliner under the AC.

Lorenzo: Yeah... that was a good sleep... I felt like a baby... nice and cold... but... dammit! I missed out on that!!!

Cooper: Don't worry, I'll cook you, Dew, and Rena some more later.

Krista: *(looking around in amazement at how clean and organized everything is)* I see you're keeping the place clean too... Cooper, you're wonderful. I can never find the time or care to do the dishes or those other daunting chores.

Cooper: It's like they say, "Happiness is a clean and organized home" ... I got you covered.

Krista: I appreciate that...

Dew: Krista, how far along are we?

Krista: Oh. We're halfway through the Salemanca Hills. The closest place to civilization is Masaya village... That's another five hours from here.

Dew: Masaya village?

Krista: Yes. It's one of those small settlements that's not on any official map... It's been around for thirty years. There are several others like it.

Dew: Really? Hmm... I learned something new. But it's not too far away... I think it's a good time for a break as you suggested.

Rena: Getting some fresh air wouldn't hurt at all...

Lorenzo: I am feeling a little cooped up here.

Cooper: I do need to stretch a bit...

Krista: While we're at it, we could do some exploring of the area.

Dew: I'm not opposed to that, although it is dark out.

Rena: ...And that makes it more of an adventure. Count me in.

Krista: I like your sense of adventure, Rena.

Cooper: No need to be afraid of the dark, Dew.

Dew: It's not because of that...

Lorenzo: So, we doing this, or what..?

Dew: Meh... Why not... Let's not stray too far away from the *Tor*, okay?

Krista: We won't. Ready?

Dew: Always...

Krista: Great..! Let's do it...

Narrator: Dew and the others exit the RV as Krista pulls out her key-chain. She uses the RV entrance door key to lock it. Dew and the others then begin exploring the surrounding area of Salemanca Hills. During their exploration, the party engages in several battles with some of the wildlife - but fends off the threats with ease. Two hours pass and the group gets caught up in the first splatter of an incoming heavy rainstorm. They run and take shelter at a nearby citadel ruin. Drenched and exhausted, they come to a stop surveying the ruins in awe and curiosity.

Dew: So much for not straying away from the *Tor*...

Krista: ...Soggy clothes and socks never feel good... Eww...

Rena: It's really coming down heavy out there...

Cooper: ...Guess we'll be stuck here for a bit, huh?

Dew: Looks like it...

Krista: Well, I, for one, can really use a break from the random fights with the wildlife we've been having... And what's up with that..? I've never seen the animals here act so aggressively like that before...

Lorenzo: Eh. It's fuckin' nature. It's unpredictable... at least they're not mutants...

Krista: Huh..?

Lorenzo: Oh. Never mind...

Cooper: What... is this place..?

Lorenzo: From the looks of it, it must be some sort of citadel... or was... Hah... it's keeping us dry from that rain... that's all I care about...

Rena: Hmm... that it does.

Krista: Could it be..? What chance this is...

Dew: What?

Krista: ...This place is the citadel ruins of Gerent Yersinia Mor Kataktitis. Are any of you familiar with his story?

Dew: Who isn't..?

Cooper: So, this is THE place...

Rena: ...

Lorenzo: What are you talkin' about..?

Krista: You're not familiar?!

Lorenzo: Am I supposed to be..? I didn't have the best school attendance growing up. I was too busy hustling and trying to stay alive.

Narrator: Dew finds a spot on the citadel ruin floor and sits down, as Cooper remains standing. Dew and Cooper continue to remain silent, listening to Krista and Lorenzo's conversation. Rena walks toward one of the citadel ruins pillars. She examines it briefly before leaning her back against it.

Krista: ...I didn't go to school much myself either, but this is common knowledge. Have you not read the Vademecum?

Lorenzo: Not much of it...

Krista: Really..?

Lorenzo: Ehh...

Krista: Oh wow... Well... while we wait for this storm to fade, then I guess I'll play storyteller... Hundreds of years before Mesovilla became a unified country; the five present-day provinces were once six segregated ethnic kingdoms of their own. The six kingdoms would still trade with each other and maintain friendly and peaceful relations. That is until Yersinia succeeded his 16-year-old brother, Ayin, after his untimely death. After becoming the new Gerent, he appointed his pet sloth, Kassidi, to the royal consul.

Lorenzo: The hell..?

Narrator: Meanwhile, Rena is still leaning against the pillar, apathetic to Krista and Lorenzo's conversation. She is fixated on the rainfall outside the ruins.

Krista: ...It gets crazier... Yersinia would proclaim that he was the last "pure-blooded" Priscus, and that all ginger-haired people were the "super race".

Lorenzo: ...A Priscus..?

Krista: Yes, the very same ancient civilization that went extinct 25,000 years ago.



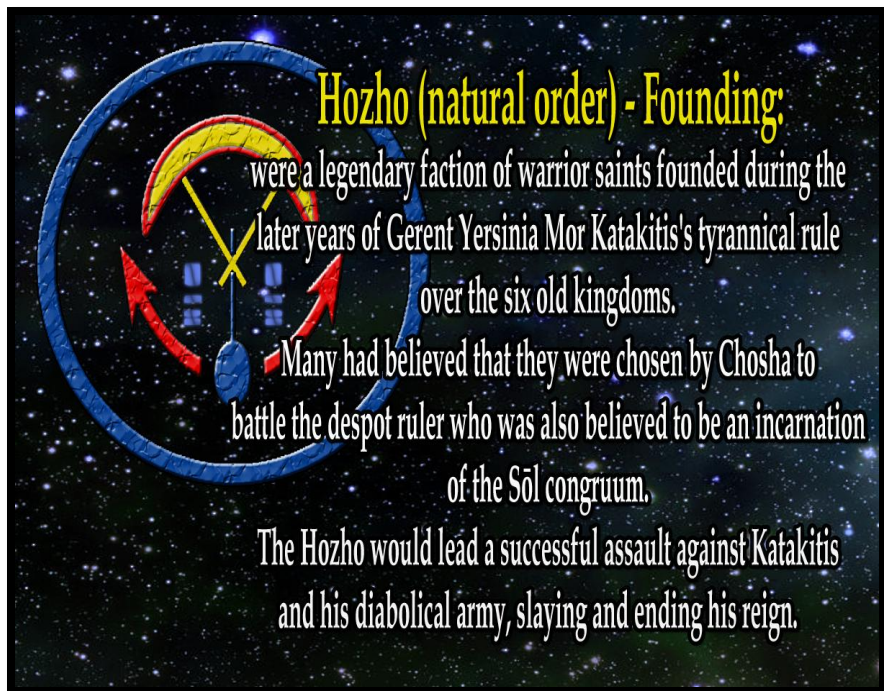
Lorenzo: (sarcastically) ...He totally sounded like a “sane” guy.

Narrator: The rainfall continues to intensify as the wind begins to pick up, making a whirling noise.

Krista: ...Yersinia would then embark on a massive military campaign of ethnic cleansing, wiping out 65% of the five nations' inhabitants and acquiring their land. A few escaped captivity and would band together to rebel against Yersinia years later. Those who didn't would suffer a worse fate. Those captured were forced into slavery to endure strenuous labor to the benefit of expanding Yersinia's empire. The others, such as the Women and adolescent girls deemed healthy and fit, would be made into comfort women. Once it was felt that they served their purpose, they would be killed off. Also, many disabled and ill would become unwilling participants in the death-style matches against Yersinia's military elites as

entertainment. Many did believe that Yersinia was the prophesied Söl Congruum...

- Narrator: As Krista mentions the name "Söl Congruum", suddenly everyone and everything around Rena - from the rainfall to the howling wind becomes inaudible. Rena then hears a faint echo of an ethereal, feminine humming. It sounds strangely familiar. She agitatedly scans her surroundings with her eyes looking from left to right, then right to left for the source of the humming. The humming then stops, and everything is audible as before. Rena, unsure of what just happened with a blank stare, whispered to herself while looking at the rainfall.
- Rena: (*whispering to herself*) ...*The one who brings chaos, order, and bliss...*
- Lorenzo: Wait, a second... Dew, didn't Thornton mention something about a Renascence and the Söl Congruum..?
- Dew: I recall that he did...
- Cooper: I'm still trying to figure out what he meant by all that babble...
- Krista: Interesting. And this is the guy you're all searching for?
- Dew: Yeah...
- Krista: I see... Before I met you all, I had this one client who was all decked out in a cloak on one of my tours. He was mumbling something incoherent and handing out leaflets about a "Renascence of the Söl Congruum"...
- Dew: I do remember you mentioning something about that when you burst into your boss's office.
- Krista: It sounds like to me, this Thornton guy might be involved in some way with this cult that I've heard about lately. Hmm... Now, what did they call themselves..? Was it... *Bush of Life*? ...I think it was...
- Dew: I'm not certain...
- Cooper: If that's the case, then what the heck is he doing with them?
- Dew: We'll find out soon once we come across him...
- Krista: Hmm... Anyway. Yersinia's reign lasted for seven years until he was defeated and slain by a group of warrior saints known as the *Hozho*. His body would never be found because, allegedly, the Earth had opened and swallowed him whole that day.
- Lorenzo: ...The Earth swallowed him up! That sounds a little silly... you believe that?



Krista: Yes.

Lorenzo: Tch.

Krista: ...After his death, the old world would know peace again, and Mesovilla, as we know it today, would be eventually formed.

Lorenzo: Hmm...

Krista: If you think about it... Yersinia wasn't too different at all from the ancient Priscus. The blinding lust for power and relentless abuse of knowledge... led to their downfall ultimately. Of course, humankind wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the two surviving Priscus.

Lorenzo: Adan and Leva...

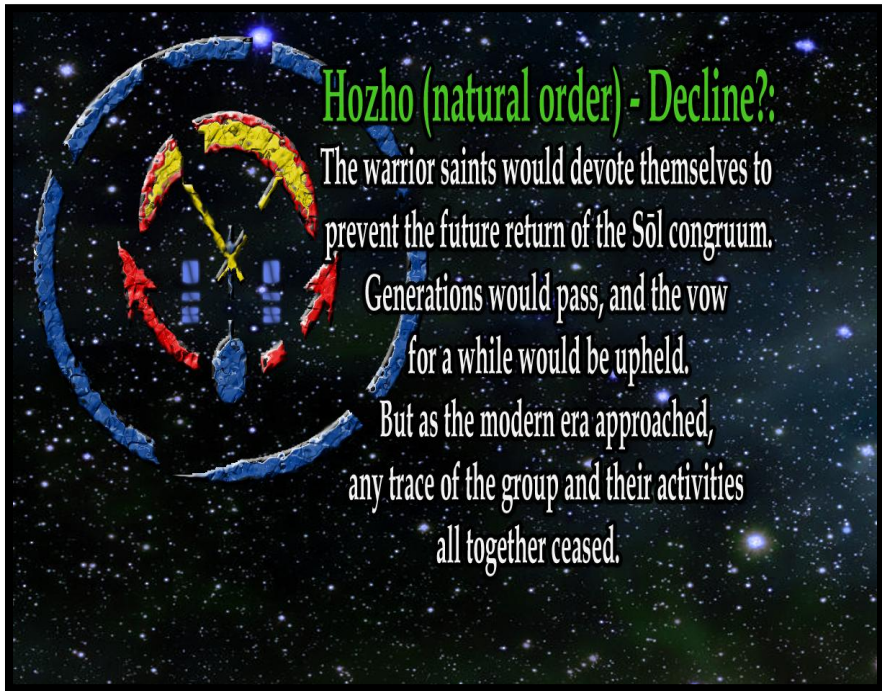
Krista: Correct... Chosha spared their lives so they could repopulate and bring bliss back to the world... the second nascency.

Lorenzo: Chosha... Pfft.

Krista: Yes. "Our Higher Power". "The Great Author". "Prime Mover"... I take it that you're not a believer.

Lorenzo: When you're growing up on the streets trying to survive, as I

said before – fables and some “sky daddy” isn't on your mind. I can't say Chosha was ever there for me when I needed 'em the most... Chosha wasn't there when my brother was murdered... or the countless others I've lost...



- Krista: You can't blame Chosha for humans acting out on their own free will which affect others... that's on them.
- Lorenzo: Like hell, I can...! For an almighty being, it's irresponsible to allow your alleged creations to do reckless things.
- Krista: But isn't that the point of free will, being able to make choices? With those choices come consequences too.
- Lorenzo: ...Yeah. And those choices can also be an unnecessary burden on others who didn't ask to be affected by them...
- Narrator: As it continues to rain heavily, lightning suddenly flashes in the evening sky, followed up moments later by the sound of crashing thunder heard from afar.
- Krista: ...I'm sorry for your past losses... I'm not going to pretend to understand what you've been through Lorenzo... this world has been pretty cruel to me also, as you know... but through my

faith with every waking moment, I do my best like so many others to make this world a better place... to be better than those who did me wrong... to be better than what I was yesterday... to take the good from the bad, and make it work... from every meaningful deed I do to giving a simple smile that hopefully brightens up someone's day... to some, those things might seem insignificant... but it can go a long way... that's what I choose to do... to bring a piece of empyrean to Earth...

Lorenzo: Fair enough...

Krista: I've always found it fascinating... dwelling on the wonders of life and the universe... It's been said before all life was conceived - there was nothing more than a blank slate... Then Chosha came into existence... Chosha's body is the universe, Chosha's soul is the plane of the hereafter, Chosha's heart is the Earth, Sun, Moon, Stars, and all other planets, and Chosha's mind was the afflatus that started it all... you could say, we're all just riding along in this "celestial vessel" called life...

Lorenzo: So Chosha just "magically" created the Priscus and all of this into existence then? Poof! Just like that, huh? ...So, what happens to all the damned souls? Do they go to the hereafter?

Krista: It's said that all damned souls get flushed out Chosha's cosmic anus into the endless watery void of no return. The rest enjoy a period in the hereafter until they're reincarnated to begin a new cycle of life.

Lorenzo: Reincarnation..? *(then thinks to himself)* ...Estiven *could have been reborn as a butterfly, or "Mamie" as a dog... (whispering to himself)* ...*If that's all true...* Sweet shit..!

Narrator: Then there is a short moment of silence as the whole party looks off into the distance at the heavy downpour. Moments later, the rain and wind then begin to lessen and come to a stop. Steam is then seen slowly rising from the grass, drifting off into the night sky. Rena is broken out of her trance and then turns to the group.

Rena: Well, it looks like the rain has finally let up...

Dew: Umm...

Cooper: Thank Chosha! I thought it would never stop.

Krista: That's the end of story time, I guess...

Lorenzo: Hey, Krista.

Krista: Yes, Lorenzo..?



- Lorenzo: I'm not the religious type at all... I find it to be irrational and not worth my time pondering about things like that... but it wouldn't hurt to be open-minded when it comes to having a little faith... I suppose... What I'm trying to say is... thanks for sharing the good word, Krista...
- Krista: It was my pleasure... Anyway, we should make our way back to the *Tor* before the rain starts again. Trust me, the weather here in the hills can be unpredictable.
- Cooper: I'm with you on that.
- Rena: Fun exploring... wasn't it? *(cracks a smile, and then walks off toward the exit of the citadel ruin)*
- Dew: I'm ready to head back. Let's go...
- Narrator: Dew and the others then exit the citadel ruins. An hour later, the group makes their way back to the parked RV. Krista walks ahead toward the RV's entrance door as she grabs the key-chain from her right-side pocket. She stops at the entrance door, then puts the key into the keyhole, attempting to unlock it. To her puzzlement, she finds that the door is already unlocked. Dew and the others catch up and come to a stop.

Dew: Krista, what's wrong..?

Krista: Peculiar... I'm sure I locked up before we left out...

Rena: Are you sure?

Krista: Yeah... one hundred percent certain...

Dew: Maybe you thought you did?

Cooper: We have been away for some time... It wouldn't hurt to go check around to see if anyone or anything broke in...

Krista: I was just thinking that very same thing.

Lorenzo: I'll help with that...

Narrator: Krista, Cooper, and Lorenzo then walk around the *Tor*, checking out the windowpane, and the two cockpit doors, and once again making their way back to the entrance door.

Lorenzo: ...All secure from what I can see.

Cooper: I didn't see anything out of the ordinary...

Narrator: Krista then checks the entrance lock for any tampering but finds no evidence of such.

Krista: Hmm... everything looks good... I could swear that I did lock it... Maybe I forgot...

Dew: You were driving for a long time before we left. Your mind could have been playing tricks on you.

Krista: Perhaps you're right...

Dew: Are you still sure you don't want to take turns driving?

Krista: I got this... It won't be long before we reach Masaya village anyway.

Dew: Okay. Onward it is...

Narrator: Krista nods her head in acknowledgment and then enters the RV entrance as Dew and the others follow behind. The door closes and then locks. Dew and the others situate themselves inside as Krista walks toward the cockpit area with the key-chain in hand. She sits down in the driver's seat and buckles herself in. After adjusting her seat, she turns on the radio which continues to broadcast more Bluegrass music. She begins bobbing her head to the music, puts the RV key into the ignition, and the RV powers up; she waits for a few seconds before shifting the RV gear from "Park" to "Drive," and then proceeds to drive off toward Masaya village. As the RV speeds off in the distance, the scene pans down to two small unknown shoe imprints that were left in the muddy grass area

where the RV was previously parked before departing. The scene then fades to black.

CHAPTER 8 – A COLD DRAFT

FROM YESTERYEAR

Narrator: Five hours pass. The rising sun shone melodiously over Masaya village, bringing with it a bustle of early morning activity from its inhabitants. The *Tor* is parked near the front gate entrance. Dew and the others walk past various small shops observing the active locals. Eventually, they make their way to the public square area, where they come to a stop at a nearby fountain.

Krista: ...This is it. Masaya Village.

Lorenzo: It's a big world outside of Helix...

Rena: I have never seen so many smiling faces before... You can feel the positivity in the air.

Dew: This place sure does look quaint and cozy.

Cooper: Krista, how many people do you think live in this village?

Krista: Believe it or not, the Masaya village population is no more than 6,000.

Cooper: That's not a lot of people...

Dew: I take it that you've been here before, Krista..?

Krista: No. Never have been. A lot of my information comes from reading and the stories told to me by various experienced travelers.

Dew: Oh.

Narrator: Then, a little boy no more than ten years old approaches the unobserving group.

Little boy: ...Excuse me.

Narrator: Dew and the others then turn to face the little boy.

Krista: Yes?

Little boy: Are you new here..? You all look lost.

Lorenzo: Not lost.

Dew: Actually, we're looking for a person.

Little boy: A person?

Rena: Yes, sweetie.

Dew: He's about 6ft tall, has long black hair, and blue eyes, wears a brown trench coat, has a funny-looking facemask, and carries a Bastard sword. Pretty noticeable.

Rena: Have you seen anyone passing through your village that fits the description?

Little boy: Hmm... I don't think so.

Dew: Ugh... Of course, he isn't here.

Little Boy: But besides you folks, there were these hippie weirdos wearing cloaks who kept chanting, "We are the *Bush of Life*", and something about a pilgrimage to the "*Sacred Haven*" over and over. They didn't stay here too long.

Krista: Cloaks, huh?

Rena: ..."*Sacred Haven*"? Hmm.

Lorenzo: He may not have been through here, but it sounds like his buddies were.

Dew: This wasn't entirely a waste to stop here.

Cooper: What now, Dew?

Dew: We could just keep stopping at these other smaller settlements until we find him.

Krista: ...And if we don't find him there, then the only place left to check out is the province of Twin Pines.

Dew & Rena: Twin Pines!

Little Boy: ?!

Krista: Yeah... Did I say something wrong..?

Dew: No. It's my home. I haven't been back there ever since going off to the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy.

Krista: You were in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE?

Dew: Yeah... during the *Great Civil war* ...I don't talk about that much...

Cooper: (*whispering to himself*) ...*You ain't lying about that...*

Krista: I would have never taken you for a military man... What about you Rena?

Rena: I lived there for some time myself. I used to have a martial arts school there... Dew was one of many students who I taught Bōjutsu. I've known him since he was a young teen.

Krista: Aha... so that explains your dynamic. The teacher and her pet... Geez, you really did rob the cradle with him.

Rena: What?! (*then blushes*) Oh, stop that...

Little Boy: Twin Pines.

Dew: Yep. That's where I'm from.

Little Boy: I used to live there too. Why are you folks heading there if I may ask? Are you planning to climb Mount Illini?

Dew: Climb Mount Illini? I didn't think about that at all. It may be a possibility that we'll have to.

Lorenzo: Huh?! Hold up a minute... What makes you think we'll have to climb some mountain...? I've never done that shit before...

Little Boy: Sir, don't worry. I know someone who can help you all out with that. Please follow me... *(then runs off)*

Lorenzo: Hey Kid, hold on-

Krista: There he goes...

Cooper: Should we follow him?

Dew: *(uncertain)* I guess...

Rena: Let's see what the child can do for us.

Narrator: Dew and the others follow the little boy through the village. Eventually, he leads them to a weathered stone cottage with sun-faded shutters and a patchy roof. The child slips inside, and one by one, they step into its modestly kept interior.

Lorenzo: Where did this kid lead us? ...Some getup this is.

Krista: "Real comfort is at home," as some would say.

Lorenzo: I've slept on park benches that looked better than this...

Rena: Shush. Lorenzo, that's rude.

Little Boy: *(shouting)* Mr. Prasad! Mr. Prasad! Mr. Prasad!

Narrator: A brown-skinned middle-aged bearded muscular man wearing a long red sleeve t-shirt, beige cargo shorts, and sandals enters the room.

Mr. Prasad: ...Quit that noise. I hear you. I hear you... Konrad, what are you doing here so early...? *(then turns and looks at Dew and the others)* ...and who are these people that you brought into my house? ...And what's with the pole?! Is it already *Festivus*?

Cooper: Ha-ha-ha...

Dew: It's not a pole; it's my bo staff.

Mr. Prasad: Right... at the very least, you could have brought some Pandowdy.

Dew: Isn't that usually reserved for *Pi Day*?

Mr. Prasad: That's balderdash, young man. Pandowdy can be eaten anytime. Not just on some glorified holiday worshipping infinite mathematical digits. *(then turns to Konrad)* ...Konrad, you know better than talking to strangers.

Konrad: Mr. Prasad, they're not strangers. They're...

Mr. Prasad: Well, I don't know them. You could have at least told them to take off their shoes before coming in.

Rena: Oh. Yikes. Sorry about that.

Dew: We were just passing through, and the young man wanted to assist us. He told us that there was someone here who could help us out with climbing Mount Illini.

Mr. Prasad: Mount Illini?!

Dew: Yes.

Mr. Prasad: You, folks, want to climb it, huh?

Lorenzo: Fuck no.

Dew: Hah. What my friend meant to say is, it may be a possibility.

Mr. Prasad: Hmm... Konrad, go home, and I'll see you later. I need to talk to these folks in private.

Konrad: Okay. Good luck to you, my friends... *(then exits)*

Mr. Prasad: So... Where are you folks from?

Krista: Hi. I'm Krista; nice to meet you... *(shakes Mr. Prasads' hand)*
...I'm from Llivisaca and their tour guide.

Dew: My name is Dew. This is Rena, Lorenzo, and Cooper. We're from the Helix Province...

Mr. Prasad: Helix, eh? ...I heard about the potential reunification of the provinces. It'll be good for the country. It is well overdue... You all have traveled pretty far, I see. Welcome to Masaya village. It's nice to meet all of you. My name is Vimal Naga Prasad. But you may call me by my nickname, Vilmer. Everybody else does.

Cooper: Vilmer it is.

Rena: Vilmer... Vilmer Prasad..?

Dew: ...Why does that name sound familiar?

Krista: Hmm... Hey! I know you... You're the guy who climbed Mount Illini 20 years ago. The first person to ever do so successfully...

Vilmer: Hah... Yes, that is correct, young lady. That was me.

Krista: Whoa. This is awesome!!!

Dew: I believe I was six years old when you did that climb. I'm originally from Twin Pines myself. It's an honor to meet you, sir.

Vilmer: The pleasure is all mine. I see there are still people who remember me after all this time. I guess I haven't been forgotten about...

Krista: Why would you be? You're legendary!

Vilmer: That's kind of you to say that Krista.

Dew: I recall after that climb; you disappeared suddenly. What happened?

Vilmer: (*sigh*) ...That I did. I can tell you, folks, this; you don't want to climb that godforsaken mountain.

Krista: Huh?!

Dew: Why not?

Lorenzo: Hey, I'm sure you got your reasons for saying that. Guess we won't be climbing that mountain then... (*sarcastically*) Oh darn...

Rena: Lorenzo!

Lorenzo: C'mon Rena... The top shelf of my freezer is a mystery to me, never mind climbing some cold-ass mountain. Ugh...

Dew: If there's any helpful information you can share with us, please do so.

Vilmer: Yeah, I sure can... Ohhh... what a sad story it is...

Krista: Why's that?

Vilmer: As I said before, it's a sad story... but since you, all have such inquiring minds... I might as well tell it then. Don't say I didn't try to reason with you all... It all happened during my climb to fame...

Narrator: The scene cuts to Vilmer and his friend, lover, and fellow Mountaineer, Aldous, as they set up camp midway up Mount Illini.

Vilmer: Damn. The radio is dead...

Aldous: Mine is nonoperational... I can't get a working signal up here.

Vilmer: ...Well, the weather should let up soon... (*sneeze*)

Aldous: We've come this far (*cough*) ...After the 5 deaths and 16 failed attempts by the others, we're about to make history once we get to the pinnacle of this mother.

Vilmer: We'll be well-known then. I can't believe it's already been 6 hours since we started the climb...

Aldous: We've been non-stop at this... Ha-ha-ha... this is beautiful. I'm glad to share this adventure with you, my friend.

Vilmer: I wouldn't have it with anybody else besides you...

Narrator: The wind then begins to pick up.

Vilmer: It seems like the wind is getting stronger. We should go inside soon.

Aldous: I'm going to take a smoke; you go on ahead. I won't be long...



Vilmer:

Aldous.

Aldous:

Yes, Vimal?

Vilmer:

I can see the headlines now: *"Prasad and Ghislain, the Men who toppled the largest mountain in the world."*

Aldous:

Or...*"The Two Gay Men, who toppled the largest mountain in the world"*...It's got a better ring to it...

Vilmer:

Hah. That sounds like a very long title for a porno. Pun intended on the "long" part.

Vilmer & Aldous:

Ha-ha-ha...

Vilmer:

...Try not to be out here for too long. Okay?

Aldous:

Yeah. I'll be in soon...

Narrator:

With determined strides, Vilmer navigates the treacherous terrain towards the safety of the tent, a lone

sanctuary amidst the hostile landscape. Weary and burdened by the weight of their arduous journey, he collapses onto his makeshift bed, seeking respite in the embrace of sleep.

Vilmer: *(muttering to himself)* We've come so far... Yet, the summit remains beyond our grasp...

Narrator: Time slips by unnoticed, enveloping Vilmer in a brief reprieve until an abrupt cry jolts him from his sleep.

Aldous: *(screaming)* VIMAL!!!

Narrator: Vilmer's heart thunders with fear as he sits up abruptly, the chilling grip of dread enveloping his soul. Urged by an instinctive imperative, he breaks free from the tent's confines, his eyes widening in horror at the grim spectacle unfolding: Aldous, locked in a desperate struggle for survival on the edge of the precipice, while the formerly mild winds now howl with a sudden, savage fury amidst a raging snow-storm. Vilmer sprints towards the precipice, his foot-falls a frantic cadence upon the unforgiving terrain. His outstretched hand reaches desperately, fingers straining to clasp Aldous's grip. Yet, amidst the tumultuous cacophony of wind and storm, nature's wrath rages unabated.

Vilmer: *(grunting with effort)* Hold tight! Don't you dare... let go...

Narrator: Despite his relentless struggle against the tempest, Vilmer's grip falters, his fingers slipping from Aldous's grasp. In a heart-wrenching instant, their connection is lost, and Aldous plummets into the yawning abyss below, swallowed by the merciless void.

Vilmer: *(agonized cry)* ALDOUS!!!

Narrator: As the present moment returns, Vilmer is left to grapple with the cruel aftermath of tragedy, the echoes of loss reverberating through his shattered existence, a testament to the fragile nature of life and the indomitable force of fate's cruel hand.

Vilmer: ...Following that, I immediately chose to press on with my ascent of the mountain, after the inclement weather had passed. It's what Aldous would have wanted... His death wasn't going to be in vain... Seven hours later, I finally reached the summit. While it should have been a moment of triumph, it was clouded by sorrow... Aldous and I were meant to share in that sense of accomplishment together... but I achieved it alone. It was a tumultuous mix of emotions... I couldn't shake the feeling that I could have done more to save him... The entire journey took 27 hours - both ascending and descending the mountain... After the expedition concluded, Aldous's body was discovered... it was determined that he died instantly upon impact, from severe blunt force trauma... every bone shattered, his blood frozen solid as it leaked from his wounds... and the expression frozen on his face... Err...

Rena: That... that's terrible...

Lorenzo: Shit... man...

Vilmer: I told you all... it was a sad story...

Krista: Sadly, you lost your friend, but you did what you could.

Vilmer: Did I? He was more than just a friend... he was my lover. I wish the climb had never happened...

Krista: I'm sorry...

Vilmer: You and me both... (*sigh*) I had to disappear to find solace... So, I packed up all my belongings, became a nomad for a while, and eventually ended up here in Masaya village. This has been my home for the last 17 years... I was initially planning on locking myself in a basement and sleeping in a coffin self-loathing for the next 30 years... but then I ruled against that, thinking about the morning breath and stiffness I would have...

Dew: Mmm. Riiiiight...

Lorenzo: So, you been living rent-free this entire time?!

Vilmer: Ha-ha... No. Besides the money I have left from the expedition, I too have shared responsibilities in the village. Every spring to autumn, I and a squadron of villagers travel to the coastline, just south of here, to harvest *Jubjub bird* and *Wayne bat* species guano.

Krista: Dung?

Lorenzo: You collect shit..?

Vilmer: Correct. And always manually by scarping, sifting, and bagging it.

Lorenzo: How the heck do you make money from doing that?

Vilmer: Well... fertilizer of course.

Lorenzo: Oh. Yeah.

Vilmer: ...It's quite a remunerative business. It brings in millions of *Wertes* annually for the village. We provide only the best manure that's copious in nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphate, and potassium which are essential for crop growth. Also, it's excellent for the water-holding capacity of the soil... We don't just sell to the other small settlements in Mesovilla, but worldwide! ...But anyway... Ugh... back to this talk about climbing mountains... I will never... never climb that mountain or any other again. I advise you all not to do it either.

Dew: I understand...

Krista: But, hey. We may need someone to help us get up that thing. You're the only one that can!

Vilmer: Those days are far gone for me... I wish I could help. I'm sorry, I can't ... It's best if I don't. Now, if you'll all kindly leave, I must get ready to join the others for the guano harvesting.

Krista: But...

Dew: Krista, it's all right... Thank you anyway for your time Vilmer. We're sorry to have disturbed you... Come on, everyone, let's go... *(then walks toward the cottage front door and exit)*

Krista: It was nice meeting you... *(then exits the cottage)*

Cooper: What she said... *(following behind Krista and exiting the cottage)*

Lorenzo: Enjoy the shit collecting... I guess... Eh. *(then exits the cottage)*

Narrator: Rena, without speaking a word, then exits Vilmer's cottage, meeting Dew and the others outside. The group huddled in front of the cottage.

Krista: That poor guy... What a terrible way to lose a loved one...

Cooper: What now?

Dew: If we have to climb the mountain ourselves, then it'll be without his expertise.

Rena: We have no other choice... It's going to be a first for me.

Lorenzo: That's gonna suck...

Krista: C'mon, guys. Don't be downers; we made it this far. We can do it!

Lorenzo: I guess freezing to death will be fun. Hah!

Krista: Don't be so negative, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: I hope we find that Thornton asshole before it comes to that...

Narrator: Suddenly, a scream is heard coming from afar.

Villager: YEEK!

Cooper: Where did that come from?!

Narrator: A villager then runs up to Dew and his friends.

Villager: Help, help! Please, help me..!

Lorenzo: What's wrong?!

Villager: Konrad, he's in trouble!!!

Narrator: Vilmer then exits his cottage dressed up in the same clothing but additionally decked out in a green utility vest, red knee pads, thermal socks, and brown hiking boots.

Vilmer: ...What's all the commotion out here?

Villager: Vilmer, Konrad is IN DANGER..!

Vilmer: What?! Where?

Narrator: The panicked villager points south down the road and then suddenly faints as Cooper catches her.

Vilmer: Konrad! No... *(then runs off)*

Dew: Hey, wait a sec...

Rena: We should go after him.

Narrator: Cooper gently lays the fainted villager against the side of the cottage door before quickly joining Dew and the others as they sprint after Vilmer. As Vilmer, Dew, and the group race down the block, a stampede of villagers rushes past them in the opposite direction, fleeing in terror. In the distance, the sharp crack of multiple rifle shots rings out, followed by a piercing, indignant shriek. Suddenly, the gunfire stops. Agonizing screams echo down the street, accompanied by a series of loud, violent thuds. Vilmer, Dew, and the others finally reach the source of the clamor: Masaya's village public square. There, they find Konrad cornered by a monstrous, mutated beetle. Parts of the creature's grotesque body are covered in parasitic suction-cup legions, each lined with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth. Off to the side, the six villagers who had previously been armed with rifles lie scattered across the ground — four of them writhing in pain from their injuries, while the

other two remain unconscious. Vilmer and Krista stand frozen in shock at the sight of the creature, while the others immediately draw their weapons, preparing for battle.

Krista: Holy shlorp?!

Vilmer: ...What the heck is this thing!?!

Dew: It must be another mutation...

Vilmer: Mutation..?

Krista: What is with the wildlife around here recently?!

Vilmer: I take it that you've seen some strange things along the way here?

Cooper: That's an understatement...

Konrad: M-Mr. Prasad, help!!!

Vilmer: Shit. Konrad ...Hold up. Here I come..!

Narrator: Vilmer runs over to Konrad's aid. He picks up a grappling hook lying on the ground nearby, then hurls it at the back of the giant mutated beetle's head. This provokes the giant mutated beetle causing it to turn its attention to Dew and the others. Konrad then flees.

Vilmer: That'll get your attention, you giant pest!

Lorenzo: That it did...

Narrator: Vilmer looks over at Cooper and notices a mop in his hand.

Vilmer: Hold on... Y-you're going to use a mop to fight that thing?!

Cooper: Yep.

Vilmer: (*disbelief*) A mop is your weapon?

Cooper: Yes, it is. Sometimes I use a broom too.

Vilmer: How is that even practical? ...Seriously?!

Cooper: Yes, sir.

Vilmer: ...Good grief.

Dew: It's silly I know.

Cooper: It hasn't let me down yet... Way better than a shower rod, Dew.

Dew: For the last time, Cooper, IT IS A BO STAFF!

Rena: Guys..! We have to stop this thing here before it hurts anyone else...

Krista: Get ready. Here it comes..!

Narrator: The giant mutated beetle bellicosely charges at Dew, Vilmer, and the others, its massive legs pounding against the ground with terrifying force as it launches the attack. Its parasitic suction-cup limbs lash out wildly, forcing the group to dodge, block, and counter with sharp precision. Despite the creature's brutal strength and relentless assault, Dew and the others work together, landing several critical blows and gradually chipping away at its thick, armored body. After taking significant damage, the giant beetle lets out a strained, guttural hiss before collapsing onto the ground with a heavy, echoing thud. For a tense moment, it appears to be defeated — but unbeknownst to the group, the creature is merely playing dead, coiled and ready to strike again.

Lorenzo: Fuckin' bug...

Vilmer: Well, I'll be... quite unorthodox... but effective...

Cooper: I guess you could say that creature is all WASHED UP!

Dew: Ugh... the cringe continues...

Vilmer: Where did Konrad go..? We must find-

Narrator: As Dew and the others try to catch their breath, the monstrous beetle suddenly rises, catching them off guard, and charges after a still-fleeing Konrad.

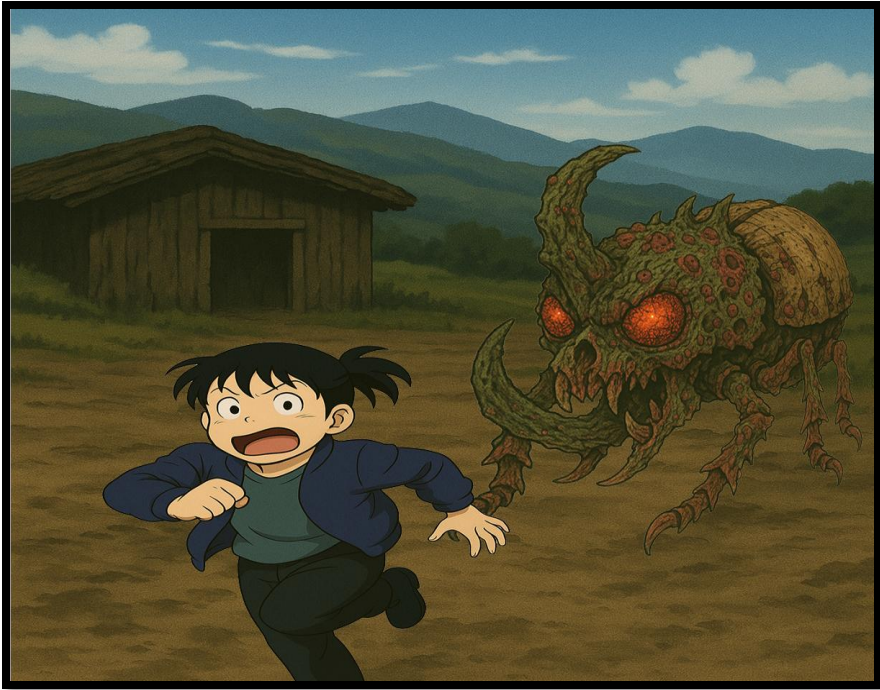
Krista: Oh—!?

Dew: You have to be kidding me..!

Lorenzo: That fucker was faking it.

Rena: Dew, the boy!

Vilmer: KONRAD—! *(then immediately sprints after the giant mutated beetle)*



Narrator: Once again, Dew and the others take off, chasing after Vilmer as he pursues the rampaging creature. Ahead of them, an exhausted and sobbing Konrad stumbles over a tree stump, crashing face-first into the soil and falling unconscious just as the mutated beetle closes in for the kill. But before the creature can reach him, a blur of motion slices through the air — and, in an instant, the giant mutated beetle is cleaved cleanly in two, its monstrous halves crashing lifelessly to the ground. Vilmer reaches Konrad's side and quickly lifts his unconscious body to safety. As Dew and the others catch up, they skid to a halt, coming face-to-face with Konrad's unexpected savior: Elvir.

CHAPTER 9 – “THE SQUAD”

Narrator: As Dew and the party are surprised to see Elvir, several other villagers are seen running to the aid of the six still laid-out villagers in the background. They immediately begin to administer medical treatment to them.

Rena: It's you...

Cooper: Well. So, we meet... again.

Krista: Elvir?!

Lorenzo: This girl again?

Dew: You must be a glutton for punishment. Back for another beating..?

Elvir: And helllllloooo to all of you too!

Krista: What are you doing here?!

Dew: ...Shouldn't you be in a jail cell by now?

Elvir: Nah. I ghosted out right before the Po-po came. Surprised, huh..?

Narrator: The group then turns their attention to the slain cut in half giant mutated beetle's corpse as it begins to rapidly decompose, turning into a puddle of flesh.

Krista: Yuck!

Elvir: Eww... gross... it looks like a giant booger. Hey, what the heck was that thing anyway?

Lorenzo: ...The question that should be asked is, were you following us this entire time?

Elvir: Yes... If I may add too, you, guys, move quickly!

Krista: How?

Elvir: I have to say I got my workouts worth riding a bicycle trying to keep up with you all. My legs were soooo sore, let me tell you... it wasn't enjoyable. But then I finally caught up and found your RV unattended back in the hills. I had no idea where you guys were. I wasn't going to wait around and get rained on either to find out. So, I used a lockpick, broke in, and made myself at home.

Krista: I knew I locked that door. Told you, guys...

Narrator: Meanwhile, the two unconscious villagers are finally awoken and back on their feet. The other villagers carefully hoist and then carry off the four injured ones on stretchers.

Elvir: ...I gotta say, Krista, you got good taste in tv dinners. Beer. Not so much... When I heard you, guys approaching, I then hid in the RV's baggage compartment. And that's where I was for the rest of the ride...

Krista: You little stowaway...

Dew: Why'd you save the boy..?

Elvir: Why not? He looked like he needed help. ...What a stupid question to ask.

Dew: I don't trust you.

Elvir: Okay. Okay. I know we didn't have the best start. But hear me out... Thanks to you all, the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* is in shambles. For that, I am grateful.

Dew: How so?

Elvir: After I joined them, I got so caught up in the thug life I almost lost touch with myself. Sure, I was sending money back home to help my loved ones, but I doubt they'd be proud of what I was turning into. Now that I'm free, I want to redeem myself—help people in need. That's what you Aurora Blade types do, right? So I'm offering my services. I want to join you. What do you say?

Krista: Hmm... I don't know...

Dew: The answer is no.

Cooper: What?!

Elvir: Oh, come on.

Dew: Sorry, but no.

Vilmer: What do you mean?! She just saved Konrad's life.

Elvir: Yeah, Dew. I just saved his life.

Dew: This thief can't be trusted.

Elvir: Oh my god... You're still bitter about that whole "stealing the talisman necklace from your MILF" thing?

Rena: I'm not his MILF.

Krista: I'm with Dew. This girl gave us nothing but trouble before.

Elvir: Hey..! That's all water under the bridge now. I'm sorry, al right? Be fair.

Dew: So you ditched the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. Doesn't mean you've changed overnight.

Elvir: I told you—I've seen the light. I'm not that person anymore.

Dew: Yeah, sure you have. Still no chance you're tagging along with us.

Cooper: ...Oh, come on now, Dew. You and Lorenzo are just like her.

Lorenzo: What'd you say?

Dew: Excuse me?!

Cooper: Well, it's true...

Dew: You're comparing us *Aurora Blade* to a common thief?! Especially one with tattoos plastered all over her face?!

Elvir: ...They're not tattoos. It's war paint. I'm repping my ancestors.

Dew: Ancestors..?

Elvir: Yes. I am a descendent of one of the *Hozho*.

Krista: Did you say *Hozho*?

Dew: Okay. My mistake. W-wait a sec... You're a descendant of one of those heroes? ...You?!

Krista: Really?!

Elvir: I sure am...

Lorenzo: (*disbelief*) Say whaatt?!

Cooper: Wow. That's so cool..!

Dew: Krista, did you know about this?

Krista: First time hearing about it. I'm shocked as you are... (*then faces Elvir*) So... are the *Hozho* still around?

Elvir: Not quite. All I know is... that I'm the last of them.

Dew: What irony... Your ancestors are probably rolling in their graves knowing the poor life choices you made, such as being involved with the likes of the *Mantid Oscuro*.

Elvir: Pfft.

Cooper: Come on now, Dew! ...That's low.

Dew: Is it? ...And Cooper, why are you defending her?

Cooper: I'm just saying... instead of trying to tear her down, you could give her a chance.

Elvir: Yeah, give me a chance.

Dew: Are you kidding me?!

Vilmer: I don't know the full details of what transpired between you and the girl before, but I thank you for saving Konrad.

Elvir: I'm happy I could help...

Vilmer: I have an idea. I want all of you to return to my cottage with me. You too, Elvir...

Elvir: That sounds great. Hey. Do you happen to have anything I could eat? Anything you could spare me?

Vilmer: Yes. I was just making breakfast before all this craziness occurred.

Elvir: Great! I am starving!

Dew: Ugh. Very well...

Narrator: Vilmer and Elvir walk off. A reluctant Dew, along with the others, then follows them both back to the cottage. The scene pans over to the now liquified mutated beetle corpse as a miniature video recording device begins to short circuit as it's floating atop the remains before sinking. The scene cuts to a dark room with a single monitor that barely illuminates the faces of the two figures watching it. One is standing, and the other is in a wheelchair. On the monitor, the video feed signal is lost. Then a screeching followed by a hissing sound comes from it as static dances across the screen.

???: ...As I figured, the "G" variant was uncontrollable.

Scientist: Yes, but the combat data is invaluable...

???: To you, perhaps. But it does me no favors with some untamed experiment running around causing trouble... just like that mountain lion of yours who's been terrorizing the residents of Twin Pines for the last two decades.

Scientist: Ah, yes. One of my earliest works... the one who escaped before scheduled termination. I honestly thought that experiment was a failure. But then it turned out to be a surprising success after all these years...

???: Speaking of surprises... Whoever those people were, they indeed did a number on your creation.

Scientist: That they did... Hmm... I can't help but... to feel... that the woman wearing the eyeglasses who wielded the scythe... she seemed familiar... but from where..?

???: Too bad there was no audio...

Scientist: Yes... too bad... In any case, we will proceed with the "A" variant as you initially requested.

???: How long will that take, doctor?

Scientist: As I told you before, it may take a day or more... you're not giving me much to work with here... the equipment for mass-producing the "A" variant is subpar. The best I can do is a

dozen duplicate samples. Your plans of revenge against the world will be limited but worth the wait.

???: Quality over quantity... And that's what we'll work with then. But my revenge is yours as well, doctor.

Scientist: Ha-ha-ha... I know... that is the only reason why I am helping you with this...

???: It wasn't easy trying to locate you after all these years...

Scientist: Being constantly on the run, one has to make it hard to be found. I am a genius, after all.

???: Yes... I will select twelve of my best men to be used for the trial.

Scientist: ...And what of the young lady and those six kids you have imprisoned?

???: What about them? They're just some communal people my men came across two hours ago... They'll make fine ransom.

Scientist: You could do that or let them be my Guinea pigs. We will need subjects for your army to test out their soon-to-be newfound abilities on.

???: Ah... then they are yours to do with as you please, Dr. Eudora...

Narrator: The male wheelchair user then wheels himself toward the exit of the room.

Dr. Eudora: Thank you. I will get on that right away... *Grey Éminence*...

Narrator: The scene cuts back to Masaya village; an hour has passed. Dew and the others with Elvir are waiting outside Vilmer's cottage. Vilmer then exits outside to talk to them.

Dew: ...How is Konrad doing? What about the other villagers who tried to help? Are they going to be fine..?

Vilmer: Konrad and the villagers will be all right. Luckily nothing life-threatening.

Krista: That's good to hear.

Rena: Thank goodness things turned out for the best.

Cooper: Indeed.

Vilmer: If it weren't for you all and the girl, they would have been goners. You have my sincerest gratitude.

Lorenzo: Don't mention it. It's what we do.

Vilmer: Also, Konrad's mother, Ms. Oilla, gives her thanks to you all for saving him.

Dew: You and she are welcome.

Rena: With that taken care of... I suppose we'll be on our way now, Dew?

Dew: Yes. It looks like it...

Vilmer: Wait... Before you all go. Don't you still need an experienced mountain climber to join you?

Dew: Do you know of someone else?

Vilmer: Ha-ha-ha ... Don't be silly. I'm talking about myself.

Lorenzo: Oh, now you want to come along?

Vilmer: Sure do.

Lorenzo: What about your dookie shoveling?

Vilmer: Guano harvesting. And it looks like I'll be taking a break from doing that for a bit. I'm sure the others will be just fine without me.

Elvir: Guano harvesting?! Eww... Bloody gross.

Vilmer: It's a dirty job, Elvir. But it does bring in millions of Wertes annually for the village.

Elvir: Really? ..."Holy dripping anus gold!?"

Vilmer: Hah... But yes. After fighting that creature, whatever that was - I hadn't felt so vigorous in a long time.

Lorenzo: If you're looking for a challenge, who knows - there may be more creatures like that to encounter along the way...

Vilmer: Hmm, yes. After talking to the other villagers, they have told me that the wildlife has been acting abnormally as of late... more aggressively than usual. But that thing... it was unreal. Nonetheless, I will be honored to help you out with your endeavors.

Dew: That would be great... I guess we won't need a group vote on this one... We're happy to have you join us.

Krista: Welcome to the group, Vilmer.

Elvir: Wait. What about me?! Can I come along?

Dew: Euh...

Cooper: Dew, come on!

Dew: I dunno...

Cooper: Dew!

Elvir: I'll be very useful. I won't get in the way at all. Plus, we're cool now. I'm just here to lend a hand for a good cause... whatever that may be.

Cooper: Dew, she did help us out back there.

Krista: You know, even though I have my reservations about Elvir... Cooper is right. She deserves a chance to prove herself... Just look at me... I would be a hypocrite to think otherwise.

Rena: I agree. It's up to you, Dew.

Dew: Me? Who made me the leader?!

Lorenzo: It's something naturally you have, man.

Vilmer: I think Elvir should join us too. If I'm coming, she should too. She'll be a fun addition.

Elvir: That's so true. I'm loads of fun!

Cooper: I bet you are.

Lorenzo: Somebody is way too thirsty... Huh, Cooper?

Cooper: Not true. I am not feeling parched at all...

Dew: I think this is a bad idea.

Vilmer: Oh, I guess you don't need an experienced mountain climber, after all?

Dew: Fuck. Dammit. Okay... fine. You can come along with us, too, Elvir.

Cooper: Yeeessss! (*then smiles*)

Elvir: Yeahhhhhh!!!

Dew: Yep. You're welcome...

Elvir: This is going to be soooooo fun!!! ADVENTURE TIME!

Dew: No funny business!

Elvir: Me? No way. That's a Girl Scout's honor.

Dew: Something tells me you probably were never in the Girl Scouts.

Elvir: I wasn't. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Dew: Ugh... I already have a hard enough time believing you're one of Chosha's "Chosen Ones". Unbelievable... (*then shakes his head in disbelief*)

Rena: Hey, Elvir...

Elvir: Hm?

Rena: Welcome aboard.

Elvir: Thanks. By the way, Rena, is it? I apologize again for the whole stealing your necklace thingy a while back. I had to meet my weekly quota. I hope you can forgive me.

Rena: It's in the past.

Elvir: So, guys, what's the mission? Are we out to discover some lost treasure? Maybe save a princess in distress..? ...Or some furries from an egg-shaped mad scientist?

Dew: Neither. We're in pursuit of a potentially dangerous man... someone who I once knew...

Elvir: Oh, yeah? Does he owe you money or something? ...Maybe he gave you a bad hand job?



- Dew: What?! What the hell..?! No...
- Cooper: Ha-ha-ha... Vilmer was right. She will be a fun addition to the group.
- Dew: (*sarcastically*) "Oh, joy."
- Elvir: I'm just messing with you. My bad. Damn.
- Dew: ...His name is Thornton. He may be involved with some sort of doomsday cult... whatever he's planning; we'll find out what that is and stop him if need be.
- Elvir: Hmm... Kinda vague of the details, but I gotcha. This is going to be one of those epic adventures... I'm totally down for that. "The outside world is our enemy. We've only got each other. It's just Elvir and the squad..."
- Dew: The who?
- Elvir: "Elvir and the squad, and their zany adventures. Elvir and the squad, for all eternity!"
- Dew: I hope not...
- Elvir: "Me and the squad, runnin' round, all day, every day. 24/7, 365 days a year, over and over..."
- Dew: I'm already regretting letting you join the party...

Elvir: "Every nano-second, every time you pee and brush your teeth in the shower, scratch your rear end, washing your bum in the sink instead of using toilet paper, or when you stop and pull down your skivvies to fart while thinking nobody is around to see you..."

Cooper: Why didn't I ever think of doing that? Hmph.

Lorenzo: I do that all the time... It's a good way to keep the gas from stinking up your drawers.

Rena: That's a mental image I can't get rid of now...

Krista: That's so gross, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: What?! Hey. It works...

Krista: ...But I do agree with the washing your ass in the sink... toilet paper was scarce growing up...

Vilmer: Hah. Have you all ever tried using three seashells to clean up after taking a dump?

Rena: Come again?

Krista: Did you say, "three seashells" ..?

Lorenzo: Whoa-ho-ho... How the heck does that work?!

Vilmer: It's simple, really. You use the two seashells like chopsticks, pull, and scrape what's left with the third. Oh. It's such a satisfying cleansing feeling...

Rena: Gross... I can't say I have ever done that.

Krista: Me neither.

Lorenzo: Thinking about that makes my anus itch...

Rena: I'm not even going to bother asking what you do with the seashells afterward.

Elvir: "...Elvir and the squad..."

Dew: STOP IT!!!

Elvir: Okay. Okay. I got a little carried away there. Sorry. Ha-ha... Lead the way, Dewster.

Vilmer: Ah... I will miss this place and the people. But it is time for me to step out into the world once more... Well, here goes nothing... *(then deeply inhales and exhales)* ...I'm ready...

Dew: Well, it's settled then...

Elvir: ...SQUAD!

Cooper: I like the sound of that.

Dew: *(scoff)* ...

Elvir: Heh-heh...

Dew: Okay. Let's get going, "squad" ...

Krista: It's a good thing the *Tor* can fit all of you...

Vilmer: The *Tor*?

Krista: Yes, my RV.

Elvir: I call shotgun..!

Vilmer: Whew. Thank goodness. For a moment there, I thought we were going to have to walk.

Lorenzo: You're going to love it.

Rena: ...Yeah, just ask "*Ms. Stowaway*" Elvir.

Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Lorenzo: Now, the thing may look like garbage from the outside...

Krista: Hey!!!

Lorenzo: But don't judge a book by its cover... Let me tell you, it's got this sweet-ass recliner in the living room area – Oh, lying on that thing with the AC on full blast feels heavenly... I've never felt so spoiled in my life... and let's talk about the kitchen...

Narrator: Lorenzo and Vilmer begin to walk toward the *Tor* as the others follow behind them.

Cooper: Hey Elvir, you're going to love my grilled cheese sandwiches...

Krista: This is a fact. Cooper makes the best..!

Elvir: Oh. That's what I like, a man who can cook. Nothing sexier than that... (*then smiles and winks at Cooper*)

Cooper: Really?! Aww... You hear that, Dew? She thinks a man who can cook is sexy. That's me. I can cook..!

Dew: Ugh... (*then rolls his eyes*)

Narrator: The scene then pans upward to the morning sky as Dew and friends make their way back to the *Tor* to continue the journey. 11 hours later, back in the Helix Province, a prisoner transport van is speeding down a desolate highway. Inside the vehicle are two SWAT TROOPERS, one driving and the other watching over a hand-cuffed Sherwin.

ST Transporter: ...I never thought the day would come with you being in cuffs. How the "high and mighty" have fallen.

Sherwin: ...Life is full of surprises. Heh.

ST Transporter: Well, I hope whoever will replace you; they'll pay us all a lot better. I won't be missing your cheap ass.

ST Driver: Ha-ha-ha... I hear you on that, man. The cost of living is too much, and raising kids is no joke.

Sherwin: ...You were all paid for what you were worth.

ST Driver: Not much, apparently.

Sherwin: Grunts like you don't deserve any more.

ST Driver: Oh yeah, Mr. Fancy pants? Of course, you would say something like that. I bet you saw a lot of bags of money lying around.

ST Transporter: Well... where he's going, the only "bags" he'll ever be seeing are ones filled with dirty laundry and the trash you'll be picking up from the side of the road!

ST Driver: Ha-ha-ha... That's a good one.

Sherwin: Oh... You're a witty one. "Har-har-Har"...

ST Transporter: ...It's sure gonna suck to be you, Mr. Cromwell, having to serve a life sentence of hard labor. Also, enjoy breaking rocks. And don't drop the soap, asshole... Ha-ha-ha... But at least you won't be alone. All your buddies will be there, even that Peoria chick.

ST Driver: Hah. Speaking of her. I know something about Peoria that you don't know.

ST Transporter: Ohh... Is it something juicy? Don't tease me, man. Tell me...

ST Driver: You'll love this... She's a transgender woman.

ST Transporter: What..? Really!?! How do you know that?

ST Driver: Years ago, a few buddies of mine got together with her... and... well, they said it was a blast... there were even pictures too...

ST Transporter: Pictures? And you saw them..?

ST Driver: Yep. Appeasing to the eyes... fine work of art...

ST Transporter: Mmm... I bet. She must have been a good lay...

ST Driver: They didn't complain...

ST Transporter: Hot..!

ST Driver: Yeah. Ha-ha... You know the late premier and her had to be fucking... all that time they spent together...

ST Transporter: Oh yeah. Highly likely... But working with her professionally, she was such a bitch! So damn bossy and cut-throat. I'm glad she's locked up. It couldn't have

happened to a better person. Hey... How long until we arrive at the labor camp?

ST Driver: ...Nine more minutes. We're almost there.

Narrator: As the prisoner transport van continues speeding down the highway, in the distance, crows cawing can be heard as mist suddenly seeps into the van.

Sherwin: ?!

ST Driver: What the?! (*cough*) (*cough*)

ST Transporter: ...Hey! Where's that... (*cough*) ...smoke coming from?!

ST Driver: Shit. (*cough*) I think it might be coming... (*cough*) ...from the engine... I'll pull over... (*cough*)

Narrator: The prisoner transport van then comes to a stop on the side of the road, and the driver gets out to check on the engine. He lifts the hood and investigates.

ST Driver: Hmm... Not coming from here... What the heck?!

Narrator: As the driver lets down the hood, a hooded female figure wearing a bird mask appears from behind and smacks the driver in the back of his head with the hilt of her sickle sword; knocking him unconscious.

ST Transporter: (*shouting*) Hey! Is everything all right out there..?

Narrator: ST Transporter waits a moment for a response but doesn't receive one back.

Sherwin: Ha-ha-ha...

ST Transporter: What's... so funny?!

Sherwin: I wonder... if your friend is okay? What do you think?

ST Transporter: Shut up! Hmm... I'm going to see what's going on out there. If you try to run for it, I'll shoot you.

Sherwin: (*sarcastically*) "I'll be a good boy and wait right here for you" ... Oh, do be safe now. Ha-ha-ha...

Narrator: ST Transporter then opens the rear door of the van to exit. He takes out his handgun as he creeps around the corner of the van to get a quick view of the surroundings. He notices the driver lying unconscious on the ground. He rushes over to check on him. As he kneels to tend to the fallen driver, the hooded female figure wearing a bird mask appears out of nowhere again. This immediately grabs ST Transporter's attention, and he points his handgun at her.

ST Transporter: Freeze!!!

Crow Sister 1: ...
ST Transporter: Who are you?! Drop the weapon!
Crow Sister 1: ...Lost boy, lost boy.
ST Transporter: ...Hands in the air, NOW!
Crow Sister 1: ...What did you choose?
ST Transporter: Did you hear me? Drop it!
Crow Sister 1: Lost boy, lost boy...
ST Transporter: This is your last warning..!
Crow Sister 1: What did you lose..?
ST Transporter: ...What?!
Narrator: The Crow sister then raises her sickle sword to her face; this startles ST Transporter, and he shoots at her only to have the bullets deflected. Crow sister 1 then slashes ST Transporter's handgun in half. ST Transporter then tries to attack her only to be caught off guard when a second hooded female figure wearing a bird mask swoops down from atop the van, landing feet first on him, knocking him unconscious.

Crow Sister 2: ...Lost boy, lost boy, you will rue.
Narrator: As the two SWAT TROOPERS lie unconscious, the Crow sisters walk to the back of the van and open the door.

Sherwin: Well, hello... *(then smiles)* I wondered when somebody was coming to set me free. Clove and Myrrh... "Birds of a feather flock together."

Myrrh: ...And set free from your cage you'll be. This is the master's will... *(then loosens Sherwin's restraints)*

Sherwin: That's much better now.... *(then rubs his wrist)*
Thanks.

Clove: The time is ripe; there is much needed to be done...
Sherwin: I concur... *(then looks over at the two unconscious SWAT TROOPERS)* Hmm... You didn't kill them I see.
...How merciful of you two.

Clove: We must make haste; the master waits...
Myrrh: ...Depart we shall?
Sherwin: *(nods his head in approval)* ...Please, do Crow Sisters.



Narrator:

With Sherwin accompanying the Crow Sisters, the three then disappear into a mist. As they depart, the two SWAT TROOPERS regain consciousness.

ST Driver:

(rubbing his forehead) Owwww ... my head ...

ST Transporter:

Huh?! W-w-what the ... Where did... those two go?
(then gets up off the ground and runs over to check the back of the van and sees that Sherwin is gone)
...He's gone too?! Dammit!

CHAPTER 10 – HEY, HANDSOME

- Narrator: 20 hours later. After passing through the Cumbersome plains and making several stops at the surrounding small settlements, the *Tor* makes its way to the Buckass Badlands as the group continues searching for Thornton. With the windows closed and the air conditioner running on the coldest setting in the RV cockpit, a seat belt buckled Krista is driving as Dew stands behind her, looking out at the windshield and observing the arid red scoria-colored badland terrain ahead. Meanwhile, Elvir is seated on the passenger side singing “*The Tro-lo-lo Song*” to Dew’s annoyance.
- Elvir: “Ahhhhh, ya ya yaaaah,
ya ya yah yah ya yaaaah.
Oh oh oh oh oooh, oh ya yah,
ya ya yah yah ya yah.”
- Dew: ...She’s kinda like a yappy puppy, huh, Krista...? Non-stop.
24/7...
- Krista: Meh. I don’t mind it. She’s just having fun... We have been on the road for a while...
- Dew: ...Was she always like this when you were with the *Mantid Oscuro*?
- Krista: Who, Elvir..?
- Elvir: The one and only... “*Hooo haha.*”
- Krista: ...I couldn’t tell you, Dew. She and I rarely interacted back then. I served as an advisor to my brother Ketcy and mainly handled the organization books.
- Dew: Oh. Hmm... You know, your “holiness,” you’ve been singing that for the past 20 minutes already. Do you know of any other song?!
- Elvir: “*Na na na na naaaaaah, na na naaaaah!!!*”
- Dew: Ugh...
- Elvir: “*La la lah...*” Oh, come on, Dew. You’re too serious. Liven up a bit. I’ve been with you guys for over 24 hours now, and we still haven’t found this Thornton guy. So, we might as well make this adventure of ours a little more fun.
- Dew: This isn’t supposed to be all fun and games...

Elvir: Boring!!!

Dew: ?!

Elvir: ...Hey. You wanna hear a joke..?

Dew: No.

Elvir: Okay. Here's one...

Dew: I just said...

Elvir: *"Why are educated people hot?"*

Dew: (sigh) Okay ...Why, Elvir?

Elvir: *"Because they have more degrees!"* ...Get it?! Ah. Ah. Ah..?

Krista: Hmm. That is a good one. Ha-ha... (still driving)

Narrator: Dew is visibly annoyed and face-palms himself. Cooper can then be heard from the RV's booth dinette area in the background, giving off a noticeable chuckle as he's playing the card game, *Go Fish* with Vilmer and Rena. Meanwhile, Lorenzo is lying passed out snoring in the recliner in the living room area.

Elvir: ...Here's another. *"How much ROOM is needed for fungi to grow?"*

Krista: How much..?

Elvir: *"As MUSHroom as possible!"*

Narrator: Cooper can be heard again in the background from the RV's booth dinette area chuckling louder. Krista cracks an approving smile as she continues to drive. Dew looks unimpressed.

Cooper: (shouting) Ha-ha-ha... That's so funny..! Ha-ha-ha... See, it was a good idea she came along with us..!

Dew: ...Yeahh. Krista, where are we now?

Elvir: *"Please play for me,
That sweet melody.
Called Doodle Doo-Doo,
Doodle Doo-Doo..."*

Krista: We're approaching the Buckass Badlands... there is a commune located northwest of here... besides that, not much more to check out...

Elvir: *"I love it so,
Wherever I go.
I Doodle-Doo-Doodle-Doo-Doo..!"*

Dew: A commune, huh? Hmm... Yeah. It's worth checking out. Let's do that...

Narrator: As Krista drives the *Tor* through the Buckass Badlands, Elvir continues singing to herself while rhythmically moving her body from side to side with her eyes closed.

Elvir: "*Aba daba daba daba daba daba dab...*"

Narrator: Elvir opens her eyes as she turns her head to face the passenger side window. She then notices a ransacked school bus off to the side 40 yards away.

Elvir: Yabba dabba doo, look at that..!

Dew: What's that..?

Narrator: Elvir starts pointing in the direction of the ransacked school bus. Dew and Krista then look over to the passenger side window and see the ransacked school bus.

Krista: What is a school bus doing out here..?

Dew: It's a suspicious sight, huh?

Krista: It is.

Dew: Hmm...

Krista: Maybe we should stop and go check it out..?

Dew: I think we should. Who knows, somebody might be in trouble and may need our help.

Krista: I'm down to do that.

Dew: ...Good catch there, Elvir.

Elvir: Oh, really!?! Thanks. And... You're welcome.

Krista: Looks like Elvir is helpful after all, huh, Dew?

Elvir: See, I told you so.

Dew: That you did... Keep it up. Krista, while you prepare to pull up, I'll inform the others and get them ready.

Krista: Okay, Dew...

Elvir: Well... I can't wait to stretch out my legs, AGAIN... Gah! All this sitting down is making my ass sore... See you out there...

Narrator: Dew, followed by Elvir, exits the RV cockpit to assemble the others as Krista drives the *Tor* toward the ransacked school bus. After pulling up and stopping several feet from it, Dew and the others exit the RV and start walking toward the school bus. As the group approaches the school bus, they see the front door left wide open and its crossing arm in the extended position on the right side.

Rena: What happened here..?

Vilmer: Hmm... Something is afoul.

Lorenzo: Afoul? More like this heat is... From the comfort of that soothing recliner under the AC, out into this debilitating disgusting ass heat... Ugh... I just can't catch a break... Hey, Krista. Where are we again?

Krista: The Buckass Badlands...

Lorenzo: This place beats Llivisaca in humidity for sure...

Krista: Dew, I'm not liking the vibes I'm getting from this at all...

Dew: I feel you... but we have to be sure.

Cooper: What's the plan?

Dew: I think we should split up and check out the area. We may come across a clue... but don't go too far. If you find anything, let's regroup, okay?

Cooper: Agreed...

Narrator: The party nods in acknowledgment and then walks off separately, beginning to investigate their surroundings. Vilmer enters the school bus through the front door. Several minutes pass, and Dew and the others — except Vilmer — regroup outside near the front door of the school bus.

Dew: You guys find anything?

Rena: Nope. What about you, Dew?

Dew: Nothing out of the ordinary...

Cooper: Nothing here.

Krista: I found nothing also. Sorry.

Lorenzo: Not a damn thing, man...

Elvir: Same here... (*arms wide-out stretching*) But... It feeeeeeels so good... (*then slightly leans backward stretching*) to... to do THAT...! Ahhhhhh... Frak yeah... (*then comes back to the normal standing position*)

Dew: Damn. No clues... Guys. Where is Vilmer..?

Krista: I haven't seen him since we split up...

Cooper: Where could he have gone?

Narrator: As the party is left pondering, Vilmer exits from the school bus's front door.

Rena: There you are.

Dew: Of course. Why didn't I think of the bus? This heat must be getting to me too...

Krista: Thank goodness you're okay.

Lorenzo: Well, that's one less thing to worry about now... We thought you got lost or something...

Vilmer: Sorry it took me so long. I didn't mean to keep you all waiting or have you worried. But I did find some things of interest.

Dew: Yeah? What's that?

Vilmer: I found six small brown lunch bags and a women's purse sitting on a chair several seats behind the driver's... the food hasn't been touched once... and it is starting to spoil. Also, there was nothing of value in the purse or any form of identification either. It's likely, they - the kids and the female adult were out here on a field trip of some sort...

Cooper: ...What a place for a field trip.

Vilmer: From my inference, this bus has been abandoned for no more than a day.

Dew: Abandoned..?

Vilmer: Yes. It looks like they never made it back...

Elvir: Then, what the heck happened to them..?

Krista: Oh no... but that would mean...

Rena: Don't say it...

Narrator: Suddenly, from off in the distance, people fighting can then be heard, and this catches the group's attention.

Elvir: Huh..?

Cooper: That sound... Hmm...

Krista: Where is it coming from..?

Rena: It sounds like it's coming from over there...
(then points to the direction from where the sound of fighting is emanating)

Vilmer: ...It looks like we're not alone out here.

Lorenzo: It sure does seem that way... What'd you say, Dew, we go check it out?

Dew: We should... I have a feeling we may get some answers from whoever is over there about the whereabouts of the missing people. Okay, everyone. Keep your guard up just in case... Let's go...

Narrator: Dew then runs off, leading the way with the others following behind him toward the

location where the fighting occurs. A little way in, the party stumbles upon four *Mantid Oscuro* thugs taking turns kicking at a defenseless young man named, Taizo Nuon who is trying to shield himself while on the ground.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 9: Punk ass!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 10: ...You're in the wrong place to be playing detective...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11: ...You should have just left us alone and been on your way... But no...

Narrator: Taizo rolls over onto his back, writhing in pain, but remains defiant against his attackers.

Taizo: You bastards...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11: What a wimp. Ha-ha-ha...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 9: This is too fun!

Taizo: Where's... (*cough*) Where's my girlfriend... and the kids..?

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11: What's this guy talking about?

Narrator: One of the *Mantid Oscuro* thugs named Gaz Lalaki then leans over to the floored Taizo looking at him perplexed.

Gaz: Your girlfriend and the kids?

Mantid Oscuro Goon 10: Hee-hee-hee!!! Gaz, he's talking about the bimbo and six brats we found wandering close to our base yesterday.

Gaz: Oh... them...

Taizo: If you hurt them... I swear...

Narrator: *Mantid Oscuro* Goon 10 then kicks the supine-positioned Taizo in his left rib cage. The bloodied and bruised Taizo squirms in pain while placing his right hand onto his left rib cage.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 10: SHUT UP!!!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 9 & 11: Ha-ha-ha...

Taizo: You'll pay for that... (*cough*) (*cough*)...

Gaz: You are a brave one coming out here alone looking for them. Love does make people do

strange things... adorable... But stupid... this is getting boring... *(then signals to the other Mantid Oscuro goons with a hand wave)* Fel-las...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11:
Narrator: Let's put lover boy here out his misery... All four Mantid Oscuro thugs then pull out their machetes. *Mantid Oscuro* Goon 10 approaches the beaten Taizo and points his machete at him.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 9: Tough luck for you... looks like you're not even worth the hassle of keeping you around for ransom...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11:
Mantid Oscuro Goon 10:
Narrator: You'll never see them again!
Hee-hee-hee!!! It's been fun...
As *Mantid Oscuro* Goon 10 is about to strike down Taizo, Krista hurls her boomerang at the thug's head, which whacks him. The blunt force from the boomerang violently pushes the thug back and then causes him to fall onto the badland ground. Gaz and the other two *Mantid Oscuro* thugs briefly look down at their fallen friend, then look up in shock as they see Dew and the others whose weapons are drawn approaching them. The boomerang returns to Krista, who catches it. Taizo continues to lie on the ground, sighing in relief.

Cooper: Leave him alone...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11: Shit!!! Shit!!!

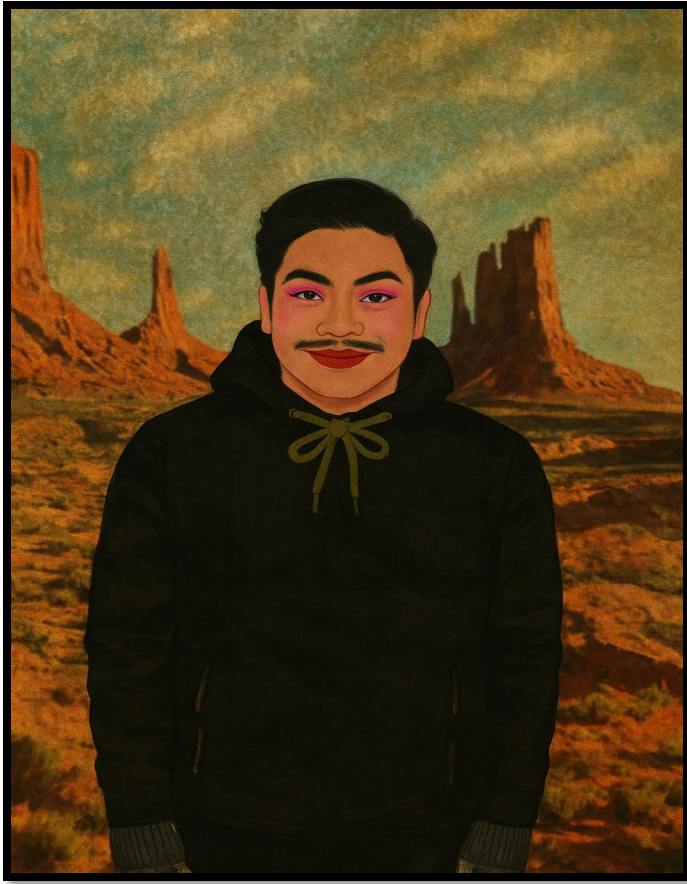
Mantid Oscuro Goon 9: It's these guys again!?!
Rena: *Mantid Oscuro*?!
Lorenzo: I thought we took care of these assholes back in Llivisaca...

Dew: You again...

Gaz: Hey, handsome. Long time no see...

Krista: What are you low lives doing out here?

Gaz: Oh, the deserter is here also... Nice seeing you again too.



Vilmer:

Deserter? *Mantid Oscuro*..? I'm not sure what's going on here. Could somebody fill me in on the details?

Krista:

Oh geez. I almost forgot. Sorry, Vilmer. Just to give you some context, I was once a member of the *Mantid Oscuro*. It was a big-time criminal syndicate in Llivisaca... long story short, when I met Dew and the others – we inadvertently ended up bringing them down. That day was really crazy!

Narrator:

Gaz then looks over and notices Vilmer and Elvir.

Gaz: You didn't bring us all down... and I see you've made some new friends. (*eyes narrow*) Elvir?!

...What are you doing with them?

Narrator: Dew shoots Elvir a suspicious glance.

Elvir: What's it to you? I've got a new squad now. You guys? Trouble. No good. Yesterday's news.

Vilmer: Elvir... was with this group too?

Dew: "Was" or "still is"—that's the question.

Elvir: Dew, come on. You can trust me...

Gaz: Is that how it's gonna be? Turning your back on us? You think walking away makes you clean? You snot-nosed little traitor!

Elvir: Is that how you feel? ...Too bad. I don't care.

Narrator: One of the *Mantid Oscuro* thugs—Goon 10—finally scrambles back to his feet, machete still in hand. He joins Gaz and the others, tightening the flank.

Mantid Oscuro Goon 9: You chose wrong, Elvir!

Mantid Oscuro Goon 11: Yeah! You're gonna wish you hadn't crossed our path again...

Mantid Oscuro Goon 10: Traitors and deserters get gutted.

Krista: How many times have I heard that before...

Gaz: You know, I should thank you, Krista. If it weren't for you and your friends, I wouldn't have been promoted by the *Grey Éminence*.

Krista & Elvir: The *Grey Éminence*!?!

Vilmer: Who..?

Lorenzo: Hey man, I have no idea what they're talking about either...

Rena: ...He's some mysterious donor funding their organization.

Dew: Wait. How do you know that Rena?

Rena: Krista told me her life story when we were locked up together by them.

Dew: Well, thanks for sharing that with us now...

Krista: (*curious*) So, you've actually met the *Grey Éminence*?!

Gaz: That's right, darling. For those of us who weren't hauled off to jail... he contacted and requested the remaining few left to make our way out here... To help him enact his grand plan... but I'll say no more about that...

Elvir: The *Grey Eminence* must be really desperate for help if he promoted you.

Krista: What "grand plan"?

Gaz: It's not going to matter once we make mincemeat out of you all...

Krista: Your win/loss record against us says otherwise...

Gaz: Hmph... It was nice seeing you again, Krista and Elvir... and especially you, Papa... (*then blows a kiss to Dew*) Mmm... but unfortunately, this will be our last encounter... I weep, and my heart breaks... Papa, your fine badooka will always be in my memories... Fellas! Finish 'em!!!

Narrator: As the four *Mantid Oscuro* thugs rush at Dew and the others, the fight quickly ends as it begins with the party smacking them around with ease. Gaz dramatically faints as he loses consciousness, and the other three *Mantid Oscuro* thugs flee, leaving him behind.

Lorenzo: Beating them up never gets old...

Dew: I'm shocked you didn't turn on us, Elvir.

Cooper: Well, she didn't...

Dew: I guess... you can be trusted after all...

Elvir: Well, duh! And I accept your apology for doubting me.

Dew: Tch. ...Whatever.

Narrator: Meanwhile, Vilmer and Cooper help the injured Taizo up to his feet.

Vilmer: You, okay? ...Can you stand?

Taizo: Yes... I'm fine now that you're all here...

Dew: ...Looks like they roughed you up pretty well.

Taizo: W-who are you, people? And what are you doing out here..?

Dew: We were going to ask you the same question. But first, I think introductions are warranted. I'm Dew Wilder. (*then points at Lorenzo*) He's Lorenzo Arana...

Narrator: Lorenzo gives a friendly wave to Taizo.

Dew: We're co-leaders of the *Aurora Blade*...

Vilmer: *Aurora Blade*? There's so much I need to be caught up on... Anyway, my name is Vilmer Parsad. Famous mountaineer and guano harvester.

Taizo: Guano harvester..?

Vilmer: Yes. Perhaps you might be familiar with the brand of fertilizer that comes only from Masaya village..? "*Magandang Tae*".

Taizo: Yeah... I am familiar with it... it's good stuff...

Rena: I'm Rena Cullen - martial arts instructor and Sifu of Dew.

Cooper: Cooper Tyler, here. Your friendly Custodian Engineer...

Krista: Hi. I'm Krista Naples. I'm their tour guide.

Elvir: And I'm Elvir... just some girl tagging along for the adventure... Also, they're my squad...

Taizo: Aha... Well, thank you all for saving me back there.

Cooper: Happy we could help...

Taizo: My name is, Taizo. It's a pleasure meeting you all, even under these circumstances.

Dew: Likewise.

Rena: So Taizo, why are you out here..?

Taizo: ...I was searching for my girlfriend Analia, who's a teacher, and the six kids that were with her...

Vilmer: So that school bus was theirs...

Taizo: I take it you all stumbled across it too... Yeah... they were off on a field trip... but never came back to the commune... they've been missing for over a day now...

Dew: Commune?

Taizo: Yes. The only one that's out in these parts... We all got worried and set out to look for them... However, the others refused to check out the Badlands right away... but I knew I would find clues out here and couldn't wait on them any longer... So, I went off on my own... I'm glad I did that too... As I was making my way out here, I caught those thugs breaking into the school bus... I tried questioning them and gave them a good chase... but then they ganged up on me, that is... until you guys came along...

Krista: Before running into you, we were just on our way to the commune too... Would you like a lift back?

Taizo: That is kind of you to ask. Yes, please.

Krista: You got it. By the way... I would tow the school bus back with us, but I don't have any tow cables.

Taizo: No worries. When we get back to Ganas commune, it'll be taken care of. You've done a lot already...

Narrator: The group then looks over at the unconscious Gaz.

Vilmer: Since your girlfriend and those kids are still missing, we should probably take him with us... and get him to speak...

Taizo: Also... as those jerks were beating on me, they did confirm that Analia and the kids were in their captivity... but didn't mention where... whatever we can get out of him would help... I just hope it's not too late...

Dew: It's a good thing I know of "someone" who's good at getting people to talk... *(then looks over at Lorenzo with a smirk)*

Lorenzo: A natural I am... Ha-ha... *(then cracks his knuckles)*

Dew: Okay then. Get him up, and let's get going...

Narrator: Cooper and Elvir walk over to the unconscious Gaz, and both begin to bind him with zip ties. Elvir walks off as Cooper hoists Gaz's body onto his shoulders. The group, along with Taizo, then starts making their way back to the *Tor*. One hour later, the RV pulls up to the entry point of Ganas commune. The communal security allows the RV to pass through after seeing Taizo sitting in the passenger seat. Once further inside the commune, the *Tor* comes to a stop and then parks next to a barn. Taizo exits the RV dashing toward the communal garden area. Dew and the others start following him from afar. Five communal members chatting amongst themselves turn their attention to the approaching Taizo. They are relieved to see him.

Communal Resident 1: Taizo, there you are...

Taizo: Hey guys...

Communal Resident 2: We didn't know where you went.

Taizo: Sorry about that...

Communal Resident 4: (*then notices Taizo's injuries*) ...What happened to you?! Are you okay..?

Taizo: I'm fine... it's nothing...

Communal Resident 2: I'm glad you're back... but, so you know, we didn't find much of anything from our search... I'm sorry...

Narrator: The approaching Dew and the party finally catch up to Taizo. They then stop and turn to face the five communal members.

Communal Resident 1: And... who are these people..?

Taizo: Uh, my new friends... I just met them when I was out searching for Analia and the kids in the Buckass Badlands.

Communal Resident 5: Buckass Badlands!?!

Communal Resident 3: So that's where you went...

Communal Resident 1: Out there?! Whoa.

Communal Resident 2: Taizo, are you crazy? ...You could have gotten yourself killed by doing that...

Lorenzo: Heh... He almost did...

Narrator: The Communal members are puzzled by Lorenzo's comments and then turn to Taizo with distressed expressions on their faces.

Communal Resident 4: You know better than that going at it alone...

Taizo: Yeah, I know... But she's, my girlfriend. I'm not just going to sit by and do nothing about it.

Communal Resident 4: We were out there looking for them, weren't we?

Taizo: In the wrong place..! Anyway. I'm here... I'm safe and sound... See... all thanks to these kind folks.

Communal Resident 5: Thank Chosha!

Communal Resident 3: (*then faces Dew and the others*) ...We humbly thank you for keeping Taizo safe.

Dew: It's always a pleasure helping those in need the most.

Elvir: He was worth the trouble...

Cooper: Anytime...

Communal Resident 1: Taizo, you're probably going to wish you were dead when Mr. Torrio finds you.

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* Mr. Torrio..?

Communal Resident 3: He has some choice words for you...

Narrator: A voice from a middle-aged man can be heard from the distance as he's talking to the other communal residents.

Torrio: Is he back yet?! *(shouting)* ...TAIZO!

Communal Resident 2: Speak of the devil...

Taizo: Shit...

Communal Resident 3: Here he comes...

Torrio: *(shouting)* TAIZO! TAIZO..!

Communal Resident 4: We'll let you handle it from here...

Taizo: Hey guys, where are you going?!

Communal Resident 5: Good luck...

Communal Resident 1: See ya...

Narrator: The five communal members then darted off past the approaching and incensed Mr. Torrio. Mr. Torrio is a middle-aged man wearing a dark gray dress suit, a white dress shirt with the collared part unbuttoned, black square-toe ankle-high boots, and tea-shade sunglasses.

Torrio: Taizo. *(sigh)* There you are...

Taizo: Mr. Torrio... Ha-ha...

Torrio: What the hell, man! I told you not to split up from the search party.

Taizo: I'm sorry, Mr. Torrio... but I had to do it... I...

Torrio: You went out to the Badlands, didn't you?

Narrator: Rena begins checking out Mr. Torrio as if she knows him from somewhere.

Taizo: Yeah... I did... and...

Torrio: We talked about this before..! It's stressful enough that my baby girl and those little rascals are missing... That's all I need is my daughter's meathead boyfriend to come up missing too... *(then notices Dew and the others)* ...Hello.

Krista: Hiya.

Elvir: Sup.

Torrio: And you folks are..?

Taizo: Mr. Torrio, they're my new friends. They saved my life from these thugs who were trying to rough me up.

Torrio: Thugs?!

Dew: Sir, it's all right. We were passing through the area and happened to come across him...

Torrio: Fuckin' guy!!! See, you could have gotten yourself killed... (*sarcastically*) They should have left you to die... I'm joking! ...Hey, thanks for looking out for him.

Vilmer: Mr. Torrio, before we ran into Taizo, we also came across a school bus...

Torrio: School bus?! ...Analia!

Taizo: Yeah, that's what I've been trying to tell you this entire time... I found the school bus, too, right before I met these guys. But it's been abandoned for some time... no sign of her or the kids...

Torrio: Fuck... dammit... (*sigh*) Listen Taizo... I'm sorry I blew up on you like that... you were just trying to help. I'm just worried about Analia and the kids...

Taizo: Mr. Torrio I don't fault you. I want to find her too...

Narrator: Rena then realizes that she knows Mr. Torrio.

Rena: (*uncertain*) Johnny..?

Narrator: After hearing Rena's voice, Mr. Torrio instantly gets chills going down his back. He then turns his attention to Rena and immediately recognizes her.

Torrio: Johnny?! Hmm... That voice... is that you Ire-... Rena..?

Rena: Yes, it's me. I can't believe it...

Narrator: Rena and Mr. Torrio then greet one another with a platonic hug briefly.

Rena: ...It has been ages...

Torrio: Yes, it has, old friend...

Rena: Of all the places to run into one another...

Torrio: Tell me about it. Ha-ha...

Narrator: Dew looks at Rena and Mr. Torrio jealously. Elvir notices this.

Dew: So, uh... how do you two know one another..?

Torrio: We go way back...

Elvir: Aww... Is somebody jealous? Hmm... How cute.

Dew: Shut up, Elvir...

Rena: ...Before I had decided to move to Twin Pines, Johnny helped me get my life together after the divorce...

Dew: Oh...

Lorenzo: Divorce?

Cooper: That's news to me...

Elvir: Wait. You were, married?

Rena: Yes, a long time ago. It's a youthful indiscretion I don't speak about much... and rather not.

Elvir: Aha...

Torrio: You got nothing to worry about, pal. Rena is like a sister to me... and I have to say, Rena, he's a nice-looking young man.

Rena: Oh, Johnny... Yes, he is... *(then proudly smiles at Dew)*

Torrio: You two make a good match...

Dew: Ah. Thanks...

Torrio: So, what are you doing out here?

Rena: Uh, road trip. Yeah... My friends and I were passing through looking for this person of interest also.

Torrio: Oh yeah?

Rena: You wouldn't have happened to have any new visitors pass by as of late?

Torrio: Nah. It's just been you guys recently. We don't get a lot of visitors out here.

Rena: Oh. Darn.

Cooper: Hmm... If Thornton isn't here then, there's only one other place left we'll have to check out...

Dew: Yeah... *(looks over at Rena, and then Mr. Torrio)* But I think our search can be put off for a bit longer. I believe there are more pressing matters currently that need to be resolved. Mr. Torrio...

Torrio: Just call me, Johnny.

Dew: Okay. Johnny. Seeing how you are friends with Rena, and we just saved your daughter's boyfriend, we'll also help you find her and the missing kids.

Torrio: That's generous.

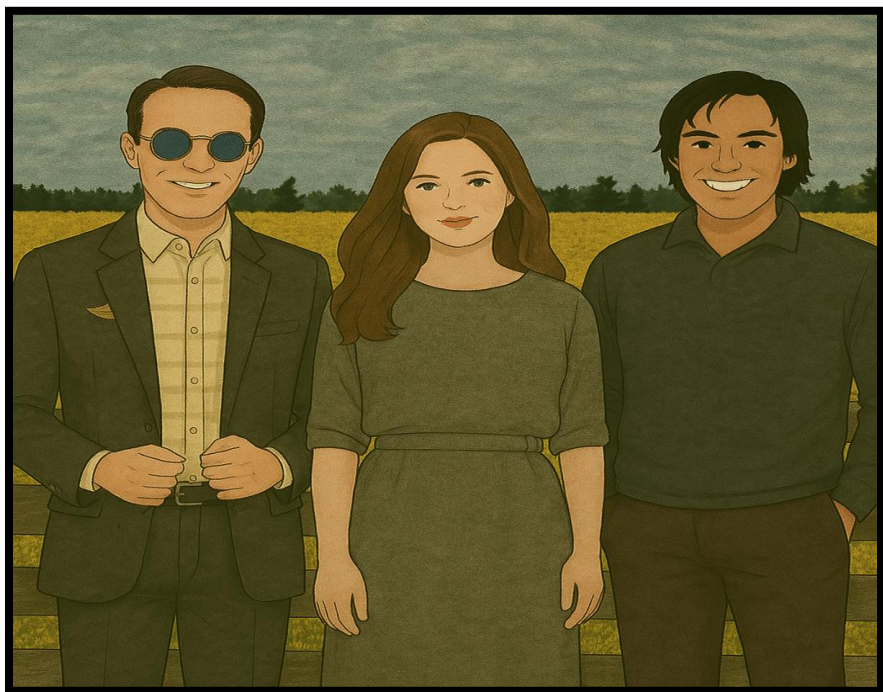
Krista: *(enthusiastically)* It's what we do!

Torrio: You're cheery...

Taizo: That would be of big help. Thank you all.

Torrio: Eh... the more the help, the better... but we've already sent out several search parties and come back empty-handed...

Rena: Don't lose out on hope just yet... We may have a lead...
Torrio: What do you mean?
Taizo: Oh yeaahhh... I almost forgot.
Torrio: What?!
Rena: We were able to capture one of the thugs who attacked Taizo and brought him back with us.
Torrio: Really?! ...You got the culprit? Oh, Rena, you're a blessing. I don't know how else to thank you...
Rena: Don't mention it... You did a lot for me back then. See this as me returning the favor...



Torrio: Right. Where's he at..?
Lorenzo: ...Still unconscious and bound in the RV.
Torrio: Bound? You guys aren't playing around... I like that... it reminds me of the old days...
Krista: The "old days..?"
Dew: Something tells me you've done this before...
Torrio: Heh... many times...
Dew: ...Rena, care sharing?

Rena: Dew, we'll talk about that and more once we get settled in...

Lorenzo: You got a place for us to take him?

Torrio: Yeah, I do. You go grab that gavone, and we'll take him back to my dwelling for questioning... But let's keep it discreet. I don't want the others getting their hands on the guy just yet... You know what I mean..?

Lorenzo: All right. You got it...

Elvir: Hold up. I'm coming to help... I want to be a part of the festivities too...

Narrator: Lorenzo and Elvir then walk off, heading toward the *Tor*, as a mesmerized Cooper watches her.

Cooper: ...She's such a team player... so eager... so full of energy... such a turn-on... Ahh... (*then begins drooling for a brief second*)

Krista: Whoa. Easy there, Cooper... Ha-ha...

Narrator: Cooper then snaps back to his senses and regains his composure.

Cooper: (*embarrassed*) Ohh... Sorry... Heh.

Dew: (*rolls his eyes*) This guy...

Torrio: Is your friend going to be okay there? Does he need a cigarette or something?

Rena: Yeah. Don't mind him. He's just silly.

Torrio: Ah, gotcha.

Taizo: ...Hey Mr. Torrio, what about the school bus..? We can't let that sit out in the Badlands...

Torrio: Yeah. Yeah. I'll send the others out to tow it back here... Taizo, go home and get some rest. I'll take it from here. Analia will be back home before you know it...

Taizo: But she's my girlfriend... I should be involved too...

Torrio: Forget about it. You've done enough... Go.

Taizo: (*reluctantly*) All right... I understand, Mr. Torrio.

Torrio: ...Also, don't tell the other residents about the guy you brought in. Once we're done with him, I'll then let them know. Capeesh?

Taizo: I won't say a word, Mr. Torrio. (*then looks at Dew and the others*) ...It was nice meeting you guys. Thanks again, and be safe... (*then runs off*)

Rena: ...Johnny, I'm curious as to what you're doing out here yourself. I would have never thought of you as a communal type.

Torrio: As you mentioned before, we have a lot to catch up on...

Rena: I'm looking forward to doing that. Okay. Lead the way, old friend...

Cooper: Hey, Dew...

Dew: Yes..?

Cooper: I'm going to wait here for Elvir and Lorenzo and then lead them to Mr. Torrio's house.

Dew: Oh, are you sure that's the only reason why you'll be waiting?

Cooper: Yeah... Why else would I..?

Vilmer: I remember what it was like to be infatuated with someone... young people...

Cooper: Oh. No, it's not that at all... (*nervous*) Ha-ha...

Dew: Sure. Sure. I think you'll need the minute alone anyway... just don't get too excited and sticky waiting, okay? Enjoy the view...

Narrator: Dew then walks off with Mr. Torrio, Rena, Krista, and Vilmer as they head toward Torrio's dwelling.

CHAPTER 11 – SPILLING THE BEANS

Narrator: Thirty minutes have passed as the party settles in at the Torrio residences. Rena finishes catching Mr. Torrio up on her current life details as Dew, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer are gathered in the living room area along with them. Meanwhile, Lorenzo and Elvir are interrogating Gaz in a small backroom.

Rena: ...And that's what I have been up to these days.

Torrio: Wow. You've done a lot of things since we last met. Rena, I'm glad that you did follow your heart and finally opened that martial arts school you were always talking about. I'm proud of you.

Rena: Yeah, thanks... Getting the space for the place was easy. However, finding students who would commit took a while. But everything worked out for the best, as you know.

Torrio: Good stuff...

Dew: ...So, Mr. Torrio, what's your deal?

Rena: Yeah, Johnny, enough about me. What's been new with you?

Torrio: Um... Where do I even begin..? Maybe I should start with my life story and how I ended up out here, eh?

Dew: Sure. It looks like we still have time to kill until Lorenzo gets that guy to speak.

Torrio: ...Okay. So, I'm originally from Llivisaca...

Krista: Llivisaca? ...Me too!

Torrio: Oh, cool. What part youse from?

Krista: The southern zone.

Torrio: I'm from the North myself. I haven't run into anyone from that place in a long time... I sure do miss the boba lychee tea... Mmm...

Krista: Sorry for interrupting... Please go on.

Torrio: W-where was I..? Oh yeah... I was born to Mikhail Torrio, an underboss to the Del Duca crime family, and Carina Savada, a Burlesque dancer. My father was a bit older than she was. They got married several months after my birth. I would have had a sister three years later, but she died during my mother's miscarriage...

Krista: Sheesh... that's rough. I'm sorry...

Torrio: Yeah. Thank you... Let's see... Um... I had a decent middle-class upbringing... My father provided for us... We were a happy family... When I came of age, he wanted me to go to law school and become a lawyer. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be a writer instead. He hated that idea, but to him, it was better than being involved with the mob. So, off I went to college to pursue my dream. Although, it wouldn't last too long. Two years into college, my old man ended up getting incarcerated for racketeering, extortion, and counterfeiting. The courts gave him a 35-year sentence. I couldn't bear the thought of my mother being alone and struggling, so I went against my father's wishes and followed in his footsteps to keep the family afloat. I would be groomed by his associates and eventually become a "made-man" and swear my oath of Omerta...

Dew: ...What's that?

Torrio: It means, "*The code of silence and code of honor...*"

Dew: Ah.

Torrio: So, the years went on, and I worked my way up through the ranks. I eventually obtained the position of Capo... Not as high as the old man was, but I had some clout. Not only was I making money through the mobs' operations, but I had my fingers in so many different pies from running legitimate businesses such as multiple restaurants, nightclubs, car dealerships, auto repair shops, and theatrical works. I was taking in 14 million Wertes a week from all that... Life was great! Heh... Speaking of the theatre... and not trying to toot my own horn here... but I was the composer and librettist of the opera buffa titled, "*Anybody Got Fifty Miedz?*"

Vilmer: Oh!?!

Dew: I never heard of it...

Rena: Oh, it's such a good production...

Cooper: So, you put your dream of being a writer to good use, huh?

Torrio: Yes, sir... and I made okay money from it too.

Vilmer: Well, I have also seen that production.

Torrio: Oh yeah?

Vilmer: It was one of my fondest memories... before the climb...

Torrio: The climb?



Vilmer: Never mind that... (*sigh*) But yes... my late beloved, cherished the opera. I didn't care much for it at first, but when we went to your show... Oh, I was entranced. The costumes and lighting design... so much to take in... Now, the overture was a bit long from what I remember... But the way the Soprano and Tenor carried their vocals... Ah... (*puts his left hand over his heart in reverence, and then sharply exhales*) ...hearing that ...it was like eating a sherbet-flavored creamsicle bar on a hot summer's day... you knew if you licked it too fast you would get brain freeze... but that soothing numbness afterward was soooo euphoric...

Torrio: Talk about a "satisfied customer". Ha-ha...

Vilmer: ...Who knew an Opera about poverty, pot-smoking belching squirrels, used dental floss, bootleg deli dressing, and

redemption would be so impeccably entertaining?! Bravo!
Bravo!

Torrio: Grazie. I'm glad it left an impression on you... So... from that production, that is how I met my wife, Imelda. She was one of the ballet dancers. My daughter was born five years later, and my father got out on parole after serving 15 years of his sentence. He would die two years later from natural causes. That's when it hit me... I looked back at how my father spent his later years wasting away in a prison cell for the mob and being away from his family. I knew I didn't want to end up like that... So, I then decided to call it quits on the mob. When I told my mother what I planned on doing, she literally disowned me on her deathbed. But it was the right choice... I took all the money I made and relocated the family several times just in case the mob decided to come after us. We eventually made our way out here and began building the foundation for the commune. It was going to be a fresh start for us... and it didn't take too long to establish either. Thanks to assistance from a few wayward travelers and families looking to escape the harshness of modern civilization, they would make our cooperative community, Ganas commune, a reality. And here we are, we've been around for 12 years now...

Vilmer: And by the looks of it, you've done a fine job building such.

Torrio: Thank you.

Dew: So, the mob stopped coming after you?

Torrio: Pretty much... Last I heard, many from the Del Duca crime family ended up dead or got life jail sentences after the national government began its campaign of cracking down on organized crime in Llivisaca. They battered them into extinction... but just because you chop the head off one beast, another one eventually comes along to fill the void...

Krista: You ain't lying...

Torrio: ...I never ratted them out once. I always maintained my oath, even to this day...

Rena: After hearing your story, and everything you went through... it was for the best... I'm glad things turned out well for you and the family also...

Cooper: But how did you and Rena exactly meet..?

Torrio: Um...

Rena: ...Through a newspaper ad.

Cooper: Hm?

Rena: For employment.

Cooper: Oh.

Rena: ...I worked as a... stagehand for the Opera. Uh... costume designer.

Torrio: Yeah. That's right...

Dew: Hmm... I never knew you worked in theater.

Rena: I only did it for seven months before moving to Twin Pines...

Dew: Ah.

Krista: 7 months..? You two seem like you have known each other for years.

Torrio: Well, that's the power of friendship. Heh...

Rena: ...Hey, Johnny. Speaking of family... How is Imelda? Where is she..?

Torrio: Oh... well... she's no longer with us...

Rena: What?!

Torrio: Yeah... She, uh... died of phenomena seven years ago...

Rena: Oh no...

Torrio: Yeah... I've been raising my daughter ever since.

Rena: I am so sorry to hear that. Imelda was a beautiful woman... my condolences, Johnny.

Torrio: Thank you, old friend...

Cooper: I wonder if Lorenzo has gotten that guy to spill the beans yet..?

Krista: He should have by now. Gaz was never "quality" *Mantid Oscuro* material in the first place...

Dew: ...Yeah, I should go check up on that.

Vilmer: They have been awfully quiet back there...

Torrio: It's because the room is soundproof. I had it made that way for privacy reasons.

Rena: It's working like a charm...

Torrio: So, Rena, these *Mantid Oscuro* wise guys are the same chumps who were giving you all trouble in Llivisaca..? I remember you briefly mentioning something about that earlier.

Rena: Yeah, Johnny, that was them...

Torrio: They sound like little punks... Hah... But they didn't know who they were dealing with when messing with you, Rena... you've always been tough as nails... But yeah, Dew, let's go check up

on your friend's progress. In the meantime, Rena, and the rest of you; please make yourselves at home...

Vilmer: Thank you, Mr. Torrio.

Cooper: ...Much appreciated.

Krista: You're the best...

Rena: Okay, Johnny. If you need me for anything, holler...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio nods his head in acknowledgment and then walks off with Dew exiting the living room into the back room. As they both enter the backroom, Gaz is zip-tied to a wooden chair with both of his hands behind him. A bare bulb that hangs over him dimly lights the room. Gaz's mouth is bruised and bleeding after receiving several brass-knuckle punches from Lorenzo. Elvir is sitting down in a chair off to the side with a handful of jellybeans watching in delight. She puts one of them in her mouth but immediately lets it drop out onto the floor while spitting in disgust.

Elvir: Yuck! Eww... I hate the licorice ones..! (*then accidentally drops her handful of jelly beans onto the floor*) NO..! MY FUCKIN' JELLY BEANS!!!

Narrator: Elvir gets up from the chair, bends over, and then picks up the partially chewed licorice-flavored jellybean from the floor. She aggressively chucks it at Gaz's face hitting him square in the left eye. The jellybean then rolls off of him, dropping back onto the floor.

Gaz: Agh... my eye!!! You... you little bitch... Mmm...

Elvir: That was for causing me to drop them... Dammit... Punch him again, Lorenzo!

Narrator: Lorenzo punches Gaz in the face. Gaz then spits out a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

Gaz: Ugh... You brute!

Lorenzo: Where's the girl and kids..?! Tell me!

Gaz: I'm not talking... (*cough*) Fuck. You. Is that all you got?! ...I've taken worse beatings in the mouth than that... Mmm... Amateur..!

Narrator: Lorenzo, for a moment, pauses to register what Gaz just said and then gives him a left hook. This almost causes Gaz and the chair to tip over.

Elvir: Whhhhhooooaaaa. Tiiiiimmmmbbbbbeeerrr!!!

Lorenzo: ...So, you gonna talk..? Or we gonna keep doing this?

Gaz: (cough) (cough) Beat me! Beat me! Beat me! Mmm...

Lorenzo: You're a glutton for punishment... Okay, then... have it your way...

Narrator: Lorenzo is about to strike Gaz in the face once more until Mr. Torrio grabs his right arm from behind.

Torrio: Wait...

Narrator: Lorenzo turns around, facing Mr. Torrio as he lets go of Lorenzo's right arm.

Lorenzo: What gives?!

Torrio: I don't think he's going to talk... He looks like he's enjoying himself more than anything else. Let me try a different approach if you don't mind..?

Lorenzo: ...I was just getting warmed up. But, sure.

Elvir: Ah, c'mon...

Narrator: Lorenzo steps aside with Elvir and Dew. The three observe Mr. Torrio pulling up a chair and placing it calmly in front of the bound Gaz. Mr. Torrio then sits down, facing him directly.

Torrio: All right, buddy... let's cut to the chase. You got information on my daughter and the six kids' whereabouts. Where are they?

Gaz: I ain't telling you shit.

Torrio: Those kids are no older than eight years old... *(then digs around in the left pocket of his dress suit jacket, pulls out a photograph, and then shows Gaz it)* ...Look at the picture... that's my daughter... I don't want her or the kids to get harmed. So, I'm going to ask again, nicely... give me their location, and maybe... I'll let you go Scott free...

Gaz: No can do...

Torrio: Fine... *(then puts the photograph back into the left pocket of his dress suit jacket)* I didn't want it to come down to this...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio gets up from the chair. He then stands over and looks down at the bounded Gaz.

Gaz: What do you mean? ...You're going to beat me up some more... Mmm... like he did?

Torrio: No... but for what's about to happen, you're going to wish I was. Back in the day, I dealt with punks like you a lot... if you want to get someone to speak... you don't always have to resort to physical measures... I, too, am a master of interrogation... Dew...

Dew: Yeah?

Torrio: Could youse guys leave? I got it from here...

Dew: Okay...

Elvir: Oooohhh... this sounds like it'll be fun to watch. Can I stay?

Torrio: Nah. You won't like this much...

Gaz: (*gulp*) W-what?!

Narrator: Dew then gestures with his right hand to Lorenzo and Elvir. The three then exit the room. Mr. Torrio walks up to the door and locks it. He then walks past the bounded Gaz and over to a drawer. He opens the top drawer and reaches inside to grab a set of over-the-ear noise-canceling headphones.

Torrio: This will do... (*then smirks as he's looking down at the over-the-ear noise-canceling headphones in hand*)

Gaz: What's going on?! ...What are you doing..?

Narrator: Mr. Torrio shuts the top drawer and then walks over to the bounded Gaz. He faces him again while standing.

Torrio: This room... so you know it is soundproof.

Gaz: Oookay...

Torrio: I had this room specifically built for my daughter so she could play her music as loud as she wanted... you know how that goes; the kids love their music... if you can call it that...

Gaz: ...And..?

Torrio: There was one song in particular that drove me nuts... I couldn't stand it... Heh... really made my flesh crawl...

Gaz: ...Hah. So... you're going to play shitty music to get me to talk..? Never..!

Torrio: Nobody will hear you scream... When the pain becomes too much... you'll give in...

Gaz: That... doesn't scare me. I won't talk... I told you this... already... there's nothing you can do to make me...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio then walks over to a corner where a mini stereo system sits on a shelf. He powers on the device which gives off a brief hum. He then toggles the volume switch to its maximum setting.

Torrio: They say, "*Music is the wine that fills the cup of silence.*" ...It also is said, "*to soothe the soul*" ... but in this case... Heh-heh...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio then puts on the noise-canceling headphones.

Gaz: Hm..?

Torrio: Sit back, relax, and enjoy the tune...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio pushes the “play” button on the stereo system. Gaz looks around the room, frightened and confused. Then *Pink fongs*, “*Baby Shark song*,” blasts loudly through the speakers causing Gaz to agonize instantly.

Gaz: W-w-what’s this-s-s!?! Argh... No. Nooo. Nooooo... not this song... no you didn’t...

Torrio: I can’t hear you... (*pointing to the noise-canceling headphones he’s wearing*)

Gaz: You sick fuck! Arrggggghhhh... Please no... Make it stop!! MAKE IT STOP!!! Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!

Narrator: Eight minutes pass by, the door to the backroom area opens, and the muffled weeping of Gaz can be heard. The door then shuts as Mr. Torrio returns to the living room area where Dew and the others are waiting.

Torrio: Bada Bing, Bada Boom! ...I know where they’re at...

Rena: That’s great, Johnny.

Lorenzo: You got him to speak?!

Dew: How’d you do that..?

Torrio: I have my ways... I think I might have mentally broken the fucker...

Rena: You haven’t missed a beat after all this...

Torrio: Literally... But anyway, it looks like these *Mantid Oscuro* thugs have been hiding out at the abandoned ship graveyard.

Rena: Abandoned ship graveyard?

Torrio: After the *Great Civil war*, it became a dumping ground for all the damaged and decommissioned ships used by the Helix Capital and New Havenport forces. Of all the places... Of course, they would be out there... that fuckin’ place gives me the creeps... Ugh...

Dew: ...And where’s this place at?

Torrio: It’s just Southwest of here and about a two-hour drive. I’ll be joining youse guys’ party temporarily.

Vilmer: What about the parents of the missing children or the other residents... shouldn’t they join us too..?

Torrio: Nah. They’ll only get in the way and get hurt. I got this... Plus, you guys seem capable enough to hold your own...

Krista: Okay. We’ll use the *Tor* to get out there. It looks like I’ll have to put the pedal to the metal. We don’t have time to spare. Just direct me where to go...

Lorenzo: Time to beat some *Mantid Oscuro* asses again...

Cooper: We'll make quick work of them.

Elvir: It's nice to be on the winning side...

Rena: Let's go rescue your daughter and the kids...

Torrio: Before we do that... He did mention some other things.

Rena: Like what..?

Torrio: Something about how at first, they were going to use my baby girl and the kids to collect a ransom. But then it was decided that they would be used in some experiment... something about a virus...

Lorenzo: ...Say what?!

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper look at one another silently for a brief moment and then turn their attention back to Mr. Torrio.

Vilmer: Guys, what's wrong..?

Narrator: Cooper is about to say something until Dew shakes his head no at him.

Cooper: Euh... nothing...

Vilmer: Hmm...

Rena: ...Did you say virus?!

Torrio: Yeah...

Dew: ...Did he say anything more?

Torrio: He kept repeating the words, "...In 24 hours" and "12 test subjects". Whatever the heck that means, it doesn't sound good...

Rena: Then we need to go ASAP, Johnny.

Lorenzo: Hey... What about our "POW" over there? Are you gonna leave him in the room?

Torrio: On our way out, I'll inform the other residents to place him in our communal jail. They'll keep watch over him. But first...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio walks over to a wall safe and inputs the combination code. The wall safe opens, and he obtains a bulletproof vest, a sawed-off shotgun, and several slugs. Mr. Torrio then closes the wall-safe door. He places the sawed-off shotgun on the floor as it leans against the wall. He removes his dress suit jacket and then dons the bulletproof vest. He puts the slugs into the front pockets of the vest and then picks up the sawed-off shotgun with a sling attached from the floor.

Vilmer: That'll do it...

Elvir: ...This mofo is packing some serious heat.

Rena: Ready to go to war..?

Torrio: I'm ready... *(then pumps the sawed-off shotgun)*
Daddy is coming for you, baby girl. Hang in there...
(then puts the sawed-off shotgun sling over his left shoulder)

Narrator: Rena puts a reassuring hand on Mr. Torrio's right shoulder.

Rena: Don't worry, Johnny. We'll get her and the kids home safely...

Torrio: Yeah... Now, let's go split some skulls...

Narrator: Mr. Torrio, Dew, Rena, and the others then exit the dwelling making their way to the *Tor*. The scene cuts to a sick bay area onboard a grounded strategic sealift, located among numerous other wrecked vessels in the abandoned ship graveyard. Dr. Eudora is meticulously toiling away with various lab equipment, then the door opens, and the *Grey Éminence* wheels himself in.

Grey Éminence: Doctor, we have a problem...

Dr. Eudora: ...If it's about the 12 SKT "A" variant samples, they're almost ready.

Grey Éminence: That's marvelous to hear... but it's not about that...

Dr. Eudora: Then, what is it..?

Grey Éminence: I have been informed by my men that they've encountered some unanticipated inconveniences earlier.

Dr. Eudora: How so..?

Grey Éminence: Do you remember when I told you about the *Aurora Blade*, that gang from the Helix Capital taking down my *Mantid Oscuro's* in Llivisaca?

Dr. Eudora: I do...

Grey Éminence: Well, it turns out that they're also the same ones who defeated your armored beetle creation back in Masaya village. And, they've seemed to have made their way out here to the badlands...

Dr. Eudora: Really?!

Grey Éminence: Yes. Also, one of the buffoons I employ got captured by them. It's likely the do-gooders got him to speak, revealing our whereabouts and operation...

Dr. Eudora: Oh. Then they would be on their way soon...

Grey Éminence: Yes.

Dr. Eudora: And it's a probability that they'll be coming here also to rescue the woman and six kids...

Grey Éminence: Ugh... Yes, yes...

Dr. Eudora: Hmph...

Grey Éminence: All these years of planning... everything is in jeopardy... we can't afford any setbacks.

Dr. Eudora: Hm. You may see it that way... but I don't... (*then wickedly smiles*)

Grey Éminence: Why are you smiling?!

Dr. Eudora: Don't you see... this gives us a perfect opportunity for more Guinea pigs to be used in the trials against the army I'm constructing for you... It's a welcoming addition...

Grey Éminence: Well... when you put it like that...

Dr. Eudora: Yes... they'll be surmounted and disposed of quickly. You'll never have to worry about these *Aurora Blade* roaches interfering ever again... Anyhoo... It's time... Go assemble the twelve test subjects...

Grey Éminence: Reprisal!!! At last... Ha-ha-ha...

Narrator: An exuberant *Grey Éminence* then turns his wheelchair around and hurriedly exits the sick bay.

Dr. Eudora: (*gleefully*) ...I can't wait to see the fruits of my labor put into motion... see you soon... my little "guinea pigs"... especially, you... woman with the scythe...

CHAPTER 12 – INTO THE LINT TRAP

Narrator: An hour later, the scene cuts to Dew and the others standing on a nearby hill along with Mr. Torrio, who's kneeling and overlooking the abandoned ship graveyard with his binoculars.

Elvir: ...You weren't lying; this place is kinda of creepy.

Krista: They would pick a place like this to dig in at...

Dew: How do we know where they're holding your daughter and the kids? There are so many wrecked ships out here...

Rena: Where do we even begin..?

Narrator: Mr. Torrio continues scanning the area through his binoculars, until he focuses in on an open well-dock of a grounded strategic sealift where two *Mantid Oscuro* thugs are standing guard.

Torrio: Aha!

Dew: What'd you find?

Torrio: There... *(pointing to the well-dock of the grounded strategic sealift)* Here... *(hands Dew the binoculars)*

Narrator: Dew takes the binoculars and begins scanning the area.

Cooper: What you see, Dew?

Dew: By the looks of it... There are two guards posted by the entrance of the well-dock, and six others patrolling the area a few yards outside... *(still looking through the binoculars)*

Rena: Is there any other way inside..?

Dew: Hmm... Nope. It doesn't look like it... *(then hands Mr. Torrio back the binoculars)*

Cooper: What's the plan?

Dew: We try to sneak past the six on patrol or take them out one by one if needed... but when we reach the well-dock... that's going to be tricky...

Torrio: It might end up being a full-frontal assault... *(then puts away the binoculars)* I'm not against that.

Lorenzo: Sounds kinda of hazardous... But fun.

Krista: Head on it is then...

Cooper: Boy, this reminds me of that one time...

Vilmer: But that may further endanger his daughter and the six kids, no?

Elvir: ...Knowing how my ex-chums operate, if they wanted to do something to them, it would have been done by now...

Krista: She's right. Plus, at this rate, they know we're on our way...

Dew: If possible, we can try to sneak up on the two guards from the side once we get close enough... as long as we don't alert them beforehand.

Torrio: You like doing things methodically... That's not bad either. All right.

Rena: Johnny, once we're inside, do you know where they're being held?

Torrio: Yeah. That little punk told me they got them in a make-shift prison cell located in the Liquid Cargo area. It's in the lower deck below the Heavy Vehicle deck...

Rena: Did he say how many *Mantid Oscuro* there are..?

Torrio: No more than thirty...

Narrator: The group looks down at the ship graveyard one last time and then says nothing more before venturing off. Making their way down and through the ship graveyard, the group silently takes out the six *Mantid Oscuro* thugs on patrol. The scene cuts to the well-dock entrance. The two *Mantid Oscuro* thugs standing guard there remain unaware of Dew and the others sneaking up from the side. The two guards are then immediately rendered unconscious, with Mr. Torrio using the butt of his sawed-off shotgun on the back of the head of one guard and Vilmer whacking the other with his grappling hook. Dew and the others then run through the well-dock entrance into the sealift with the two guards disposed of. Once inside, the group approaches the Heavy Vehicle deck. They notice many portable lights rigged to the bulkhead and various broken-down military vehicles. Walking a

bit further, they encounter and engage in combat with several more *Mantid Oscuro* thugs whom they fend off with ease. Eventually, Dew and the others make their way down a deck. As the party traverses through the long P-Way corridor to the Liquid Cargo area, a voice from behind calls out to Krista, stopping them in their tracks.

Lainy:

Krista..!

Krista:

...Huh? (*uncertain*) Is that you... Lainy? (*then turns around to face her*)

Lainy:

Don't take one more step...

Narrator:

Lainy and two other *Mantid Oscuro* thugs wielding machetes approach Dew, Krista, and the others. Then they stop midway facing the party.



Krista: You're here too...

Rena: Her again...

Lorenzo: Who's this chick..?

Krista: It's complicated...

Lainy: Why do you say that? Are you too good for me now?
...Must you always abandon those who love you?

Krista: That's not true at all...

Lainy: Then, say it...

Krista: She's... my wife...

Dew & Cooper: Your wife?!

Lorenzo: Oh really?! You two..? Mmm... that's hot...

Lainy: Hah... So, Krista, you still do acknowledge me as such
after all... and you've got some more friends with you
this time around... *(then looks over at Elvir)* And
you're here too, Elvir... I heard that you were palling
around with these people. Where's your loyalty?! I
never did trust you... *(then looks over at Rena)* ...Hello
again...

Narrator: Rena gives Lainy a friendly but awkward wave.

Krista: ...Lainy, I don't have time for this... Let us pass.

Lainy: No can-do honey. Orders are orders. The *Grey Émi-
nence* knew you and your friends would come... I
can't let you go any further.

Krista: Fuck the *Grey Éminence*! Let the kids and the woman
go...

Lainy: No, Krista. No more favors for you. I did you a solid
the last time... If you want them, you'll have to go
through us...

Torrio: ...Go through you? Okay, bitch... *(then draws his
sawed-off shotgun pointing it at Lainy and the two
Mantid Oscuro thugs)* I'm getting my daughter back!

Narrator: The party then draws their weapons.

Krista: ...Why are you making this needlessly difficult?

Lainy: A job is a job... you know that better than anyone else
when it comes to pleasing the "family"...

Krista: The "family" is dead. Move on. You don't have to do
this.

Lainy: Move on? ...While you're out running around on
some adventure with strangers... I have nothing left...

but the “family” ... and you won’t get in the way of that..!

Narrator: With no more words left to exchange, Dew, Krista, and the others engage Lainy and her two *Mantid Os-curo* thugs. After a brief but fierce struggle, the thugs are beaten to the ground. Lainy, exhausted, drops to one knee, struggling to catch her breath. Krista steps forward and offers her a hand. Lainy glares up at her, hesitates, then takes Krista’s right hand and rises to her feet.

Lainy: *(with a sarcastic smirk)* Hmph... How kind of you, Krista... *(then shoves Krista’s hand away)*

Krista: *(then gestures with a tilt of her head)* Go. Get out of here.

Lainy: *(narrowing her eyes)* Why..?

Krista: I’m doing you a solid. Don’t make me regret it.

Narrator: Lainy squints at Krista, smug yet conflicted. The two former lovers share a charged moment of silence, their eyes locking with a rekindled flame of passion between them. Without a word, Lainy turns and starts walking away, passing by Dew and the others. After about six feet, she stops, her back still facing them.

Lainy: *(calling over her shoulder)* ...If you want to find the *Grey Éminence*, once you’re done here... head to the Dual Hangar Bay, above deck near the aft end. From there, you’ll find the Command-and-Control Suite. He’ll be there...

Narrator: Lainy starts toward the P-Way corridor exit — until Krista calls out, her voice breaking the tension.

Krista: *(softly)* ...Hey, Lainy.

Lainy: *(pausing, not turning around)* Yeah, Krista..?

Krista: *(voice uncertain but sincere)* When I’m done with all this... I’ll come find you. Maybe... maybe we can start over..?

Lainy: *(exhaling, her head dipping, a faint smile crossing her lips)* Start over..? *(pauses, voice softer)* Yeah. That would be nice. I want that too. You’ll know where to

find me... (*quietly, almost a plea*) Try not to die on me, all right?

Narrator: Without another glance back, Lainy disappears into the P-Way corridor, heading toward the upper decks, leaving behind a silence thick with everything left unsaid.

Rena: ...Was that wise to let her go?

Lorenzo: I know that's your girl and all, but you don't think she'll call reinforcements or somethin'..?

Krista: No. We won't have to worry about her again...

Dew: All right, guys, let's get going...

Narrator: Dew and the others continue walking down the long P-Way corridor leaving the laid-out unconscious bodies of the two *Mantid Oscuro* thugs behind. After reaching the end of the P-Way corridor, Cooper opens a watertight door and lets the party members enter one by one into the Liquid Cargo area. He then follows them to the other side closing the watertight door behind him. Dew and the others vigilantly tread the area. Unbeknownst to them, a surveillance camera that's mounted to the overhead observes the group. Mr. Torrio spots the makeshift prison cell where Analia and the six kids await. Analia is sitting on the dirty cell deck as the six kids are sleeping. The party then approaches it.

Torrio: ...Analia!

Analia: (*surprised*) ...Dad?!

Narrator: Mr. Torrio then runs over to the cell. A relieved Analia rises off the deck and meets her father at the cell door. The six kids begin to wake up and are happy and relieved to see Mr. Torrio, Dew, and the others.

Communal Kid 1: Mr. Torrio, is that you?!

Communal Kid 3: Of course, it's him silly...

Communal Kid 2: He's gonna save us.

Narrator: The six kids then cheer excitedly.

Analia: You're here... but, how did you know where we were?!

Torrio: Don't worry about the details, baby girl. Let's get you guys out of there... everybody, stand back..!

Narrator: Mr. Torrio then draws his sawed-off shotgun, points it at the cell door, and fires off two rounds at it. This causes the cell door to open. The six kids and Analia exit the cell. As the kids run over to Dew and the others, Analia approaches her father, and they both embrace one another with a heartfelt hug.

Analia: Dad... I'm so happy you're here...

Torrio: Me too, baby girl... I was so worried... Everybody was looking for you guys... even Taizo.

Analia: That boyfriend of mine... I can't wait to see him and everyone again.

Torrio: Are you okay? They didn't hurt you, and the kids did they..?

Analia: No, Dad. I'm fine, and so are the kids.

Torrio: Thank Goodness...

Narrator: The two then pull back from hugging, and Analia curiously checks out Dew and the others.

Analia: Dad. Who are these people you're with?

Torrio: Just some new friends... *(then looks at Rena with a smile)* ...and an old one.

Narrator: Rena smiles back at Mr. Torrio and Analia.

Communal Kid 5: *(facing Krista and Vilmer)* I miss my mommy... I wanna go home.

Krista: Don't worry, little one, you'll be seeing her again soon...

Vilmer: It must have been terrifying for what these kids went through...

Communal Kid 6: *(facing Dew)* Hey, mister.

Dew: Hm?

Communal Kid 6: Why are you carrying a shower rod?

Communal Kid 3: *(facing Dew)* Hee-hee... it looks like the one that my mommy and daddy use for a shoe rack... Hee-hee...

Dew: What?! It's not a...

Cooper: Ha-ha-ha... I told you it looks like a...

Dew: Argh. Shut up, Cooper...

Communal Kid 2: *(facing Lorenzo)* ...I like your hair.

Lorenzo: Thanks, kid...

Communal Kid 1: *(facing Lorenzo)* Sooo spikey...

Communal Kid 4: *(facing Elvir)* Cool-looking knives you got there, lady... can I touch them?

Elvir: No. They're not for little kids. Only adults. They're not toys.

Communal Kid 4: Aww, c'mon. Please?

Narrator: Elvir then looks down at Communal Kid 4, who gets teary eyes and starts to frown.

Elvir: Oh... you're pulling this shit now... Ah... You're pulling at my heartstrings here, kid...

Narrator: Communal Kid 4 continues to frown and gets teary eyes.

Elvir: Ah, dammit... you're good, kid, you're good. How can I say no to a face like that? Okay, don't cry. Geez...

Communal Kid 4: Okay... Hee-hee...

Elvir: When we get out of here and get you home... I'll let you check them out then. Okay..?

Communal Kid 4: Promise?

Elvir: Yes.

Communal Kid 4: Awesome..!

Cooper: Aww... That's adorable. Elvir, I can tell kids really like you... I bet you're really good with them...

Elvir: Well, I did grow up in an orphanage...

Rena: I'm sorry to cut this short... But Johnny, we should get going before any more of those thugs show up.

Torrio: You're right, Rena... All right. Analia. You kids. Stay quiet and follow us, okay? We're going home. Got it?

Analia: Yes, Dad.

All Six Communal Kids: Yes, Mr. Torrio...

Narrator: The party, along with the six kids and Analia, head toward the exit. The sealift's intercom system is then activated. The party is startled and comes to a stop. They turn their attention to the reverbing voice over the intercom throughout the room.

Dr. Eudora: *"Leaving so soon..? The fun is just getting started..."*

Narrator: Twelve *Mantid Oscuro* thugs enter the room from the opposite end and then stand in formation. They stare down Dew and the others who draw their weapons.

Lorenzo: More of these clowns again...

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* ...That voice... Hmm...

Dr. Eudora: *"Ready to fight, eh..? Good. Good. Good..."*

Dew: *(looking upward and panning the room) Who are you?!*

Dr. Eudora: *"That is of no concern to you, my little "guinea pig".*

Rena: *"Guinea pig..?"*

Lorenzo: *The fuck?!*

Dr. Eudora: *"...All that's important is for YOU ALL to put on a good show for ME..."*

Dew: *What, is this a game to you?*

Dr. Eudora: *"This is precisely that... Now I know what you're thinking- you're going to easily run through these twelve here as you did the others... But... Ha-ha... looks can be deceiving... you see..."*

Narrator: *One of the twelve *Mantid Oscuro* thugs then uncontrollably begins to vomit. Seconds later, he falls to the floor, convulsing in pain.*

Torrio: *What the fuck is going on?!*

Rena: *This...*

Narrator: *Moments later, the other eleven start reacting the same way. Three *Mantid Oscuro* thugs fall to their knees and clutch onto their rib cages, gasping and wailing. Two of them place a hand over their head while still standing but stagger backward. The other six are curled up into a ball on the floor, writhing in pain. The party stands there observing in horror and confusion. The six kids start screaming at the sight.*

Torrio: *Shit. Kids... Cover your eyes..!*

Narrator: *The six kids do as they're told and cover their eyes with their hands. Analia then gathers all six kids together to comfort them.*

Krista: *Agh!*

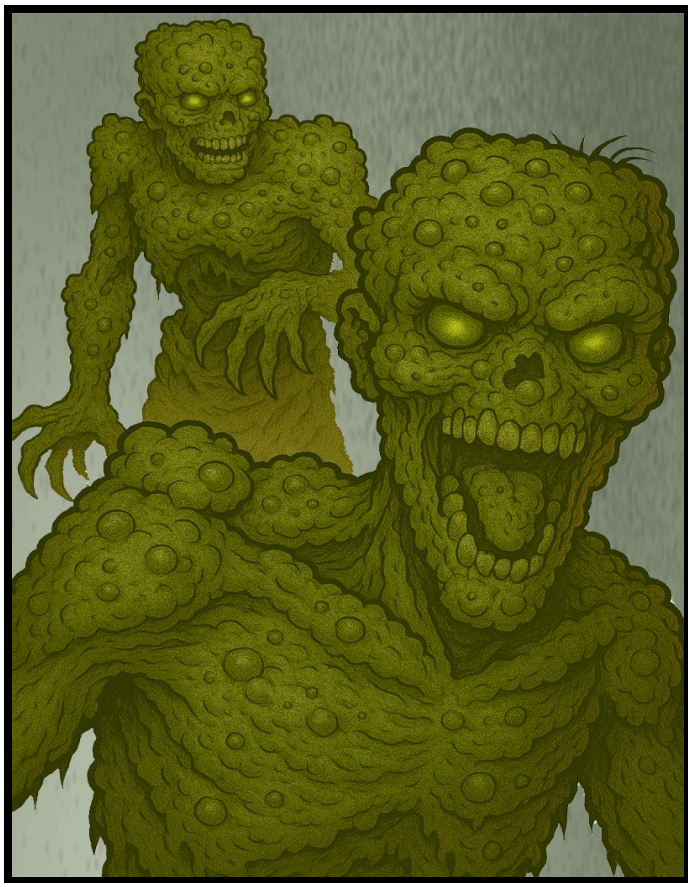
Vilmer: *What's wrong with them..?*

Elvir: *What the fuck?!*

Dew: *Is this...*

Cooper: *...SKT...*

Dr. Eudora: *"Ah... it looks like things are about to pick up... right on schedule too..."*



Narrator:

Suddenly, all twelve *Mantid Oscuro* thugs mutate into zombie-like creatures whose bodies are covered in a hunter-green-colored woolly substance that can only be described as lint. A Clear film covers their eyes as discharge seeps from them. Their teeth appear rotted but sharper. The “Linted” then rise onto their feet and stand upright, twitching and drooling, facing the party.

Torrio:

Mama Mia?!?

Krista:

What’s happening..?

Vilmer:

Wow. Just when you thought you had seen it all... first that creature we encountered in Masaya vil-lage... now this...

Elvir:

This is out there for sure...

Dr. Eudora: *"...What a beautiful metamorphosis... behold perfection..!"*

Rena: *(turns to Mr. Torrio) ...Johnny, get them out of here now!*

Torrio: What?! But I can't...

Narrator: Krista then tosses Mr. Torrio the keys to the *Tor*. He catches them.

Lorenzo: You heard her. Go.

Dew: We got this... it'll be fine.

Narrator: A reluctant Mr. Torrio looks over at Rena, who gives him a reassuring glance. Mr. Torrio motions to Analia, who then grabs the six kids and exits the Liquid Cargo area. Mr. Torrio quickly follows them and then closes the watertight door behind him. The party is left confronting the "Linted" creatures.

Dr. Eudora: *"Now that they're gone... the trial can begin..!"*

Narrator: The twelve "Linted" creatures begin to circle Dew and the others as they growl intimidatingly.

Vilmer: ...Are you sure we can handle this?

Dew: We have no other choice...

Dr. Eudora: *"Don't disappoint me now my little "guinea pigs"... Put on a good showing, okay..? As if your life depends on it... oh, wait... it does... Ha-ha-ha..."*

Lorenzo: Taunting asshole...

Krista: I sure do miss Llivisaca and those rude clients right about now... Ha-ha...

Rena: Get ready...

Dr. Eudora: *"FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE! BEGIN!!!"*

Narrator: The twelve "Linted" then lunge at the party with animalistic fervor, and the battle commences. The fight proves to be difficult for the party as most of their attacks are shrugged off by the "Linted" at first. As time goes on, Dew and the others relentlessly hack away at their enemies, which weakens and eventually floors them permanently. The twelve "Linted" corpses then immediately dissolve into nothingness. After observing this on a monitor in the sealift's Command-and-Control suite, the *Grey Éminence*

countenance turns from entertained to displeased.
Dr. Eudora is shocked by the fight results.

Grey Éminence: ...MY ARMY!!!

Dr. Eudora: Well... that was a severe miscalculation... Mhmm...

Narrator: Dr. Eudora continues watching the monitor screen, then his jaw drops. At this moment, he frighteningly begins to recognize who the woman with the scythe is.

Grey Éminence: ...My chance at revenge... it's... it's RUINED..!

Dr. Eudora: (*gasp*) No!!! (*mumbling to himself*) ...Can it be?!

Grey Éminence: Huh..? What are you mumbling about?

Narrator: Dr. Eudora regains his composure. He deactivates the intercom system, and his hands begin to tremble nervously.

Dr. Eudora: I-it's... h-h-her...

Grey Éminence: Who?

Narrator: Dr. Eudora's hands stop trembling. He then burst out laughing aloud.

Dr. Eudora: Ha-ha-ha... It's her... it's her... IT'S HER..! She's alive...

Narrator: The *Grey Éminence* turns his attention back to the monitor screen and sees Dew and the others exiting the Liquid Cargo hold and running down the P-Way corridor. He grimaces.

Grey Éminence: Argh. Goddamn, those do-gooder fucks!!!

Dr. Eudora: ...But that would mean... Ohhh... "he" sent her... Ha-ha-ha...

Grey Éminence: I don't understand...

Narrator: Dr. Eudora then grabs his black knapsack from off the floor and strides toward the exit.

Dr. Eudora: ...I won't be going down with the ship... Nooo...

Grey Éminence: Wait. Where are you going?!

Dr. Eudora: ...I won't allow "him" that satisfaction... Not today... not EVER..!

Grey Éminence: You're not making any sense... GET A HOLD OF YOUR-SELF!

Narrator: Without giving a response, Dr. Eudora exits the Command-and-Control suite.

Grey Éminence: Dr. Eudora, I said wait!!!

Narrator:

The door then closes. As Dr. Eudora walks down the P-Way corridor, he continues mumbling incoherently to himself. He then pulls out a plastic explosive device from the knapsack. Meanwhile, the *Grey Éminence*, now alone in the suite, is left feeling humiliated and defeated. For a moment, he contemplates suicide until he looks down at his left coat pocket. He reaches into the left coat pocket and grabs the SKT virus A vial. Holding the vial in front of his face, he grasps it tightly with determination.

CHAPTER 13 – A HAIRY SITUATION

Narrator: The scene cuts back to Dew and the others who have made their way to the Dual Hangar Bay atop deck. After defeating several more *Mantid Oscuro* thugs who attempted to hold back the party from advancing, the watertight door to the P-Way corridor leading to the Command-and-Control suite then opens. The party turns around still with their weapons drawn and sees the *Grey Éminence* wheeling himself toward them.

Lorenzo: Who's this guy..?

Narrator: The *Grey Éminence* then stops six feet away from the party. He eyes the party up and down arrogantly.

Grey Éminence: You've all caused me enough trouble tonight...

Dew: ...That was you over the intercom?

Grey Éminence: No. Not me. That was the scientist...

Rena: Scientist..?

Grey Éminence: ...Yeah, the same one who tucked his tail between his legs and jetted out of here. I must say, you spooked him really good after us watching you all manhandling my men below deck... (*then points at Rena*) He was especially terrified by you... woman with the scythe... (*then lowers his hand*)

Rena: Um... Who, me..?

Grey Éminence: Yes. But I don't see why...

Krista: ...Are you, the *Grey Éminence*?

Grey Éminence: I am... and you would be that deserter I've heard so much about... (*then looks over Elvir*) ...But let's not forget about your traitorous friend also...

Elvir: Hold up. So, you're the "mastermind"?! The "big cheese." You..? ...Honestly, I was expecting you to be... much taller... minus the wheels...

Vilmer: Wait a minute... I know you from somewhere...

Dew: Hm?

Krista: What do you mean, Vilmer..?

Vilmer: Yeah, I remember you now. You're... or were... the Seneschal of New Havenport...

Dew & Cooper: Seneschal Ligo!?!
 Ligo: In the flesh.
 Vilmer: ...But you're supposed to be dead.
 Ligo: *(then cracks a smile)* ...You and everybody else believes that... but here I am... and If I'm not mistaken, you're that famous mountaineer who climbed Mount Illini all those years ago... "New Havenports finest," or rather you were... But that's irrelevant right now...
 Rena: You were the one who funded the *Mantid Oscuro*...
 Ligo: *(sarcastically)* Ding-ding! Nothing gets past you, huh?
 Cooper: Explain yourself.
 Ligo: Oh. You want a backstory, don't you? Fine... I can do that... I've got nothing but time on my side... *(then smirks)* ...Before the end of the war in New Havenport, I barely escaped that hell with my life. I was then forced into hiding like a rodent... But I patiently waited and planned until the opportunity would arise to begin enacting my revenge... and chance did fall upon me in the form of the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. For the past six years... I invested many resources and money into them from the shadows... building them up enough to become a powerful army rivaling all... my instrument of vengeance against the Helix Capital... for all the lies they spread and the misfortune they caused; during the *Great Civil War*...
 Cooper: Lies..?
 Dew: ...
 Lorenzo: I hate to break it to you, pal, but Zircon is dead.
 Ligo: I know he is... and that is unfortunate he was able to evade my wrath. But he wasn't the only guilty party... No, no. He was just a product of a corrupt system... that very same structure prop up by liars, needing to come crumbling down... not rebuilt, but left in a glorious, tormented, and devastated smoldering heap!
 Cooper: Ramblings of a madman...
 Ligo: Hmm... A shame that the SKT "A" variant wasn't all it's cracked up to be... you sure proved me wrong...
 Rena: ...Pardon me?
 Dew: What did you say..?

Elvir: SKT? "A" variant..?

Krista: ...Is that what turned the twelve into those creatures?

Ligo: You saw it with your own eyes, didn't you? They were magnificent looking, weren't they? ...And to think that the scientist wanted to go with the "G" variant initially... the timing was perfect to put the "A" variant to good use.

Krista: ...You stripped away their humanity just to carry out your twisted vision..!

Ligo: ...They volunteered. And were loyal to the cause, to the very end... I would have had my revenge too if it wasn't for you meddlesome pricks ruining everything..!

Elvir: ...All that time I spent serving in the *Mantid Oscuro*, and the things I did for them... just to find out now that I was being used as a tool unknowingly to abet some edge lords' fiendish wet dream of bringing death and destruction to the world... I feel so dirty...

Ligo: (*facing Elvir*) Really?! Do you, now..? Ha-ha-ha... For all the criminal misdeeds you had partaken in... while with the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*, learning of my intentions and aspirations bothers you the most?

Elvir: I didn't sign up for any of that!

Ligo: Oh, but you were okay with hurting and accosting innocent people when ordered to do so? It was just "fun and games," at their expense, right..?

Elvir: ...

Ligo: Ha-ha-ha... Speechless..? As I thought...

Elvir: You played us..!

Ligo: Bah. Such misplaced anger... be mad at yourself!

Elvir: Fuck off.

Ligo: ...Truth hurts, doesn't it? (*then turns his attention back to the entire party*) Hmph... You all have been unremitting... You ran through every single one of my *Mantid Oscuro's*, the "Linted," and that mutated beetle creature back in Masaya village...

Vilmer: That was your doing..? You sent that monster to attack the village and Konrad?!

Ligo:

That failure? No. That was also the scientist doing, just like all the other creatures you've encountered along the way. But it was entertaining watching it cause havoc upon your village.

Vilmer:

You will pay for that offense..!

Ligo:

Hmm... Maybe I should... just give up then, huh? Hah. Fat chance..! *(then shakes his fist at the party)* All my years of planning weren't for nothing... Ha-ha... You'll sEe... Uggghhhh...



Narrator:

Ligo then vomits and begins to convulse suddenly. The party is startled but maintains a defensive posture pointing their weapons at him. He then abruptly falls out of his wheelchair onto the deck.

Lorenzo: Shit. That fucker must have injected himself with the virus...

Narrator: Ligo's body continues to convulse with excruciating pain as he turns himself over onto his belly. He reaches out with his hand trying to crawl toward the party.

Ligo: (*weakly*) ...iF I cAN't hAvE... mYYY reVenGE... thEn I wiLL tAKE it OUT... on ALLlll OF yoUuuUUUUUuuu!!!
...ARRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

Narrator: Ligo's body then ripples as the hunter-green-colored woolly substance covers him entirely. He grabs his face writhing in pain as his fingernails begin to extend. Moments later, his agony ceases and fully mutates into a gigantic "Linted" creature. The "Linted" Ligo rises off the deck and then forcefully shoves his wheelchair off to the side, knocking it over. Dew is momentarily distracted as he looks over at the downed wheelchair and notices what appears to be a vial lying next to it on the deck. Before he could make a move to go investigate, the "Linted" Ligo turns his attention to the party and gives off a roar. Dew redirects his focus to the enemy standing in front of him and the party. The "Linted" Ligo then immediately charges at them. The fight begins. Meanwhile, Dr. Eudora, still mumbling incoherently to himself, approaches the Engine room entrance. The door opens. He then drops the now-emptied knapsack at the entrance and continues to proceed inside. He walks up to the main engine and then begins rigging it with several plastic explosives. Once finished, Dr. Eudora pauses with grim satisfaction and then hysterically laughs aloud to himself again.

Dr. Eudora: Ha-ha-ha... (*then yells*) IT'S MY WORK... YOU HEAR ME?! ...MY WORK...! ...AND YOU'RE NOT GETTING IT!!!

Narrator: Dr. Eudora presses a button on the arming device that he's holding in his left hand. This activates the plastic explosives rigged throughout the sealift, including the Engine room for a timed detonation

sequence. The scene cuts back to the fight. The “Linted” Ligo continues to attack the party frenziedly. Dew and the others manage to avoid and defend against his incessant assault while sustaining minor damage. But try as they might, they can’t seem to mount any well-meaning offense against him. Whenever they’re able to land a hit or knock him down, “Linted” Ligo rises again. Krista notices a large container wrapped in netting hanging overhead in the hangar. She motions to Dew and the others to lure the “Linted” Ligo under it. Once in place, Vilmer uses his grappling hook to clamp down “Linted” Ligo’s right foot into the deck. “Linted” Ligo screams in pain as he claws at the grappling hook trying to remove it. Krista then throws her boomerang at the rope attached to the netting above. Vilmer then forcefully pulls back on the grappling hook ripping the flesh from the “Linted” Ligo’s right foot. This causes “Linted” Ligo to wobble to the deck, momentarily immobilizing him. While on the deck, he looks up. His face turns from rage to despair as the large container comes hurling down, crushing, and instantaneously killing him.

Vilmer: ...That was for having my village attacked... and for Konrad.

Krista: The *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* is dead...

Lorenzo: Yyyeah... He’s not getting up from that. He’s D-E-D. Dead.

Dew: I’m pretty sure that’s not how it’s spelled.

Cooper: What a deplorable man...

Elvir: Yeah... I guess we had a leg up on him, huh..? (*then gives a “shit-eating-grin”*)

Narrator: The others then turn and stare at Elvir disapprovingly.

Lorenzo: Woooooow...

Cooper: Not cool, dude...

Elvir: What..?

Narrator: As the others continue with their post-battle banter, Dew walks away from the group turning his back to them and over to the downed wheelchair. He finds

the vial still lying in place on the deck. Dew then reaches down, retrieves it, and notices the vial is ¼ filled. He conceals the vial from the sight of the others.

Dew: *(whispering to himself) ...This is it... the SKT virus A sample...*

Narrator: Dew begins zoning out while staring down at the SKT virus A vial in hand. Meanwhile, the party continues talking amongst themselves.

Krista: I have to say, guys... since tagging along with you all... I've seen some trippy things... and it has gotten stranger... Why do I have this nagging feeling that I haven't been given the full details about this journey we're on..?

Narrator: Then suddenly, a loud popping noise can be heard coming from the forecandle of the sealift. This catches the attention of the party and snaps Dew out of his daze.

Dew: *(turns his head and faces in the direction of the loud popping noise)* Huh?!

Rena: What the heck was that..?

Narrator: Another set of rigged plastic explosives goes off, this time coming from the P-Way corridor leading to the Command-and-Control suite. A large part of the bulkhead is blown off on the starboard side. An enormous amount of debris plunges down the side of the sealift and then hits the ground hard. The party then witnesses the swishing intense red-orange flames and white smoke swaying into the night sky.

Krista: Yikes!!!

Vilmer: Uh-oh... That's not good.

Narrator: A fire alarm then activates, giving off a deafening blare throughout the interior and exterior of the sealift.

Cooper: It looks like this place is set to blow...

Narrator: A consecutive set of explosions goes off in the distance.

Elvir: Shit. Shit. Shit.

Lorenzo: I don't know about you all... I ain't dying here. I'm dipping...

Cooper: It's time to go...

Rena: Dew. Come on..! (*then runs off*)

Narrator: Dew immediately pockets the SKT virus A vial, turns around, and runs off, joining the others who have started to flee. As the party makes their escape, more of the rigged plastic explosives detonate, rocking the wrecked vessel in its place. Debris continues to plummet all around them as the scorching fire advances toward the aft end of the sealift. They eventually make it outside after exiting the dock-well and see the surviving *Mantid Oscuro* thugs frantically running in different directions trying to get to safety. The party continues running a bit until Rena sees something in the distance approaching them. Dew then motions to the group to stop running, which they do. From afar, the *Tor*, which Mr. Torrio is driving, can be seen speeding down the ship's graveyard, passing up the fleeing *Mantid Oscuro* thugs. The RV's speed picks up, getting closer and closer. Within a matter of seconds, the RV forcefully decelerates, swerves to the side as it pulls up, and comes to a complete stop a few feet away in front of the party. The cockpit window comes down.

Torrio: (*monotone voice impersonation*) "Come with me if you want to live." Ha-ha... I always wanted to do that.

Rena: (*relieved*) Johnny!

Torrio: You didn't think I was going to leave youse guys hanging? ...By the way, nice ride you got here, Krista.

Narrator: The RV entrance door flies open with Analia standing in the doorway.

Analia: You all made it. Hurry up and get in!

Narrator: Dew and the others quickly enter through the RV entrance door. Once everyone makes it inside, Krista then closes and locks the door. The *Tor* makes a quick U-turn and then speeds down the ship's graveyard away from the abandoned sealift. A few moments later, the rest of the charges finally detonate,

exploding, entirely consuming the sealift and the nearby wrecked ships in its colossal blast. A huge fireball lingers in the background of the night sky as the *Tor* drives safely off-site to higher ground. The scene cuts back to Ganas commune, sixteen hours later. At the entry point, the RV's engine runs with Krista in the cockpit and Elvir seated on the passenger side. The other party members are inside as Dew is patiently waiting for Rena outside the RV's entrance door. Mr. Torrio is with Rena seeing her off. The two friends stop midway near the RV. Rena then turns around to face Mr. Torrio before departing.

Torrio: ...It really does feel like it's been forever since we last saw one another.

Rena: Yes, it has, old friend.

Torrio: ...And here we are saying goodbye again.

Rena: Yeah... You know, I never pictured our reunion being so "action-packed."

Torrio: Me neither. I was thinking something simpler... you, me, Analia, and the other residents enjoying a nice communal dinner.

Rena: That would have been nice... and just from the short time getting to know Analia, she's got a good head on her shoulders. You've raised a fine woman. Imelda would be proud.

Torrio: Thank you. That means a lot coming from you.

Rena: Hey. I know you're just being a protective dad but go easy on her boyfriend. He's an okay kid. I can tell.

Torrio: Yeah. I think you're right about him... He's all right.

Rena: I do wish that I had a little more time to enjoy this beautiful place you built up...

Torrio: But you got things to do.

Rena: I do... Hey. What do you plan on doing with that Gaz guy? Are you going to keep him here?

Torrio: Nah. We'll be turning him over to the Llivisaca authorities soon. He's probably worth a lot of wanted reward money.

Rena: No doubt.

Torrio: Well, youse guys got your well-deserved rest after all that ACTION last night... Now you won't be exhausted when you make it to your next destination... With the kids and my daughter now home safely... I don't know how I could ever repay you and your friends...

Rena: Well, you did save our lives by coming back for us.

Torrio: Nah. That doesn't count.

Rena: Johnny, don't worry about it... You don't owe them or me a thing...

Torrio: You're too modest. But I can't let that slide... I'm in your debt, you hear me?

Rena: Johnny, stop.

Torrio: No. If you ever need anything, I'm here to help. ...You know where to find me.

Rena: Hm. I can't turn that down... All right if you say so.

Torrio: No, I mean it. From me and the others, thank you again. I will forever cherish our friendship...

Rena: Hah... I recall in another "life," it wasn't always like that between you and me... well, at least in the beginning...

Torrio: No, it wasn't. Just to think... when we first met, I was contracted to kill you... but I couldn't go through with it... I still can't explain why... but you reminded me of what she could have been like... my unborn sister... that's why I gave you her name...

Rena: ...Her name, and the surname, belonging to that other person...

Torrio: ...You're talking about your best friend from college who died in a motorbike accident..?

Rena: Yes... Edna... *(sigh)* ...bless her soul... she'll always be missed... But they both helped contribute to a new identity... and life for me... two things I haven't taken for granted...

Torrio: I see that... *(then looks over at Dew)* So, I guess your young friend there will never know the truth?

Rena: No, he never will... It's better that way.

Torrio: Ah. *(then looks back at Rena)* Some things are just better left in the past.

Rena: *(then whispers to herself)* If it can be helped...

Torrio: Hm?

Rena: Um, nothing...

Torrio: Now, how did that saying go you once told me...?

Rena: What's that...?

Torrio: I'm trying to remember... Hmm... Oh yeah!
(*then snaps his fingers*) ...I remember now...
"Exculpate your past, revel in your present, and yield and entrust yourself to the future."

Rena: (*then smiles*) Oh. You still remember that...

Torrio: Truer words have never been spoken. Well...

Rena: ...I guess this is goodbye.

Torrio: Take care of yourself, Rena, and good luck on your journey...

Narrator: The two friends embrace one another with a brief hug. With no more words spoken, the two smile at one another before pulling back and going their separate ways. Mr. Torrio watches Rena walking off toward the RV as Dew gives a farewell gesture to him. Rena is then seen ascending the stairway and entering through the RV entrance door. Seconds later, Dew follows right behind her. The RV door shuts and locks. With that, the *Tor* slowly begins driving off and then exits the commune grounds as Mr. Torrio waves goodbye. The scene cuts to a few moments later as the *Tor* speeds off down a road and passes through the Buckass Badlands. On a nearby cliff, Dr. Eudora stands close to the edge with binoculars in hand, looking through it. He watches the RV driving off into the horizon. He lowers the binoculars and then speaks aloud to himself.



Dr. Eudora:

Still alive and on your way, are we..? Things have most certainly gotten interesting... I'm sure we'll see one another again soon... happy trails... Dr. Etteip...

Narrator:

Dr. Eudora grins, then turns away from the cliff's edge and walks back across the rocky terrain, disappearing into the distance.

CHAPTER 14 – A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

- Narrator: Five hours later. The scene cuts to the provincial front gate area of Twin Pines — Southeast Zone. The party walks through the massive gateway, leaving the parked RV behind. They then enter a residential area of the Southeast Zone and come to a stop.
- Krista: ...We've finally made it, guys, to Twin Pines.
- Lorenzo: It took long enough. What a ride it has been...
- Elvir: And none of us died from Dysentery. Hoo-ray!
- Cooper: So, this is Twin Pines... (*satisfying looking around*) Not bad...
- Rena: ...The place still looks the same.
- Dew: (*thinking to himself*) *I'm home, again... after all these years...*
- Narrator: As the party looks around at their surroundings, Vilmer briefly turns his attention away from the group. He glances at Mount Illini in the distance. A sense of dread and nostalgia strikes him suddenly.
- Vilmer: (*whispering to himself*) *This is where it all started... (sigh) I can't let the past hold me down... Time to suck it up and do this...*
- Cooper: ...So, Dew and Rena. How does it feel being back here?
- Rena: It's like I never left...
- Dew: ...
- Elvir: Oh, you're both from here?
- Rena: Not originally. But I lived here for close to seventeen years.
- Dew: Born and raised here myself...
- Elvir: That's cool. This place... I like its vibe... so soothing... It's like snuggling up in a warm blanket on a cold winter's night while obnoxiously smacking on bubble gum like a cow...
- Dew: What..?
- Elvir: ...You only do that to savor the flavor from the gum... then you happen to fall asleep and eventually wake up having to pee... At first, you don't want to get out of bed and go pee... but if you don't, you'll wet the bed... Nobody likes soiled sheets..!
- Lorenzo: Yeah, especially after wet dreams... Who wants to wake up to that stickiness?

Dew: ?!

Elvir: Humanah Humanah..! So, anyway... You then go relieve yourself on the toilet, flush it, clean up, and then climb back into bed again... the is gum still in your mouth, minus the flavor and it has sort of melted... but if you add an ice cube to the mix; chew on that and the gum long enough, the cooling sensation you get afterward... Woooooooooooo... Mmm...

Dew: Y-yeaahh. It's "just like that"...

Cooper: Hey, Dew. You probably haven't seen Hoplyn in a while... I bet she'll be glad to see the both of us. What a surprise that'll be for her, huh?

Dew: Yeah... Cooper, about her.

Cooper: What?

Dew: Hoplyn... she doesn't live here anymore...

Cooper: Oh... How do you know that?

Dew: I just do...

Cooper: Hmm... Dew, when was the last time you saw her..?

Dew: When the war ended...

Cooper: When the war ended..? Then how do you know...

Lorenzo: Hey gang... Ha-ha... (*nervously*) Sorry to interrupt you two... But since we're here now, I think it's a good time to start that search for Thornton.

Krista: That's why we're here.

Cooper: Of course... no more time to spare. Right.

Lorenzo: I was thinking that we should split up into smaller groups, to cover more ground.

Vilmer: That makes sense.

Elvir: Fine. That sounds good and all... But how are we going to find one another if something comes up?

Dew: ...The monorail station is a good meet-up spot.

Vilmer: The monorail station? They finally finished building that thing... I remember when it was first in construction.

Elvir: And where is THIS monorail station?

Dew: Just north from here...

Vilmer: Same spot?

Dew: It should be.

Rena: Yes. It still is.

Lorenzo: We should all regroup there in two hours. Does that work for everybody?

Elvir: For sure.

Krista: We'll meet there in two hours... Got it.

Dew: Also. Regardless of whether we happen to run into Thornton or find any leads on him, once we meet up again, we all can decide from there what to do next...

Narrator: The party nods their heads in acknowledgment.

Vilmer: ...While we're out on our search, I'll go purchase the equipment for our climb...

Lorenzo: Goddammit... I hope it doesn't come to that still. Ughh.

Rena: Oh, stop that, Lorenzo. You'll be fine...

Lorenzo: I don't wanna climb that mountain...

Vilmer: ...and more provisions. Does anyone care to join me?

Elvir: Yeaahhh... I'll go with you, Vilmer.

Vilmer: Elvir, I appreciate your company. What about you, Dew..?

Dew: There is something I need to do alone... If you all don't mind, I will meet you all at the monorail station.

Elvir: Party pooper...

Krista: Sure.

Lorenzo: Do what you have to do, man.

Rena: Ah. I understand my pupil.

Dew: Thanks.

Vilmer: Well... I guess it'll be me, Elvir, and...

Krista: I'll tag along with you both.

Vilmer: Excellent. So, it's the two former *Mantid Oscuro* girls and me.

Lorenzo: ...And that leaves me with Cooper and Rena. Not a bad choice for a "three-way"... Heh...

Dew: So, it's settled then. Okay. I'll see you guys later on...

Rena: Be safe, Dew...

Narrator: Dew waves goodbye to the party before turning away and walking off. Moments later, Vilmer, Krista, and Elvir do the same but go in the opposite direction of Dew.

Cooper: *(thinking to himself) I can never get a full answer from him... what is up with that..?*

Narrator: Rena looks over at Cooper and notices he's troubled about something.

Rena: Cooper. Is something bothering you?

Cooper: Yeah. There is... Is it just me, or does it seem like Dew is hiding something?

Lorenzo: Err... It could be that he's just happy to be back home..?

Rena: He's probably going to visit his parents' and Othmar's graves. I think he just wants some time alone. We should respect his privacy.

Lorenzo: Who?

Rena: His grandfather...

Lorenzo: Oh.

Cooper: Yeah, I get that, Rena... but that's not the problem...

Rena: What is..?

Cooper: It just seems like... whenever I try bringing up something about the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, he's hesitant to speak on it. Do you know why that is..?

Lorenzo: I... I wouldn't...

Narrator: Cooper then turns to face Rena, looking for an answer.

Rena: I couldn't tell you either, Cooper... But knowing my pupil, if he has something on his mind, he'll talk about whatever it is when he's ready.

Lorenzo: Yeah... That's about right. That's Dew for you.

Cooper: I suppose... but I have this nagging feeling...

Lorenzo: Hey. Forget about all that for now. We've got to start our search for that cultish asshole Thornton. Standing around here and chattering won't help...

Narrator: Cooper feels slightly irritated that his concerns are being ignored. He rolls his eyes at Lorenzo but then regains his composure by cracking a reassuring smile.

Cooper: Sure. Let's go do that... Ladies first.

Narrator: Cooper then motions to Rena to take the lead. The three then walk off, beginning their search. Close to two hours have passed by, and it's now evening. The scene cuts to Dew walking up to a house. He stops at the door and then pauses, contemplating.

Dew: *(thinking to himself) No trace of Thornton... I hope the others had better luck with their search... I'm glad I stopped to visit my parents' and grandfather's graves... but now, I have to do this one last thing... before I go... I'm going to be cutting it close... This should have been done years ago... But is it right for me to come here now? What do I say..? Damn, I hate myself for waiting this long... Here goes nothing... (then he knocks on the door. He waits for a few moments, but there is no answer) ...Go figure. No one is home... This was a waste of time...*

Narrator: Dew then turns away from the door and starts walking off. The door suddenly opens behind him. Dew then stops and turns back around. A surprised Dew is greeted by a familiar face. The woman standing at the doorway is stunned as if she has seen a ghost.

Dew: Emily...

Narrator: For a moment, Dew and Emily continue to stare at one another silently. A look of confusion then settles on her face.

Emily: ...Dew? Dew Wilder?! No...

Dew: Emily, it's been... awhile...

Emily: This... This is impossible... Is that you?!

Dew: It is... *(then walks up to her)*

Emily: This can't be... but how!?!

Dew: I know this is a lot to take in, but it's me... I'm here...

Emily: My goodness, it's been a long time... Come here... *(opens her arms to hug Dew)*

Dew: *(hugs Emily)* ...It's nice to see you again, too... *(then smiles at Emily)*

Emily: *(then pulls back from hugging Dew)* ...This is so unexpected. Please tell me I'm not dreaming... no... not a dream... you're here... *(then eyes Dew up and down)* in front of me... and alive... you've aged well...

Dew: Thank you, Emily... You still look good too.

Emily: *(then smiles at Dew)* ...I ...I still can't believe what I'm seeing...

Dew: I'm at a loss for words myself...

Emily: *(shaking her head in disbelief as a tear falls from her left eye)* ...This is crazy... *(then wipes the sliding tear from her face)* I'm sorry... I'm getting emotional...

Dew: It's okay, Emily.

Emily: Where are my manners... having you stand out here like this... Let's talk some more inside... I'm sure you've traveled pretty far...

Narrator: Dew then enters Emily's house. The door closes behind them. Fifteen minutes pass by, and the scene cuts to inside the family living room. No words have been spoken as Emily incredulously continues staring at Dew.

Emily: I'm sorry... for the silence... I know this is weird... I'm still processing all of this...

Dew: I understand...

Emily: ...I thought I would never see you again. There are so many questions I have...

Dew: I know this was a pretty random visit, but I had to see you... to see how you've been doing. But... this is... some surprise, huh..?

Emily: It is... A very good surprise, though. *(then smiles at Dew)*

Dew: *(awkwardly)* Um... Hmm... So... how have you been..? Ha-ha...

Emily: Straight to the point... Now I know you're the real Dew.

Dew: Hah.

Emily: I've been... all right... Just making the best of life, I suppose.

Dew: And that's all we can do... Everything still... looks the same around here.

Emily: Not much has changed. It's only been eight years... But Dew, this is still mind-blowing to me that you're here... You've been alive this entire time... and not one single letter, a phone call, or email from you... Why didn't you try to contact me?

Dew: I had some... unfinished business to deal with after the war. I didn't want to involve you in that mess...

Emily: What do you mean by "unfinished business"? What mess? ...Do you know that people think you're dead?

Dew: I know... Emily, it's just a long story.

Emily: Yeah..? I have many long stories I could tell you... Dew, I cried my eyes out for two months straight, thinking you were dead... I thought I had lost another person close to me...

Dew: Emily, please understand it wasn't my intention to hurt you... I just couldn't come back here then. It was for the best.

Emily: Oh yeah?! What would have been "best" is if you had just let me know you were alive and doing well! ...So you just walk back into my life again, and this is the explanation I get..? You're not just a heartbreaker... You're... you're an inconsiderate JERK! *(then slaps Dew's right cheek)*

Dew: *(covers his right cheek and rubs it with his right hand)* I... I guess I deserved that... *(then lowers his right hand from his right cheek)* You had every right to do that...

Emily: ...Dew... *(puts both hands over her mouth)* I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that... *(lowers both hands from her mouth)* I'm just feeling a whirlwind of emotions right now. This is all just so unreal...

Dew: Emily, I truly do apologize for not doing this sooner... I don't blame you for being upset with me.

Emily: Okay... Let's start over... So, Dew... what have you been up to these days? ...Where have you been?

Dew: Well, Emily... I've been living out in the Helix Capital these past few years... working closely with the community. Helping the less fortunate...

Emily: Oh. Charity work, huh? Hmm... That does sound like something you would do. Hey. At least you've been helping others...

Dew: I have...

Emily: You've been quite busy. We all have our lives to live... I can't stay mad at you for that...

Dew: Well, I'm here now...

Emily: Yep. Here you are after all these years... Dew, I'm curious... do you... Do you have any other women in your life?

Dew: Me?! That's a pretty random question. Well...

Emily: He-he-he... Your silence says enough. I kind of figured that would be another reason why I haven't heard from you.

Dew: No. That's not a reason at all!

Emily: Hah. Okay. No need to get defensive... You're always going to be my little stud I remember growing up with.

Dew: Am I still? ...Emily, didn't you have a child? A boy, was it? Where's your son at? I never did get a chance to meet him. How old is he now?

Emily: Aspen, he's eight years old now. The tyke is tucked into bed.

Dew: Oh. No need to wake him up then.

Emily: That kid, he keeps me on my feet. I don't know where he gets all the energy from. He's like a little spider monkey... It's so hard to keep up with him. Ha-ha... He's so talkative, inquisitive, and adventurous; he reminds me a lot of you and Hoplyn. Oh, I love that little cum pet of mine...

Dew: Ha-ha...

Emily: I'm blessed to have him in my life... he's all I have left... You know, ever since the passing of my mom... if it wasn't for him, it would be dull around here.

Dew: Your mom is gone?! ...When did this happen?

Emily: She passed away after we got the news that Hoplyn didn't make it... (*sigh*)

Dew: Oh ...Geez... I... I'm sorry...

Emily: Me too... but what can you do... I think about them both all the time... I miss them... a lot... *(sigh)*

Dew: I miss Hoplyn too... *(sigh)* She was the main reason why I couldn't come back here...

Emily: ...You know about her passing too?

Dew: I do, all too well... unfortunately...

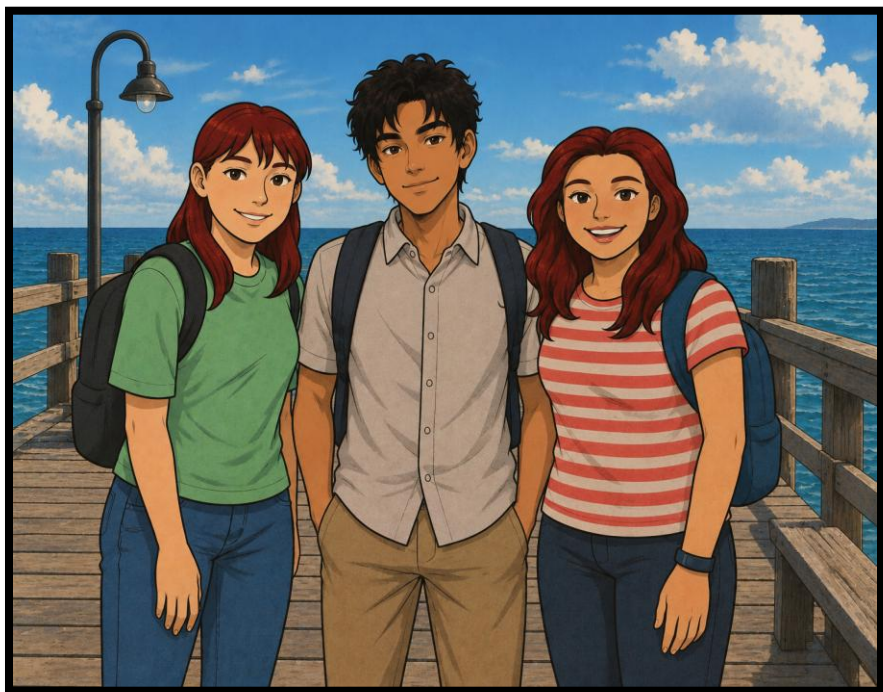
Emily: It must be a nice feeling knowing you don't have to deal with the pain head-on, huh..? It's just easy to run away from it, and start life all over again...

Dew: No. I think you misunderstand me... Emily, I've dealt with her death and all the others ever since the war ended... that is something I can never run away from.

Emily: You're right...That was insensitive of me to say that. You were her best friend... she, of course, meant something to you. It's just... It's hard for me when I think about her...

Dew: I know what you mean.

Emily: Hmm... but there are good memories... do you remember when the three of us would sneak out of school to go fishing?



Dew: Every Friday, that was... I remember those sunsets, the cool breeze, and the shimmering water. ... It was just the three of us... fishing... laughing... goofing off... how the time just dragged...

Emily: Those were good times ...I remember something else too.

Dew: What's that?

Emily: I remember when your grandfather caught you and my sister going up on Mount Illini.

Dew: Oh, I never forgot about that... He was so pissed at us.

Dew & Emily: Ha-ha-ha...

Dew: Emily, how's your husband doing?

Emily: ...Husband? ...I don't have one. He decided to call off the engagement at the last minute. He wanted nothing to do with Aspen and me, either. I haven't seen or heard from him ever since...

Dew: ...He just ditched both of you like that?! (*shaking his head in disapproval*) That's terrible.

Emily: It's okay... Things weren't working out between us anyway. So, no biggie... We've been surviving...

Dew: Hmm...

Emily: Dew, why are you back here now?

Dew: Well... I'm just passing through with some friends.

Emily: Going on some adventure, are we?

Dew: You could call it that...

Emily: Care to elaborate?

Dew: I could. But I would bore you with the details.

Emily: That doesn't sound like a fun adventure at all. Then no need to. Ha-ha... Dew...

Dew: Yes, Emily..?

Emily: No. But... never mind...

Dew: Emily, what is it?

Emily: I need to tell you something... I would regret it if I didn't get another chance to do this...

Dew: ...Yeah, Emily?

Emily: Every day we spent together when we were growing up, I cherished it a lot. I was too shy and insecure about expressing how I felt about you... about us... I always had butterflies in my stomach being around you... but, when we last saw one another... before you and Hoplyn had left off to the SWAT

TROOPER ELITE Academy... when we were alone that night... where we “connected”...

Dew: Yes, Emily. I do remember... our moment together... in the lifeguard tower.

Emily: ...All that doubt and anxiety I had disappeared. I could finally be myself. I felt safest and most relaxed with you. Nobody else has ever made me feel the way you did. Our moment together... it’s something I still relive in my mind from time to time... what we had in that moment... and what more I wish it could’ve been...

Narrator: Emily is then interrupted by a shouting Lorenzo walking around outside calling for Dew.

Lorenzo: (*shouting from outside*) DEW! HEY DEW..!

Dew: Ah...

Emily: Mmm... One of your friends..?

Dew: Yes... (*then looks at his wristwatch*) ...Mono-D’oh! I’m running late!!!

Emily: You have to go..?

Dew: I do...

Emily: ...And you just got back too.

Dew: I told the others I would meet up with them at the monorail station...

Emily: You don’t want to keep them waiting then...

Dew: Yeah. I don’t...

Emily: Are you coming back here anytime soon..?

Dew: I will...

Emily: Are you sure of that?

Dew: Emily, I will be back to see you. I wish I had more time, but...

Emily: I’m just messing with you. I know you will, even if it takes you another eight years to come back. At least now, I know you’re alive. Ha-ha...

Dew: You still have that sense of humor of yours... Ha-ha-ha...

Emily: I can still make you laugh after all these years. See? Thank you, Dew... It was good seeing you again, even if it was for a short time.

Dew: Emily...

Lorenzo: (*shouting from outside*) HEY, DEW! ...WHERE ARE YOU?!

Dew: I’ll see you around. Bet on it. Also, tell Aspen hello for me...

Narrator: Emily nods her head in acknowledgment. She then runs up to Dew and kisses him on his cheek.

Emily: Sorry for slapping you earlier. See you when I see you. Be safe...

Narrator: Dew then smiles at Emily before turning away and exiting her house. As Dew steps outside, he sees Lorenzo walking down the block, still calling out his name.

Dew: Lorenzo. Over here.

Lorenzo: (*turns around, and then runs toward Dew*) ...Dew, there you are, man! Hey, the others have been waiting for you at the station.

Dew: Sorry about that. I lost track of time.

Lorenzo: There you are... Hm? (*then looks over at Emily's house*) You were visiting someone..?

Dew: A friend...

Lorenzo: Oh. They must have been shocked to see you again...

Dew: That they were...

Lorenzo: I didn't mean to interrupt... my bad.

Dew: Don't worry about it. Hey... How did you know where I was?

Lorenzo: I didn't. I just started randomly walking around and calling out for you.

Dew: It worked, and you found me... I'm sorry about keeping you and the others waiting.

Lorenzo: Yeah. While I was out doing that, some guy threw his size 15 shoe at me from a window.

Dew: Size 15?!

Lorenzo: Yeah. A size 15 shoe!

Dew: ...You know what they say about men with big feet.

Lorenzo: What's that..?

Dew: Big feet, large shoes...

Lorenzo: Pfft. Fuckin' big-footed bastard almost got me with it too. He said I was "disturbing his rest." Fuck that guy. It's too damn early to be sleeping!

Dew: Okay. Okay. Take it easy. Ha-ha...

Lorenzo: All right... Let's head over to the station and meet with the others. But wait...

Dew: What's up..?

Lorenzo: Dew... don't you think it's time that you came clean with the others about why we're really on this journey? They've come

a long way with us... especially Cooper. He won't stop asking about what happened with you, the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, and the war. I feel bad for having to brush him off when it came up... You owe it to them.

Dew: Yeah... I think you're right. It has to be done...

Lorenzo: It does... the full story...

Narrator: Dew nods in acknowledgment. The two friends say nothing more and then hurry down the streetlight-lit block heading toward the monorail station. Twenty-five minutes have passed. The scene cuts to the Twin Pines Southeast Zone Monorail station entrance, where the other party members are patiently waiting. Moments later, Dew and Lorenzo are seen approaching the party. The others then turn their attention toward the duo.

Cooper: Dew...

Krista: ...Hey there, stranger.

Lorenzo: Yo.

Vilmer: I see you found him.

Dew: Here I am...

Elvir: What took you so long?

Dew: ...I'm sorry I kept you all waiting. I had to go say hello to an old friend.

Rena: No worries.

Cooper: Old friend..? And you didn't invite me?

Dew: It's not what you think... It's...

Lorenzo: ...So, yeah... (*nervous*) Ha-ha... Since we're all together again...

Cooper: Hmm...

Lorenzo: ...Did you guys find anything of importance? Because we ain't found shit during our search.

Dew: Nothing, huh?

Cooper: That's right... No sighting of Thornton.

Rena: Unfortunately...

Dew: I didn't either... Hm. (*then faces Vilmer, Krista, and Elvir*) And what about you guys..?

Vilmer: I have some good news for you...

Cooper: Yeah?

Dew: What you got..?

Vilmer: While we were out, we came up short. But when we went to restock the provisions and acquire some mountain climbing

equipment, I also questioned the shop owner about Thornton. It just so happens that the shop owner said a man fitting Thornton's description had stopped by there earlier in the day.

Cooper: He did?!

Dew: Did he mention anything else..?

Vilmer: Yes, he did... let's see... He came in and bought a 44-ounce lemonade and cola-flavored slushie, Uh... two chicken fajita wraps... a box of oatmeal raisin cookies, and a small bag of licorice candy...

Elvir: Licorice candy!?! Eww... I hate him already...

Dew: I didn't mean that... but, yep, that does sound like him...

Vilmer: ...The shop owner also said that our person of interest mentioned that he wanted to take a hike up Mount Illini. So, he asked for directions on how to get there and then left.

Krista: What luck, huh, Dew..?

Dew: It's not that... Thornton purposely left clues behind for us to track him down... He'll be waiting for us somewhere up there on Mount Illini...

Lorenzo: Ah shit. Say it ain't so...

Rena: Yes, Lorenzo... we get to climb that mountain. (*sarcastically*) I know you were looking forward to doing that...

Lorenzo: Dammit... Ugh.

Krista: At least we now know where this guy is.

Cooper: Yeah.

Dew: Good work, everybody. So, are we all ready to go..?

Rena: No better time than the present.

Vilmer: Before we go... Krista, will the *Tor* be all right? I wouldn't want your RV to get impounded. We don't know how long we'll be gone.

Krista: Eh, don't worry. It'll be fine. Due to my work in tourism, I have an indefinite parking pass. It's accepted nationally.

Vilmer: Oh, okay. That's good.

Krista: It comes in handy...

Lorenzo: (*sigh*) I will miss riding around in that thing... especially sitting in that comfy recliner... under the AC... Aww...

Krista: Don't worry, Lorenzo. We won't be gone for long.

Vilmer: You know... for a moment back there, I thought I might have blown our cover. But thankfully, the shop owner didn't recognize me. That would have complicated our climb if he did.

Dew: We do want to keep a low profile...

Rena: Hey, Dew..!

Dew: What?

Rena: I just remembered... The Twin Pines Seneschal did implement a mandate restricting civilian access to Mount Illini. It's been in place ever since you left home.

Dew: That I didn't know...

Lorenzo: Oh, great. Now you tell us this, Rena?!

Rena: Sorry.

Krista: Geez, Lorenzo. I thought you, of all people, would have been relieved hearing that after all your complaining. Now you want to climb the mountain?!

Lorenzo: Not really. But it's a little too late to turn back now.

Elvir: ...Then how the heck are we going to get up on that mountain?

Dew: I imagine the entrance will be guarded by law enforcement... maybe even some patrols around the area to keep trespassers out... Hmm... Once we get there, we'll have to find an alternative route onto the trail. We have no other choice...

Cooper: Well, let's not keep Thornton waiting...

Vilmer: All right. Let's go purchase our tickets...

Narrator: The others then start walking off toward the ticket booth. Lorenzo then turns and looks over at Dew. The two stare at one another briefly. Dew then nods his head, knowing what he has to do.

Dew: Guys. Wait..!

Narrator: The party comes to a stop and turns around to face Dew.

Cooper: Dew, what's wrong?

Dew: There's something I need to get off my chest... I think now would be a good time to fill you all in with the details about our journey... the full story...

Vilmer: The full story..?

Dew: Yes. You all have come this far with me, so I owe you that...

Krista: I'm all ears.

Elvir: Yeah. Me too!

Cooper: Does this have something to do with Hoplyn and others?

Dew: Well... I'll get to that soon... As I mentioned before, we're going after a dangerous man... A man who killed Premier Videl is trying to obtain four virus vials... the SKT viruses.

Krista: SKT viruses..?

Elvir: You mean there's more out there?!

Dew: Yes...

Vilmer: Wait. Wait. Back it up... If I heard you correctly, you said this Thornton guy killed the late premier? I thought he had passed away due to an unknown illness..?

Dew: No, that was all a cover-up to keep the public from going into a frenzy.

Vilmer: Why? I would think most people in the capital would celebrate his demise with the way he was running things...

Lorenzo: I know I did... Hah!

Dew: I suppose that was all said to "maintain law and order." Anyway... Cooper and I formerly served alongside Thornton in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE during the *Great Civil War*. He was our Sergeant in the unit... We were sent on a retrieval mission to New Havenport to obtain the SKT virus vial, which we successfully did... As the war was coming to an end, the Helix Capital had betrayed us...

Cooper: What?! Betrayed..?

Dew: ...We fulfilled our purpose, and Zircon had the entire unit... (*sigh*) my best friend, Hoplyn...

Cooper: Hoplyn...

Dew: ...Dr. Voight and his daughter...

Narrator: Upon hearing this, Rena's countenance turns from inquisitiveness to being visibly dejected.

Rena: ...That... That... no...

Dew: ...And all of the other New Havenporters executed... Thornton included ...or so I thought. But I was fortunate enough to escape before the nuke was dropped.

Cooper: (*disbelief*) ...Man... so they're all dead... unreal... When the war had ended, and I was honorably discharged... I could never get any straight answers from the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy on what had happened... I just assumed everyone went on with their lives... or they didn't want to speak to me ever again... but this all makes sense now... this is why you didn't want to talk about it... Oh... I'm so sorry...

Dew: It's hard to think about sometimes...

Narrator: Rena becomes penitent and then appalled by what she hears.

Rena: ...All that happened to you!?! ...All because of the SKT viruses...
Dew... I... had no idea... I...

Dew: How could you?

Rena: I wish you could have said something before... I could have...

Dew: Helped? Maybe... But there's more...

Rena: More?!

Dew: Yes... Ligo wasn't lying when he said that the war was a sham...
New Havenport was never a threat... but we all blindly played
our part to benefit Zircon's government...

Vilmer: That means... all those innocent lives that were lost... all be-
cause of propagated fabrications... Oh, such wickedness!

Elvir: That's fucked up...

Lorenzo: Yeah, Zircon was a piece of shit like that... But he's taking a long
dirt nap now...

Rena: *(whispering to herself) ...The lies that kill.*

Cooper: Dew, that person you said you were visiting... I take it that it
was her sister..?

Dew: Correct.

Cooper: Gah. That must have been a shocker for her to see you again af-
ter all these years..?

Dew: It was a little bumpy at first... That went as well as me trying to
do the milk crate challenge blindfolded... when this is all over, I
will have to come back and visit her, again... Whenever that is...

Cooper: Aha.

Krista: So, Cooper – where were you when all this was happening?

Cooper: On that very same retrieval mission, I ended up getting injured
while saving Dew's life. Shortly after, I was sent back to the cap-
ital to recuperate. I guess you could say it was a blessing in dis-
guise... I had no idea all that had occurred. Before meeting you
all, I got reacquainted with Dew - and here I am.

Dew: Also... Thornton is Zircon's younger brother.

Krista: His brother?! Wow!!! There's no love lost in that family...
Sheesh!

Vilmer: How's this, Thornton even still alive after all that?

Dew: I don't know...

Elvir: What is the SKT virus exactly..?

Dew: Well, you saw what two variants of the virus could do... As I mentioned before, there are four variants... the SKT virus C, G, A, and T. SKT stands for "Systemic Karyotype Transmutation." It's a mutagenic pathogen that can alter a host's genetic structure, ultimately mutating them into an uncontrollable blood-thirsty monster... Zircon thought, for whatever reason, he could use the SKT virus C variant as a means of controlling its subjects. That wasn't the case...

Cooper: ...Like the rest of us, he wasn't aware of the existence of the other three vials until recently.

Krista: Okay. So, what's Thornton's reasoning for trying to collect them?

Dew: Your guess is as good as mine.

Cooper: ...I'm still trying to figure out how that even fits in with his talk about the "Renaissance of the Söl Congruum".

Rena: ...

Elvir: Excuse me. Did you say, Söl Congruum..?

Cooper: Yeah.

Dew: Hah. That's right up your alley, huh, "Chosha's Chosen"?

Elvir: (*then gives a smirk*) Well, I won't deny it's my speciality. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Krista: Hm.

Vilmer: So, Dew... this is the same guy that you and Cooper served along with in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE?

Dew: Yes... But he has changed...

Elvir: I'm beginning to have a bad feeling about all this... We can't let him find the other vials, that's for sure.

Dew: No, we can't... And we won't. While he may have one of the four... We also have one of the vials ourselves.

Elvir: Since when?

Narrator: Dew then digs into his vest front pocket and pulls out the SKT virus A vial. He shows the vial to the astonished party members.

Lorenzo: Brah...

Rena: You had this the entire time?!

Dew: Yeah. After we had defeated Ligo and the sealift was going up in flames, I quickly retrieved the vial.

Elvir: Well, fuck... You should have left that there to burn... It's dangerous that you have it!

Dew: And risked contaminating that area..? No thanks. It's better in our possession...

Narrator: Dew then puts away the SKT virus A vial in his vest front pocket.

Krista: This is a lot to take in... In a way, I feel somewhat deceived just learning this all now... Things are getting more serious than I had anticipated... But...

Dew: I don't blame you, Krista, or anyone else here for wanting to turn back now...

Vilmer: Nonsense, Dew. We've already been through a lot, and you all did save Konrads' life. I am grateful for that. There won't be any turning away for me... I'm still in.

Krista: Yeah, same here. And Vilmer's right... If it weren't for us all meeting, Llivisaca wouldn't be a better place now than it was a few days ago. Plus, who would turn down this level of fun? Not me. I'm your guys' tour guide through and through.

Dew: What about you, Elvir?

Elvir: Just a few days ago, you didn't even want me around... But that all changed... Even now, I have no choice but to stay. It would dishonor my ancestors if I didn't. It must be fate... So... let's go get this sonofabitch.

Narrator: Dew then faces Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper.

Dew: And you guys?

Rena: Don't even dare ask, Dew...

Lorenzo: Really, Dew?!

Cooper: Nothing has changed my mind about this journey...

Narrator: Vilmer then walks over to the monorail schedule bulletin board and begins viewing it.

Dew: I appreciate you guys. Thank you for doing this with me...

Lorenzo: Although I'm not feeling too hot about climbing that mountain... but it's gotta be done...

Vilmer: Then we should hurry... According to the schedule, the next and last monorail car will depart from this station within the next twenty minutes. We don't want to miss that one, or we'll be walking to the next zone.

Dew: We'll be on our way then... Come on, everybody. We've got a ride to catch.

Narrator: The party then, one by one, passes Dew as they head toward the ticket booth. Rena passes him and comes to a stop. She

turns to face him and clears her throat. Rena grabs his right hand gently, and the two make eye contact. Dew notices she's distraught about something.

Dew: Rena, what's wrong..?

Narrator: Rena, for a moment, pauses and frowns while holding back a tear.

Rena: I'm... I'm sorry... You didn't deserve any of that...

Dew: The others didn't either...

Narrator: Rena sighs and then forces a smile on her face.

Dew: (*concerned*) Rena, is everything okay..?

Narrator: Rena caresses his right hand and then releases it. She hurriedly walks off, catching up to the others at the ticket booth. A confused Dew scratches his head as he stands there, lost for words. A moment later, he shrugs it off and joins the others at the ticket booth.

CHAPTER 15 – A SHEDDING LIGHT

- Narrator: Twenty minutes have passed. The scene cuts to the interior of one of six moving monorail cars. An indifferent Dew, arms crossed, is seated next to Krista, who is talking to the standing Vilmer as he holds onto a safety railing overhead. Across from them, Cooper and Elvir are also seated, chatting, while Lorenzo naps with his head slumped down onto his chest, drooling. Meanwhile, Rena sits quietly a few seats away from the group. She glances over at several other passengers in the car; some are talking, smiling, laughing, or wearing headphones and listening to music. A few others, exhausted after a long day of work, are eating a snack or reading a newspaper. She then turns her attention toward the window beside her. She stares out and becomes entranced by the nighttime scenery of Twin Pines. With each accelerated movement of the monorail car, the glistening sky, twinkling lights, cityscape, and distant ecosystems blur before her eyes. Suddenly, everything around Rena becomes inaudible, and she dazes off. The scene cuts to Rena's daydream sequence, where she is seen walking down a street through a dark void. Behind her, a faint green light lingers. With each step she takes, the green light intensifies. After walking a few blocks, she comes to a rundown old martial arts school. She turns her head to look back and notices the growing light. Feeling unperturbed, she turns away from it, looks forward again, and approaches the martial arts school. After entering, she pauses to take in her surroundings.
- Rena: ...Not so different than what we were before... the memories...
- Narrator: Rena looks around the room in awe. She notices a desk nearby and feels compelled to approach it. She walks over to the dusty, dilapidated desk and proceeds to open a drawer. The drawer comes loose and falls to the floor, breaking into many pieces. Rena looks down and sees a small envelope among the broken pieces. She bends down to pick it up. After dusting off the envelope, she opens it and, to her amusement, finds a familiar photograph inside.

Rena: ...I thought I threw you out a long time ago... (*looking at a faded picture of her ex-husband Kenneth Voight and their two children*) Nope. I guess not... a memory from a former life... from another person who no longer exists... Irene...

Narrator: Rena continues to daze off, reminiscing twenty-five years ago when she met her late husband, Dr. Kenneth Voight. The scene cuts to a laboratory located within the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy compound on Marigold Isle. Head scientist, Dr. Trofim Eudora, sits on a stool at a table, peering through a microscope and observing a bacterial culture covering a piece of lint while taking notes. A young Irene Etteip stands next to him, eagerly awaiting instructions.

Dr. Eudora: Hmm... Ohh... Ahh...

Dr. Etteip: Any fascinating findings, Doctor..?

Dr. Eudora: Argh! No, no, no. (*sigh*)

Dr. Etteip: What is it, Doctor?!

Dr. Eudora: ...Eh? (*then turns and looks up at Irene in disappointment*) Well, my assistant, nothing of much, that is for sure.

Dr. Etteip: What do you mean?

Dr. Eudora: It's nothing... Nothing but a waste of my time...

Dr. Etteip: Oh. I'm sorry...

Dr. Eudora: Dr. Etteip, could you please hand me the bottle of bleach?

Dr. Etteip: Yes, Doctor... right away...

Narrator: Dr. Etteip walks over to a nearby table to grab the bleach bottle. As she does that, she inadvertently knocks over a test tube rack. One of the sealed test tubes begins to roll toward the end of the table quickly.

Dr. Etteip: Oh, dear... (*drops the bleach bottle*)

Dr. Eudora: ...the Sulfuric acid!!! (*then jumps up off of the stool*)

Narrator: The test tube continues rolling closer to the end of the table as Dr. Etteip and Dr. Eudora scramble to stop it. A young man enters the lab and runs over to the table, barely catching and preventing the test tube from falling off.

???: ...Well, that was a close one. Try to be more careful next time... (*then gives the test tube to Irene*) Here you go...

Dr. Etteip: T-thank you...

Dr. Eudora: It's not her fault entirely; it's those big booty ghost bitches knocking things over again...

Dr. Voight: Huh? Big booty ghost bitches..?

Dr. Eudora: Yes.

Narrator: There is an awkward silence as a puzzled Dr. Voight stares at Dr. Eudora for a brief moment.

Dr. Etteip: ...It's an old wives' tale.

Dr. Voight: Ohh...

Dr. Eudora: And... who may you be..?

Dr. Voight: My apologies. My name is Dr. Kenneth Voight. I was selected by the Athenaeum Foundation to serve as an assistant for the upcoming top-secret bioweapon research project with Helix Capital.

Dr. Eudora: Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes. Why else would you be here... Ha-ha... That's right; you're the graduate from Helix University we've been expecting... *(then extends his left hand out for a handshake)* I am, Dr. Trofim Eudora. It's a pleasure to meet you finally...

Dr. Voight: *(shakes Dr. Eudora's hand)* ...The pleasure is the same here, Doctor. Thank you.

Dr. Eudora: I assume the ferry boat ride to the Isle went smoothly?

Dr. Voight: It was.

Dr. Eudora: Good to hear that... And this is Dr. Etteip.

Narrator: Dr. Etteip and Dr. Voight are immediately enamored by the sight of one another.

Dr. Voight: It's nice to meet you, Dr. Etteip... *(then smiles)*

Dr. Etteip: *(nervous)* Oh! Yes... likewise...

Narrator: The two then shake hands. Before letting go, the two scientists continue to eye one another with rising sexual tension. Dr. Etteip's hand then slips from Dr. Voight's grasp. The two regain their composure as Dr. Eudora cheekily looks on.

Dr. Voight: Sorry... Ha-ha...

Dr. Etteip: No need to be... Hey. Just call me, Irene... Irene Etteip.

Dr. Voight: Okay, Irene Etteip...

Dr. Etteip: Ha... You don't have to use my full name, silly.

Dr. Voight: I know. I was just joking. But my, what a beautiful name that is.

Dr. Etteip: Aww... Thank you. You're too kind.

Dr. Eudora: ...Dr. Etteip is a recent graduate of Demmin University. She graduated from high school at the age of 16 and worked her way up.

Dr. Voight: Really?! That's impressive. So what was your major, if I may ask...?

Dr. Etteip: A Master's degree in Genetics...

Dr. Voight: Wow... you did hit those books, and it paid off. That's dedication... Puts me to shame...

Dr. Etteip: Oh... gosh...

Dr. Eudora: I have been blessed to have two gifted assistants at my side. And by the looks of it, I won't have any issues with you two working together. Ha-ha-ha...

Dr. Etteip: Yes, Doctor.

Dr. Voight: I agree... We'll make a great team.

Dr. Etteip: Tee-hee-hee...

Dr. Voight: What's so funny?

Dr. Etteip: Oh, it's nothing bad... I've... I've just never seen someone so handsome... so dreamy... as you are.

Dr. Voight: Dreamy...? Me? Handsome..?

Dr. Etteip: Well... yeah. Ha-ha...

Dr. Voight: There aren't other handsome scientists running around here?

Dr. Etteip: No.

Dr. Eudora: ...Oh?

Dr. Etteip: I mean, you're okay, Dr. Eudora... a little too old for my taste... but...

Dr. Voight: Well, Irene, your genes suit you well. You're the finest woman I've ever seen.

Dr. Etteip: (*blushing*) Oh... geez... That's the nerdiest compliment I have ever gotten... but I'll take it.

Dr. Eudora: Okay, now, you two. Don't make me break out the firehose. Ha-ha... Dr. Etteip, let's allow Dr. Voight to get settled in...

Dr. Etteip: Sorry. Of course, Doctor.

Dr. Eudora: Dr. Voight, I will show you around the facility and then to your quarters.

Dr. Voight: Yes, Doctor. That sounds good... (*then turns to Irene*) I'll be looking forward to working with you, Irene. I feel comfortable here already...

Dr. Etteip: (*smiling*) Me too... and welcome again to the team!

Narrator: Dr. Voight nods and returns a smile to her. He then exits the room with Dr. Eudora. Rena continues to reminisce about her past as the scene changes to a year later. Dr. Eudora, Etteip, and Voight are standing in front of a computer terminal in a

dimly lit control/observation room while also staring through a window into another room. A video recording device is propped up on a stand directly in front of the terminal.



- Dr. Eudora: ...We, as a team, have made much progress in such a short time... There were a lot of sleepless nights, but well worth the toil of cracking the Priscus genetic code. Truly a scientific breakthrough that'll be put to the test today...
- Dr. Etteip: Dr. Eudora, I must object to using any human test subjects for this...
- Dr. Voight: Honey, I think you are overreacting. This will be a success. Our research has gotten us this far. We must see this through.
- Dr. Etteip: ...We need more sufficient data. Peer reviews. We've only tested this out recently on several lab specimens..!
- Dr. Eudora: Bah..! In science, we shouldn't be limited by any minor inconveniences when pursuing societal betterment.
- Dr. Etteip: That sounds unethical.
- Dr. Eudora: ...Scientific innovation is only successful when you take chances... You should know this as a scientist...

Dr. Etteip: But, Doctor..!

Dr. Voight: Irene, please.

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth! You're okay with this?! You can't be serious..?

Dr. Eudora: Dr. Etteip, if you feel so adamant about this – you're more than welcome to resign from this project at any time.

Dr. Etteip: No... I have no intention of doing such a thing. This is my work as much as it's yours...

Dr. Eudora: Good to hear that, Dr. Etteip. Thank you for coming to your senses...

Dr. Etteip: I don't see the need to rush... I'm just saying we should be practical...

Dr. Eudora: Our time is now... no more waiting... our investor wants results, and he'll get them... our work... this "elixir" has the potential to excel humanity beyond its capabilities... With Priscus mimetic information, we will enhance strength, stamina, and intelligence... we may be able to cure diseases and perhaps end aging itself..! But before we get to that point... the whole purpose of this research was to advance our military might... for them to be bestowed with abilities unmatched by any regular soldier... with this, Mesovilla's standing on the global stage will shift to one of a political superpower... Our moment is here... and it is now... let's make history... Dr. Voight, we may start the video recording process now.

Dr. Voight: Got it...

Narrator: Dr. Voight then walks over to the video recording device and pushes the "record" button. Dr. Eudora then presses a button on the computer terminal activating the microphone and speaks into it. The intercom system in the next room turns on, and Eudora's voice is heard by the two SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistants there.

Dr. Eudora:
S.T Lab Assistant 1:
Narrator:

SWAT TROOPERS..! Bring in the volunteer.
Yes, Doctor...
Both SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistants open the door and exit the room. Moments later, the door opens again. The SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistants escort the volunteer into the room. The door shuts again. He is sat down in a chair and then strapped to it as the other SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistant places a monitoring device on him. SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistant 1 then gives a thumbs up to the three scientists observing from the window on the other side.

Dr. Eudora:

...This is Participant Zero. Age 27, Male, Caucasian, Occupation: SWAT TROOPER ELITE – Recruit... Normal blood pressure levels. Height: 5 feet, 7 inches. Weight: 158 pounds. He is in perfect health, with no known deficiencies... *(then pushes the button on the computer terminal, activating the microphone again. The intercom in the next room turns on)* SWAT TROOPER, you may proceed with medication administration...

Narrator:

The intercom system clicks off again. SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistant 2 walks over to a desk in the corner nearby and opens a black case holding a vial. He takes it out and then draws a liquid substance from it into a syringe. He closes the case leaving the empty vial in it. Meanwhile, SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistant 1 takes an alcohol gauze and cleans the area around Participant Zero's arm where the injection will be administered. SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistant 2 walks over to Participant Zero and injects him with the substance in his left arm. The two SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistants step back as the three on the other side of the window continue to observe.

Dr. Eudora:

Hm. What do the readings say, Dr. Voight..?

Narrator: As the three scientists huddle over the data feed on the computer terminal, Participant Zero starts flinching and gradually mutates.

Dr. Voight: (*checking the computer terminal*) Doctor... the brain matter of the subject remains stable; muscle mass has increased by 52%...

Narrator: The three scientists look up and observe Participant Zero further mutating.

Dr. Etteip: ?!

Dr. Voight: Look! Doctor, it's working. It's working. It's working..!



Dr. Eudora: Yes, it is!!! Eureka! Ha-ha...

Dr. Etteip: What... in the name of the Chosha...

Dr. Eudora: Oh, in the name of Chosha, indeed! ...Now I know what it feels like to be a God!

Dr. Voight: We've done it...

Dr. Eudora: ...You see, Dr. Etteip, "Those who do not move do not notice their chains." Our work is unparalleled. We have unshackled ourselves from limitations... we have reached the zenith! Ha-ha-ha!!!

Narrator: Moments later, the control terminal begins to make unsettling noises catching the three scientists' attention. Suddenly, black boils start to form all over Participant Zero's body rapidly. He then yells out in pain, followed by foaming from the mouth while aggressively jerking at his restraints. The two SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistants look at one another, unsure of what to do.

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth... What is going on?!

Dr. Voight: I'm... I'm not sure... There seems to be an abnormal increase of swelling in the frontal lobe; all other vitals are slowly deteriorating...

Dr. Etteip: We have to stop this!

Dr. Eudora: No. It's too late...

Narrator: Participant Zero, still jerking at his restraints, finally breaks free and lunges toward the two SWAT TROOPER Lab Assistants. He grabs Lab Assistant 1 by the face and violently hurls him into the exit door, leaving a body imprint on it. The mutated Participant Zero then pounces on Lab Assistant 2, mauling him to death. Dr. Voight and Dr. Etteip are startled by what they have just witnessed, while Dr. Eudora remains unfazed. As the mutated Participant Zero gnaws at the corpse of Lab Assistant 2, the downed and injured Lab Assistant 1 slowly struggles to get back to his feet. Now covered in his victims' blood, the mutant rises off the floor and lets out an animalistic growl. Instinctively, he turns his attention to the observation window, causing Dr. Etteip to jump back and fall to the floor. Dr. Voight quickly helps her up as Dr. Eudora, elated, continues to observe the mutant's behavior. The mutated Participant Zero viciously claws at the observation window, attempting to break through. Unbeknownst to him, Lab Assistant 1, now back on his feet, quickly draws his rifle and shoots the mutant in the back of the head. The shot instantly

kills him, and his body collapses onto the floor. Brain matter and blood splatter across the observation window. Lab Assistant 1 then falls to one knee, clutching his left rib cage and panting heavily. Dr. Etteip stares in shock at the aftermath. Dr. Eudora, sneering, glances at the two scientists before turning back to face the blood-covered window.

Dr. Eudora: ...Drat! Drat! Drat! (*sigh*) That didn't go as planned... Hah... (*takes off his glasses and clears off the condensation from it with a part of his lab coat*) ...It's like they say, "If first, you don't succeed, try, try again".

Dr. Etteip: What... what have we done?! This didn't have to happen... (*then shakes her head in disbelief*)

Dr. Voight: ...

Dr. Eudora: ...Somebody really should get the decontamination crew in there... what mess... yuck... (*then puts back on his glasses*)

Narrator: Dr. Voight then embraces the traumatized Dr. Etteip trying to comfort her while she remains fixated on the blood-stained observation window. Dr. Eudora turns away from the two scientists. He leans over the computer terminal and pushes the "pause" button on the video recording device stopping it. He then quietly starts walking toward the exit of the control/observation room.

Dr. Eudora: (*whispering to himself*) But... Even in failure, there is... promise... This "elixir"...it's a Karyotype take over of some sort... transmutation... systemic... a "virus"... an SKT virus... Yyyyyeeesssss... Heh-heh-heh!!!

Narrator: Dr. Eudora then exits the observation room. Rena continues to remember further into her past. The scene cuts to six years later, as we see Dr. Etteip and Voight arguing as they both enter the laboratory in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy compound.

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth, please put some more thought into this...

Dr. Voight: I have, Irene... With the removal of Dr. Eudora from the project and his security clearance revoked, and me still acting as the initiative's lead - the government has granted us more funding and a brand-new team to continue with the research in New Havenport...

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth, listen to me...

Dr. Voight: ...Dr. Eudora has always had it out for me, ever since the beginning of the initiative... His plans of using the variants for biological warfare usage were always going to end up in failure... time after time... It's pitiful he tried to frame me for mailing ricin-laced letters to those politicians... all because we were more successful than he was... Well, fuck that quirky-socially awkward louse... and his bruised ego...

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth...

Dr. Voight: ...And, after hearing about those multiple accusations of him sexually assaulting various female government employees... I knew he was a little off... I didn't want to believe it at first... but it turns out he was no good...

Dr. Etteip: Yes.

Dr. Voight: Look at him now... on the run from the law... like a cowardly rat..!

Dr. Etteip: Listen. He's irrelevant now.... After all this drama and having your name cleared... maybe it's time to reassess our life.

Dr. Voight: What do you mean..?

Dr. Etteip: We should move on from all this... together. We don't need to do this anymore. We've done enough...

Dr. Voight: Not true. More can be done... I know it.

Dr. Etteip: What about us..?

Dr. Voight: I love you, Irene, but the initiative...

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth, what about our children?!

Dr. Voight: I am thinking of them. Always...

Dr. Etteip: No, you're not. This has always been about the *Priscus Initiative*, nothing more.

Dr. Voight: Hey. Have you forgotten?! This was our plan. You and I started this together.

Dr. Etteip: I know... But things have changed... Don't you think they deserve to live a happy and normal life? Don't we owe it to them..?

Dr. Voight: Irene... you know that isn't possible... especially in this world...

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth, they're our children. Not just some science experiment!

Dr. Voight: They're that and more...

Dr. Etteip: Kenneth...



- Dr. Voight: Irene, let's not argue anymore. Come on... Just come with me to New Havenport. Everything will be fine...
- Dr. Etteip: No, Kenneth. I will not... I do not want the burden of knowing what could happen if these viruses ever got loose... this has been all wrong, right from the beginning.
- Dr. Voight: Hah. You're still worried about that..? We've come a long way since that first trial... The creation of our children is living proof of this, is it not..?
- Dr. Etteip: ...
- Dr. Voight: I don't want to lose you, but I must continue our work. Irene, will you come with me..?
- Dr. Etteip: Kenneth, I'm sorry, but no. This has gone on long enough!
- Dr. Voight: Irene.
- Dr. Etteip: No, Kenneth. I can't go on like this...
- Dr. Voight: You're serious..? Oh. Well. If you leave, you know the children will not be going with you.
- Dr. Etteip: *(sigh)* You would say that...
- Dr. Voight: ...And the government will hunt you down. You know too much. They won't take that risk. There is "no" out for us...

We're too deep into this now... You knew from the beginning what would happen if either of us walked away from this obligation.

Dr. Etteip: I know. I haven't forgotten...

Dr. Voight: Then stop with this foolishness, and come with me... with us... Come with our family...

Dr. Etteip: No... I sorrowfully will be walking away...

Dr. Voight: What..? How could you?!

Dr. Etteip: Even... (*sigh*) even if I must do it without my beautiful children. The thought of doing this will be torture... but it has to be done... I'm not contributing to this anymore...

Dr. Voight: What is wrong with you?! ...We have a good thing going!

Dr. Etteip: You "have a good thing going." We don't.

Dr. Voight: Irene, be reasonable!

Dr. Etteip: I'm sorry... I'm done. No more. ...Never again!

Dr. Voight: Unbelievable... you're just going to abandon us... (*then shakes his head in disbelief*)

Dr. Etteip: ...Tell our children... (*sigh*) Tell them for me, I am sorry... and I will always love them...

Narrator: Holding her tears in, Dr. Etteip turns away from Dr. Voight and runs towards the lab exit. She then breaks down crying as she leaves.

Dr. Voight: Irene. Irene! Irene, please wait!!!

Narrator: The scene then cuts back to the run-down martial arts school. Rena continues to look at the faded photograph in her hand. Grinding her teeth together, she angrily and remorsefully rips up the photo and envelope into small pieces and then throws them onto the floor. Rena then looks down at the scattered pieces of paper.

Rena: (*exhales deeply*) I am not that person anymore... but "her" and "I" ...our lives ...are like these scattered pieces of paper... ripped apart... faded... and never meant to be whole... never again...

Narrator: As Rena continues to stand somberly in place, the pulsating green light outside the martial arts school suddenly bursts through the windows, shattering the glass. Accompanying the green light, a gale of wind violently sweeps into the room, swirling around Rena, who has no chance to react before she is entirely consumed by the illumination. The scene

fades out to white, ending Rena's daydream sequence. The scene then cuts back to the present as Rena snaps out of her daze. Sound returns to her surroundings. Still staring out the speeding monorail car window, her vision gradually refocuses on the nighttime scenery of Twin Pines. A single tear falls from her right eye and slides down her cheek, but she quickly wipes it away.

CHAPTER 16 – GO TAKE A HIKE

- Narrator: Thirty minutes pass. The scene cuts to the party arriving at the Twin Pines — Northwest Zone monorail station. The six monorail cars come to a complete stop, and the doors open. All passengers, including Dew and the party, depart the monorail onto the platform. A moment later, the doors close, and the monorail cars pull away from the station toward a nearby railyard. The party then makes their way down the platform staircase and exits the station through a turnstile. Once outside, they begin walking toward the base of Mount Illini. Several minutes pass before Dew and the others come to a stop, roughly two hundred yards away from a 10-foot-tall chain-link fence that stretches along the mountain's base. Dew pulls out his binoculars and begins scanning the nighttime surroundings while the others observe the mountain ahead.
- Krista: ...This is... breathtaking... prettier seeing it in person... totally beats what you see in the magazines...
- Cooper: ...And intimidating at the same time.
- Rena: Meh. You get used to seeing it once you've lived here for a while...
- Elvir: ...We're climbing that, huh..?
- Vilmer: Yep... While it may look intimidating, it's not that bad of a climb, trust me.
- Lorenzo: Hey, Vilmer. Like, is it really safe to be climbing this thing at night?
- Vilmer: As long as we move at a slow pace until dawn and often stop to rest, we'll be fine. This time of the year... the weather is a bit warmer; clear skies and moonlight will work in our favor. If this were any other time of the year, we would see temperatures at night drop to -22°F.
- Lorenzo: Brrr... that sent a chill down my spine thinking about it...
- Narrator: Meanwhile, Dew continues using his binoculars to survey the area. He sees one SWAT TROOPER standing guard on the other side of the chain-linked barrier entrance and another sitting in a security shack reading a magazine and laughing while snacking away on a bag of potato chips. He continues

to pan the area and notices several surveillance cameras pointing in multiple directions mounted atop a single concrete column placed in the middle of the mountain base area. A few searchlights also comb the inner area.

Dew: Hm.

Cooper: *(turns to face Dew)* Dew..?

Krista: *(turns to face Dew)* ...Anyway in?

Dew: ...Hmm ...By the looks of it, no... they have the perimeter covered tight... too many surveillance cameras... and going through the front definitely isn't a good idea... *(then lowers the binoculars from his eyes to his left side)* There has to be some way inside...

Lorenzo: Oh, c'mon. Don't say that...

Cooper: Dew, we might have to consider taking out those guards...

Dew: No.

Lorenzo: Huh? What do you mean?!

Elvir: Uh, guys...

Krista: What other options do we have..?

Dew: I don't know. But we CAN avoid any unneeded fighting.

Lorenzo: "Unneeded fighting"?! Since when was that ever a problem?

Elvir: Hey... guys...

Dew: Lorenzo, no.

Lorenzo: No? You guys dragged me all the way here... Oh, we're going up that damn mountain no matter what..!

Rena: *(sarcastically)* ...That's the spirit!

Lorenzo: Ugh... I set myself up for that one...

Rena: Ha-ha...

Elvir: GUYS!!!

All: *(then the party turns to face Elvir)* ...What is it, Elvir!?!

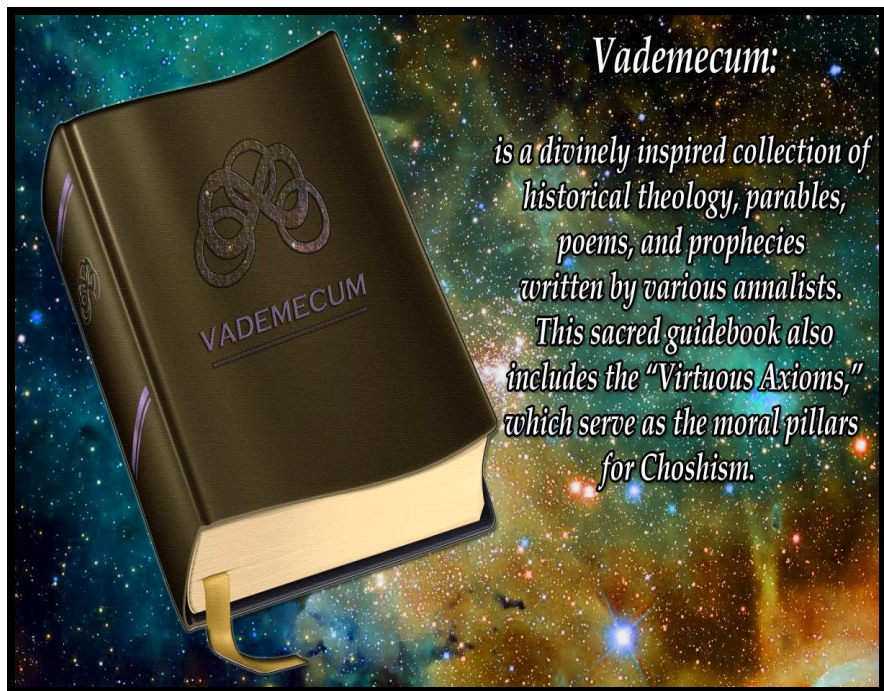
Elvir: There's our way in...

Lorenzo: Eh?

Dew: What are you talking about?

Vilmer: Where..?

Elvir: Right there..! Just off to your far right... *(then points in that direction)* You don't see it..?



Vademecum:

is a divinely inspired collection of historical theology, parables, poems, and prophecies written by various annalists.

This sacred guidebook also includes the "Virtuous Axioms," which serve as the moral pillars for Choshism.

- Narrator: Dew raises the binoculars to his eyes again and looks in the direction Elvir is pointing. He spots a large hole cut through one section of the chain-link barrier. Lowering the binoculars to his left side, he continues observing the area.
- Dew: Even a broken clock is right twice a day... How did you see that?!
- Elvir: I've got good eyes, that's why. Duh!
- Narrator: The others then look toward the section with the large hole cut through it.
- Lorenzo: *(squinting while looking in that direction)* Shit. I didn't even notice that before...
- Rena: Me neither. But we know how Thornton got in...
- Krista: Somebody is getting fired once they find out about that large hole there... They don't even have the searchlights covering that part of the section...
- Cooper: Well... there's our way in.
- Vilmer: Fantastic. We'll be on our way then..?
- Elvir: *(sarcastically)* Oh. Don't everyone thank me all at once...

Dew: Uh, yeah. Thanks, Elvir... *(then puts away the binoculars in his front vest pocket)*

Rena: Thank you.

Vilmer: Good eyes there...

Cooper: I told everyone you were worth having around...

Elvir: Thanks for always vouching for me, Cooper. What would you guys do without me..? Tsk, tsk, tsk... And you're welcome...

Vilmer: ...You ready for this, Dew?

Dew: Yeah... But, hey... Will you be fine? I'm sure you're feeling a lot of different emotions right now...

Vilmer: Yes, this does bring back a lot of memories... but it won't get in the way of what must be done... Bless us, Chosha, for the climb we are about to embark on. I don't need to lose any more friends as it is....

Krista: Don't worry. We're a sturdy bunch.

Cooper: Plus, we have an expert guiding us.

Narrator: Vilmer then cracks a smile.

Vilmer: Thank you, Cooper. Before we go... I bought us all headlamps just in case we needed them. Most importantly, we'll need a change of clothes for the climb... Hold on a sec... *(then removes his backpack from his shoulders, places it on the ground, and opens it)* Here...

Narrator: Vilmer digs into his backpack and begins handing out mountain climbing attire to each party member. The party then changes into their gear, consisting of insulated hiking boots, warm socks, lightweight fleece gloves and caps, waterproof and windproof jackets with attached hoods, and hard-shell waterproof pants with full-length side zippers. Lorenzo's outfit is noticeably different from the others, as he wears an extra-large, puffy purple onesie snowsuit. Once fully dressed in their mountain climbing attire, the party takes a moment to check themselves over.

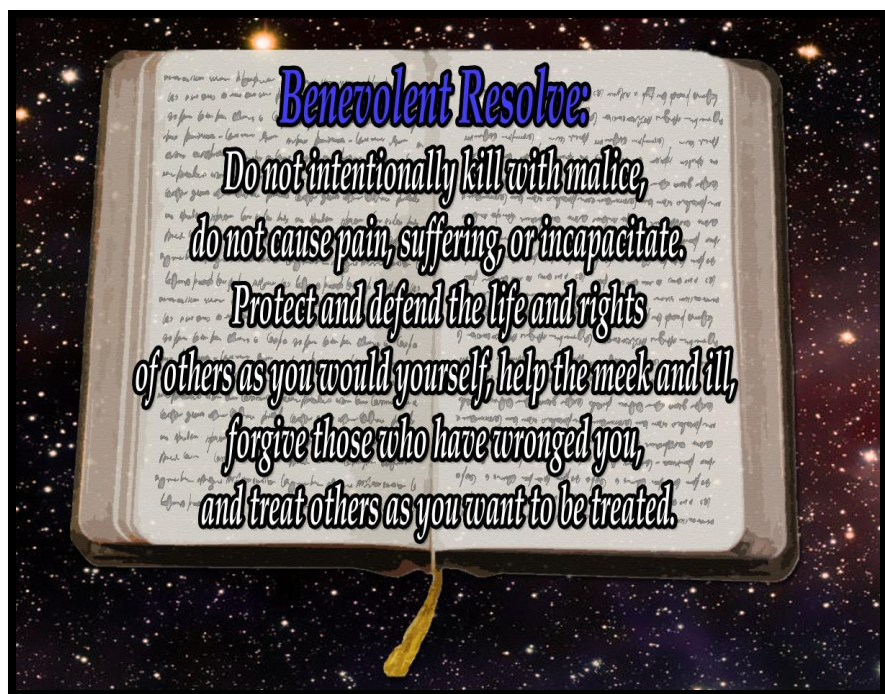
Rena: ...Nice fit if I do say so.

Cooper: Comfy...

Dew: A little tight on my caboose... but it's not bad...

Lorenzo: Uh... why does mine look different than the rest of yours..?

Krista: Yeah, about that... the shop was running low on the climbing attire, so the snowsuit was all they had left.



- Lorenzo: Of course, I had to be the odd man out of the group...
- Elvir: Awh diddums, you poor thing.
- Lorenzo: Tch... And did you have to go with Purple?!
- Krista: Oh. Well, it was that or all White. Would you want to look like a giant Marshmallow?
- Lorenzo: No. But I bet I look like a tall purple dinosaur wearing this... Ugh... I feel ridiculous...
- Elvir: Ehh... you look more like an angry bell pepper that's about to go snowboarding.
- Cooper: Ha-ha-ha...
- Elvir: ..."Gnarly, dude"! Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...
- Lorenzo: Oh, now it's your turn to tease me... Great...
- Vilmer: Looking, good everybody... When we do get up to the trail, let's all stick together and follow my lead, okay?
- Cooper: Roger that.
- Krista: You got it.
- Lorenzo: All right. All right. Let's get this over with...
- Elvir: Up, up, up, and the way we go..!

Narrator: Dew nods in acknowledgment, and the party begins their approach toward the chain-link barrier. A few minutes pass, and they reach the section with the hole cut through it. One by one, the party slips through the opening, remaining undetected. Once on the other side, they dart toward the mountain trail and begin their ascent up Mount Illini. Hours pass as night transitions into morning. During the climb, the party reaches different points along the mountain, passing by a single discarded plastic bag, an empty 44-ounce paper cup, a ripped plastic candy bag, some scattered licorice candy, and several paper food wrappers smeared with Thousand Island dressing. Eventually, Dew and the others stop after ascending 7,200 feet. Vilmer turns and walks toward the mountain ledge, stopping to gaze at the vivid red, orange, and pink hues of the morning sky as the sun rises over the horizon.

Vilmer: Ah... (*inhales, and then exhales*)

Cooper: ...That's a gorgeous sunrise if I've ever seen one...

Vilmer: Just by doing this again... I almost forgot how simple things such as a sunrise can still be exciting to see from so high up...

Lorenzo: Exciting?! ...From up here? Looks no different to me... Shit. It's so fuckin' cold...

Krista: Don't be so whiny, Lorenzo. It's not that bad.

Lorenzo: Says you. Fuck. This. Bullshit. Brrr!

Dew: I think we should take a pit stop here.

Elvir: Yes! Let's do that. I'm getting exhausted..!

Narrator: The party then separately finds their spot to sit down on the ledge. Vilmer remains standing and continues staring off into the horizon as Elvir lies back first flat on the ground.

Vilmer: Ah, the horizon... "Nature's Canvas"... the lights, the colors... It's majestic... (*then closes his eyes and thinks to himself*) *If only you were here now, Aldous... How I miss our weekend activities together, doing long runs, whitewater rafting, surfing, and biking...*

Dew: Hey, Vilmer...

Vilmer: (*then opens his eyes and turns his head to face Dew*) ...Yes?

Dew: I wanted to say thank you again for helping us out here.

Vilmer: (*then nods his head*) ...It had to happen sooner or later for me to climb this thing again... Oh..! That's right... Ha-ha...

Dew: Hm?

Vilmer: I almost forgot... And here I am doing just that on my birthday - of all days.

Lorenzo: ...Really?! It's your birthday today..?

Vilmer: Yes.

Rena: Oh?

Lorenzo: Well... Happy birthday my man.

Vilmer: Thank you.

Krista: Life is an adventure, like the one we're on now... Happy birthday, Vilmer!

Vilmer: Adventure, huh..? It's a day where one is left to reflect on their existence full of endless failure and bad decisions... along with the good stuff too...

Dew: I never looked at it that way... Anyway, Happy birthday.

Cooper: I wish you a Happy birthday and many more to come.

Elvir: Happy Uterus Liberation Day..!

Rena: Happy Birthday, Vilmer. I'm sure you would rather be doing something else than this right now, huh?

Vilmer: I would likely be helping with the guano harvesting right about now if I wasn't here...

Elvir: That would literally be a "shitty" birthday.

Vilmer: Ha-ha... for many years it was... You're all too kind and thank you for the birthday wishes. I believe our meeting was a blessing... I haven't had fun like this in a while... I'm beginning to feel like my old self again... thanks to you all. I may not know you all that well... But I'm glad to be spending my birthday with fine folks like you. I wouldn't have it any other way today.

Elvir: Aww... Likewise.

Krista: Hey, guys... Once we do find this Thornton fella and deal with him, we'll have to throw Vilmer a proper birthday party.

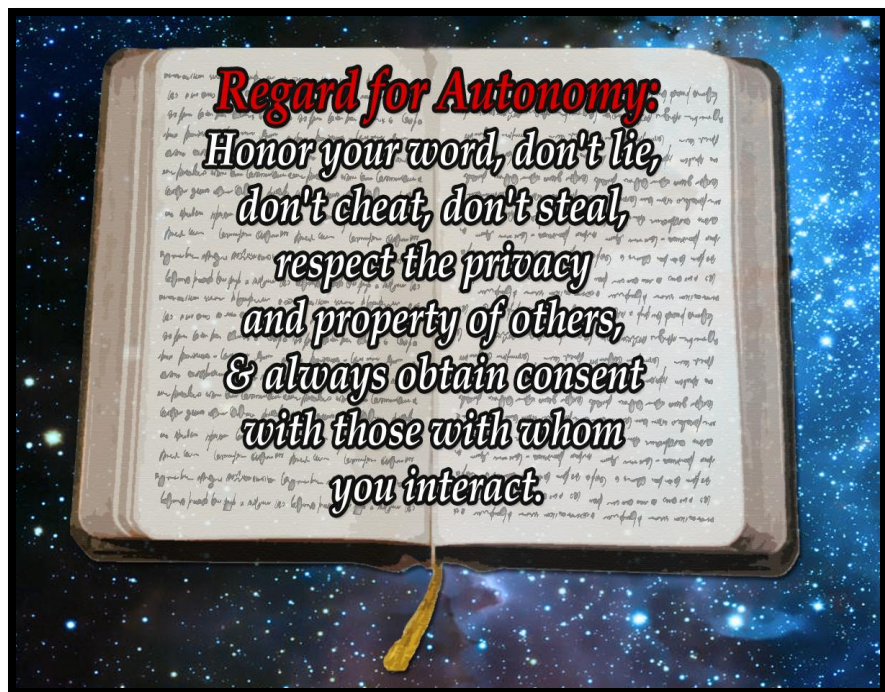
Cooper: I concur.

Vilmer: Ha-ha... You guys don't have to... when this is all over with, we'll not just celebrate my birthday, but our newfound friendship.

Krista: Okay.

Dew: I like that idea. We'll do that...

Narrator: Rena then rises off the ledge ground and walks over next to Vilmer and Dew. For a moment, she stares off into the horizon, watching the sunrise and several birds fly by. She then lowers her head and begins staring down at the mountain base below.



- Rena: ...The base... It's hardly visible from up here... (*then faces Dew and Vilmer*) We've climbed pretty high, no?
- Vilmer: We have... in a short amount of time. Not bad for novices'...
- Lorenzo: ...I'm not used to all this climbing junk. I'm an urban boy; I'm not made for these outdoors.
- Vilmer: If you do this often, you'll get used to it. It's good cardio...
- Lorenzo: Hell no! No, thank you. Once is enough for me... If I want a workout, I'll use a treadmill... Give me the good old concrete jungle any day over this. I, at least, know where my feet are going next.
- Elvir: Amen to that.
- Lorenzo: "Mamie," would have loved this...
- Krista: Who's "Mamie"..?
- Rena: ...That was the name of Lorenzo's stamp album.
- Krista: You gave your stamp album a name..? ...You collected stamps?
- Lorenzo: Yes, I did. It was a fun hobby for eight years until I lost "her," ... but "she" was avenged...
- Krista: "Her"? "She"? ...Avenged?!

Rena: It happened before we met you all.

Krista: ...I'm not going to even ask for the backstory on that one.

Narrator: The party then turns to face Lorenzo.

Vilmer: ...Lorenzo, I would have never taken you to be the philatelic type.

Elvir: ...Philatelic? What's that? ...That sounds like the name of a fad diet or some sexual kink.

Lorenzo: It has nothing to do with sex! "Philately" means to "collect and study stamps." For me, it was enjoyable, educationally beneficial, and a de-stressor.

Elvir: Hmm... de-stressor, huh? Did you ever lick the stamps and get turned on?

Lorenzo: What?! I-I would never do that to "Mamie"! Shut your dirty mouth..!

Elvir: Nyuk-Nyuk-Nyuk...

Dew: Elvir, that's enough... Lorenzo is quite sensitive when it comes to "Mamie."

Cooper: *(whispering to himself)* Is he ever... Hah.

Dew: ...Bless "her" and "she'll" be missed...

Elvir: Okay. Okay. I'm sorry... No need to get defensive. I'm just joking with you about your stamp album.

Krista: Wow...

Rena: Yep. That's what I said too. Give it no further thought...

Krista: To each their own...

Lorenzo: Err... *(then grabs his forehead with his right hand)* I'm feeling... a little light-headed all of a sudden... *(then lowers his right hand from his forehead)*

Elvir: It's probably all those memories coming back to you at once from all that stamp licking you were doing... *(then makes a teasing sexual tongue gesture toward Lorenzo)*

Lorenzo: Go hug a landmine, you gross little girl..!

Vilmer: ...That's just the elevation doing that to you. The higher you go up into the atmosphere, the less oxygen there is.

Lorenzo: Oh...

Elvir: Hmm... *(then rises off the ground and faces the party)* Hey guys. I have a question...

Dew: What's that?

Elvir: What do we do with the empty health potion bottles? *(then pulls out an empty health potion bottle from her pocket and*

shows the party it) ...I would feel bad just throwing this somewhere. I've been holding onto it for hours!

Cooper: ...Just eat it.

Elvir: Excuse me..? What?!

Cooper: Yeah, just eat it.

Elvir: You want me to... *(confusingly looks at Cooper, and then looks at the health potion bottle)* ...eat this?

Cooper: Why not?

Elvir: Cooper, it's made of glass... *(points and shakes the health potion bottle toward Cooper)* ...No way am I doing that! Is the lack of oxygen getting to you..? *(then lowers the health potion bottle to her right side)*

Cooper: Ha-ha-ha...

Elvir: What's funny?

Rena: I think what Cooper is trying to tell you is that the glass is edible. It's sugar glass, dear...

Cooper: Yes, and it's biodegradable too. So, you have nothing to worry about.

Elvir: Ohhhhh... I'll be. My entire life has been a lie... Why am I just learning this now?! You could have just said that silly!

Dew: Well, at least somebody cares about the environment and cleaning up after themselves...

Cooper: ...When we passed up all that litter earlier, it's evident that Thornton must be close by...

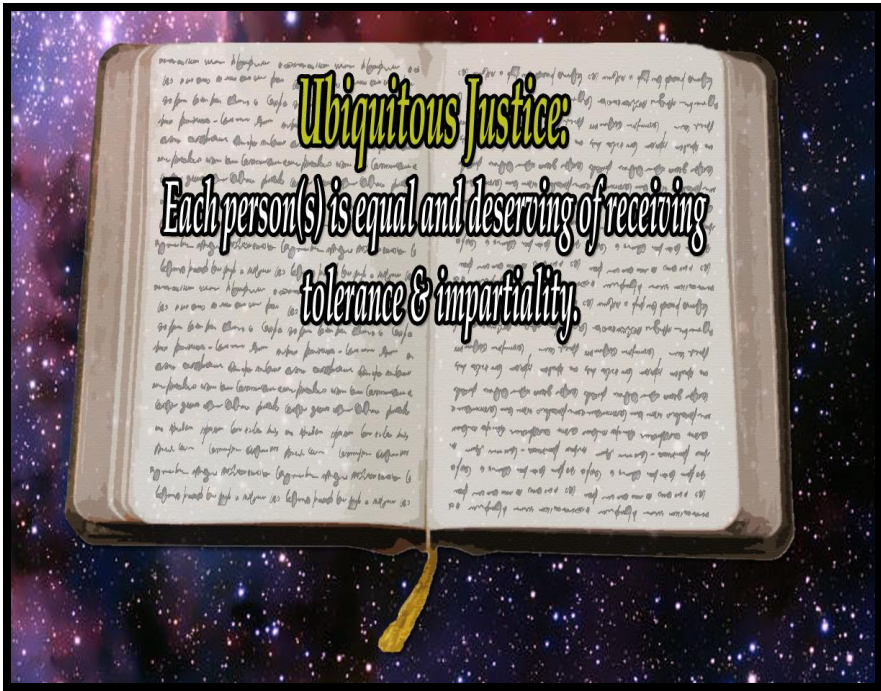
Dew: ...But where?

Elvir: Hmm... *(then raises the health potion bottle to her mouth and then bites into it. As she chews away on the pieces of the health potion bottle, loud crunching sounds, and her smacking lips can be heard. A few seconds later, she gives a satisfied look on her face after swallowing the pieces)* ...Woo-woo-woo... that's tasty! Ooh-Wee... *(then takes what's left of the health potion bottle, shoves it into her mouth, and begins crunching away at it as some saliva drips out)* Om-nom-nom-nom-nom...

Dew: Try not to choke, will ya?!

Rena: Ugh... you little savage.

Cooper: *(awestricken)* When a woman can do that, then you know she's the one for you... Wifey material...



- Narrator: Dew's lips pursed, and Rena impassively stares at Cooper for a moment. As Elvir finishes eating and swallowing the health potion bottle, a blanket of fog suddenly begins covering the area and catches the party's attention. The rest of the party then scrambles to their feet, looking around confused but also alert.
- Krista: Huh?
- Elvir: What the heck is going on?!
- Rena: This fog...
- Vilmer: Where did this fog come from all of a sudden..?
- Narrator: The blanket of fog then swirls around the party, growing heavier. Some of the party members swipe away at the surrounding blanket of fog to clear their field of vision. A silhouette figure can be seen approaching them from a distance but is barely visible.
- Cooper: Dew. Who... is that..?
- Dew: ...I can't... tell...



Narrator: Suddenly, the blanket of fog begins to recede gradually. As it clears, a tall man with a fair complexion and long, dark brown hair comes into view—Thornton. Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, and Cooper recognize him instantly, their expressions hardening. Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir’s eyes narrow—watchful, wary—as they take in the masked figure for the very first time. Thornton stands just as before, his facemask still in place, a dark beige trench coat draped over forest green pants, black gloves, and scuffed combat boots. In one hand, he grips a Bastard sword, its tip pointed toward the ground. He stands with the left side of his body angled toward the group, his head tilted downward, eyes closed—like a statue caught mid-thought.

Cooper: It’s him...

Krista: Who?

Dew: ...Thornton.

Narrator: Thornton's eyelids then crack open as his icy blue eyes intensely refocus. He then snaps his head up and begins slowly turning to face Dew and the party. They draw their weapons and ready themselves in a fighting stance. Now fully facing the party, Thornton quietly observes them briefly before making a single swiping motion with his Bastard sword in front of him. This startles the party a bit, but they continue remaining in their fighting stance. Thornton then brings his Bastard sword back down to his right side.

Thornton: Dew... You have arrived...

Elvir: This is the guy we're after..?

Dew: Yeah. It's him...

Elvir: So, uh... isn't it a little early for Halloween..?

Thornton: ...

Elvir: How are you not cold dressed like that?! Eh—this bloke... he looks like a giant tin can of mixed vegetables... and not even the good ones—like, the ones everyone skips over.

Thornton: (*noticing Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir*) Ah... I see you've brought some new friends. (*then his gaze shifts to Lorenzo, Cooper, and Rena*) And some old ones, too. For a moment, I was starting to worry you wouldn't show.

Dew: You certainly didn't make it easy finding you... Well... besides that large hole you left in the fence below back at the base... and all your trash we came across while climbing...

Thornton: ...And you have found me. I should have known better than to doubt you... She didn't...

Dew: She..?

Thornton: Ha-ha...

Narrator: As the party maintains their weapons drawn and their fighting stance, Rena suddenly hears a faint ethereal, feminine giggle. For a moment, she takes her attention off Thornton and eyes her surroundings trying to pinpoint its source. Then it stops. She quickly reverts her attention to Thornton.

Dew: Okay... Well, I'm here.

Thornton: That you are... finally, at... Hmm... (*then looks at Dew's Bo staff*) Wait... is that a shower rod you're... holding..?

Dew: What?! Ha-ha... Uh... No. It's a bo staff.

Thornton: Hah. It kind of looks like a shower rod.

Dew: Uh... well... it's not.

Thornton: I... think it is.

Dew: And you would be sooooooooooooo wrong...

Thornton: You seriously are trying to pass that thing off as a "bo staff" ..?

Dew: Uhhhh...

Thornton: What are you going to do, hang-dry your laundry up on that thing?

Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... that's a good one. I mean, Tin-canned Mixed Vegetables Man does have a point, Dewster... It does look like a shower rod. I'm just noticing this now... Wow...

Dew: No. It. Does. NOT!

Cooper: (*snort-laugh*) ...See, Dew, I'm not the only one who thought it looked like a shower rod.

Dew: Grrr... Says the guy with a mop!

Krista: Hmm... Not to divert from this tense standoff... But I just noticed something... Cooper, I know you also use a broom as a weapon... but that mop... is that the same one you've been carrying around with you this entire time?

Cooper: Yes, it is.

Vilmer: Eww... That thing must be so filthy!

Cooper: Not at all.

Vilmer: Really? ...With all the creatures we've fought and you beating their brains in with it... There's no way that thing is clean... Please do explain.

Lorenzo: Yeah. I got to hear this.

Thornton: ...

Dew: Oh, for fuck's sake...

Cooper: You see... the trick to that is... get ready for it... this answer will blow your mind away... I always change out the mop head.

Lorenzo: Huh...? But...

Cooper: ...But, what? I have been carrying the same mop STICK with me this entire time... but not the mop HEAD. There's a difference...

Lorenzo: Well... yeah. That makes sense...

Krista: I can accept that answer.

Vilmer: Fine. You made your point...

Elvir: Hold on, Cooper...

Cooper: Hm?

Elvir: That's all fine about your mop... But, but, but... where do you keep your broom then?

Lorenzo: That's a good question, Elvir.

Krista: ...Makes me wonder about that too.

Vilmer: Cooper..?

Cooper: Um... you see... I... Uhh... I carry it... Uh... You know what... you're all asking way too many questions...

Dew: Guys!!! Forget about that... We have a pressing matter at hand here to deal with...

Thornton: That's right, we do... *(then looks to his right side and starts talking to himself aloud)* What's that..? Not here..? You want us to go where..?

Dew: Huh?

Krista: Who's he... talking to?

Thornton: *(still talking to himself aloud)* Go up a little bit further..? ...It's too soon for that, you say..? *(turns to look at Rena briefly and then back to his right side)* Aha...

Rena: ...

Thornton: *(still talking to himself aloud)* ...The easy way first..? As you wish... *(then turns his attention back to the party)* Let's take this somewhere else...

Dew: Somewhere else? ...Playing games with us now?

Thornton: Come find me... and you'll see...

Lorenzo: Listen, Zircon's brother, I didn't climb a mountain for this shit.

Elvir: What... like, Hide and seek..? Count me out. I was never good at that. I don't have the patience... plus I enjoy board and video games more anyway...

Krista: Tell me about it... My mother would never come looking for my brother and me when we played. She was too busy using the time to dope up.

Narrator: The sympathetic party members turn to face Krista as they continue to have their weapons drawn and pointed at Thornton.

Rena: That's not nice... Geez.

Lorenzo: Damn.

Elvir: What a... bitch.

Vilmer: Aww... I'm sorry to hear you went through that, Krista.

Cooper: No child deserves to be treated like that... tragic...

Krista: Yeah... she wasn't "Mother of the Year," that's for sure...

Dew: Wowzers...

Narrator: Meanwhile, Thornton turns around and begins walking off. The party then turns their attention to him again.

Dew: Huh?! ...Thornton.

Thornton: ...There's so much to reveal... very soon... (*then stops walking with his back turned to the party*)

Dew: What are you up to, Thornton..? Answer me.

Thornton: ...I will be waiting... see you then...

Narrator: A blanket of fog then appears and surrounds Thornton.

Dew: Thornton, wait..!

Narrator: Seconds later, the blanket of fog subsides, and he vanishes.

Dew: Dammit! He's gone...

Lorenzo: ...That fuckin' guy. Just great!

Narrator: The party then lowers and sheaths their weapons.

Elvir: That's rude... He didn't even let us count to ten before running off. No fair...

Cooper: Ha-ha-ha... (*then faces Dew*) She's a riot, huh?

Dew: Pfft...

Krista: Oh, Elvir... You're always the life of the party.

Vilmer: Dew...

Dew: Yeah..?

Vilmer: Don't be distraught. Let's keep climbing... We'll come across him again sooner or later...

Dew: All right...

Narrator: The party then leaves the area and continues with their climb.

CHAPTER 17 – A MOUNTAIN, BEAST, & PINEAPPLE PIZZA

Narrator: Nearly two hours have passed. As the party further ascends the mountain, Dew begins to reminisce sixteen years ago, when he and a young Hoplyn had decided to play hooky from school and run off to explore Mount Illini. The scene cuts to the two youths running up the mountain hiking trail. The ten-year-old Dew leads the way as young Hoplyn tries to keep up. In the distance, an alluring humming can be heard. As the two get closer, the humming becomes faint.

Young Dew: Hoplyn, this way... can you hear it..? (*running*)

Young Hoplyn: Yeah... wait... for me... (*running right behind Dew*)

Young Dew: Hee-hee-hee... (*running*)

Narrator: After running a bit toward the source of the humming, it ceases, and Young Dew then comes to a stop.

Young Dew: The humming... it stopped... (*turns his head and confusingly looks around at his surroundings*) ...Hello? Is anybody there..? (*then scratches his head and shrugs his shoulders*) Where was that coming from..? Hmm...

Narrator: Young Dew then looks down at his feet. He curiously bends over to retrieve something off the ground. Young Hoplyn eventually catches up. She stops and is panting heavily, trying to catch her breath. Meanwhile, Young Dew continues to stare at the item in hand. Regaining her composure, Young Hoplyn walks over to him to see what he's holding.

Young Hoplyn: Hey, roadrunner... What happened to that humming?

Young Dew: Hey slowpoke... I don't know...

Young Hoplyn: Oh... What'd ya got there..?

Young Dew: ...This! (*then shows Young Hoplyn a shiny blue pebble*)

Young Hoplyn: It's purty ...so shiny.

Young Dew: Yeah... it looks like a fruit snack... Mmm...

Narrator: Young Dew tries to put the shiny blue pebble in his mouth, but Young Hoplyn grabs his hand and pushes it away from it.

Young Hoplyn: No, silly..! Don't do that... You aren't a goat!

Young Dew: Maaaaaaa... Hee-hee-hee....

Narrator: As Young Dew and Hoplyn continue observing the shiny blue pebble, unbeknownst to them, a creature quietly approaches them from behind. The beast then comes to a halt several feet from them. The creature's noisome body odor catches the two youth's attention.

Young Dew: *(sniff) (sniff) Whew! ...What's that smell?! (then sniffs toward Young Hoplyn direction) ...Is that you, Hoplyn?*

Young Hoplyn: Not me.

Young Dew: Big Sis, did you bust ass..?

Young Hoplyn: No...

Young Dew: Don't lie...

Young Hoplyn: No, I'm not... you probably farted...

Young Dew: Unh-uh.

Young Hoplyn: Yes, you did...

Narrator: Then the two youths hear growling coming from behind them.

Young Dew: ?!

Narrator: Young Dew and Hoplyn slowly turn around and see a menacing heterochromatic-eyed mountain lion staring them down while licking its mouth.

Young Hoplyn: Gulp! Dewey, I-look!

Young Dew: YIKES! Oh... boy!!!

Narrator: As the two youths are frozen in place by fear, the mountain lion slowly approaches them.

Young Dew: *(nervous)* Ha-ha... nice kitty...

Young Hoplyn: Pspspspsp...

Young Dew: *(turns his head facing Young Hoplyn)* W-what... are you doing?!

Young Hoplyn: Pspspspsp... I'm trying... to... to... tell the kitty to go... away...

Narrator: The mountain lion continues to approach them as it growls.

Young Dew: Stop that! You're calling it... That's not how you scare it off... *(turns back to face the mountain lion and aggressively gestures to it)* Shoo... shoo... You big mean ugly fat cat..!

Narrator: The mountain lion then becomes agitated and lets off a roar.

Young Hoplyn: Uh-oh...

Young Dew: R-r-r-r-run!

Narrator: Young Dew and Hoplyn then quickly make a run for it passing up the mountain lion and leaping down the hiking trail. The mountain lion turns around and begins its pursuit of them. As the two youths tearfully run away, the mountain lion catches up to them. It springs forward and knocks Young Dew to the ground, pinning him there. Young Hoplyn continues to flee. The mountain lion snarls at Young Dew as he whimpers in place. The mountain lion is about to bite into his face until Grandpa Wilder arrives, running up and shoulder ramming into the beast pushing it off his grandson. Grandpa Wilder and the beast now standing on its hind legs momentarily get into a struggle. Grandpa Wilder is then knocked to the ground by the beast. The mountain lion attempts to pounce on him until Grandpa Wilder pulls out a combat knife from his right-side pocket and then swipes away at the beast's face, followed by kicking it in the stomach with all his force. The mountain lion drops to the ground face-first as Grandpa Wilder rolls out of the way, quickly getting back onto his feet. The beast is dazed and then slowly gets back onto its four legs. A bloodied, jagged gash can be seen running down the right side of the mountain lion's face. It then gives off a yowl and immediately scurries off up the mountain. Grandpa Wilder puts away his combat knife and then walks over to the downed Young Dew. He bends down to pick him up off the ground. Once on his feet, the Young Dew wipes the tears away from his face as Grandpa Wilder stands over him,

looking down in disappointment, but relieved at the same time.

Young Dew: Grandpa?!
 Grandpa Wilder: Dew...
 Young Dew: Grandpa... I...
 Grandpa Wilder: You're lucky I was here. If not, you would have been dead by now...
 Young Dew: I'm... sorry, Grandpa.
 Grandpa Wilder: I bet... When I got word from the principal that you and Hoplyn didn't make it to school, I got worried... her family got worried... We had no idea what had happened to you two... luckily, some of the others spotted you two heading this way... Now boy, tell me why you thought ditching school and coming up here was a good idea?!

Young Dew: Grandpa... Hoplyn and I wanted to go on an adventure...
 Grandpa Wilder: ...An adventure?! You could have gotten yourselves killed! I swear you kids are trying to give me a stroke..! I ought to give you a good paddling... But, eh...
 Young Dew: S-sorry...
 Grandpa Dew: ...Also, how the heck did you two even make it up here..?
 Young Dew: We took our bikes, Grandpa, and rode here... none of the adults cared to stop us as we walked on by...
 Grandpa Wilder: Well... they should have... But never mind all that right now... Are you okay?
 Young Dew: Yes, Grandpa... Grandpa, where is Hoplyn? Is she... okay?
 Grandpa Wilder: She's probably at the base of the mountain by now. When I was coming up, she zoomed right past me. When she gets home, though... that's a different story...
 Young Dew: I'm sorry, Grandpa. Sorry...
 Grandpa Wilder: All right. All right... I'm glad you're okay, boy... Please don't ever come up here again like that. It's too dangerous...
 Young Dew: I won't... I won't ever again, Grandpa...

Grandpa Wilder: I hope not. I love you... If I ever lost, you... I wouldn't know what to do. Do you understand..?

Young Dew: *(remorseful)* Yes...

Grandpa Wilder: *(sigh)* Okay, boy... *(bends down and hugs Young Dew briefly. He then releases his embrace and stands back up)* Come on. Let's go get Hoplyn and head home...

1.25
Thursday, May 22, 1997

TWIN PINES BULLETIN

YOUR RELIABLE SOURCE FOR LOCAL NEWS, SINCE 1901

CODA, THE CATAMOUNT – ANOTHER SIGHTING!



By Crescent Hayter

A family is mourning the tragic loss of their brother and son. A 33-year-old experienced outdoorsman mangled body was discovered by SWAT TROOPERS on Tuesday evening at a ransacked campsite on the base of Mt. Illini. From further investigation, it was concluded local wildlife was suspected in this ill turn of events. Foul play has been ruled out.

Weeks prior, a family of four on a hiking trip was also attacked. Minor injuries were sustained, but only thanks to the armed patriarch shooting and scaring off a beast. A young couple that same week would also be attacked and survive their grisly encounter. One of them suffered deep lacerations and losing a part of their right thigh.

Five years before that, a local elderly man claimed he had encountered a mountain lion after fighting it off while saving his grandson and a friend after they went missing earlier in the day.

Many believe, along with the survivors- that these random attacks were the actions of the infamous Catamount dubbed, "Coda" who has terrorized Twin Pines nature-lovers for close to a decade. A few of the survivors claim the creature has an uncanny human-like hell that puts you into a hypnotic state and then relentlessly proceeds to assault.

Law enforcement has been unsuccessful in locating or catching "Coda". In the past, residents have been urged to use caution when venturing through Mt. Illini and solely stick to the approved trails. Although, the Twin Pines Seneschal is considering permanently restricting civilian access to Mt. Illini until the matter is resolved.

As of this publication, there have been a total of 17 deaths.

Narrator: Grandpa Wilder then grabs onto Young Dew's hand. The two walk down the mountain hiking trail back toward the base. The scene cuts back to the present day as Vilmer, who is ahead of the party, comes to a stop. The party does the same soon after. Vilmer looks around in confusion at his surroundings.

Vilmer: Hmm...

Dew: Vilmer, what's wrong..?

Vilmer: Something seems... out of place...

Dew: What do you mean..?

Narrator: Vilmer pauses, then walks away from the party to inspect the area more closely. Dew and the others stand by, watching him. A cool breeze swiftly passes by, whistling softly. During this, only Cooper hears what sounds like subtle humming coming from somewhere nearby. He turns his head, looking in all directions until the humming abruptly stops. As the others continue watching Vilmer search the area, Elvir notices Cooper's odd behavior. She sidesteps closer to him, intending to question him.

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* Psst, Cooper... Hey. You, okay..?

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir)* Yeah. Yeah... Did you hear that just now?

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* ...Hear what?

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir)* ...I thought I heard... humming...

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* Humming?

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir)* Yeah... it sounded close by...

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* No. I didn't hear that... Maybe it was the wind..?

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir)* Hmm... Yeah... I guess that's what it was... Never mind then...

Narrator: Meanwhile, Vilmer, who is becoming visibly flustered, is still investigating the surrounding area. A few moments later, he turns around and walks back toward the party, feeling uncertain and looking more perplexed than before.

Vilmer: ...I know it's been a while since I last climbed this... Yet... I don't remember this area being here at all...

Rena: ...

Krista: Are you... sure..?

Vilmer: Definitely...

Narrator: Suddenly, a blanket of fog appears and begins covering the area, catching the party off guard. For a moment, their field of vision is completely obscured as they try to look around and figure out what is happening. Seconds later, the fog quickly dissipates, revealing Thornton standing several feet away from the party, both hands resting on the hilt of his bastard sword, which is planted firmly into the ground. The party immediately draws their weapons.

Thornton: ...You finally caught up. Good.

Dew: Thornton.

Elvir: Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetables Man!

Lorenzo: Well, well... if it isn't the "hide & seek champion" himself...

Thornton: ...Dew, are you and your friends enjoying the climb?

Dew: Whatever, Thornton. We're here now. Speak..!

Thornton: Ah. Still forthright as always... some things haven't changed, I see... Dew, the Renaissance is nigh... soon the Söl Congruum will return... We stand atop this mountain and look upon this decaying world... its people have become morally and spiritually bankrupted... there is no future for them... the only way to avert humanity's eventual demise... is to bring forth her... the Söl Congruum...

Narrator: Rena then raises an eyebrow upon hearing this as she continues to draw her weapon facing Thornton.

Dew: ..."Her"?

Thornton: Yes... the one who will bring chaos, order, and bliss to the world... a hard reset... a clean slate... a new world where the Söl Congruum's will shall be manifested...

Dew: Hmm... And what do the four SKT virus variants have to do with that..?

Thornton: They are the keys to ushering in the return of the Söl Congruum... and you all will be willing participants in helping me achieve such...

Elvir: What?!

Krista: Excuse me..?

Lorenzo: Like hell, we will!

Cooper: Thornton, you're sadly mistaken if you think we'll ever help you...

Dew: What makes you think that's going to happen?

Thornton: Fate? A prophecy fulfillment? Story foreshadowing..? Call it whatever you like... It's inevitable... Dew, Cooper we served in the same unit together during our time in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE... we blindly served a government that lied to us... that used us to advance their agenda for personal gain under the guise of promoting "freedom" and "security"... And when they were done using us... We were tossed away like yesterday's garbage... You both know me very well... I'm nothing like my late brother or those bureaucrats... I'm not your enemy... We can be allies...

Cooper: Allies?

Dew: What are you getting at..?

Thornton: I'm offering you AND your friends something... Something in exchange for your help... That something is, a place in the new world to come... have whatever your heart desires... the Sōl Congruum can grant you that...

Elvir: Bullshit, Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetables Man!

Thornton: (*turns his head looking in Krista's direction*) ...If those desires are to live life without unneeded discord and being left undisturbed... (*then looks at Rena*) ...or no longer having to sulk in past regrets wishing to make amends... It'll be so...

Rena: ...

Thornton: ...If one wishes to be reunited with long-deceased loved ones such as... (*looks over at Dew*) ...a grandfather... (*then looks over at Lorenzo*) ...a brother... (*then looks over at Cooper and Elvir*) ...a mother, or both mother and father... (*then finally looks over at Vilmer*) ...or a lover... to have a chance to relive those most cherished moments with them anew...

Vilmer: Ehh...

Thornton: ...Then, it'll be so... Help me collect the four SKT virus samples so the Renascences may commence... Help me free us from Chosha's constraints and our subjugation of being performers for divine amusement... then, once we've accomplished this, all of us will be rewarded for the good work... But all you have to do is... join me and my followers, the *Bush of Life*, and pledge yourselves to the Sōl Congruum...

Narrator: Dew glances down at the front pocket of his vest, where the SKT virus A vial is secured. He then looks back up at Thornton.

Thornton: What do you say, Dew and friends..? Will you help me?

Narrator: For a brief moment, the party begins pondering Thornton's tempting offer before eventually rejecting it.

Dew: ...Nice recruitment pitch... But I don't think so. What you want to do is wrong. I will not serve that evil...

Thornton: Evil? Ha-ha-ha...

Lorenzo: All that sounded like a bunch of mumbo-jumbo bullshit to me! No thanks. And I don't do cults either...

Rena: No... living with one lie is enough...

Thornton: Oh..? (*turns his head to the right and then starts talking to himself aloud*) Yes... It is... that is ironic... (*then turns his head toward the party again*)

Krista: Nice try. But forget about it. My life is fine the way it is.

Vilmer: It wouldn't be worth it... more do not need to die...

Cooper: What has happened, has happened...

Elvir: I will never dishonor my ancestors by following the likes of you. Take your false promises... and shove it! We know where this leads to, and it isn't pretty...

Thornton: How unfortunate to hear that... so you all have chosen to do things the hard way... *(then starts talking aloud to himself again)* ...Ungrateful... yes, they are...

Elvir: Yoo-hoo... Hey, asshole. Are you done talking to yourself over there..?

Thornton: *(then faces Elvir)* ...Irk some little girl.

Elvir: Yeah. I'm that and more... As a descendant and last of the *Hozho*, your unholy villainy will be stopped at all costs.

Thornton: You?! You're the remaining member of the *Hozho*..? Ha-ha... Intriguing...

Elvir: Pretentious, aren't we? I'll happily fix that! ...Servant of the Söl Congruum, prepare to face judgment and feel the wrath of my ancestors for your transgressions. For Chosha..!

Narrator: Elvir attempts to dash toward Thornton, but Dew puts out his left arm blocking her advancement.

Dew: Elvir, no..! If we're going to do this, we'll take him on together... *(then puts his left arm down to his side)* ...As a team.

Thornton: I didn't want it to come down to this... *(removes his Bastard sword from the ground)* But... It'll be so... *(then points it toward the party and ready himself in a fighting stance)* It's been a while since my sword has tasted the blood of the meek...

Dew: Cut the shit, Thornton, and let's get on with it...

Thornton: Dew, the only thing I'll be "cutting into" is...

Dew: What? ...Pineapple pizza?

Thornton: You still remember that, eh? A slice of Pineapple pizza would be good to have about now. Mmm...

Rena: Why?!

Cooper: ...An abomination!

Krista: Who puts pineapples on their pizza?!

Vilmer: It makes my stomach turn just imagining such a thing... I'm never eating pizza again.

Lorenzo: I may have been poor most of my life and shouldn't be picky when it comes to food... But I wouldn't eat that shit!

Elvir: Yeah. I totally agree... putting pineapples on pizza is just wrong. It should be made illegal... Now, Banana curry pizza, on the other hand... DELICIOUS!!!

Narrator: Dew and the others, along with Thornton, briefly lower their weapons and turn to look at Elvir in disgust.

Vilmer: Eww...

Cooper: ...What?!

Elvir: Huh? ...You've never tried it?!

Cooper: No way...

Elvir: Oh, come on... It's soooooooo good... It's a must.

Dew: No thanks.

Elvir: You're missing out. Don't knock it if you haven't tried it.

Thornton: I rather not have my stomach fall out of my asshole. Eww... just no... You sick little monkey!

Elvir: Argh! First, you insult my intelligence by trying to tempt me with your false promises. Second, you arrogantly underestimate me, and third, you now bash my taste in pizza... I'm really peeved! That's it... I end you, NOW..!

Dew: Elvir, wait..!

Narrator: Elvir rushes toward Thornton, attempting to attack him, but he effortlessly dodges and parries her dual dagger strikes with his bastard sword. Seizing an opening, Thornton delivers a diving punch to her sternum, sending her flying backward and hitting the ground hard. The concerned party rushes to the downed Elvir, who is still gripping her dual daggers, to check on her. Meanwhile, Thornton turns his back to them and calmly sheathes his sword.

Cooper: Elvir! (*then kneels beside her*) ...Are you okay?

Elvir: Owwww... Goddamn... that... packed a... punch... (*cough*) (*cough*) (*cough*)

Narrator: As Cooper and the party help Elvir back to her feet, a sudden growl echoes throughout the area. The party immediately goes on alert, looking around for the source. Meanwhile, Thornton, unmoved by the commotion, keeps his back turned to them.

Krista: W-what... was that?!

Dew: Huh?!

Narrator: Just then, off in the distance, the sound of galloping echoes through the air. With each thunderous step the unseen creature takes, the noise intensifies. Suddenly, a mountain lion charges over the edge of a ledge above, leaping down and landing on all fours with a heavy thud. The mountain lion now stands between the party and Thornton, whose back remains turned. It glances briefly at Thornton but quickly loses interest. The beast — with heterochromatic eyes and a jagged gash slashing across the right side of its face — shifts its gaze toward the party. Lifting its nose into the air, it sniffs, catching a scent. A low, hostile growl rumbles from its throat. Instantly, Dew recognizes the creature — the same one that attacked him sixteen years ago. The one the surviving victims and residents of Twin Pines call Coda.

Dew: *(whispering to himself)* It's... you.

Rena: Is this... Coda?

Lorenzo: Who..?

Narrator: The mountain lion turns its entire body around and begins prowling toward Dew and the others. The party quickly draws their weapons and points them at the creeping mountain lion. Thornton then starts walking away.

Thornton: ...It seems that nature wants to meddle in our affairs... Our fight will have to wait... *(a blanket of fog suddenly appears around his body as he continues walking off)* ...If you all survive your encounter with this beast, continue climbing up for a bit... you'll then find something of interest... *(the blanket of fog entirely covers Thornton)* ...Use it to find me again... there are more reveals to come... *(then disappears as the blanket of fog subsides)*

Dew: Thornton..!

Lorenzo: Forget about him. We have other problems to deal with currently.

Dew: Urgh...

Elvir: Ah, shit... that's one big moggy!

Cooper: Just our luck...

Narrator: Coda then stops and readied itself to attack the party.

Krista: Whoa... N-n-n-nice kitty...

Vilmer: We have no other choice; we must defeat this beast...

Dew: *(thinking to himself) ...This time, it will end differently... (angrily) ...Defeat it we, WILL! (then starts charges toward Coda) Yaaaaaarrgggghhhh!!!*

Narrator: While running, Dew swings his bo staff at the beast, but it evades the strike by leaping over him. Annoyed, Dew quickly turns around to face the mountain lion, now standing between him and the party. Coda hisses — and the fight for survival begins. During the battle, Coda repeatedly attempts to rush, scratch, bite, and stab the party with the sharp, protruding bone at the tip of its tail. Though battered, the party manages to avoid any life-threatening injuries. They land a few solid strikes on Coda as the fight wears on, further irritating and wearing down the beast. In a desperate attempt to go in for the kill, Coda lunges toward the party, but Dew forcefully smacks the beast across the face mid-air with his bo staff. The impact sends Coda flying off the mountain's edge, yowling as it plummets into the depths below, ending the battle. Exhausted, the party takes a moment to catch their breath.

Krista: *(slightly kneeling with her hands on her knees and back arched) Whew... Bad kitty!*

Rena: *What a fight... (then leans her back against a boulder nearby)*

Dew: *(leaning forward and resting against his bo staff as it's planted into the ground) ...You weren't so... (huff) (puff) ...tough after all...*

Lorenzo: *(slouching forward with left hand on his hip) (huff) (puff) ...Furry bastard...*

Vilmer: *(sitting on the ground crossed-legged) ...Now... (huff) (puff) that's what you call... a landslide...*

Elvir: *(laying on the ground in the supine position) Good one... (huff) (puff)*

Lorenzo: *Ha-ha-ha... (still slouching with his left hand on his hip)*

Vilmer: *...Thanks... (still sitting on the ground cross-legged)*

Cooper: *(pulling himself up onto his feet with both hands grasping onto the mop stick as the mop head is facing up) Hey, Dew... (then regains his composure) Yes... Cooper?*

Dew: *(then regains his composure) Yes... Cooper?*

Cooper: If I recall correctly, Dew... Didn't you tell me a long time ago... that your grandfather had fought and... beat up a mountain lion?

Lorenzo: Wait... (*regains his composure and then faces Dew*) Your Grandfather fought a mountain lion?!

Dew: Yes, he did.

Cooper: ...And Coda, was it?

Dew: Same one... Yes.

Rena: (*then stops leaning against the boulder*) ...And the reason why the mountain trail was made off-limits to the public in the first place.

Vilmer: Clearly done for a good reason...

Lorenzo: So, you're telling me, it took... seven of us to do what one man did!?!

Dew: Pretty much...

Lorenzo: Wow... He was one bad motherfucker...

Krista: (*walking over to the ledge and then looks down*) Well... the good thing is guys... we won't have to ever worry about our feline "friend" there bothering us again... (*then turns and faces the party*)

Lorenzo: Yeah, it's probably just as flat as the poop you would get after eating Elvir's "favorite" Banana curry pizza right about now.

Elvir: Hey...! (*then slowly rises onto her feet*)

Vilmer: Hah... I think that's enough for break time... (*then rises onto his feet*) Should we all get going?

Dew: Yes... We must find Thornton immediately...

Narrator: The party walks off, continuing their climb further up the mountain. The scene cuts to the motionless, mangled corpse of Coda sprawled across a cluster of large, jagged rocks several hundred feet below where the beast fell. As the scene pans in, the corpse suddenly begins to convulse and gradually mutate. Some of its injuries from the fall heal instantly, while parasitic suction-cup lesions lined with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth start to form across parts of its body. Ram-like horns grow over its ears, covering them, and its tail transforms into a scaly appendage, now featuring several sharper bone protrusions jutting out from the sides. The heterochromatic-eyed mountain lion's eyes snap open. Coda immediately rises to all fours, lifting its nose into the air to sniff around, before letting out an incensed growl. Reanimated and more monstrous than before, Coda gallops back up the mountain, determined to exact revenge on Dew and the party.

CHAPTER 18 – A FAMILY REUNION

Narrator: An hour passes, and the group comes to another stop after discovering to their confusion, a timeworn freight elevator idly waiting.

Dew: Is that...

Cooper: ...a freight elevator?

Krista: Why is there a freight elevator on this mountain?!

Dew: I have no fuckin' idea.

Lorenzo: You don't see that every day, that's for sure...

Vilmer: Odd... I most certainly do not remember this being here...

Narrator: The party cautiously approaches and then enters the freight elevator as a hesitant Rena stays behind and watches them. Before Dew enters the freight elevator, he notices Rena not following suit. He then turns around to question her.

Dew: Hey. Rena. You coming..?

Rena: Uh...h...

Dew: (*concerned*) ...What's wrong?

Rena: It's... (*then lowers her head, looks down at the ground, and starts shaking her head from side to side as if she's disturbed about something*)

Dew: Rena..?

Rena: (*then quickly raises her head and looks at Dew*) It's nothing... I'm sorry... I'm coming now...

Dew: Oookay...

Narrator: Rena then gives a forced smile to Dew while passing by him and entering the freight elevator. A concerned Dew briefly stares at her until he turns his attention to the interior of the freight elevator. As this is going on, the other party members are also curiously checking out its interior.

Cooper: Talk about something out of place...

Elvir: Didn't you know, Cooper..?

Cooper: Hm?

Elvir: (*sarcastically*) ...Only the "best mountains" in the world have elevators built into their interior... How else do you think they get down silly?

Cooper: Heh... (*then walks toward the control panel*)



- Vilmer: When the heck was this built?! ...And what purpose does it serve? Hmm...
- Rena: ...
- Lorenzo: Should we even be standing in this piece of junk..? The cables on this thing could snap on us at any moment...
- Narrator: Meanwhile, Cooper is intensively investigating the dusty freight elevator control panel and its buttons. He then wipes off some of the dust from the panel with his right index finger. He briefly looks at it and then flicks it off his finger.
- Cooper: Hmm... This hasn't been used in quite some time... But it's still operational... somebody intended for us to use this.
- Elvir: I wonder where it leads to?
- Dew: (*walking over to Cooper, and then stops*) We all know who that "somebody" is... This is the "something of interest" that

Thornton was talking about earlier... *(then turns facing the others)* Wherever this takes us, he'll be there for sure...

Vilmer: The good news is, we won't have to climb any higher looking for the guy.

Lorenzo: That's the best news I've heard all day...

Vilmer: Yes. It would have taken us ten more hours if we did.

Lorenzo: Fuck that...

Vilmer: Be grateful we'll never have to pass through the Death Zone...

Lorenzo: Death Zone..?

Vilmer: ...It would have been a lot of dead bodies to step over... lack of oxygen, harsher weather conditions... Possibly some of us would have ended up joining them... becoming permanent "landmarks"...

Lorenzo: Ugh... All right. All right. I get it. I'll take my chances with riding this thing... Just get me off this crazy mountain already!

Cooper: So, Dew. Should we take this down..?

Dew: *(nods his head in approval)* Go for it.

Cooper: All right. Going down...

Narrator: Cooper presses the "Down" button on the freight elevator control panel. Seconds later, two rings are heard from the elevator bell as the three-speed center telescopic door shuts. On the outside, the exterior of the freight elevator door is camouflaged, appearing to be part of the mountain wall structure. As the freight elevator descends inside the mountain, it starts making an unsettling creaking noise, and crumb-like debris falls from the ceiling ever so often. In the meantime, the party then begins removing their mountain climbing attire. During the descent, the temperature noticeably gradually shifts from frigid to stuffy and damp. Eventually, the freight elevator reaches the bottom floor and comes to a stop. A single ring is heard from the elevator bell as the three-speed center telescopic door opens. Dew and the others then exit the freight elevator, and the door, without delay, shuts behind them. Cooper turns around and pushes the single button on the wall panel a few times. The freight elevator door does not open. He then turns to face the party.

Cooper: It looks like going back up is not an option...

Narrator: The party then looks around at their surroundings, finding themselves in a dimly lit underground cavern.

Elvir: Where the heck are we now..?

Krista: Are... those...

Dew: Drums?

Narrator: Off in the distance, the party sees thousands of Blue 55-gallon steel hazmat drums palletized, shrink-wrapped, and lined up behind one another in many rows. The drums on most of the pallets are stacked atop one another, going as high as nine feet. Other drums can also be seen lying on the ground in random spots littering the cavern.

Lorenzo: Hmm... those are a lot of drums...

Cooper: This place... it looks like it was used as some sort of underground disposal site for hazardous materials...

Vilmer: Inside this mountain..? Since when?

Narrator: Cooper walks toward a damaged and busted open drum lying on the ground. He kneels over to investigate it. He notices the rust covering the upper part of the drum and the bent lid hanging off it. He then looks down at a chemical stain left on the cavern ground before rising back to his feet and turning around to face the party.

Cooper: I don't know... maybe more than ten years?

Lorenzo: Wait... a second. How do you know that by looking at some rusty drum?

Cooper: Well... I am a Custodian Engineer by trade, who happens to be HAZMAT certified thanks to my training in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE.

Lorenzo: Oh yeaahh... the obvious...

Krista: What is so special about this place..? Why did Thornton want us to come here?

Rena: ...

Dew: I dunno, Krista...

Elvir: I know one thing... *(then uses her right hand to wipe the sweat from off her forehead)* ...Whew. It's getting hot just standing here.

Lorenzo: You ain't lying. It's humid as fuck down here..! I kinda miss being up on that mountain now, cold air and all...

Vilmer: Hah. I knew you would eventually take a fancy to that, Lorenzo... But we should get moving. Thornton is down here somewhere...

Dew: Standing here won't help us find him. Let's go...

Narrator: As the party is about to walk off, Rena then stops them from proceeding forward.

Rena: Wait..!

Vilmer: Huh?

Krista: What's wrong?

Rena: But should we... really, though..?

Cooper: "Should we really," what, Rena?

Dew: What do you mean?

Rena: Dew, this place looks vast... What if we get lost, run to a dead-end, or even worse... injured?

Lorenzo: Injured? We've got healing *Elementomes* to fix that...

Vilmer: Rena, don't forget, I do have a wealth of knowledge when it comes to treating injuries if needed. So, no need to worry...

Rena: But... who knows how long we'll be down here for... we've been lucky so far on this quest... but we might be pressing our luck here...

Dew: What are you suggesting, Rena?

Rena: ...Maybe going forward isn't a good idea.

Vilmer: That sounds counterproductive...

Elvir: How else are we going to find Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetables Man, then? I still owe him an ass-kicking for earlier.

Cooper: ...Going forward is the only way.

Dew: Rena, I think we should be fine... Plus, we do have enough provisions to last us a while, just in case.

Rena: Ah...

Krista: Rena. Are you okay..?

Rena: *(anxious)* It's... *(looks down at the ground briefly, then back up at Dew and the party)* It's nothing...

Krista: You seem apprehensive about something. Are you sure, Rena?

Rena: Yes, Krista... *(sigh)* I'm sure.

Narrator: Dew then steps to Rena's left side.

Dew: Hey, Rena... Whatever it is, you know you can tell me... *(then grabs her right hand affectionately)* ...You know that, right?

Rena: Dew... everything is... *(then yanks her hand back from his hand)*

Dew: Oh?!

Narrator: Suddenly, the atmosphere turns awkwardly quiet, and the party looks at Rena with growing concern. She notices them all staring at her and becomes visibly uncomfortable at first, but then quickly changes her demeanor, putting on a front of reassurance.

Rena: Why are you all staring at me like that? ...I'm fine. Really. I guess... I'm just... I'm just, uh... getting tired... that's all...

Dew: Right. "Tired"...

Rena: No, I am... Really... *(then smiles)*

Krista: If you say so, Rena...

Vilmer: Rena, have you eaten in a while?

Rena: *(nervous)* Uhhh... no.

Vilmer: That would probably explain why you're acting a little unusual... Being active on an empty stomach is no fun.

Rena: You're right... Silly me. I forgot to do something as simple as eating... It must be all this excitement making me forget such... Ha-ha...

Vilmer: Yes. That's understandable. Hmm... Be sure to eat something soon, okay?

Rena: *(nervous)* I'll have to do that. Thanks for reminding me... Good ole' Vilmer. What would we do without you? Ha-ha... *(then gives Vilmer a thumb up)*

Dew: Hmm...

Vilmer: Yep. Anyway... *(then turns to face Dew)* Ready to continue onward, Dew?

Dew: Yeah. Let's do that... and stay alert, guys...

Narrator: The party nods in agreement and proceeds through the underground disposal site. As Dew and the others venture deeper into the cavern, they encounter several hostile mutated creatures along the way. In each fight, the party easily defeats and kills these subterranean threats. After some time, they come across Thornton again. His back is turned toward the party, and he is holding a tactical handheld radio at his left side. His bastard sword remains sheathed. Thornton raises the radio to his mouth, presses, and holds down the transmission button before speaking into it.

Thornton: Bring it down...

Narrator: Seconds later, Thornton releases the transmission button, lowers the radio to his left side again, and attaches it to his

belt. Meanwhile, the party attempts to sneak up on him from behind, moving slowly with their weapons drawn. However, Thornton has been aware of their presence the entire time. He turns around to face them, and the party then stops in their tracks.

Thornton: ...You're all still alive. Good...

Vilmer: Surprised?

Thornton: A little...

Elvir: Hey, tosser! Remember me?

Thornton: My fist does...

Elvir: Argh. You fuckin' knob...

Thornton: But if you all could survive fighting Dew's fuzzy childhood "buddy", then a few failed experiments certainly wasn't going to be a hindrance.

Dew: Failed experiments..?

Cooper: Thornton, explain yourself.

Thornton: I'm sure you all have by now noticed the purpose for this underground cavern... the creatures you fought before and what lays in all those drums are remnants from the early stages of the SKT viruses research... The secrets of the past... sealed away... all down here from the public eye... until now...

Dew: What are you getting at?

Thornton: Of those many experiments... A child was born... a child whose sole purpose in life was that of a lab rat... but even then, that child had a family... a happy family, once... or was that a façade..? *(then briefly stares in Rena's direction)*

Narrator: Rena slightly grimaces.

Thornton: ...That child's mother ditched him and the family... The child was left brokenhearted and angry... One day, that child decided to run away in hopes of finding his mother... days, months, and years would pass, to no avail... But during his search...

Rena: *(whispering to herself) ..."His"?*

Thornton: He was also slowly losing himself... succumbing to a genetic abnormality... the very same thing that was used in his genetic blueprint... left him decrepitude... eventually rendering him a shell of his former self... now wallowing in desolation...

Dew: What does any of this have to do with us..?

Narrator: Suddenly, the cavern begins to shake as something in the distance lets out an enormous roar. The party, still with their weapons drawn, immediately turns away from Thornton's direction, alert and ready. The shaking continues as they struggle to maintain their footing. A blanket of fog then envelops Thornton once again. Dew and some of the party members turn back to face him — just in time to see him vanish.

Thornton: Ah... The "tormented child"... so he comes... Will you ease his troubled existence? ...Or, will he find solace by extirpating you..? *(then disappears)*

Elvir: Ugh! Gone again...

Lorenzo: Where'd he go now?!

Dew: Stay alert, everybody...

Narrator: The entire cavern continues to shake as large chunks of stalactites begin falling from the ceiling. At the same time, several nearby steel-sealed drums roll rapidly across the ground. Dew and the others effortlessly dodge these obstacles, avoiding any damage. As the party regains their footing, the tremor abruptly stops. Suddenly, something leaps down from the cavern ceiling, landing heavily in front of them and sending pieces of gravel flying. As the dust begins to clear, a shoeless, bare-chested, muscular humanoid/Komodo dragon hybrid creature stands before them. The party immediately draws their weapons, pointing them toward the mutant.

Krista: What is this!?!

Cooper: It's another mutation...

Lorenzo: Eww... You are one ugly-looking motherfucker!

Narrator: The mutant slowly prowls in front of the party before turning its body toward Dew. As it pivots, Rena catches sight of a black barcode branding on its upper left shoulder blade. Beneath the barcode, a letter and two numbers are visible: "N-14." Instantly recognizing the creature, Rena is shocked by the revelation.

Rena: No... No, no... NO!!! *(then falls to her knees)* It can't be you..!

Dew: Rena..?



Narrator: N-14 then bellows in rage as it takes its hook-like hands and swings once at Cooper and Elvir. The two jump back, avoiding the oncoming attack.

Elvir: Hah! You missed...

Cooper: Hmph. I guess we can't try to reason with it, huh?

Narrator: N-14 looks over at Rena. The two lock eyes as if there was some sort of familial bond. The mutant then struggles as if it is trying to get words out of its mouth.

N-14: Mo... mo... mothe....

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* It really is... you... You're alive...

Krista: What is it doing?

Lorenzo: I don't know... but it's time to bust this thing up!

Rena: Don't!!! You can't...

Narrator: The party then turns and looks at Rena in confusion.

Vilmer: Come again..?

Elvir: What?! Uh... It did just try to attack us.

Rena: STOP IT!

Elvir: Huh?!

Rena: No... no... please don't...

Krista: ?!

Dew: Rena?! ...Rena, what is going on with you?!

Rena: I said... NO!

Narrator: Rena then steps in between the party and N-14 as if she's trying to protect it.

Krista: What are you doing?!

Cooper: Have you become delirious?

Lorenzo: Rena, get the fuck out of the way!

Rena: No.

Narrator: N-14's body suddenly starts twitching uncontrollably, causing the mutant pain, frothing from the mouth, and enraging it further. A groaning N-14 then slowly approaches the party with murderous intent.

N-14: Fe... FeE... fEeD..!

Narrator: Rena then gets backhanded from behind by N-14 knocking her unconscious. Her body is sent flying off to the side, hitting the ground. N-14 continues advancing toward the party.

Dew: *(looks over at Rena's unconscious body)* Shit. RENA..! *(then turns his attention to the approaching N-14)* You freak!

Vilmer: It looks like the "light" at the end of the tunnel isn't in sight just yet...

Krista: You'll pay for that!

N-14: BaSssh... iintoooo... to-to... mUssSSshHh...

Cooper: Bash? ...into mush? You're right about one thing, there's about to be a mess made... and it's going to be you!

Lorenzo: So, you want a fight?

Elvir: Then let's give it what it wants..!

N-14: Agon... agOnY... Bloo... BLOOd... FLeSssh... RAWRRRRRRRRRRRR!

Narrator: The battle begins as N-14 charges forward, wildly swinging its hook-like hands at Dew and the others. Throughout the fight, Rena remains unconscious, laid out on the ground. At first, N-14's unrelenting savagery overpowers the party, but through their combined focus and teamwork, they manage to beat down and slay the mutant once and for all. As the others

catch their breath, Dew rushes over to check on the still-unconscious Rena.

Vilmer: That worked up a good sweat...

Elvir: Another baddie, down for the count!

Lorenzo: All the charisma rings in the world... wouldn't have made up for his ugly mug...

Narrator: Meanwhile, Dew is kneeling beside Rena, trying to revive her.

Dew: Dammit, Rena. What were you thinking..? Come on... wake up!

Narrator: Moments later, Rena begins to regain consciousness.

Rena: Ugh... Dew... What... happened..?

Dew: You're okay... Thank Chosha!

Narrator: A relieved Dew then hugs Rena, who is now sitting up while still on the ground. Rena looks over at N-14's corpse. She pulls away from Dew's embrace to his dismay and begins scooting herself near its corpse.

Dew: Rena?

Narrator: Once nearby, Rena stops scooting and starts cradling N-14's corpse in her arms. The others look on puzzled.

Krista: Rena, get away from that thing!

Rena: *(whispering) Poor child... this fate was never intended for you... You deserved so much better...*

Lorenzo: What the?!

Elvir: Ooookay... I'm really confused about what is going on now.

Cooper: She must now be suffering from some sort of brain damage...

Rena: *(whispering) I should have never left you or your sister behind... all of this is my fault... Nathanael... please forgive me... (then a single teardrop falls from her right eye and slides down her cheek) ...I am sorry... (then wipes the single teardrop from off her cheek) I'm so sorry... for all of it... my baby...*

Narrator: Rena then compassionately hugs N-14's corpse. Moments later, the corpse begins to gradually liquefy and eventually turns into a puddle of mush in her arms. Rena remains on the ground, saddened. Dew walks over to her and extends his hand down to help her up. She looks up at him impassively and then down again at the remains of Nathanael.

Rena: *(thinking to herself) ...There's no denying it... Everything I have done trying to move on from the past... all of it was in vain...*

sooner or later, I knew it would catch up to me... and here we are now... all roads leading back here... where it all started...

Narrator: Moments later, Rena turns back and looks up at Dew, who still extends his hand to her.

Dew: Here. Take my hand...

Narrator: Rena then grabs Dew's hand and gets back onto her feet. She looks around at the other party members for a second before turning her back on them. She begins mumbling something to herself.

Rena: No more... I will make this all right... I promise that... Nathanael...

Elvir: Who?

Dew: Hey, Rena... Rena...

Rena: *(with her back turned to Dew and the others)* Yes, Dew..?

Dew: What was with all that just now?

Rena: *(still with her back turned to Dew and the others)* I... *(coldly)* I have nothing to say to you... or the others...

Narrator: Rena then exhales sharply and starts walking away from the party.

Krista: Rena...

Lorenzo: Hey. Rena, where are you going..?

Rena: ...I know where Thornton is heading...

Dew: You do?!

Cooper: How? Where..?

Rena: ...I must confront him and put an end to all of this... before he...

Krista: What?!

Vilmer: ...By yourself?!

Dew: Rena, wait. I don't think that's a good idea...

Narrator: As Rena continues walking, her steps gradually pick up speed.

Dew: Rena. Hold on..!

Narrator: Rena then immediately runs off, leaving the baffled party behind to watch her disappear into the shadowy distance of the cavern. Seconds later, they turn to face one another.

Elvir: Weiiiiird!

Lorenzo: She booked it on our asses...

Vilmer: I don't think it's a good idea to let her wander off alone.

Cooper: Yeah... She isn't herself.

Vilmer: Dew...

Dew: Yes, Vilmer..?

Vilmer: Do you think... there's a possibility that Rena might have some sort of connection with the SKT viruses research?

Dew: What? Ha-ha... No. No way... That's insane even to suggest that!

Lorenzo: Is it..?

Dew: What do you mean?!

Lorenzo: It's also "insane" She was hugging that mutated freak corpse back there too.

Dew: I... I can't explain what was up with that. But I know her; I've known her since I was eleven years old. She's my Sifu, and we're close.

Vilmer: ...But was she doing before you met her?

Dew: I... I don't know. I mean, we never really talked much about her personal life before coming to Twin Pines. Outside of knowing she's from Demmin, she was adopted, her adopted father trained her in Bōjutsu; in return, she trained me and many others... She's divorced, and her ex-husband was a workaholic... Like the rest of you, everything else I've learned about her past so far is new to me.

Vilmer: Uh-huh... I hate to say this, Dew, but I think Rena knows more than she has let on.

Dew: Hmm... But, why..? None of this... makes any sense... Rena...

Krista: Guys. I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about this...

Lorenzo: Me too.

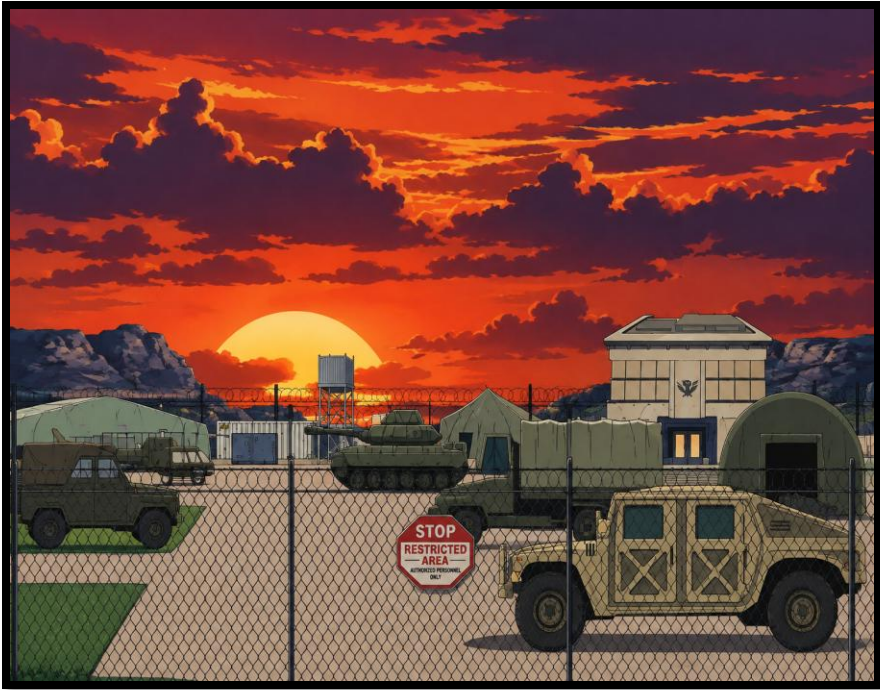
Elvir: We can't have that... no.

Krista: Dew, let's go after her. Whatever is going on with Rena... we'll get to the bottom of it.

Narrator: Dew nods his head in agreement. The party then hurriedly departs the area and begins their pursuit to catch up to Rena.

CHAPTER 19 – A GOOD DAY TO DIE

- Narrator: Nearly seven hours have elapsed. After traversing through the labyrinth of the underground cavern, battling more mutated subterranean threats, running into several dead-ends and having to backtrack, and avoiding pitfalls along the way - the party still fails to catch up to Rena. Along the way, they reach the top tier of the cavern and then come across a malfunctioning biparting blast door. Its lower panel is fully open, while the upper panel remains stationary. Dew and the others then crouch-walk through the opening one by one to the other side. Once on the other side, hundreds of huge concrete chunks are seen dispersed throughout the area. Dew pauses and takes notice of this as the others begin maneuvering around and through the debris that's obstructing their path forward. Dew then walks over to examine parts of what seems to be a wall base sticking out from under the debris.
- Dew: *(thinking to himself) ...There must have been a wall here at some point... Hmm... (sniff) (sniff) ...that faint bituminous odor... explosives were recently used here...*
- Narrator: With that thought in mind, Dew then runs off and catches up to the others, joining them in the next tunnel. A short time later, the party eventually finds the tunnel leading toward the exit. As they get closer to exiting, they feel a cool breeze rushing in. Once at the cavern's mouth, they see the sun has set, and dusk begins to settle on the horizon. Also, far off in the distance, what appears to be a military installation can be seen. The party then comes to a stop before leaving the cavern.
- Cooper: Is that what I think it is, Dew..?
- Dew: No way... The SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy.
- Cooper: So, we must be on... Marigold Isle...
- Dew: Looks like it...
- Krista: Marigold Isle you say?!
- Dew: Yep.
- Elvir: What the freak?!
- Lorenzo: Damnnn... we've traveled pretty far.



Elvir: Hey, Dew. Cooper.

Dew: Hm?

Elvir: You both attended boot camp here, right?

Dew: Yeah...

Cooper: Yes.

Elvir: And you didn't know about this cavern?

Dew: No. Not really.

Elvir: How so..?

Dew: When I was here, I didn't pay much attention to my surroundings like that. I just wanted to get my basic training done and be off to the battlefield...

Cooper: ...Yeah that, and we were all also prohibited from ever trespassing here too. It would have been considered going AWOL and an instant dishonorable discharge right there.

Dew: That's right. There was something about "getting a paddlin'" too if I remember correctly..?

Cooper: Yep. I was also told that the cavern was haunted by big booty ghost bitches who leave ghost farts.

Elvir: Eh. Ghost farts..?

Cooper: The kind where you have a neighbor in an apartment building with thin-ass walls who lets one rip at 2 A.M., and it wakes you out of a dead sleep... and you're not sure if it was them, if it was you, or if it was one of those big-booty ghost bitches playing tricks on you.

Elvir: Ohhh... Okay.

Cooper: What?! You don't believe me..? This isle used to be owned by a small group of aristocratic nymphs. They would throw parties and orgies here all the time with their rich friends. The decadence would know no bounds... they did it everywhere... even in the cavern where they all would die from a cave-in. That all happened nearly eighty years ago. The Isle would remain deserted for some time until the Mesovillain government acquired the land to construct the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy.

Dew: Oh, yes... now I remember hearing about that... But I'm not so sure if I believe the part about the ghosts.

Cooper: It's not just the cavern they haunt... I saw one of them while I was still in basic training. It happened one night as I was standing watch in the barracks. I could never forget those scrumptious thick luminescent ghost butt cheeks bouncing up and down like glow sticks at a rave... I swear this on everything.

Dew: Really?!

Elvir: (*sarcastically*) "Cool story," Cooper... Big booty ghost bitches... Ha-ha... Sure...

Cooper: Oh... okay. Believe what you want then... but they are real.

Lorenzo: Dude, you probably were just seeing things that night ...And it seems the reason you were told that bullshit story was to keep you and the others away from the cavern. They just didn't want you all snooping around there and accidentally uncovering their secrets...

Cooper: But I tell you, they're real... I know what I saw!

Elvir: Sure. Sure. Cooper. Oh boy...

Dew: Yeah... if you say so, Cooper...

Vilmer: Dew... (*then turns to face Dew*) Seeing how we haven't run into Rena yet, do you think she and Thornton might be headed to the academy?

Dew: Well... There's no other place but there...

Cooper: ...Yeah, he's right.

Krista: But why there..?

Dew: I don't know... But I can tell you that it's unlikely that both of them will get let in through the front door so easily.

Narrator: Suddenly, multiple rapid gunshots are heard from afar.

Vilmer: What was that..?

Krista: Uhh... Maybe fireworks..?

Cooper: That noise... did that just come from...

Narrator: Suddenly, a civil defense siren begins to blare from the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy grounds. This catches the party's attention, causing them to turn toward the academy. Dew quickly pulls out his binoculars and takes a look. Zooming in, he sees a team of armed SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers engaged in a firefight with several advancing mutated creatures. The soldiers easily mow them down; however, off to the far left, he spots another team of soldiers being pummeled and torn apart by different mutated creatures.

Dew: Fuck...

Lorenzo: What?! What do you see..?

Narrator: Dew continues scanning the area seeing more mayhem and carnage ensue. Dew puts away the binoculars and then turns to face the party.

Dew: Not good... It looks like more of those mutated creatures have made their way onto the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy grounds... the soldiers are being overwhelmed by them...

Lorenzo: Shit. Rena is going to get caught up in that mess...

Cooper: Then we have to go immediately!

Dew: Right.

Krista: Guys... What happens if we get attacked by those SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers too? I don't think they'll have open arms seeing us run up in there.

Vilmer: Good point, Krista... Is it even feasible to try sneaking onto the base?

Lorenzo: Well, we have to do something soon... or Rena could end up being a goner...

Elvir: Besides those mutated creatures, how many SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers could we be potentially facing?

Cooper: ...After the *Great Civil War*, the SWAT TROOPER ELITE ranks were cut drastically. Those who survived were either given

honorable discharges, like me, or absorbed into the civilian peacekeeping units. Tops, we'll be facing no more than 2,500 SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers.

Krista: Geez... that's a lot...

Vilmer: The odds would be definitely against us...

Cooper: You could say that.

Vilmer: Sounds like more fun. Okay.

Elvir: (*sarcastically*) Eh... it is a good day to die. Who doesn't love a good suicide mission? ...Off we go?

Lorenzo: Ready whenever you all are...

Cooper: Same here.

Krista: We've made it this far... Why not. Let's tempt fate.

Vilmer: Dew..?

Dew: Just to let you all know, I have no plan of action in mind... But we're going after Rena... And whatever happens when we get down there- we're totally winging it...

Narrator: The party all nods in agreement with Dew and exits the mouth of the cavern, making their way down the hill toward the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy. Meanwhile, inside the academy grounds, Rena manages to evade detection as the fighting between the soldiers and the invading mutated creatures continues. She slips into a research facility, moving cautiously through the halls. Several armed soldiers frantically rush outside to assist in the defense of the academy, allowing her to remain unnoticed. Rena hurries down a corridor, calls for the elevator, and rides it down to the second-floor basement. Once there, she moves quietly until the sounds of gunfire and screaming catch her attention. The chaos is brief, followed by an eerie silence. Pressing herself against the wall, she silently creeps toward the next area. Peeking around the corner, she spots a large puddle of blood pooling on the floor and smeared across the walls. Sticking close to the wall, Rena cautiously continues through the corridor. Turning the next corner, she gasps in horror at the sight of seven slaughtered SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers sprawled across the ground. She quickly regains her composure. Spotting a familiar door ahead, Rena approaches one of the fallen soldiers and rifles through his pockets. After a few tense seconds, she retrieves a key card. She then makes her way to the door and uses the

card to unlock it. Slowly, she steps into the pitch-black room, the door closing ominously behind her. Feeling around in the dark, she eventually finds the light switch and flicks it on. The lights reveal a fairly large laboratory. As she explores the lab, unpleasant memories of her involvement with the SKT virus research come flooding back. While Rena is lost in thought, the door quietly opens behind her. Another figure steps into the lab. Oblivious, Rena suddenly feels the cold press of a handgun barrel against her back. She snaps out of her daze and grits her teeth.

???: Hands up..!

Rena: ...Says who?

???: Hah. You're in no position to be asking questions... Dr. Etteip...

Rena: Dr. Etteip?! That voice... you're...

Narrator: Rena then makes a sudden movement by instantaneously drawing her scythe and turning around to face the man with a two-handed hold on a handgun that's still pointing at her. Both stand a few inches apart from one another. She right away recognizes him as her former SKT viruses research colleague and head scientist, Dr. Trofim Eudora.

Dr. Eudora: Nice scythe you got there...

Rena: It's you... Dr. Eudora.

Dr. Eudora: That's right... It's me.

Rena: I didn't expect ever to see you again...

Dr. Eudora: It has been a while, hasn't it, Dr. Etteip?

Rena: What's with the gun?

Dr. Eudora: For protection, of course...

Rena: What are you doing here?

Dr. Eudora: Following you. To get back what belongs to me.

Rena: What belongs to you..?

Dr. Eudora: Don't play coy with me! I know you have the SKT virus A sample. I saw what you and your travel companions did back there at the ship graveyard in the Buckass Badlands.

Rena: So... you were the scientist that Ligo was speaking of.

Dr. Eudora: Correct. When I saw you and your friends take down the "Linted," at first, I didn't believe it was you... I thought you were dead... But it turns out you're very much alive and well...
Rena: (*sarcastically*) ...It's the glasses. It's hard for people to recognize me with them on. (*then cracks a smile*)

Dr. Eudora: Still quick-witted, I see... I must say, Dr. Etteip, you have developed quite the bloodlust over the years... slaughtering those seven soldiers like that out in the corridor... and releasing the dormant failed experiments from the cavern onto the academy grounds... my oh my, you have become coldblooded! I'm a bit jealous that you were able to pull off such a feat... that's what brought you back here... revenge? Isn't it..?

Rena: Not quite. None of that was my doing... And, I don't have the SKT virus A sample on me.

Dr. Eudora: Liar! I know he sent you to retrieve the virus samples.

Rena: "He"? What are you talking about..?

Dr. Eudora: Still playing dumb? Your charade will not work here. I've been on the run for all these years... and today, you will not do me in! Now the hunter has become the hunted.

Rena: You think I'm after you? You're mistaken.

Dr. Eudora: You're not getting my SKT virus G sample either... You hear me?! Never!

Rena: Wait. Do you have the "G" variant?

Dr. Eudora: Of course, I do.

Rena: I'm not the one who you think is after you. Dr. Eudora, your life is in danger, and you don't even know it.

Dr. Eudora: What..? What do you mean? If it's not you, then who?

Rena: Thornton is his name... He's the one who's out trying to obtain all four samples.

Dr. Eudora: Hm. Is that so? So, Cromwell didn't send you after all... How silly of me... to think that the likes of you could be my taker... Ha-ha-ha... ridiculous.

Rena: Hand over the SKT virus G vial to me... My friends and I will keep it safe. I assure you of this.

Dr. Eudora: Nice of you to offer, but I will be holding onto it for a bit longer; thank you very much.

Rena: Are you crazy?!

Dr. Eudora: Because of your honey poo, I was put out of a job. Forced to flee and go into hiding like a rodent...

Rena: Oh, please. You did that to yourself after trying to frame Kenneth for those ricin-laced letters you sent out... all because our vision for the project was more favorable than yours.

Dr. Eudora: Oh, how the truth stings after all these years... I'll give you that... Funny... When it came to you and his way of doing things, those moral concerns went out the window, huh?

Rena: ...

Dr. Eudora: Anyway. Once I heard Kenneth had perished in the New Havenport bombing, I knew that sly weasel Zircon had taken the SKT virus C sample. Yet, he remained ignorant about the existence of the others.

Rena: Well, Thornton now has the "C" variant.

Dr. Eudora: Does he now...

Rena: Do you know where the "T" variant is?

Dr. Eudora: I don't... I do know that a bunch of piteous Neanderthals will no longer abuse MY WORK... My scientific legacy has value... it deserves respect. But since we are going down memory lane here... Hmm... I am curious... tell me, Dr. Etteip... when you left it all behind, including abandoning your children... did it hurt?

Rena: How do you know about that?!

Dr. Eudora: When you're on the run from the law, you still hear lots of things through the grapevine.

Rena: None of that is of your concern.

Dr. Eudora: ...Do you think your children were sad when their mommy left them without saying goodbye?

Rena: Shut up.

Dr. Eudora: You think they ever missed you?

Rena: I said, shut up..!

Dr. Eudora: ...Or even remembered who you were after a while?

Rena: (*angry*) Shut up! Shut up! Or I'll cut you into TWO!

Dr. Eudora: Oh..? But really, how does it feel knowing that they're now all dead and their deadbeat mother wasn't there for them?

Rena: THAT'S IRRELEVANT!

Narrator: Rena makes a slight gesture with her scythe but then regains her composure by calming down. The two remain in a tense standoff pointing their weapons at one another.

Dr. Eudora: ...Is it? I think I got my answer. How sad.

Rena: You're wasting time... with this fatuous line of questioning. Hand me the vial.

Dr. Eudora: It makes me feel good to know you've suffered all these years for such a choice and that I was right this entire time. My way

should have been the path for the project... what a total waste of resources... But as I said before, no can do. Neither you nor this Thornton fellow will be getting their hands on the vial. I wish we could have met under better circumstances... *(pulls the hammer back on the handgun)* ...but it was great catching up again. Say hello to Kenneth and the kids for me... Okay..?

Narrator: Before Dr. Eudora can pull the trigger — and before Rena can react with her scythe in hand — a blanket of fog suddenly appears, filling the entire laboratory. This immediately catches Dr. Eudora's attention, and he turns away from Rena, looking around the room in confusion. The fog quickly dissipates, revealing Thornton standing several feet behind Dr. Eudora. Meanwhile, Rena, still gripping her scythe, has moved off to the side, silently watching the events unfold.

Thornton: Dr. Eudora...

Narrator: A startled Dr. Eudora with the handgun lowered to his side quickly turns around and faces Thornton.

Dr. Eudora: W-who... are you?! *(then raises the handgun, holding onto it with both hands and points it at Thornton)*

Thornton: Dr. Eudora... you have something I want... something we want... *(then starts sauntering toward Dr. Eudora)*

Rena: Dr. Eudora, give me the vial!

Dr. Eudora: This... this is Thornton?! *(hands begin to nervously shake while pointing the handgun at Thornton)* S-stay back..!

Narrator: Thornton, in a flash, unsheathes his Bastard sword and wounds Dr. Eudora's left hand causing him to drop the gun to the floor.

Dr. Eudora: Uaaagh!

Narrator: A pain-stricken Dr. Eudora then leans over, grabbing onto his injured, bloodied left hand.

Thornton: Time to take back her lifeblood... the Söl Congruum demands it... *(still sauntering toward Dr. Eudora)*

Dr. Eudora: Argh... Söl Congruum?! Her..? So... it wasn't a... Agh... waste after all... Ugghhh... No, you can't... HAVE IT... Agh... over... my dead... body..!

Thornton: As you wish...



- Narrator: Dr. Eudora attempts to grab the handgun off the ground with his right hand, but with a single swipe of his bastard sword, Thornton severs his head from his body. Dr. Eudora's decapitated corpse collapses to the floor as his head rolls off to the side. Thornton then bends over the corpse and begins rummaging through the pockets. After a moment, he pulls out the SKT virus G vial. Holding it directly in front of his face, he marvels at it in silence.
- Thornton: *(talking aloud to himself)* Here we are... Yes, soon. Elizabeth, soon... my love... everything will come into play...
- Rena: Elizabeth..?

Thornton: *(then immediately turns around to face Rena)* Ah... I almost forgot you were there... It's nice to finally and formally meet you... mother of my love...

Narrator: With no further exchange of words, Rena and Thornton intensely stare one another down. The scene then cuts to Dew and the party arriving at the front gates of the academy, having fought through several mutated creatures along the way. The civil defense siren has gone silent, and the front gates stand wide open, having been busted through. The acrid smell of spent gunpowder lingers in the evening air. Blood-soaked bodies of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers and mutants, many with lacerations and exposed organs, litter the ground. Cautiously, the party enters the academy grounds. Vilmer approaches one of the fallen soldiers and kneels down, checking for a pulse.

Krista: This is... awful... *(then shakes her head in grief)*

Elvir: I guess we can just walk right in after all... Sheesh!

Dew: Looks like it...

Vilmer: Hm. He's... dead... *(then rises back to his feet)*

Dew: Ugh. Dammit...

Narrator: Cooper walks over to the fallen soldier. He lowers his head and closes his eyes, standing silently over the corpse. The others stand by, quietly watching him. After a few moments, Cooper raises his right hand in a silent salute, then opens his eyes and lifts his head once more.

Cooper: ...Rest in peace, my brother-in-arms...

Dew: Amen... So... we're going to have to be really careful when trying to find Rena throughout this commotion.

Lorenzo: So much for winging it...

Narrator: The party then continues looking around at their surroundings and notices the malfunctioning searchlights flickering above. They also see, two damaged tanks still on fire with smoke coming from them.

Cooper: I never imagined myself coming back here again... especially like this...

Narrator: Farther away, a faint sound of rapid gunfire and growling can be heard.

Krista: Looks like they're not all dead... yet.

Lorenzo: That's a good sign...

Vilmer: Dew, perhaps we should split up into two groups to find her quicker?

Narrator: Cooper bends down and retrieves two handheld radios from the fallen SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers nearby. He then rises back to his feet.

Dew: Yeah... This place is big. It'll be a lot of ground to cover for sure.

Cooper: Dew, since you and I know this place well... we should both take the lead in our respective groups.

Dew: All right.

Cooper: Also... *(then hands Dew a handheld radio)* We can use these to stay in touch. If any of us find Rena, we can reconvene at that spot.

Dew: Right. *(then takes the handheld radio from Cooper and places it in his front right pant pocket)* Now... who's coming with me..?

Lorenzo: You know I will, buddy. *Aurora Blade* through and through...

Krista: You can depend on me, Dew.

Cooper: I guess that leaves me with...

Elvir: Don't take forever trying to figure out the obvious. I'm tagging along with you. Duh!

Vilmer: This pairing works for me... We have no time to waste.

Dew: Cooper, you and your team should go cover the West section of the academy... I'll take my group to cover the East.

Cooper: Ah... so that'll be the Airfield, Mess Hall, and Vehicle Repair, Maintenance, and Storage facility. I remember the days of cleaning those places back during basic training... especially that Mess Hall... Not so many fond memories working there... nasty motherfuckers... Ha-ha... Okay. Roger that... *(then places the handheld radio into his apron pocket)*

Dew: ...And that'll leave us with the Barracks, Medical clinic, Armory, and Research facility. You guys stay alert...

Lorenzo: *(sarcastically)* ...Especially stay on the lookout for those big booty ghost bitches.

Cooper: Ha-ha... "will do."

Krista: See ya when we see ya. And guys... take care of yourselves.

Vilmer: You too.

Elvir: Cheers, mates.

Narrator: Cooper, Elvir, and Vilmer then start walking off in the opposite direction. Dew then turns to face Lorenzo and Krista.

Dew: Ready, team..?

Krista: Yes. The sooner we find Rena, the better.

Lorenzo: Then, let's bounce.

Narrator: Dew and his team walk off, beginning their search for Rena. Meanwhile, on the other side of the academy grounds at the Boat Hangar, eight black-masked, cloaked figures carry a large olive-colored metal storage container. Four of them are positioned on each side, gripping the handles as they make their way toward a docked motorboat. Around them, twelve slain SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers lie on the floor, their throats slit or necks snapped. The eight masked figures place the metal storage container onto the dock's surface. Two of them climb aboard the motorboat, grabbing onto the sides of the container, while the six remaining figures carefully lower it into the boat. Once the container is secured, one of the masked figures on the dock turns to another nearby and makes a swift hand gesture. The other grunts in agreement and walks toward the dock's shutter door. The five masked figures on the dock then hop aboard, removing the securing lines as one of them inserts a key into the ignition and starts the motorboat's engine. The last masked figure, still on the dock, presses a button on a nearby control panel, activating the shutter doors, which begin to open steadily. He then sprints toward the motorboat and hops on board, joining the others. Moments later, the dock shutter door fully opens, revealing the vast ocean and nighttime horizon ahead. One of the masked figures

advances the throttle, and the motorboat picks up speed, zooming off into the night, unobserved. The scene cuts to an aerial view of various suitcase-sized radio jamming devices placed throughout the academy. Suddenly, they all activate, emitting a low, erratic warbling tone.



CHAPTER 20 – EAT YOUR HEART OUT,

GRANDPA WILDER

Narrator: Sometime later, after exploring the Mess hall - Cooper, Elvir, and Vilmer make their way to the Vehicle Repair, Maintenance, and Storage Facility. As the three advance through each room in the facility, corpses of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers are found. They also end up clashing with throngs of mutant threats who seemingly come out of nowhere. The team eventually defeats and slays all the creatures before proceeding to the exit. Before they do, Cooper's handheld radio begins to beep. All three then come to a stop.

Vilmer: ...What's that noise?

Elvir: Is that the radio..?

Cooper: I think so.

Vilmer: Then it could be Dew and the others trying to reach us...

Cooper: Yeah.

Narrator: Cooper then grabs the handheld radio from his apron pocket as Elvir and Vilmer look on. Suddenly, muffled radio chatter, gunshots, and screaming can be heard.

Elvir: Blimey?!

Vilmer: I don't think that's them...

Narrator: Then, for a moment, there is radio silence until a faint, distorted, and anxious voice is heard speaking.

STE Radioman: *Is... anyone... there?! Over.*

Narrator: Cooper pauses for a moment before raising the handheld radio to his mouth. He then pushes the transmission button to respond.

Cooper: I copy... How do you read? (*then releases the transmission button*)

Narrator: A crackling static noise is then heard, drowning out the voice that continues speaking on the radio.

STE Radioman: ...Dispatch? ...Anyone who is... receiving this transmission... requesting additional... re-enforcements... to...

Elvir: What is he saying?

Cooper: I can't understand him either... (*pushes the transmission button*) Say again? (*then releases the transmission button*)

STE Radioman: ...the Airfield... I say again... requesting additional re-enforcements...

Vilmer: The Airfield... Hmm...

STE Radioman: ...We're being... overwhelmed... swarms of mutated...

Narrator: The radio then begins making a screeching noise causing the transmission to become inaudible.

Cooper: (*pushes the transmission button*) Hello..? You're breaking up... Radio Check. 1, 2, 3. 3, 2, 1... Over. (*then releases the transmission button*)

Narrator: The radio signal strength begins to fade in and out.

STE Radioman: ...HU...HURRY!!!

Narrator: Then the radio transmission ends.

Cooper: (*pushes the transmission button*) Hello? Hello..? Are you still there?! Hello? Damn... (*releases the transmission button. Then places the handheld radio back into his apron pocket*)

Elvir: The Bleeps, The Sweeps, and the Creeps..! That didn't sound good...

Vilmer: Hmm... What do you two think..? Should we make our way to the Airfield next?

Elvir: We might as well... Who knows, we may run into Rena there if the others haven't found her already.

Vilmer: It's a possibility.

Cooper: Okay. Then let's do that. We had to go that way eventually. Let's go...

Narrator: Cooper and his team then proceed to the Airfield, exiting the Vehicle Repair, Maintenance, and Storage Facility. While on the way to the Airfield, Cooper and his team once again encounter more mutants but easily dispatch them. Once finally arriving at the Airfield, corpses of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers and mutants are laid out all over as a putrefying stench lingers in the air. In the background, there are three

turned-over military jeeps and burning helicopter wreckage that can be seen. Vilmer then hears what sounds to be subtle humming coming from off in the distance.

Vilmer: Wait... Do you hear that?
Narrator: Cooper and Elvir then turn to face Vilmer.
Elvir: Huh?
Cooper: What..?
Vilmer: The humming...
Cooper: Humming?
Vilmer: Yes, humming.
Cooper: I... No. I don't...
Vilmer: You don't hear that? You have to be kidding me?!
What about you, Elvir..?
Elvir: Umm... Me neither... sorry.
Narrator: The subtle humming then suddenly stops.
Vilmer: It stopped... What the?! I could have sworn I heard humming... Maybe my hearing is playing tricks on me...
Cooper: Perhaps.
Elvir: *(sniff) (sniff)* But that smell isn't... Ugh.
Cooper: I know that smell... too well... something I thought I wouldn't ever experience again...
Vilmer: ...Definitely not a pleasant smell... *(then clears his throat)*
Elvir: Whew... The smell is too much... Ugh... I'm getting a headache here... *(then pinches her nose shut with her fingers)* Can we please move on..?
Cooper: *(then nods his head in agreement)* Let's keep moving...
Narrator: The group walks on for a bit and then finds themselves surrounded by more corpses.
Elvir: The bodies just keep piling up...
Cooper: I still can't believe this is happening... of all places...
Narrator: As Cooper and Elvir observe their surroundings, Vilmer curiously walks over to one of the mutant corpses and examines it. He then looks over at a fallen SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier's corpse nearby.

Vilmer: Some of the wounds on them... look different from the other bodies we've seen earlier... and still fresh...
Hmm...

Narrator: Elvir then turns to face Vilmer, who's still examining the corpses.

Elvir: Hey, Vilmer. What ya got there..?

Vilmer: Both of you, come take a look at this...

Narrator: Cooper and Elvir then walk over, joining Vilmer. The two look down, examining the two corpses.

Cooper: Those marks...

Elvir: Woah!

Vilmer: Yeah, that was my reaction too.

Cooper: ...This one... it looks like something was gnawing on it... the flesh is completely peeled off the face...

Elvir: Waah... What could... have done this?!

Cooper: Something deadlier than those mutants that came from the cavern...

Vilmer: It's safe to say, it's not because of those big booty ghost bitches... that's for certain...

Cooper: Tch.

Narrator: Suddenly, a distressing scream is heard coming from close by.

Elvir: Did you hear that..?

Vilmer: That scream...

Cooper: ...It came from over there... *(then gestures with his head toward the direction of where the scream came)*

Vilmer: It could be Rena...

Cooper: Let's go.

Narrator: The three then immediately run off toward the source of the scream. Seconds later, Cooper stops and stretches his right arm out in front of Elvir and Vilmer, preventing the two from going forward. A few yards away, something in the shadows is seen gnawing on a slain SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier. The unknown creature loudly and hectically bites into the corpse's neck, causing a puddle of blood to ooze out onto the ground. A shocked Elvir puts her hand over her mouth.

Elvir: Ack! Fuckin' sick...

Narrator:

The unknown creature, now aware of their presence, stops feasting on the corpse and slowly turns its head toward Cooper and his team. It steps out from the shadows, revealing itself as the heterochromatic-eyed mountain lion, Coda — now fully mutated. The three quickly draw their weapons, aiming them at the Coda Complex.



Elvir:

Ah shit. You again?!

Vilmer:

It's still alive?! I thought we killed this thing..?

Cooper:

I guess not. And the thing is looking worse for wear too.

Elvir:

What is that now... eight lives left?

Narrator:

Coda Complex stops in its tracks and lifts its nose into the air, sniffing around. Instantly, the beast recognizes their scent from its previous encounter with them on Mount Illini. It growls, staring ferociously at the three before opening its blood- and drool-covered mouth and unleashing an ear-piercing screech.

The force of the screech lifts the surrounding corpses into the air, flinging them several feet away. It also pushes Cooper and his team back slightly, though they manage to maintain their balance, remaining in a fighting stance with their weapons still drawn.

Vilmer:

...Somebody isn't happy to see us again.

Cooper:

I take it, it isn't.

Elvir:

Moggy... still sore from that last fight, huh? Persistent little bugger... This time, we'll make sure you're put to sleep for good. Come on, furball!

Narrator:

Coda Complex growls again, baring its sharp teeth in an intimidating display. Suddenly, it charges at the three, performing a spin-dash maneuver. Its claws extend from its paws, and it uses its barbed tail like a whip, attempting to slash them. However, the group blocks the attack, forcing the beast back and triggering the start of an intense battle. Cooper and the team find themselves mainly on the defensive, enduring a relentless barrage of attacks from the dominating Coda Complex. Just like during their last encounter, it takes all their combined strength, skill, speed, and stamina to keep pace with their mutated foe. As the fight wears on, Coda Complex begins to fatigue. Seeing an opening together, the three strike down Coda Complex. The creature crashes to the ground, flailing and groaning loudly in pain before rapidly decomposing into a puddle of flesh.

Cooper:

Eat your heart out, Grandpa Wilder... (*then smirks*)

Narrator:

The three then sheathe their weapons.

Elvir:

That's definitely the last we've seen of Moggy. I guess it used up all of its nine lives.

Vilmer:

And from the looks of it, Rena isn't here either.

Elvir:

No, she isn't.

Vilmer:

We still have other areas of the academy left to check. Shall we go?

Cooper:

Let's do that...

Narrator:

As the three are about to walk off, they hear moaning coming from the pile of nearby corpses.

Vilmer:

Huh? What was that noise..?

Elvir: Oh, what is it now?!

Narrator: They cautiously walk over to the pile and see one of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers alive and moaning in agony on the ground.

Elvir: OMG! He's still alive...

Narrator: Vilmer then rushes over to the soldier's side and grabs his hand. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier barely has any strength left to sit up.

Vilmer: Hey you... You're going to be okay... You hear me..?

Narrator: The disorientated injured soldier turns his head and looks at Cooper and Elvir standing in front of him. He then turns his head to the left, looking at Vilmer.

Injured STE Soldier: Civilians..? Here..?

Elvir: Hey, take it easy there, mate...

Injured STE Soldier: Who... Who are... You people..? What... are you doing here..?

Narrator: Vilmer continues holding onto the soldier, propping him up while examining for any injuries.

Cooper: I'm SWAT TROOPER ELITE war veteran and former Corporal Cooper Tyler. These are my friends... we're looking for another friend of ours who happened to get separated from our group...

Injured STE Soldier: Group..?

Elvir: Uh... we were on a tour...

Injured STE Soldier: Oh... a tour... Hmm... I thought the public tour of... the academy was... next week..? Guess not... What a... shitty day... to tour the... Isle, huh..? Sorry, it got ruined for you all... Ugghhh...

Narrator: The injured soldier then doubles over in pain.

Cooper: ...Vilmer, is he going to be okay?!

Vilmer: Hold on...

Narrator: Vilmer, while holding onto the soldier, pulls out and uses the *Light Elementome* gemstone to heal his injuries. Seconds later, the soldier's injuries are healed, giving him some relief.

Injured STE Soldier: Ahh... Ah... That's... much better... Thank you.

Vilmer: You're welcome... (*then faces Cooper and Elvir*)
Thankfully, his injuries weren't too severe... He'll be fine.

Narrator: Cooper and Elvir sigh in relief as Vilmer then helps the soldier back onto his feet.

Injured STE Soldier: It's a good thing you all were here... I don't know what would... have happened to me if you weren't.

Vilmer: We're glad we could help.

Elvir: You're lucky to be still alive...

Injured STE Soldier: Unfortunately, I can't say the same about my comrades... Those things... they just came out of nowhere... and swarmed the academy grounds... Also... I remember... There was a mountain lion that ambushed us and those mutants... none of us had a fighting chance against that beast...

Cooper: Well, don't worry about that now... those mutants and the mountain lion, they've been dealt with...

Injured STE Soldier: You three, took care of that..?

Cooper: Yes.

Injured STE Soldier: Hmph. That puts all of our SWAT TROOPER ELITE training to shame... Thank you for the assist, though... I do... hope the others are faring better than we did...

Elvir: About that...

Cooper: ...Hey. By any chance, did you happen to see a fair-complexion-looking MILF in a blue dress carrying a scythe come through here?

Injured STE Soldier: A MILF..? In a blue dress..? With a scythe..? ...Your missing friend?

Cooper: That's correct.

Injured STE Soldier: Hah... So, I wasn't seeing things... after all...

Cooper: Hm?

Elvir: You've seen her..?

Injured STE Soldier: The platoon I was with... before we made it this way... I had thought... I saw a woman fitting that description running... toward the Research facility...

Cooper: Research facility.

Injured STE Soldier: Yeah...

Vilmer: And Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista are heading that way...

Injured STE Soldier: More friends of yours..?

Cooper: Yes. They're looking for her too.

Injured STE Soldier: I see. And here I was thinking... that she was one of those damn big booty ghost bitches I saw... this place

is haunted you know... you gotta watch out for them... those things are crafty... and their stinky ghost farts will take your breath away... the worse...

Narrator: Elvir and Vilmer then look at one another with their eyes widened, as Cooper shakes his head in vindication while smiling.

Cooper: Aha! See... They are real! I told you all so...

Narrator: Suddenly, approaching vehicles can be heard coming from the distance.

Elvir: Huh?

Narrator: Cooper, Elvir, Vilmer, and the injured soldier then turn around and see a fleet of military armored trucks approaching their direction. Moments later, the armored trucks pull up and come to a stop. The armed SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers then exit the trucks scrambling to secure the parameter as others are seen examining the corpses of their fallen comrades and the mutants before being carted off. A high-ranking SWAT TROOPER ELITE member approaches Cooper, Elvir, Vilmer, and the injured soldier. The injured soldier then stands at attention and salutes the Commander.

Injured STE Soldier: Sir!

STE Commander: *(salutes him)* As you were... *(then drops the salute)* Are you okay, private?

Injured STE Soldier: *(then drops his salute)* Yes, sir.

STE Commander: ...Are there any other survivors besides yourself?

Injured STE Soldier: None that I'm aware of, sir...

STE Commander: *(then looks over at Cooper and his team)* ...And who are you three?

Cooper: *(then salutes the STE Commander)* SWAT TROOPER ELITE war veteran and former Corporal, Cooper Tyler, here... *(then drops his salute)*

STE Commander: A war veteran...

Cooper: Yes. I was assigned to General Landmore's unit during the *Great Civil War* and also partook in *Operation Greased Wheels*.

STE Commander: General Landmore?! That's a name I haven't heard in a long time... Bless his soul...

Cooper: ...My friends and I were here on... a tour... earlier of the Isle... but during the sudden commotion, a friend of ours got separated from our group... we were looking for her...

STE Commander: There was a tour of the academy today? I wasn't aware of one taking place... I thought that was next week.

Injured STE Soldier: ...Sir. These three saved my life. If it weren't for them, I would have been done for. They also helped defeat those mutant threats and another that ambushed us.

STE Commander: Hm. Understood, private... It makes sense seeing how we have a high caliber former SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier in our presence... *(then salutes Cooper)* Thank you for your service, Mr. Tyler. *(then drops his salute)* ...And thank you and your friends for helping us deal with those things... After handling a bunch of those things, ourselves outside the academy grounds, we've been patrolling the area trying to find any survivors... This place looks like a goddamn war zone... but you would know something about that, eh? All right... To show our gratitude, we'll help you find your missing friend.

Cooper: That would be appreciated, Commander. But the private said he saw her last near the Research facility. Some other friends that were with us are heading that way looking for her also.

STE Commander: You guys are brave... Here's what I'll do. While we finish cleaning up here, I'll lend you some help to escort you all that way.

Elvir: Thanks, mate.

Vilmer: That would really help.

Cooper: Thank you, Commander... *(then turns to face Elvir and Vilmer)* ...I'll give Dew and the others a call now...

Narrator: Cooper then reaches into his apron pocket to retrieve the handheld radio and pulls it out. He holds it up to his mouth, and before pushing the transmission button, Elvir notices that it's been damaged.

Elvir: Cooper. The radio is busted!

Cooper: What?! *(then looks at the handheld radio seeing the damage on it)* Argh. Oh, just “great”! *(then looks down at the apron pocket and sees a claw mark on it)* ...My freakin’ apron too! Ugh.

Elvir: That and the radio must have gotten damaged during the fight with our fluffy “buddy.”

STE Commander: Need a radio? It wouldn’t help anyway. Ours haven’t been working either. Something may be jamming the signal...

Narrator: An annoyed Cooper then places the damaged handheld radio back into his clawed-up apron pocket.

Vilmer: It looks like making that call will have to wait.

Cooper: Yeah. But we’re heading that way soon... I hope Dew and the others are doing all right...

CHAPTER 21 – ME, RENA, & IRENE?

Narrator: Meanwhile, on the other side of the academy, Dew and his team make it to the Research facility after having just fought through several mutant threats while exploring the Barracks, Medical clinic, and armory. The bloody remains of more SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers can be seen as they enter the Research facility. Dew and his team take in the grisly sight that surrounds them before cautiously proceeding down the corridor. Once the three reach the end of the corridor, they find an elevator and call for it. While waiting on it, Lorenzo turns to face Dew and Krista.

Lorenzo: What's the plan..?

Dew: Just like everywhere else we'd hit up, we're checking every floor until we find Rena...

Krista: ...From the top floor to the bottom?

Dew: Yes.

Narrator: Seconds later, the elevator arrives on the main floor, and the door opens. Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista enter the elevator and take it first to the 4th floor. As they work their way down each floor, Dew and his team find more slain bodies of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers and encounter hordes of mutants lingering about. The three make quick work of them before moving on. After reaching the 2nd-floor basement and walking for a bit down the corridor, they come across a large puddle of blood on the floor and smeared all over the walls. They then turn the next corner and find the lacerated corpses of seven SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers on the ground. The group comes to a stop as Dew kneels next to one of the fallen SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers to examine him.

Lorenzo: These guys got fucked up...

Krista: So many dead here too. Geez.

Dew: Hmm...

Lorenzo: What's up, Dew?

Dew: These marks... whoever did this to them, they used a bladed weapon, that's for certain...

Krista: Bladed weapon..? That means Thornton could have been through here.

Dew: And Rena...

Lorenzo: Well, fuck. We've been all through this place and still haven't come across her yet. Where else could she be..?

Narrator: Then muffled voices and weapons clashing are heard coming from the other side of the laboratory door that's a few feet away from the three.

Krista: That noise... sounds like someone talking...

Lorenzo: ...And fighting. Where's it coming from?

Narrator: Dew then turns his head to the left, looking in the direction of the laboratory door.

Dew: Over there.

Narrator: Lorenzo and Krista then turn and face the direction of the laboratory door.

Lorenzo: Oh! I didn't even notice that damn door there until now...

Krista: All the blood and dead bodies are a little distracting, I suppose...

Dew: ...If that's Rena in there, then we have no more time to waste... *(then starts digging through the slain SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier's pockets and obtains a key card. He then shows Lorenzo and Krista the key card as he rises to his feet)* Let's go meet up with her...

Narrator: The three then draw their weapons as they approach the laboratory door. Dew uses the key card to open the door. They enter the laboratory and come around another corner inside, spotting Rena with her scythe drawn looking around the room.

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* Where'd he go..?

Narrator: The three then run up, approaching Rena.

Dew: Rena..!

Narrator: Rena turns and sees Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista as they come to a stop.

Rena: Dew?! You guys... What are you doing here?!

Lorenzo: ...To find you.

Krista: Oh thank Chosha..! Rena, we were all worried sick about you. I'm so glad we found you.

Narrator: The three sheath their weapons as Rena continues having her drawn. Dew then pulls out the handheld radio, puts it to his mouth, and pushes the transmission button.

Dew: Cooper, this is Dew. We've found Rena. We're over at the Research facility, 2nd-floor basement laboratory. You and your team, come over this way now. See you soon. *(then releases the transmission button and puts away the handheld radio back into his front right pant pocket)*

Lorenzo: Hey, Rena, why'd you run off from us like that..?

Krista: Yeah... It isn't safe around here, as you might have noticed.

Rena: I had to take care of some unfinished business...

Dew: Unfinished business? Before we made it here, we heard some talking and fighting from the corridor... What the...

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista then see the headless corpse of Dr. Eudora lying a few feet away from them on the floor.

Krista: Yikes!

Lorenzo: Shit. Somebody took care of business and some more...

Rena: You all shouldn't have come here...

Dew: Rena. Did you... do this..? And those soldiers in the corridor..?

Narrator: Suddenly, a blanket of fog quickly appears and vanishes as Thornton is seen standing several feet behind the four.

Thornton: ...Don't give her too much credit for that. That was all me.

Narrator: A Scythe-wielding Rena and a startled Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista unsheathe their weapons again and turn to face Thornton.

Dew: Thornton! You're here too.

Thornton: Rena and I were having a “friendly” chat and quarrel before you three showed up. Your teacher there, she’s formidable, I do say...

Dew: You mean Sifu... she’s my Sifu. And, yeah, I know. She’s the best.

Krista: “Sorry” to have interrupted.

Lorenzo: Rena, you fighting without us? That’s rude...

Thornton: Dew and friends back together again... Ah. I see the annoying *Hozho* girl isn’t with you.

Lorenzo: Don’t worry dickwad, she and the others will be on their way here soon.

Thornton: I hope they do... but I’m afraid they’re going to be preoccupied for a while dealing with those failed experiments running amok.

Dew: And all thanks to you. So, you purposely released those things to attack the academy to get your revenge? Well, “congrats”... “Mission accomplished.”

Thornton: Ha-ha... no, not for revenge.

Krista: What?

Dew: Then why, Thornton..?

Lorenzo: You’re just causing havoc? What could you gain from doing that?

Thornton: A lot more than you all need to know... But it seems that fortune has smiled upon me yet again. I gained something else unexpectedly... *(then shows Dew and the others the SKT virus G vial)* See!

Dew: No. Dammit.

Krista: He found the other vial.

Lorenzo: Fuck.

Thornton: All thanks to the good doctor there... *(then gestures toward Dr. Eudora’s headless corpse lying on the floor)* Thank you, Dr. Eudora... Two down, and two more to go.

Krista: Not if we have anything to say about it!

Thornton: Oh? Ha-ha-ha... The Renascence of the Sōl Congruum is nigh! *(then places the SKT virus G vial into the inner pocket of his trench coat)*

Lorenzo: You know, you’re no different than your piece of shit brother. You both love trying to subjugate others...

you just can't help yourselves... and just like him, you're going to be stopped.

Thornton: Ha-ha... we'll see about that. You're wrong, however. We are nothing alike. Zircon was a short-sighted nit-wit who only served his earthly ambitions. I serve a great entity that will soon set this world on the right path... correct all wrongs... but you already heard this... Ha-ha... *(then stares maliciously at Rena)* ...Right. But speaking of righting a wrong... There is something you all should know. Isn't that right, Rena? ...Or should we call you, Irene?

Dew: Irene?

Lorenzo: Who is that?

Rena: ...

Thornton: Are you going to tell them, or should I?

Dew: Rena, what is he talking about?

Rena: ...

Thornton: Oh, okay. I'll do it then. Let's get straight to the point. Everything that has happened... involving the SKT viruses from their creation to all the experiments conducted... is because of this woman's doing.

Dew: Excuse me?

Lorenzo: Huh? What?! Get the fuck out of here with that bullshit..!

Krista: That's not true... No way it is.

Thornton: Oh, but it is... but she wasn't the only guilty party responsible for that. No. no. Do you remember, Dr. Voight, Dew..?

Dew: I haven't forgotten about him... or the others...

Thornton: Then you also remember that he was a part of that very same research too?

Dew: Yeah.

Thornton: Dr. Voight once had a wife who was just as dedicated to their work... but then one day, she got up and left, abandoning him, their daughter, and son so she could selfishly live a carefree life on her own...

Rena: *(whispering to herself)* ...That is not true...

Dew: A son?

Thornton: Yes, he had a son too. His name was Nathanael. But do you know who his wife was?

Narrator: A confused Dew then looks at Lorenzo and Krista briefly before facing Thornton again.

Dew: Who, Thornton?

Thornton: Not connecting the dots yet? And when it's so obvious. Hah! Dew... you never were good at this. When you and the others were pursuing me through the underground cavern, and then you all fought that mutant... You didn't find it odd how protective your Sifu was over him? ...As if she was being motherly?

Narrator: Dew then briefly stares at Rena with uncertainty before facing Thornton again.

Dew: What are you trying to get at?

Thornton: What I'm saying is... that the mutant you fought... and my love, Elizabeth is Rena's... excuse me... Ha-ha... Irene's children. Byproducts of the SKT viruses!

Narrator: A shocked Dew then lowers his bo staff and faces Rena. Although surprised themselves, Lorenzo and Krista maintain their fighting stance, watching Thornton, who looks on.

Dew: W-what... no... just no... that... that... can't be true... I don't believe it...

Thornton: Oh. Why? Are we a bit in denial..? There is no deception here, Dew. The truth shall set you free... isn't that right... Rena? Excuse me again, I mean... Irene. Go ahead. Tell him..!

Rena: No...

Dew: *(then turns to face Rena)* You and Dr. Voight..? Elizabeth and that thing were your children?! Rena... say it isn't so...

Rena: *(sigh)* Dew, it is... It's all true.

Lorenzo: Whoa!

Krista: Wha... Really?!

Dew: Unbelievable... *(then shakes his head in disbelief)* But... I knew something was off with you... I didn't want to admit it at first... It does explain why you've been acting strange ever since the monorail ride... "Irene" ... "Irene" ... I remember now... that was his,

Dr. Voight's last words to me... your true name before he had died...

Rena: (somerly) Kenneth...

Dew: In a way, I feel like I don't even know who you are right now... but at the same time... from what we have shared... the memories of the Bōjutsu lessons, our student/mentor dynamic... and our love for one another... that was all real... I know that for a fact... none of it was a lie... But Rena, why didn't you ever tell me about any of this..? Why hide it from me? I could have helped...

Rena: (then stares at Dew with a tormented look in her eyes) Tell you? How could I..? You wouldn't have understood...

Dew: You don't know that.

Rena: Really? It's not like my life before was what you could consider "normal" ... then again, it isn't currently either...

Dew: Did my grandfather know?

Rena: No. The only person who knew the truth was Johnny. But you want to hear my sorry origin story? Huh, Dew..? Okay... you deserve to know the truth... everything... It all started with the three of us: my late husband, Dr. Kenneth Voight, myself, and the head scientist at the time, Dr. Trofim Eudora... We were part of a joint top-secret bioweapons research project commissioned by the Mesovillain government and the private biomedical charity, Athenaeum Foundation... This project was called the *Priscus Initiative*... Initially, our goal was to create a super-soldier serum by using the then newly discovered 30,000+-year-old fossilized Priscus DNA on volunteered military personnel. With the Priscus DNA as our base, we would begin bioengineering four variants from it. These variants would come to be known as the SKT viruses. A year would pass, and then came the first several trials. From the early experiments we conducted, each variant had varied effects on the subjects. But the results would always be the same... failure. The subjects would

either succumb to death instantly or mutate into uncontrollable abominations. After those failures, the Initiative established the *Neogenesis Registry*. Every subsequent human subject was assigned an ‘N’ designation—short for Neogenesis—followed by a chronological case number. Instead of scrapping it right there and then, Dr. Eudora had wished to weaponize the variants for warfare usage instead... but Kenneth and I had plans of our own... plans that would yield the desired results our handlers were looking for... After further research, Kenneth and I would decide to synthesize the four variants and inject them into our unborn child while in its embryonic stage... Nine months later, our gamble turned out to be a great success, which would then be replicated years later... I helped give life to two extraordinary, unnatural, healthy, beautiful beings... Elizabeth and Nathanael—they were also known as Subjects N-13 and N-14... Their revolutionary creation was our success... complete control over the project was ours thereafter... that was the allure... that’s all that mattered at that time... My husband and my unyielding devotion to our scientific pursuits... However, after a while, I came to a realization... experiment after experiment... the dehumanization of it all... it became all so numbing... I couldn’t be a part of that anymore... Especially when I would look at the faces of my innocent children... they deserved so much better than being cooped up and treated like lab rats... they deserved a better life... enough was enough, I said... I had to make a change... But in my attempt to start life anew, I was forced to leave them behind... I was then on the run... I changed my name, my appearance... everything... but even when I tried to put the past behind me for peace of mind... it wasn’t enough... I grew to resent myself every day for having to make that decision... and thinking back on how I allowed all those scientific perversions to occur beforehand... Ha-ha... It’s ironic... as I think about it now... I only got into

genetic research intending to find out who I was... who my biological parents were... and if I could make a difference by helping to heal the ill and maimed... but this adopted girl from Demmin with all her martial arts skills and scientific know-how lost sight of that... *(then shuts her eyes tightly in anguish, then moments later opens them with resolve)* Well... no more running away! It's time for me to face the consequences... of everything... and make it right... Dew, I'm sorry... I should have been honest from the beginning... *(then looks over at Lorenzo and Krista)* I'm sorry to all of you...

Dew: You know... I couldn't imagine what I would have done if I were in your place... You've done some morally questionable things, yes... and you have suffered silently because of that... But... what is done is done. ...All that matters, at least to me - is what's in the present... Your past demons may torment you, but I'll always be your "shining lighthouse" to keep them at bay... Plus, I don't know who this "Irene" person is... You're still going to be "Rena" to me... *(then smiles at her)*

Krista: Hmm... Even after hearing all that, you're still not as bad as my mother was. As fucked up like that is to say... I'm not sure how we're going to explain this to the others... but "Irene," who?

Lorenzo: Yeah. Never heard of her...

Rena: Guys... thank you. Thank you for understanding and listening... even when I didn't deserve it... I truly feel a huge weight has been lifted off my troubled soul...

Thornton: Oh, is that it?! ...All is forgiven and forgotten, already? Ha-ha-ha... You lot are too much.

Dew: Okay, Thornton, enough..! So, you have two of the SKT virus vials now... What, more carnage and destruction on the horizon? Do you think Elizabeth, if she were here, would condone this? You know this is all wrong. It doesn't have to be this way...

Thornton: Ha-ha-ha... You're so benighted! Who says she wouldn't? She commands such.

Dew: She commands it?

Rena: She speaks to you..?

Thornton: As she has spoken to you too... *(feminine voice tone change)*
Mommy Dearest...

Rena: ...That voice... is it... you..?

Dew: Wait a minute... are you saying that the Söl Congruum is...
Elizabeth?!

Narrator: Thornton then nods his head in acknowledgment as
Elizabeth's apparition suddenly appears, startling Dew and the
others. Elizabeth is seen hovering over Thornton for a brief
moment before disappearing.

Krista: Did you see that?!

Lorenzo: Was that a... ghost!?! ...Cooper was right. Those big booty
ghost bitches are real after all..!

Dew: No, Lorenzo. Not them...

Rena: It's her... Elizabeth.

Thornton: Yes... That's right... Even now, she calls out to me... working
through me... her servant... she demands of me to deliver...
swift and unrelenting punishment unto this malignant world...

Dew: Well, "right now" this peregrination and you and Elizabeth's
schemes are coming to an end... *(then raises his bo staff and
assumes a fighting position)*

Rena: *(then steps in front of Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista)* After all these
years... all those visions and the nightmares I would have...
somehow... I've always known it was because of, you...
Elizabeth. Elizabeth, I'm talking to you directly... Listen... there
hasn't been a day that has gone by where I didn't wish that I
would have taken you and your brother with me... If only I had
the courage back then to do that... life would have been
different for all of us... but that didn't happen... I failed you...
and him as a mother... I'm sorry... But please don't let your
contempt toward me condemn this world... You were blessed
with great power... use it to do good, not evil. You aren't
bound to some prophetic fate or what's in your genes. You
still have a choice. Be better than I was! I know you can...

Thornton: ...Only, in the end, does one see the errors of their ways. But
your desperate plea falls on deaf ears as her unanswered
prayers were all those years ago... Don't fret, "Rena"... she will
always be better than you... and she has already chosen... by

embracing her existence and purpose of fulfilling her destiny as... the Söl Congruum. And, HER will SHALL be manifested..! ...Hm? *(then turns his head left looking at something)* What was that, my love..? Oh. Is it time..? It will be done... *(then turns his head back facing Rena and the others as he unsheathes his Bastard sword, getting into a fighting stance)* All has been revealed... now, you all will not hinder us any longer...

Rena: *(sigh)* Then... then my daughter truly is dead... It pains me to know what needs to be done next... *(then assumes a fighting stance while pointing her scythe in Thornton's direction)* But I will make all of this right... I will stop you, Thornton, and the Söl Congruum!

Dew: No, Rena... We WILL, together.

Lorenzo: Yeah. It's time to merk this fool!

Krista: You heard that? You're going down..!

Narrator: The four then come together, standing side by side with their weapons still drawn, and stare down Thornton.



Thornton:

Hmph... You all will try... *(then shifts his Bastard sword into the Ochs position readying to attack)* “Ring a ring o’roses... A pocket full of poises... Ah-tishoo! Ah-tishoo! We all... FALL DOWN!!!”

Narrator:

The battle begins as Dew and his party and Thornton simultaneously charge toward one another. Then their weapons clash. The battle is extremely fast and fierce, with neither side getting the best of the other at first. Each side, at times, would land a few hits on the other, but nothing critical. As the battle continued, Thornton would start teleporting to random spots in the laboratory, attempting to catch the party off guard. But they would manage to avoid or defend against the lethal blows from his Bastard sword. Thornton would also, during the fight, pull out his service pistol and shoot at Dew and the party. The hail of bullets would be deflected and damage the lab equipment in the back-ground. With the fight nearing its end and both sides exhausted- Lorenzo then charges in, trying to unleash a combo of punches on Thornton, who parries the attacks, kicks him in the knee, and ferociously backhands him across the room. Krista attacks next, throwing her boomerang at Thornton as a distraction while running up, trying to punch him. However, he deflects the incoming boomerang and sends it back toward Krista, hitting her forehead and knocking her to the floor. Dew and Rena rush in, attacking Thornton together. Thornton effortlessly blocks and dodges their attacks. Dew then runs right into a high kick that sends him sprawling off to the side. Thornton tries to bash the hilt of his Bastard sword into Rena’s chin, but at the last second, she blocks the attack, which pushes

her back a bit. As Rena and Thornton continue to clash around the laboratory, Dew, with his bo staff still in hand, slowly brings himself to his feet, feeling disorientated. As he recovers, Dew notices Rena's talisman giving off a faint green flicker. Suddenly, everything around him becomes inaudible, as if time itself freezes in that very moment. Flashing images then surge through his mind: his grandfather and several SWAT TROOPERS engulfed in flames, himself looking up at a blood-covered Rena as the world darkens around him, Emily turning her back to him, the other party members lying motionless, a rocket exploding in Earth's upper atmosphere, the planet consumed by fire and Ethereal laughter echoes in the silence. The images repeat again and again—at first confusing, then frustrating, and finally enraging Dew—until they abruptly stop. He snaps back to his senses. Meanwhile, Thornton has gained the upper hand over Rena and is about to strike her down—until Dew, driven by instinct, lets out a scream and charges forward, delivering a shattering blow to Thornton's chest with his bo staff. The impact sends Thornton staggering back and dropping to a knee, still clutching his now bloodied bastard sword.

Thornton: Arrrrggh...! (*exhales deeply*) Annoying... Gnat...

Narrator: While defending Rena from being dealt a killing blow, Dew was stabbed through his stomach by Thornton's Bastard sword.

Dew: UUUUUUUUUUggggggggggggggghhhh...
(*then slumps to the floor in a heap and starts bleeding out profusely*)

Rena: Dew!?! Noooo!

Narrator: Rena, now realizing what has just happened, immediately drops to her knees. She

frantically turns Dew onto his back and begins applying pressure to the wound in his stomach, desperately trying to stop the bleeding. In the chaos, she doesn't notice the SKT virus A vial that slips from Dew's vest pocket and rolls across the floor—coming to a stop near the kneeling, injured Thornton. Thornton spots it at his feet and picks it up, inspecting it with curiosity.

Thornton: What is this..? Curious. And how fortunate. Ha-ha-ha... So, Dew... you had the "A" variant on you this whole time. Holding out on us, eh? Your loss... is now our gain. *(then slips the vial into the inner pocket of his trench coat and slowly rises to his feet)* Three down. One more to go. *(then glances down at the bleeding Dew)* Thank you... and goodbye, Dew Wilder...

Narrator: Meanwhile, a sobbing, blood-covered Rena remains at Dew's side, still trying to stop the bleeding.

Rena: No, no, no, no... It's not working... Dew—stay with me... please... no... wait..!

Narrator: Frantic and refusing to give up, she reaches into her pocket for the *Light Elementome* gemstone and inserts it into her *Elementome Bracelet*. She presses the glowing device against Dew's wound, channeling its power in a desperate attempt to heal him and keep him conscious. Elsewhere, Thornton begins to walk away, a thick fog curling around his body—building with each step, though his form remains visible through the haze.

Thornton: Sorry, Mommy Dearest... We'll have to continue this some other time. Soon, our dreams will be fulfilled... and we'll be one step closer to the Renascence. Chaos, order, and bliss will reign... "*Ah-tishoo... ah-tishoo... we all fall down...*"

Narrator: As his voice fades, the fog swallows him entirely. Thornton vanishes into the mist, leaving only silence in his wake. Rena clings tightly to Dew, who looks up at her with glazed, unfocused eyes—struggling to remain conscious as his vision flickers and fades in and out.

Dew: *(labored breathing)* ...Sifu... Oh... force of habit... ha-ha...

Rena: Don't worry about that silly...

Dew: You're... *(labored breathing)* you're okay...

Rena: I am... *(then holds back her tears and holds onto his hand)* My "shining lighthouse" ...

Dew: Mmmm... *(then smiles at Rena)*

Rena: Shhh... Save your strength. I'm not going anywhere... You hear me?! Hang in there... You're going to be all right...

Narrator: Everything around Dew then gradually starts becoming inaudible and a blur. He slightly turns his head to the right and sees a blurry image of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers hastily entering the laboratory accompanied by Cooper, Elvir, and Vilmer. His eyes close, and then moments later, as he slowly opens them, an even blurrier image is seen of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers, Elvir and Vilmer, aiding the battered Lorenzo and Krista in the background. He then turns his head back and sees a distraught Cooper running over to him and Rena. He abruptly begins coughing up blood and slowly shuts his eyes again before losing consciousness. Dew's body then goes limp as Rena still grasps his hand while a dismayed Cooper stands over them. The scene fades to black, and in the background, an agonized Rena is heard.

Rena: ...Dew?! Wake up... Dew? Dew?!
DEEEEEEEWWWW!!!



TO BE CONTINUED IN, VALOR TALE: RENASCENCE, VOLUME III...