

VALOR TALE RENAISSANCE

VOLUME III

DAVID EARL WILLIAMS III

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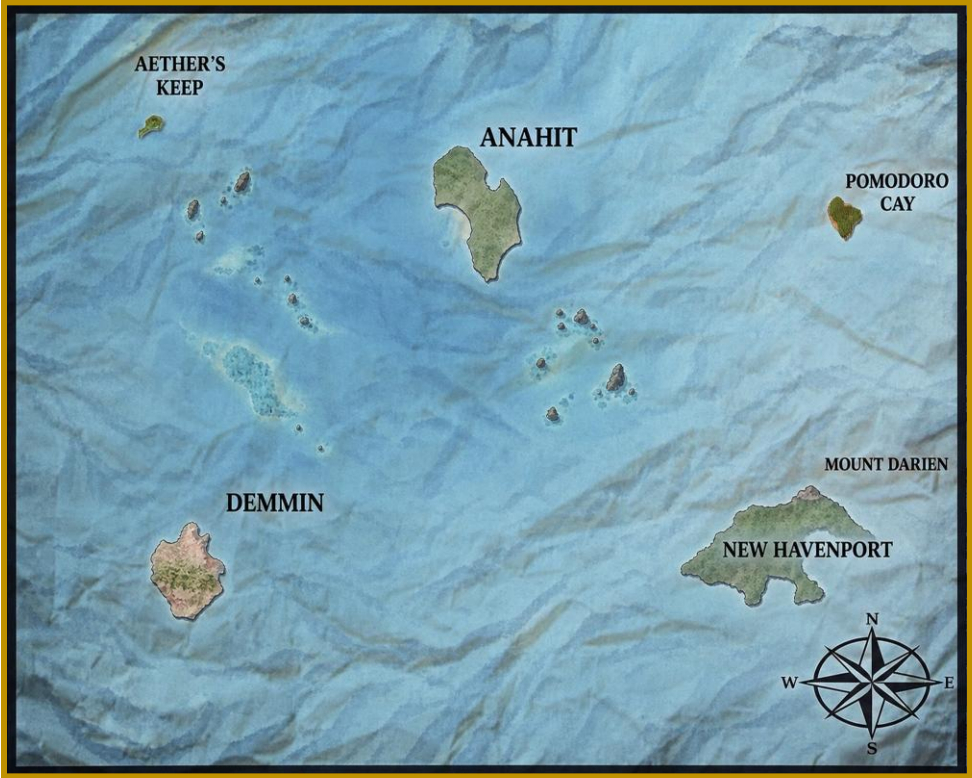
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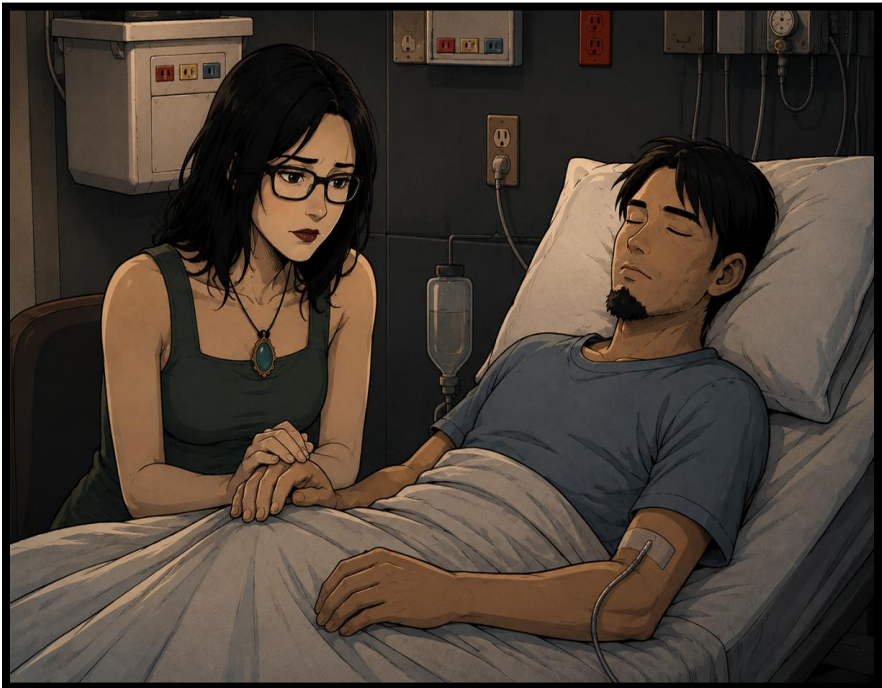
MAP OF MESOVILLA: SOUTHWEST REGION



CHAPTER 1 – AWAKENING RESOLVE

Narrator:

Our chapter begins a day later within the confines of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic. Within one of its rooms, Rena occupies a seat beside the comatose Dew. The room, minimally adorned with military-issued furniture and a closed-blind small window, exudes the sterile scent of antiseptic. The soft hum of medical equipment pervades the background, creating an atmosphere of quiet intensity. Rena's gaze is fixed on Dew, her eyes revealing a blend of patience and regret. Amidst the oppressive silence, the only disruption comes from the steady beeping of the heart monitor. In a quiet moment, Rena extends her hand to grasp Dew's, delicately tracing the lines of his calloused palm.



Rena: *(whispering) Dew, if you can hear me... thank you for saving me... Even after everything that has happened... after all the secrets... You still did... Hah. It's funny... I've lost count of how many times I've told you this... I didn't deserve to be spared... And witnessing you in this state... It feels like I'm losing you... and there's not a damn thing I can do about it... (tears well up in her eyes as she tightens her grip on Dew's hand) It should have never come to this... This is all my fault... (sigh) But, at least, you'll recover, as the doctors say... when you wake up, who knows... (then glances at the medical machines monitoring Dew's vital signs, her eyes following the rhythmic blips and lines on the screens) Dew... You and the others have done all you could... (determined) I will make this right... I'll handle the rest... Rest tight... my "shining lighthouse."*

Narrator: Rena kisses the comatose Dew's forehead and then releases his hand, gently placing it next to his side. She remains seated, her eyes fixed on Dew, hoping for his swift awakening, stoically contemplating her next move. As Dew lies there in a coma, the scene cuts to him dreaming of the evening when he first arrived at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy. A bus carrying Dew, Hoplyn, and the other recruits pulls up to the academy. Through the window, Hoplyn's face lights up with enthusiasm as she eagerly peers outside, capturing the palpable anticipation of their arrival at the academy.

Hoplyn: I can't believe we're almost here.

Dew: Yep.

Hoplyn: *(still looking out the bus window)* That ship ride wasn't that long at all...

Dew: It wasn't...

Hoplyn: *(still looking out the bus window)* ...This is where the fun begins.

Dew: If you want to call it that.

Hoplyn: *(then turns to Dew)* Do you think it's going to be tough for us?

Dew: I don't know, but we'll see. All I can say is we signed up for this, so it's "Do or Die."

Hoplyn: You're right... I'm so ready.

Narrator: The bus smoothly navigates to the front gate of the academy, where attentive guards promptly swing it open, allowing the vehicle to enter. Peering through the window, Dew takes in the sight of recruits marching in perfect unison and another group enthusiastically engaging in physical training activities in the distance. Though a slight wave of intimidation washes over him, Dew quickly shakes off the feeling, his resolve unwavering as he sets his sights on completing his basic training. The bus comes to a gradual stop, and as the passengers begin to gather their belongings and disembark, Dew and Hoplyn follow suit. Sensing Dew's unease, the STE Bus Driver, upon stepping off the bus, directs a reassuring remark to him before firmly shutting the door.

STE Bus Driver: *(to Dew)* ...Hey, kid.

Dew: *(then turns to face the STE Bus Driver)* Hm..?

STE Bus Driver: I know how you feel... been there myself. But don't stress. Basic training isn't that bad. Once you're done with that part, it's all "smooth sailing" from there. You're in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE now; you have a chance to prove that you're the best! You're the heart and soul of it all... make your family and country proud. Don't let the bastards get you down. Okay?

Dew: Right. Thanks, I will remember that.

STE Bus Driver: *(then to Hoplyn)* Good luck to you and your friend.

Narrator: The bus door closes, and the vehicle starts to depart from the academy grounds.

Dew: *(turns to Hoplyn)* "Good luck"? Why'd he say it like that..?

Hoplyn: Don't make it more than what it is. He was just wishing us off well.

Dew: Hmph... Well, as you said... let the "fun" begin...

Narrator: Dew and Hoplyn proceed to join the line of other recruits, awaiting their turn for processing. As Dew continues dreaming, the scene cuts to the training

grounds of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy. An STE Drill Instructor oversees the recruits, Dew and Hoplyn among them, executing pushups. The atmosphere resonates with their grunts and the authoritative commands of the instructor. Dew encounters difficulties with his pushups, drawing the focus of the STE Drill Instructor, who quickly approaches and steadfastly but supportively coaches him through the exercise.

STE Drill Instructor: Recruit, do you believe this is challenging? What lies ahead will make this seem easy. Keep pushing..!

Narrator: The scene cuts to a training montage as Dew, Hoplyn, and the other recruits jog in perfect synchronization, led by the STE Drill Instructor across the training grounds of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy. With each coordinated step, their boots echo against the pavement, drawing them closer to their objective, their determined expressions glistening with sweat. Despite Dew momentarily falling behind, he pushes himself to catch up. Subsequently, under the STE Drill Instructor's vigilant gaze, the recruits begin their weapons training drills. They practice handling their rifles, loading, and unloading them with precision. The STE Drill Instructor offers corrections and encouragement as necessary, spurring them to perform their best. Over time, the recruits gain confidence with their weapons, their movements becoming smoother and their aim more precise. Then, the scene cuts to the recruits engaged in hand-to-hand combat training drills, participating in intense sparring matches. Initially, their movements are clumsy, particularly Dew's, but they gradually refine their techniques under the instructor's watchful eye, achieving fluidity and precision. Afterward, they are shown diving into an indoor swimming pool with meticulous precision, their synchronized strokes demonstrating their unwavering strength and determination against the water's resistance. Dew's confidence grows as he effortlessly masters swimming, a smile

lighting up his face. Finally, the scene cuts to an obstacle course where they confront various barriers and challenges, driven by the STE Drill Instructor's intense motivation.

STE Drill Instructor: That's the spirit, recruits. Every obstacle you face is a chance to prove your strength and overcome it. Move it. Move it.

Narrator: As Dew confronts a notably challenging obstacle, memories rush through him—moments of losing his parents, recalling Rena's teachings, and envisioning his late grandfather proudly smiling down on him. Then the words uttered by his grandfather resonate in Dew's mind.

Grandpa Wilder: *"You have the vigor and valor to overcome anything. I believe in you, Dew... Never forget that."*

Narrator: These words further ignite a determination in Dew, urging him to press on. Dew then fiercely ascends the obstacle. The STE Drill Instructor enthusiastically cheers him on until he conquers the summit, surpassing the other recruits who eventually join him. The STE Drill Instructor commends them for completing the task.

STE Drill Instructor: Well done! Outstanding! You did it, recruits! Life's challenges may be formidable, but you are even more resilient. Never forget that...

Narrator: Standing triumphantly at the pinnacle of the obstacle course tower, Dew, visibly breathless, receives congratulatory gestures from the impressed fellow recruits. Hoplyn pats him on the back, while others exchange high-fives to acknowledge their collective efforts. Dew smiles and nods appreciatively at Hoplyn.

Dew: *(whispering to himself) No matter how hard things get; I'll face whatever challenges come my way. I won't give up... Not now. Not ever. I can do this. Not just for myself... but for everyone who depends on it...*

Narrator: The dream sequence gradually fades away, revealing Dew's burgeoning inner strength. The scene then cuts back to the present, four days later, in the room at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic.

Dew's eyes slowly open, and focus gradually returns, fixing on the plain expanse of the room's ceiling. At his bedside, Cooper, now seated, keenly observes Dew as he stirs awake, marking the end of his dream-filled slumber.

Cooper: *(smiling)* Hey there, buddy. Welcome back.

Dew: *(turns his head to face Cooper)* Cooper..? *(groaning)* Where... where am I?

Cooper: You're in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic. You've been out for four days after that nasty hit you took.

Narrator: Dew rubs his forehead, then instinctively touches his stomach, wincing as his hand traces the memory of the gut wound he received from Thornton's bastard sword, now covered with a bandage.

Dew: Right. I remember... our fight with Thornton.

Cooper: ...You're lucky Rena used the *Light Elementome* when she did, or you'd be a goner otherwise.

Dew: Hmm. So, four days? I was out... that long?

Cooper: I'm afraid so.

Dew: Cooper, what about Lorenzo and Krista? Are they okay?

Cooper: *(nodding)* Yeah, no major injuries. They're fine, as is everyone else.

Narrator: Dew sighs in relief, but concern creeps into his eyes as he wonders about Rena.

Dew: Wait. Where is she?

Cooper: Rena..?

Dew: Yeah.

Cooper: *(hesitant)* About that... The last any of us saw her was yesterday evening. She left a note for you.

Dew: A note?

Cooper: Yeah. Here...

Narrator: Cooper hands over a folded piece of paper to Dew. Dew unfolds it, his eyes scanning the words. His dismay grows as he reads it.

Dew: *(talking aloud to himself)* ...She went after Thornton and her daughter on her own? No... Rena!

Narrator: Dew's determination flares, and he puts down the note, trying to sit up to get out of bed, but Cooper gently pushes him back.

Cooper: Dew, stop.

Narrator: Dew tries sitting up again, but Cooper stops him once more.

Dew: What are you doing?

Cooper: Dew, take it easy.

Dew: (*frustrated*) "Take it easy"? Easy for you to say. Why didn't any of you try stopping her from leaving?

Cooper: (*defensive*) She left without saying a word. We didn't even know until it was too late.

Dew: She left..? What... Dammit, Rena. (*determined*) I can't let her face that danger alone.

Cooper: Well, Dew, you're in no condition to help anyone at the moment. You need some time to get back on your feet.

Dew: Time?! I think my four-day nap was enough. I can't sit here any longer... (*grim determination*) Give me an hour, and we regroup with the others. We have to go after her.

Cooper: But, Dew.

Dew: Cooper... Please.

Narrator: The room is filled with tension as Dew and Cooper share a charged silence. Dew's gaze pierces through Cooper with unwavering determination. Cooper, recognizing the fire in Dew's eyes, nods reluctantly, understanding the urgency despite Dew's weakened state.

Cooper: Fine... I'll give you an hour to rest. I'll go and inform the medics and the others that you're awake.

Narrator: Dew nods, his eyes filled with a mix of frustration and resolve. As Cooper exits the room, leaving Dew alone, a heavy atmosphere hangs in the air. Dew shifts uncomfortably in the hospital bed, glancing around the room. Suddenly, his gaze locks onto the chain of a talisman hanging from his neck. He untucks it from his gown, holding it in his hands, a whirlwind of surprise and confusion crossing his face.

Dew: *(whispering to himself) How did this..?*
Narrator: Dew's gaze then falls upon the note still lying on the sheet. With a sense of trepidation, he proceeds to read it. At the bottom of the note, he speaks the postscript aloud to himself.

Dew: "P.S.

This talisman has always protected me as intended. Now, I give it back to you in hopes that you soon recover. Thank you for all you have done for me, my 'shining lighthouse.'"

Narrator: Dew places the note down, and his hand tightens around the talisman. A wave of gratitude washes over him, but anxiety about Rena's whereabouts lingers. With a deep breath, Dew settles back onto the hospital bed, the talisman remaining untucked from his gown as he allows himself a brief moment of respite amidst the storm of emotions. An hour passes, and the scene cuts to the waiting area of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic. Dew, appearing slightly disoriented yet determined, enters to find Cooper and the rest of the party eagerly awaiting him. Their faces light up with a blend of relief and sheer joy at the sight of Dew's arrival.

Cooper: There he is...

Elvir: Dewster.

Vilmer: Dew. *(sigh)* Thank Chosha.

Krista: It's wonderful to see you're awake.

Lorenzo: Hey man. Welcome back.

Narrator: Dew pauses, overwhelmed by the warmth of their greetings, his gratitude evident in the soft curve of his smile.

Dew: It's good to see you all too.

Krista: We were terribly worried about you...



- Vilmer: Yeah, you had us all on edge. But I never doubted you'd make it.
- Lorenzo: How are you feeling..?
- Narrator: Before responding, Dew notices that Krista's forehead bears little evidence of Thornton's brutal counter with her own boomerang, the bruise now almost completely healed thanks to the restorative power of the *Light Elementome*. Beside her, Lorenzo shows little trace of the bruises he sustained during the skirmish.
- Dew: Officially discharged from medical care. Ready to face the world. But... what about you two? *(then gestures toward Lorenzo and Krista)*
- Krista: Me..? Ah. *(then almost reaches to touch the spot on her forehead where the bruise had been but quickly pulls back, brushing it off casually)* Hah. 'Tis but a scratch...
- Lorenzo: Don't worry about me. You know I've faced worse. I'm itching for another round with Thornton.

Narrator: Dew's grin broadens, filled with pride and affection as he admires his companions' resilience. Fueled by curiosity, he steers the conversation, eager to learn about what transpired during his absence.

Dew: So, what did I miss while I was out?

Elvir: Oh, you know, the usual. Played some Nintendo and bone some chicks. *(then grins mischievously)*

Dew: Ha-ha... *(then amusedly shakes his head)* I see your sense of humor is still the same, Elvir.

Elvir: Oh. And would you look at that? I managed to get a laugh out of you for once. I'll be...

Dew: You know, normally, I would have been slightly annoyed by your wisecracks, but being in that coma made me appreciate you more.

Elvir: Aww...

Cooper: Dew, while you were away, the entire SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy has been on lockdown. Due to the casualties, they provided a convincing cover-up story to the public, claiming it was a training exercise gone wrong. Families who lost their loved ones are being compensated, and the rest were instructed to remain silent or face jail time if any information leaked.

Dew: *(sarcasm)* Yep. Got to keep those skeletons in the closets. Sounds about right.

Cooper: Interim Premier Janerio has *ISPYA* scouring all parts of Mesovilla in search of Thornton.

Dew: I'm surprised he hasn't had any of us locked up for failing to stop Thornton. But here we are, still with our weapons and accessories on us.

Cooper: You would think so. After all, Thornton now possesses three of the four SKT virus vials.

Dew: Three?!

Cooper: Yeah, three.

Narrator: Dew's heart thunders in his chest as he frantically feels around the seams of his hastily restitched vest. His fingers tremble as he reaches into the front pocket, his breath catching in his throat. With a

sinking feeling, his fingertips brushed against emptiness, sending a chill down his spine.

Dew: Oh... shit. It must have rolled out after...

Cooper: Unfortunately.

Dew: Well. Damn. Ugh.

Krista: Don't worry, Dew. We'll locate the remaining SKT virus vial before Thornton does.

Dew: I hear you, and I'm confident we will. But Rena...

Krista: We'll find her too. She probably hasn't ventured far from the Isle since leaving.

Dew: Hm.

Vilmer: But it makes you wonder. How did she manage to leave the Isle while it's been on lockdown?

Lorenzo: Well, considering she used to work as a scientist here, she likely knew of a way off undetected.

Dew: ...

Vilmer: Ah, that makes sense.

Elvir: I still can't wrap my head around it... Irene, I mean Rena, being the mother of the Söl Congruum...

Dew: Yeah... that...

Narrator: Dew briefly falls silent, glancing around at the others as he wonders how the revelation has affected their perception of Rena. Cooper quickly picks up on his concern.

Cooper: Dew... knowing that hasn't changed anything for me.

Vilmer: ...Mistakes are a part of being human. We have a choice to either avoid them or confront them to make amends. Rena is sincerely doing her best, and I can't help but empathize with her struggles to some extent.

Elvir: It was utterly shocking at first, but given everything we've been through, Rena still has my loyalty despite her familial connection to the mortal enemy of my ancestors.

Dew: Ah... It's reassuring to hear that from all of you. I know Rena values your friendships. But does anyone else beyond our group know about her past involvements? Do they even know she's missing?

Lorenzo: Don't worry, bro. Even after all the questioning, Rena never came up once. I'm no snitch.

Krista: Yeah, same here.

Narrator: Dew then glances toward Cooper, Vilmer, and Elvir, who offer subtle nods of reassurance, silently letting him know that Rena's secrets were safe with them. Dew manages a small, grateful smile, touched that his friends had chosen to protect someone so deeply important to him without needing to be asked.

Dew: Thank you, all of you. I appreciate that.

Vilmer: No problem. By the way... it seems the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers are also unaware of her absence. That's a good thing, too. We definitely can't afford any more complications.

Cooper: Speaking of complications, I overheard some soldiers mentioning coming across communication jammers during cleanup.

Dew: Jammers?

Cooper: Yes, strategically placed around the base.

Dew: Strategically placed? Hmm. That would explain why our handheld radios were malfunctioning. But why were they there? Did something come up missing?

Cooper: I couldn't tell you. That's all I know.

Dew: Hm. I don't know... That doesn't sound good.

Cooper: I agree. But we can't let it deter us. We need to focus on finding the last virus vial.

Dew: You're right. There's no need for us to worry about it anyway. But, hold on. Are we even allowed to leave the Isle?

Lorenzo: *(turns to Elvir)* ...Do you want to tell him?

Elvir: Soitenly! *(then reaches into her pocket)* La-la-la, la-la-la... Just a moment... *(still feeling around in her pocket)* ...the interim premier gave us a little gift... *(then reveals a set of keys)*

Dew: Keys..?

Elvir: Indubitably. For a patrol boat. *(then places the patrol boat keys back into her pocket)*

Dew: Well, that will certainly speed things up. I guess we're free to go then.

Lorenzo: ...Killbin wants us to continue the journey. From his perspective, every bit of help counts.

Dew: I suppose it does. Hey, before we continue our journey, I think it would be wise to make a stop back at Twin Pines. We might encounter Rena there or come across some clues to her whereabouts along the way. Plus, I need to make a quick stop there to check in on someone.

Narrator: The party members in unison then nod their heads in agreement.

Krista: Sounds like a plan.

Cooper: Indeed, Krista. Let's not delay any longer.

Lorenzo: Ah, shit, here we go again...

Vilmer: Ah, Lorenzo, my friend, it's not like we're scaling Mount Illini again. I know how much you missed doing that. *(then smirks)*

Lorenzo: Oh, don't you start with that... Ugh.

Elvir: Well, what's the holdup? Let's not waste a moment longer! To the Boat Hangar, my squad!

Dew: Right. You heard her, let's get going then.

Narrator: Dew and the party exit the waiting area of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic and make their way toward the Boat Hangar. As several minutes pass, the scene cuts to the Boat Hangar entrance. Dew, along with the rest of the party, makes their way towards the entrance where they encounter a SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier guarding it. This soldier happens to be the same one rescued by Cooper, Elvir, and Vilmer four nights earlier during the attack on the Academy. Upon recognizing Cooper among the group, the STE Private snaps to attention and crisply salutes him.

STE Private: Good afternoon, sir.

Narrator: Cooper comes to a halt in front of the other party members, his expression warm as he returns the salute with equal respect. The STE Private lowers his hand.

Cooper: It's good to see you again, Private.

STE Private: Likewise, sir.

Cooper: You seem to be in better health.

STE Private: Yes, all thanks to you and your comrades.

Cooper: *(nodding solemnly)* I'm glad we could be of assistance.

STE Private: *(then his gaze briefly flickers to the other party members before settling back on Cooper)* Leaving so soon?

Cooper: Duty calls, unfortunately.

STE Private: Understood. Say no more. I've been briefed on the situation. By orders from my superiors, you all have permission to enter.

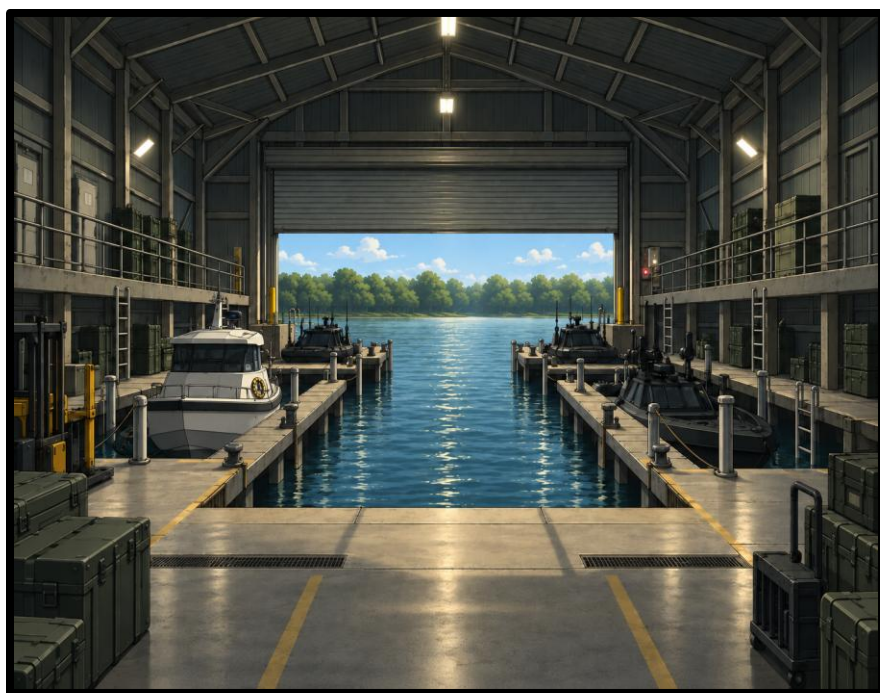
Cooper: Much appreciated, Private.

STE Private: Next time, when things are less tumultuous, we'll provide your companions with a proper "tour"... *(then winks conspiratorially at Cooper)*

Narrator: Cooper reciprocates with a warm smile, appreciating the STE Private's understanding of their true mission at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy.

STE Private: Good luck on your journey. We're counting on you and your friends' success, Corporal...

Narrator: With a respectful nod, the STE Private steps aside, granting Dew and the party passage into the Boat Hangar.



As they step inside, four boats come into view, moored along the docks bordering the central waterway. Elvir gestures toward the patrol boat directly ahead and to their left, indicating it as the vessel designated for their use. Dew approaches

the boat, satisfaction evident in his expression. However, as he draws closer, a sudden realization strikes him.

Dew: Wait a minute. I've never operated a boat of any kind. (*then turns to face the other party members*) Good thing someone here does... right..?

Narrator: Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer exchange uncertain glances before shaking their heads in response to Dew's inquiry. Dew then shifts his attention to Cooper, wondering if his military experience might prove useful.

Dew: Not even you, Cooper?

Cooper: No, unfortunately. I never had the chance to learn while serving. My apologies.

Dew: (*sigh*) Well, that complicates things. Great. Just great. This will be useless to us now...

Narrator: Elvir, who has been quietly observing their predicament with amusement, finally steps forward with a confident smile, revealing the patrol boat keys in her hand again.

Elvir: OMG, you guys are clueless. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... Don't worry, I've got this covered.

Dew: Oh? You do..?

Elvir: Yep. I've got some experience and know my way around boats.

Narrator: Dew and the others then exchange relieved glances, placing their trust in Elvir's assurance.

Dew: (*nodding*) Okay then, "Chosha's chosen." Do your thing. We have a journey to continue...

Elvir: Aye, aye, Captain. (*salutes Dew, then drops it with a chuckle*) Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: With that, Elvir dashes ahead, leading the way as Dew and the party members follow, crossing the boarding ramp onto the patrol boat. Moments later, the scene cuts to the bridge of the patrol boat, a spacious area adorned with various control panels, switches, and screens. Elvir stands at the helm, radiating a blend of nostalgia and excitement in anticipation of her companions' arrival. As each member of the party enters, Elvir warmly greets them, exuding confidence and authority.

Elvir: Here's everyone. Gather 'round; it's time to acquaint ourselves with our vessel.

Narrator: Dew surveys the bridge with interest before musing aloud to himself.

Dew: Quite the setup...

Lorenzo: Never pictured myself on a patrol boat. Then again, I never thought I would have taken a cruise, had my insides wrecked by delicious Lychee boba tea, rode around in a comfy RV, climbed a mountain... Ugh... or seen the crazy shit that I have seen either...

Narrator: Krista then turns to Cooper, briefly examining him and noticing something different about his attire before chiming in.

Krista: Cooper... is that a different shirt?

Cooper: Hm? Yeah.

Krista: ...And a different green apron too?

Cooper: Well... yeah. I change clothes sometimes. Is that unusual..?

Lorenzo: Around this group? Apparently. I swear the rest of us been wearing the same damn clothes for a while.

Vilmer: Hmm... You know, our appearances have been fairly consistent, but it's like we've had different art styles here and there until now...

Dew: Different art styles..?

Krista: ...Now that you mention it, I noticed that too, Vilmer.

Lorenzo: Heh. Must be the lighting.

Elvir: Sure. The "lighting."

Dew: Huh. What are you all talking about..?

Narrator: The others conspicuously ignore Dew's question and continue their peculiar discussion.

Vilmer: ...Perhaps we should simply be grateful everyone is still recognizable.

Cooper: Exactly. Anyway, maybe the rest of you should change outfits once in a while too.

Narrator: The party falls silent for a moment, several of them awkwardly glancing down at their clothes.

Lorenzo: ...Nah. Too much work.

Narrator: A few amused chuckles follow Lorenzo's response as Dew, still oblivious to the peculiar conversation, simply shrugs his shoulders. The party then turns their attention back to Elvir at the helm.

Dew: *(to Elvir)* So, Elvir, how do we operate this thing?

Elvir: *(smiling reassuringly)* Allow me to demonstrate... *(then walks over to the control panel, ready to explain the functions of each switch and lever)* First, we need to power up the engines... *(then flicks a switch on the panel, the hum of the engines fills the air)*

Vilmer: *(observing intently)* Ahh.

Elvir: ...Now, this lever here controls our speed. Push forward to accelerate, pull back to slow down or stop.

Cooper: ...And what about navigation? How do we chart our course?

Elvir: *(giving an acknowledging nod to Cooper)* Good question. We'll use the GPS system to set our destination coordinates. *(then gestures towards a screen displaying a map)* It'll guide us there.

Cooper: Got it.

Elvir: *(then points to the steering wheel)* Steering's straightforward. Left to go left, right to go right.

Krista: Simple enough.

Vilmer: What about rough waters?

Elvir: ...Navigating rough waters requires finesse. We'll adjust our speed and direction accordingly.

Dew: *(confidently)* I think we can handle this.

Elvir: *(then smirks)* I have no doubt. This beauty can cruise at a steady 30 knots, so we'll be covering some serious ground and be back at Twin Pines before you know it.

Lorenzo: Uh, a knot? What's that..?

Narrator: Elvir then turns to face Lorenzo with a patient smile, ready to explain.

Elvir: A knot is a speed unit used in sailing, mainly at sea. It equals one nautical mile per hour. So, if we say we're sailing at ten knots, it means we're going ten nautical miles per hour. It's the usual way boats and ships measure speed.

Lorenzo: Oh. Gotcha.

Elvir: ...By the way, before we set sail, does anyone here get seasick?

Narrator: Dew and the party members share silent glances before unanimously shaking their heads to indicate no in response to Elvir's question.

Elvir: No? Poifect!

Krista: Hey, Elvir.

Elvir: Yes?

Krista: How do you know so much about boats, again?

Narrator: Elvir hesitates for a moment before answering.

Elvir: From... my father.

Cooper: (*raising an eyebrow*) Father? But I thought you were an orphan, no?

Elvir: Uhh... I am. My father... he hasn't been in my life for quite some time.

Cooper: Hm. Understood.

Elvir: Yeah... Anyway. Let's focus on the task. First things first, before we can depart, we'll need to remove the boarding ramp and then unmoor the patrol boat from the dock. I'll need help with doing all that...

Narrator: Elvir then gestures to the party before exiting the bridge. Following her lead, Dew and the rest of the group swiftly proceed, working in unison to efficiently remove the boarding ramp from the dock and detach the boat from its moorings. Moments later, they reconvene back on the bridge, ready to embark on their next endeavor.

Elvir: Okay, everyone, let's kick off this nautical adventure. Dew, you're in charge as Captain. Cooper and Vilmer, I need you to keep an eye on the screen display for navigation. Krista, you'll be on the port side, which is the left, and Lorenzo, you'll handle starboard, the right side, keeping watch for any debris. I'll be on the helm steering the ship...

Narrator: Dew steps forward to join Elvir at her side as she takes the helm. Cooper and Vilmer nod in acknowledgment before positioning themselves at the screen display map, their fingers poised to adjust settings as needed. Lorenzo and Krista swiftly assume their watch station positions, their trained eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of movement, alert for potential hazards lurking in the water. As the patrol boat subtly begins to drift away from the dock, Dew glances around uncertainly, his brow furrowed in thought, momentarily grappling with the weight of responsibility resting on his shoulders. Elvir, attuned to his hesitation, stands nearby, her posture relaxed yet attentive, her gaze fixed on Dew with a blend of reassurance and support, silently urging him to trust in his abilities and take command of the situation.

Elvir: Your move, Captain.

Narrator: With a sudden realization dawning upon him, Dew turns to Elvir with a mischievous glint in his eye before playfully issuing his command.

Dew: Okay. Uh. Let's make some waves..! Engage.

Narrator: Elvir smiles at Dew's playful approach, appreciating the camaraderie among the team.

Elvir: You got it, Captain. Right then, backing us out of the hangar. Setting course for Twin Pines.

Narrator: Elvir's hands remain steady as she skillfully reverses the patrol boat from its mooring and backs it into the central waterway. With practiced control, she guides the vessel in reverse through the open hangar entrance and out onto the water. Once clear of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Boat Hangar, Elvir maneuvers the patrol boat around and shifts forward, its engines humming as they set off. Bathed in the golden light of the sun, its radiant rays shimmering across the water's surface, the boat begins its journey back to the province of Twin Pines, marking the continuation of their adventurous voyage.

CHAPTER 2 – THE QUEST FOR RENA

- Narrator: Several hours pass. The scene cuts to the patrol boat navigating through rough waters as it approaches the Twin Pines Province. The vessel gradually slows, finally docking at the weathered pier. Dew and the rest of the party disembark, their determination palpable with each step echoing on the aged wooden planks. Before proceeding, Dew addresses the group urgently.
- Dew: ...We've finally arrived. Not a bad ride, I'd say. Okay, everyone, listen up. As we've discussed, we're here to find Rena or any clues about her whereabouts. I believe splitting up will help us cover more ground. I'll take the solo route as I have something to attend to alone. The rest of you, pair up as you see fit. Let's meet back here at the pier in four hours.
Agreed?
- Lorenzo: You got it, man.
- Krista: Sounds like a plan, Dew. We'll make sure to cover as much ground as we can.
- Vilmer: Count me in. We'll keep our eyes peeled for any signs of Rena.
- Cooper: Agreed. Splitting up seems like the best approach. Let's get to it.
- Elvir: Yeah, Dew. Don't worry, we'll find Rena quicker than a towel that dries after wiping your face and genitals with.
- Narrator: Dew's initial confusion transforms into amusement as he gazes at Elvir, while Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer ponder the joke. Lorenzo, however, casts a skeptical glance at Elvir, questioning the reasoning behind her jest.
- Lorenzo: Now why the hell would you use the same towel for both?! That's disgusting.
- Elvir: Why not? It's common knowledge—you start with the face and then move downward. The towel resets itself. It forgets everything the next day. Duh!
- Narrator: Lorenzo responds with a slight eye roll, while Cooper finds humor in Elvir's quip, chuckling softly before Dew redirects their focus.

Dew: Hah. All right. Let's get moving...

Narrator: The party members nod in agreement, their determination shining through their eyes. With a shared sense of purpose, they scatter in different directions, leaving the pier behind as they embark on their quest to find Rena. Sometime later, the scene cuts to Dew, his steps purposeful as he approaches Emily's house. Upon reaching the front door, he raises his hand and knocks. Silence surrounds him as he waits for a response. His gaze then drops to the ground where a lone letter rests, bearing his name. Bending down, he picks it up and carefully unfolds the paper, silently pondering the words written upon it.

Dew: *(reading the letter to himself)*

"Dear Dew,

If you're reading this, it means you kept your word and came back to see me again. I'm sorry—we must have just missed each other. Something unexpected came up, and I had to leave for a while. I've asked one of the neighbors to look after Aspen. They live in the old Stanchez place—Greg and Arvella. You wouldn't know them; they moved in after the Stanchezes left a few years ago. But they're good people. Aspen's in good hands. I don't know when I'll be back, or when I'll see you again... but hopefully soon. I'm sorry again.

With love,

Emily."

Narrator: Dew's heart swells with a blend of disappointment and understanding as he carefully folds the letter and tucks it into his pocket. With a heavy sigh, he departs from Emily's house and resumes his search for any leads on Rena's whereabouts, his footsteps resounding through the desolate residential streets. Hours pass unnoticed until Dew finally convenes at the dock with the party awaiting. The sound of seagulls permeates the air as boats glide in and out, their engines emitting soft hums. Dew anxiously surveys the party members hoping they have a lead

on Rena's whereabouts. Lorenzo is gazing into the horizon, while Krista engages in conversation with him. Vilmer paces back and forth, deep in thought. Elvir and Cooper are seated on adjacent crates, their faces marked by weariness and dejection. Dew then approaches, and the party turns their attention toward him.

- Dew: Hey, guys. How did everything go? Got any leads on Rena..?
Lorenzo: *(solemnly)* Nothing, man. I'm sorry.
Vilmer: *(halting in his pacing)* I asked around, but no one has seen her coming through any of the zones here in the province... *(then starts pacing again)*
Cooper: *(grimly)* Elvir and I got nothing either.
Dew: *(disheartened)* Oh.
Krista: We've searched every boat, every dock, but there's no sign of her.
Elvir: Yeah. It's like she vanished off the face of the Earth or something...
Dew: *(defeated)* Well, I haven't had any luck on my side either.
Krista: Bummer.
Dew: Tell me about it...
Cooper: Dew, how did it go when you checked up on your friend, the one you mentioned earlier? Was it Hoplyn's sister again?
Dew: Yeah. Emily. But she wasn't home. I guess I'll see her when I see her. But we have more pressing matters to deal with right now.
Krista: By the way, Dew, while we were out, I did go and check on the *Tor*. It's still parked in place. So at least she didn't take off with the RV.
Narrator: As Krista relays the news about the RV, Dew nods in relief, yet his thoughts remain consumed by Rena. A weighty mixture of frustration and concern overwhelms him, feeling powerless and anxious for Rena's safety. Lorenzo, sensing Dew's distress, steps forward and extends a comforting gesture, placing a reassuring hand on Dew's shoulder.
Lorenzo: ...Hey, Dew, I know this is tough, but we can't lose hope. Rena's proven to be resilient. If anyone can handle themselves out there, it's her. But we'll find her, buddy, I promise... *(then removes his hand from Dew's shoulder)*
Elvir: Yeah, Lorenzo's right.

Vilmer: *(suddenly stopping his pacing, and then faces Dew)* We've faced tough situations before, and we've always come out on top. Rena will be no different. We'll find her.

Krista: *(nodding in agreement)* ...And until we do, we'll keep searching every nook and cranny.

Cooper: Absolutely..!

Dew: I appreciate hearing that, guys. But where the heck could she have gone then..?

Narrator: As a hush settled over the group, each member found themselves immersed in their own musings, pondering Rena's whereabouts. Dew's mind raced with worry, conjuring up various perilous scenarios. Lorenzo's thoughts drifted towards Rena's unwavering resilience in the face of adversity. Krista's determination shone through her narrowed eyes, silently promising to exhaust every avenue in their search. Elvir and Cooper exchanged somber looks, conveying the weight of uncertainty they all felt. Vilmer furrowed his brow, delving deep into thought. Suddenly, a glimmer of realization crossed his face, prompting the others to watch him expectantly, awaiting his next words.

Krista: Vilmer? What is it..?

Vilmer: Wait a minute. Of course... What if she's at the Ganas Commune?

Narrator: Dew and the other party members exchange hopeful glances at Vilmer's sudden insight, a glimmer of anticipation dawning in their expressions as they dare to believe in the possibility.

Dew: You know, why didn't I think of that before?! Ah! Stupid. Stupid me. Duh..! *(then smacks his own forehead)* Thank you, Vilmer.

Vilmer: "In the maze of uncertainty, clarity serves as our guiding compass." ...And you're welcome.

Dew: Hah. You're starting to sound like her putting out quotes like that.

Narrator: Vilmer then offers Dew a grateful smile.

Lorenzo: ...Vilmer, you might be onto something.

Cooper: *(nods in agreement)* Agreed. She may be there.

Krista: Then, guys, let's get going.

Elvir: Dew, are you ready to head on out..?

Dew: I'm ready. Let's be on our way to the Ganas Commune.

Elvir: ...Who knew Rena would give Carmen Sandiego and Waldo a run for their money? Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... But hey, at least we'll have a story to tell when we do find her! All right. We're off to find our girl...

Narrator: With no other words to be said, Dew and the party then swiftly board the patrol boat, their eagerness to pursue the lead evident. Moments later, their vessel glides away from the weathered wooden dock at Twin Pines, the gentle lapping of waves providing a rhythmic accompaniment to their departure. As the patrol boat gains momentum, it leaves a foamy wake trailing behind. The familiar sights of Twin Pines gradually recede into the distance, giving way to the expansive Mesovillain Ocean ahead as they journey towards Ganas Commune. As twilight settles in, several hours have passed. In the distance, the outline of the Ganas Commune gradually emerges, a silhouette against the fading light on the horizon. The patrol boat smoothly glides into a nearby dock on shore. Upon securing the boat, Dew and the party disembark and make their way towards the quaint commune. As they draw near the entrance, the watchful eyes of the communal security promptly recognize them, allowing their passage without a hint of suspicion.

Scenario 1: "A Blossoming Meeting"

Narrator: Within the commune's tranquil confines, they navigate towards the communal garden, where the fragrant scents of blossoming flowers waft through the air. It's here that they chance upon a familiar face, Analia, who is attending to the flowers. Upon spotting Dew and the others, she turns to greet them with a warm smile.

Analia: (*cheerfully*) Oh, it's you all. Hey there! Welcome back. (*then gestures toward Dew*) ...You're Dew, right..?

Narrator: Dew and the party members reciprocate the warm greeting with smiles and nods.

Dew: I see you remember my name. (*heartfelt*) Analia, it's wonderful to see you again and to be back here at the commune. How have things been?



Analia: Everything's been peaceful and it feels like business as usual. I've been busy with the garden here and helping out where I can.

Dew: How's Taizo?

Lorenzo: Hopefully, that boyfriend of yours is staying out of trouble.

Analia: Hah. Yeah, he's doing well. He's been focused on his wood-working projects and is almost fully healed from his injuries. Thanks for asking, Dew. But if I had to guess, you all came back here for another reason, Hmm?

Dew: Well, actually... we're here looking for Rena. Have you seen her recently?

Analia: Ohhh. I see. That would make sense. Yes, she was here just yesterday. She stopped by and visited my dad. They had a lengthy conversation before deciding to leave together.

Narrator: Dew and the party members exchange glances, intrigued by this new information. Dew then asks for more details.

Dew: She's with your dad? They took off together? Hmm...

Analia: (*shaking her head*) ...My dad seemed in a rush. All he said was they had urgent business to attend to, something Rena needed help with.

Dew: Did they mention where they were going..?

Analia: No.

Dew: *(disappointed)* Ugh.

Analia: I did find it strange that she was alone and not with you all. Did something happen?

Narrator: Dew and the party members share silent glances, a subtle exchange of understanding passing between them. Dew clears his throat before redirecting his focus to Analia.

Dew: Analia, the truth is we got separated, and we thought Rena might have returned here. Our intuition proved correct. However, she's currently with your father, so there's no need to worry. I'm confident we'll cross paths with her again soon.

Narrator: Analia nods in understanding, though a hint of concern flickers across her features.

Analia: I see. If there's anything else I can do to assist, please don't hesitate to ask.

Dew: *(earnestly)* Thank you, Analia. But we'll be heading back out soon.

Analia: Dew, if anyone can handle whatever situation Rena's in, it's you all. But remember, the commune is always here if you need anything. *(then faces Elvir)* Oh, by the way, Elvir, the kids can't stop talking about you. You're like a hero to them.

Elvir: *(astounded and ecstatic)* Really? That's so sweet of those little Munchkins. I wish we had more time, but please tell them I was here and said hi, Analia.

Analia: I'll be sure to let them and Taizo know you stopped by. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some flowers that need tending to. Thanks for stopping by and take care.

Narrator: Analia offers a final nod before returning her focus to her garden, her cheerful disposition unchanged as she continues her work. Dew and the party members share appreciative looks before getting ready to leave once again.

Scenario 2: "A Wandering Reconnection"

Narrator: Within the commune's tranquil confines, Dew and the party weave through the serene communal gardens, the air rich with the scent of blooming flowers. Their path leads them towards the residential area of the commune. As they stroll,

they spot Taizo walking about. Suddenly, Taizo notices them, and his face lights up with recognition.

Taizo: Well, well, well, if it isn't my favorite adventurers! What brings you all back here?

Narrator: Dew and the party members return Taizo's warm greeting with smiles and nods.



Dew: Hey there, Taizo. How have things been?

Taizo: Quiet since you all handled that *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* problem. I've been keeping busy with my woodworking projects and pitching in around here. Can't say I've had a dull moment!

Lorenzo: You staying out of trouble?

Taizo: Absolutely, and I'm nearly fully healed from my injuries. I still owe you guys big time for swooping in and saving me back in the Buckass Badlands from those thugs.

Dew: Don't mention it. How's your girlfriend, Analia?

Taizo: She's doing well. She's probably out in the communal garden, tending to the plants. You probably passed her on the way

here. (*then faces Elvir*) Oh, and Elvir, the kids can't stop talking about you. They really admire you.

Elvir: Aw, you're making me blush. I miss those kids already. Tell them hello for me.

Taizo: You got it. So, what brings you all back here? Not planning on sticking around?

Dew: Actually, no. We're looking for Rena. Have you seen her recently?

Taizo: Rena? Can't say I have. Although, Analia did mention she saw her stop by yesterday and have a long talk with her dad, Mr. Torrio. They left together in a hurry, but I haven't seen them since.

Narrator: Dew and the party members exchange glances, intrigued by this new information. Dew then probes for more details.

Dew: She left with Mr. Torrio? Do you know where they went..?

Taizo: All I heard was that they had urgent business to attend to. Something about helping Rena. They didn't mention where they were off to, though.

Dew: Ugh, that's disappointing.

Taizo: Did you all get separated or something?

Narrator: Dew and the party members share silent glances, silently conveying their understanding of the situation. Dew clears his throat before refocusing on Taizo.

Dew: Yes, Taizo. That's what happened. We thought Rena might have come back here. Looks like we were right. But if she's with Mr. Torrio, then there's no need to worry. We'll find them eventually.

Narrator: Taizo nods in understanding, offering his assistance if needed.

Taizo: If there's anything else I can do to help, just let me know.

Dew: That's kind of you, Taizo. You've done enough. Thank you. But we'll be off on our way.

Taizo: Fair enough. Remember, you're always welcome here. I'll let Analia and the kids know you stopped by. Take care, adventurers.

Narrator: After a final nod of appreciation, Dew and the party bid farewell to Taizo, then proceed to make their way to the commune exit.

End of Scenario 1 & 2

Narrator: As they head towards the commune exit, they pause once more to engage in conversation with each other.

Lorenzo: There we have it. Rena's with Johnny...

Krista: Well, at least we know she's safe with him.

Cooper: But where..?

Dew: My guess is as good as yours...

Lorenzo: (*frustrated*) Well, fuck. They could be anywhere.

Narrator: The group falls into a troubled silence, each lost in their thoughts. Vilmer steps forward, his expression thoughtful as he addresses the group.

Vilmer: You know, there are still other provinces we haven't checked out yet. Such as Anahit in the Southwest Region. We could start there.

Narrator: Elvir's discomfort is evident as she shifts uneasily at the mention of Anahit. She hesitates before speaking, her voice tinged with apprehension.

Elvir: Anahit?! Why there?

Narrator: The party is taken aback by Elvir's unexpected objection. Cooper, sensing Elvir's distress, presses for an explanation.

Cooper: Why not there, Elvir..?

Narrator: Elvir hesitates, struggling to find a suitable explanation without revealing her true feelings. She briefly avoids eye contact with the party as she speaks.

Elvir: Oh, uh, it's just... People say it's gotten pretty rough over there lately. Not the kind of place we want to walk into blindly. Yeah.

Krista: This is the first I'm hearing about Anahit having these issues.

Elvir: Um. Well. I doubt those two would even waste their time stopping by a place like that. I think we should search elsewhere...

Cooper: Elsewhere?

Lorenzo: You bothered by a little danger? Heh. It can't be any worse than what we encountered in Llivisaca... Especially after dealing with you and your former associates in the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*. What's gotten into you? Are you feeling well?

Narrator: Before Elvir manages to devise an excuse, Dew furrows his brow, carefully contemplating Elvir's words.

Dew: Hmm... Well, it's worth investigating at least. We can't afford to overlook any possibilities. Besides, we've faced worse dangers before. We'll stick together and keep our guard up.

Narrator: Krista and Lorenzo nod in unison, while Vilmer extends a supportive smile. Although Cooper maintains skepticism toward Elvir's hesitation, he chooses not to delve deeper into the matter. All attention then shifts to Elvir, anticipating her reply. With evident reluctance, she nods in agreement, yet her lingering anxiety remains palpable.

Dew: (*decisively*) Okay, then. It's decided. We're heading to Anahit Province.

Vilmer: Sounds like a plan, Dew. Let's see what Anahit has in store for us.

Krista: Hopefully, we'll find Rena and Johnny there.

Dew: One can only hope...

Cooper: Let's not waste any more time.

Lorenzo: We'll be fine. Anahit won't be any different. Let's get going, y'all.

Elvir: Yeah. Fine. Off to Anahit... Ugh.

Narrator: Elvir strides forward, visibly vexed by the party's decision. Dew and the others briefly exchange puzzled glances, bewildered by Elvir's sudden change in demeanor. Nonetheless, they fall into step behind her as she leads the way back to the patrol boat. Leaving Ganas Commune behind, the party makes their way towards the docked patrol boat. Once aboard and prepared to depart, the others assume their positions as Elvir takes command of the patrol boat, her hands steady on the controls as she guides them back into the ocean. The engine's hum provides a soothing backdrop amidst swirling emotions. Despite her unease about returning home after so long, Elvir remains steadfastly committed to aiding in Rena's search. The patrol boat, enveloped by the serene nighttime ocean scenery, steadily progresses towards its intended destination in the Southwest Region, Anahit, disappearing into the horizon.

CHAPTER 3 - A RELUCTANT

HOME COMING

Narrator: The scene cuts to the next morning as the rising sun casts a golden hue over the water, painting shimmering reflections on its surface. The patrol boat smoothly glides into the berth at Anahit's Northern Zone marina, settling with a gentle bump. Overhead, seagulls call, and the distant sound of waves sets a rhythmic backdrop. Inside the bridge, Dew and the party are preparing to disembark. The air is thick with anticipation and quiet determination as each member readies themselves to continue the quest.

Dew: We finally made it to Anahit. Everyone ready?

Lorenzo: Ready as I'll ever be.

Krista: Ready and raring to go, Dew. Let's go find Rena and Johnny.

Vilmer: I'm ready to hit the ground whenever you all are.

Dew: Elvir..?

Narrator: Dew redirects his attention to Elvir, anticipating her response. However, she hesitates, her eyes flickering away from his gaze, searching for a distraction.

Elvir: Um... You all go ahead and search for Rena and Johnny. I think I'll stay with the boat. It's important to keep watch, and...

Narrator: Suddenly, Cooper, feigning discomfort, interjects.

Cooper: Ugh, I think I might be coming down with something.

Narrator: Dew and the party then shift their focus to Cooper, their expressions tinged with concern.

Elvir: *(raising an eyebrow)* Cooper?!

Dew: What's wrong..?

Cooper: Better if I stay behind too, just in case. Wouldn't want to slow you all down. I'm sorry guys...

Lorenzo: If you ain't feeling good, then it's better to stay here.

Krista: Yeah. We'll handle things out there, Cooper.

Vilmer: Whatever's best for the team. If you need to stay back, we understand. Just take care of yourself.

Elvir: No need to fret. I'll look after him as well. Go on ahead. Everything will be shipshape.

Dew: Yeah. At least you have Elvir here with you. We shouldn't be gone for too long. We'll be back in a few hours. Feel better friend.

Cooper: Thanks, everyone.

Dew: Okay then. See you two later.

Narrator: With unanimous agreement, the rest of the party nods and steps ashore, disappearing into the bustling streets of Anahit's Northern Zone. Elvir and Cooper linger aboard the boat, their eyes tracing the dwindling figures of their companions as they merge into the urban tapestry, swallowed by the zone's pulse. The distant sounds of the zone - chatter, honking cars, and distant music - drift across the water, mingling with the gentle lapping of waves against the hull. Minutes stretch on, with Cooper, still feigning illness, settling into a chair. His gaze alternates between the horizon and Elvir, who, meanwhile, uneasily glances around the familiar landscape.

Elvir: *(thinking to herself) Of all the places they could've chosen, they wanted to come here. Just my "luck"... Ugh... I haven't been here in so long. How much has changed? How much has stayed the same? And what if I run into him..?*

Narrator: Noticing Elvir's silent contemplation and sensing her discomfort, Cooper decides to break the silence.

Cooper: Hey, Elvir.

Elvir: *(then turns to face Cooper)* Hm?

Cooper: You know, it might do us some good to stretch our legs a bit. We can keep an eye on the boat from the shore.

Elvir: *(casting a hesitant glance at him)* I'm not entirely sure, Coop... And didn't you mention not feeling well?

Cooper: I'm beginning to think staying here isn't helping much... Maybe some fresh air would do me good after all. *(then smiles reassuringly)* Come on, let's just take a quick look around. We won't be gone for too long.

Narrator: Elvir nods reluctantly, curiosity and a need for distraction overcoming her hesitation.

Elvir: Sure, why not?

Cooper: *(nodding)* Great. It'll be good for both of us. Let's go then.



Narrator: The pair then exits the bridge, disembarking from the patrol boat, their footsteps echoing softly as they navigate their way from the marina into Anahit's Northern Zone, the bustling heart of the zone welcoming them with its vibrant energy. As Elvir and Cooper ventured through the Northern Zone of Anahit, they found themselves immersed in a picturesque scene characterized by winding canals and bustling water taxis ferrying passengers along the waterways. The surrounding architecture presented a charming fusion of old-world charm and modern elegance, featuring colorful buildings adorned with balconies overflowing with flowers. As they meandered through the cobblestone streets, the vibrant energy of the zone embraced them, with the sounds of laughter, music, and conversation permeating the air. While Cooper couldn't resist marveling at the beauty of their surroundings, Elvir found herself silently engulfed by a wave of nostalgia. After some time, their journey eventually led them to a poorer neighborhood known as Flea Bottom Heights, which was marked for potential construction—a revelation that surprised Elvir. Here, the atmosphere underwent a

noticeable shift as the vibrant colors of the cityscape gave way to muted tones. The streets grew quieter, and the buildings bore signs of neglect, with peeling paint and crumbling facades. As they delved deeper into the neighborhood, they passed by a group of people quietly assembling with picketing signs, preparing for a protest. A few blocks later, the two came across a three-story orphanage nestled in the heart of the neighborhood, a familiar sight to Elvir. Elvir's eyes shimmered with a blend of nostalgia and wonder as she gazed at the orphanage, while Cooper, intrigued, silently observed her before posing his question.



Cooper: Elvir? Why are we stopping here?

Elvir: *(smiling wistfully)* Because, Coop, this... this is home.

Narrator: Cooper's gaze shifts to the side of the Orphanage, where he spots a weathered sign that reads, "*Woodworm Orphanage.*" His eyes widen with understanding, a gentle realization dawning upon him.

Cooper: Oh, I see. So, this is THE orphanage... You're from here, Anahit.

Narrator: Elvir nods in acknowledgment and then hesitates briefly, her hand hovering over the aged doorknob, before mustering the courage to push it open. With a creak, the door yields, and she steps inside into the lobby, with Cooper quietly following behind. The atmosphere within is laden with memories, as the orphanage, both familiar and transformed, embraces their presence.



Elvir: *(whispering to herself)* Not too different from what I remember...

Narrator: Cooper observes Elvir closely, a blend of empathy and curiosity dancing in his eyes. With cautious steps, Elvir runs her fingers along the weathered walls and furniture, as if attempting to soak up every fragment of her past. Just then, a door to the dining room swings open, revealing an elderly woman: the head caretaker, Ms. Joanne Penway. As the dining room door behind Ms. Penway shuts, her eyes widen with surprise and joy as they fall upon Elvir, a long-lost familiar figure, and then Cooper, a new and unexpected visitor.

Ms. Penway: Elvir..? Is that really you?!

Narrator: Elvir's eyes widen, and her face immediately brightens with recognition.

Elvir: Ms. Penway! Oh my, it's been ages.

Narrator: Elvir and Ms. Penway rush towards each other and embrace warmly.

Ms. Penway: (*patting Elvir's back*) Oh, my dear child, it's been so long! Look at how you've grown!

Elvir: It's been too long, Ms. Penway. I'm sorry I haven't kept in touch.

Ms. Penway: (*smiling warmly*) Oh, don't you worry about that. I'm just glad to see you again.

Elvir: Same here.

Narrator: Then the two reluctantly let go of each other's embrace. Elvir then turns to Cooper, who has been quietly observing the exchange.

Elvir: Oh, how rude of me. Ms. Penway, this is my friend Cooper. Cooper, meet the woman who practically raised me and is the head caretaker here.

Cooper: (*nods politely*) It's nice to meet you, Ms. Penway.

Ms. Penway: (*grinning*) Oh, the pleasure is all mine, Cooper. Any friend of Elvir's is welcome here.

Narrator: Elvir gazes around the orphanage once more, her heart filled with a mixture of nostalgia and gratitude. Cooper smiles, understanding the significance of the orphanage to Elvir.

Elvir: This place... I've missed it. (*then faces Ms. Penway*) Hey, did you ever manage to fix that leaky faucet in the kitchen?

Ms. Penway: Ha-ha... Oh, you know me, always one step behind. But we managed just fine without your handy skills.

Elvir: I knew you all would do just fine without me. But I bet you DO miss my legendary pancake breakfasts.

Ms. Penway: Ha-ha... Oh, don't remind me! The kitchen was never the same without the smell of your blueberry pancakes in the morning. Remember when you almost burned down the kitchen trying to make them?

Elvir: (*grinning sheepishly*) Hey, it was one little fire! And it was under control... eventually. But what about your famous Sunday pot roast? The kids and I used to count down the days for that one. Oh—and those bomb-ass steamed hams... (*then*

briefly drools before catching herself and regaining composure)

Ms. Penway: *(smiling)* I still make both, you know. Some traditions are just too good to let die.

Elvir: Oh, yeah? And what about your Banana Curry pizza? I still dream about it. Mmm...

Ms. Penway: That was your favorite, wasn't it? I haven't made that in so long. Hm. Ha-ha...

Elvir: What's so funny, Ms. Penway..?

Ms. Penway: The memories that are coming back now... It just made me think of that time you made your "health tonic." Mixing cod liver oil, prune juice, and seltzer water together was a disaster. The children had stomach aches for days!

Elvir: Oh, yeah. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... I was just trying to keep everyone healthy!

Ms. Penway: Healthy? More like giving everyone a survival challenge! Oh, and do you remember the talent show you organized? You insisted on performing a juggling act with water balloons stuffed with eggs and mayonnaise. I'm still puzzled about how you managed to insert the eggs without cracking them. However, it didn't end well for the carpets.

Elvir: Who knew they would make such a mess? Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Ms. Penway: I had to scrub those stains for weeks! But, oh, it was worth it to see everyone laugh so hard.

Elvir: *(smiling)* Those were the days, huh? We made some good memories here, didn't we?

Ms. Penway: Indeed, we did, Elvir. And every single one is precious.

Narrator: Elvir and Ms. Penway laugh and then share a warm, nostalgic look, the bond between them stronger than ever. Suddenly, Elvir remembers the protesters she saw earlier and changes the subject to ask about them.

Elvir: Ms. Penway, when Cooper and I were coming this way, we noticed a small group of protesters down the block. What's with all the caution tape?

Narrator: Ms. Penway's expression shifts from initial joy to profound distress. Her eyes grow somber, and her smile fades as she carefully chooses her words to explain the dire situation.

Ms. Penway: *(sigh)* Ah, that... It's fortunate you came back when you did.

Elvir: What do you mean..?

Ms. Penway: Elvir, the residents are being forced out. The orphanage may have to close.

Elvir: What?!

Ms. Penway: It's the burgomaster's doing, or rather, your father's.

Narrator: Elvir's expression darkens at the mention of her father. Cooper notices and is surprised to discover that Elvir has a father.

Cooper: Father..? I thought you said you were an orphan?

Elvir: (*facing Cooper*) Yes... I have a father. It's complicated. I'll explain later. (*then tensely turns to Ms. Penway*) What's he up to now?

Ms. Penway: ...Several months ago, he lobbied for eminent domain to clear out this area. He intends to build upscale condominiums, retail spaces, restaurants, and entertainment venues, all at the cost of displacing us. What's worse, we're not receiving any compensation. Nothing.

Narrator: Elvir clenches her fists, her knuckles turning white from the pressure. Her mind races with memories of her father and the disappointment he has caused.

Elvir: (*angrily*) So, he's just going to bulldoze over people's homes and memories for his own profit, leaving you all homeless?

Ms. Penway: (*nodding sadly*) I'm afraid so, my dear. We even petitioned the seneschal to intervene, but our request was ignored.

Narrator: Elvir takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Her thoughts are a whirlwind of anger and determination.

Elvir: Of course, he's paid off the seneschal. He hasn't changed at all. In fact, he's gotten worse... even after she... I should never have left... (*resolutely*) Well, he won't get away with it. I won't let him. I'm here now.

Narrator: Seeing Elvir's fierce determination to help the neighborhood and save the orphanage, Cooper nods firmly in agreement. Inspired by her resolve, he steps closer, prepared to offer his full support and assistance.

Cooper: No, Elvir. We're here now, together. Count me in to help.

Elvir: (*facing Cooper*) Really? Thank you, Coop. It means a lot to me. (*then turns back to Ms. Penway*) When is this all supposed to happen?

Ms. Penway: (*gratefully*) Thank you both. Your help could make all the difference. As far as I know, they're planning to start demolition within the next two weeks.

Elvir: (*determined*) We still have time...

Narrator: Just then, the dining room door creaked open once more. A young girl, around the age of nine, named Betsy, timidly entered the room. Her small frame seemed to blend into the shadows as she hesitantly stepped forward. Elvir's mood shifted instantly, and her eyes lit up with joy at the sight of her.

Elvir: (*excitedly*) Hey toots!

Narrator: Betsy's face broke into a shy smile as she saw Elvir. Her eyes sparkled with a mix of relief and happiness, her shyness melting away.

Betsy: Elvir! You're back!

Narrator: Without hesitation, Elvir rushed toward Betsy and enveloped her in a warm embrace. They held each other tightly, their bond palpable and radiating warmth throughout the room. Betsy's small arms wrapped around Elvir with surprising strength.

Betsy: (*tearfully*) Oh, Elvir, I missed you so much!

Elvir: Oh-ho-ho... I missed you too, Betsy. It's been forever!

Narrator: Cooper and Ms. Penway watched the scene unfold, their eyes shimmering with emotion. The tender reunion touched their hearts deeply. Elvir finally pulled away from the embrace as Betsy wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

Elvir: (*grinning*) You're getting so big. What's new with you, toots?

Betsy: (*excitedly*) Not much. Just school and stuff.

Elvir: (*smiling*) So, how's school been treating you?

Betsy: (*rolling her eyes*) It's okay, I guess. Math is still hard, though.

Elvir: That doesn't sound fun. What else have they been teaching you around here? Any cool projects or just boring stuff?

Betsy: (*excitedly*) Actually, we did this awesome science experiment last week with volcanoes! I got to make one explode!

Elvir: (*raising an eyebrow*) Exploding volcanoes, huh? Did you get extra credit for that?

Betsy: Ha-ha... I wish! Mine was the best one. I practiced for weeks in class.



- Elvir: *(pretending to be serious)* Practiced explosions in class? Good thing everything turned out well. Not a single nick or bruise on you. Good job.
- Betsy: *(smiling appreciatively)* Thanks. Hey, Elvir. What about you?
- Elvir: Oh, you know, just the usual saving-the-world kind of stuff. Nothing too big.
- Betsy: *(playfully)* Yeah, right! You're like a superhero or something.
- Elvir: *(grinning)* Maybe. It looks like I came back just in time to save Flea Bottom Heights and keep the orphanage from being shut down.
- Betsy: So, you heard.
- Elvir: Yeah. But don't worry, I'm not alone. My friends and I will make sure this place remains our home, always.
- Betsy: Really, Elvir?
- Elvir: You know it, toots. But, hey. Don't tell anyone about me being a superhero. I've got to keep my secret identity safe.
- Betsy: *(whispering)* Your secret's safe with me. Ha-ha...
- Elvir: Thanks. You're the best. *(then ruffles Betsy's hair affectionately)* And don't you forget it!
- Betsy: Do the others know you're here?

Elvir: No, not yet. I just got in a little while ago. (*then turns to Ms. Penway*) Speaking of which, where is everyone?

Ms. Penway: Oh, some of the staff took a few of the kids to the market. They left just before you arrived. I imagine the rest are either in their rooms or playing out back.

Narrator: Elvir nodded, then turned to Cooper with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Her playful nature was evident as she addressed him.

Elvir: I'm sorry, Coop. I did it again. Hah. (*then gestures to Betsy*) Cooper, this is Betsy.

Betsy: Hey, Cooper.

Cooper: Hello, Betsy.

Elvir: This girl is like a little sister to me. But watch out, she's a troublemaker!

Cooper: (*playfully*) Oh really? Well, two troublemakers are better than one, right, Betsy?

Betsy: Yeah! We can make double trouble!

Ms. Penway: Oh dear, double trouble indeed. Just make sure you don't turn the orphanage upside down, all right?

Elvir: (*grinning*) No promises, Ms. Penway. But we'll try to keep the mischief to a minimum. Right, Betsy?

Betsy: (*nodding enthusiastically*) Right! We'll behave, Ms. Penway...

Elvir: Soitenly...

Narrator: Elvir and Betsy then shared a mischievous laugh, their joyous sounds filling the room and lifting the spirits of everyone present. Suddenly, a loud commotion from outside catches the attention of all four.

Cooper: What's going on out there..?

Narrator: Ms. Penway rushes to the window and peers outside, her face growing pale as she takes in the scene. The sounds of raised voices and clashing arguments filter into the room, making the atmosphere tense and uneasy.

Ms. Penway: (*anxious*) Oh. It looks like the protesters are being confronted by some agitators again.

Elvir: Agitators? Are they from my father's side?

Ms. Penway: Most likely, yes. They've been trying to intimidate the residents and break up the protests.

Elvir: This has gone too far. I can't just stand by and watch.

Ms. Penway: Elvir, be careful. These people can be dangerous.

Elvir: I'm sure they are.

Ms. Penway: Just promise me you'll be safe, Elvir. This neighborhood needs you, but so do we.

Betsy: Yeah, Elvir.

Elvir: Don't you both worry. I promise I'll be careful. I've dealt with worse before. I'll do everything I can to protect this place and everyone in it.

Narrator: Elvir and Cooper exchange a glance, their expressions steeled with determination. Elvir's jaw tightens, and Cooper gives a subtle nod, a silent understanding passing between them. They quickly leave the orphanage, their footsteps echoing purposefully as they head toward the escalating confrontation outside. The noise of the commotion grows louder with each step, the shouts and cries of the protesters blending with the aggressive taunts of the agitators. As they draw closer, they see protesters being pushed and shoved by masked agitators, their aggressive movements inciting chaos. Tensions reach a boiling point, and the scene erupts into a full-blown brawl, with fists flying and shouts echoing through the air. Elvir's eyes narrow as she spots a familiar face partially uncovered, the distinct features of someone she knows all too well becoming visible amid the frenzy.

Elvir: *(whispering to herself)* Jahiga. Unbelievable... *(then turns to Cooper and points to Jahiga)* That guy over there is one of my father's lackeys. I know him. Let's go say hello.

Narrator: Without hesitation, Elvir and Cooper charge into the chaos, pushing through the frenzied crowd to reach Jahiga and the masked agitators. The sounds of shouting, scuffling feet, and clashing bodies fill the air as they navigate through the brawl. Elvir's determination is evident as she plows forward, her eyes locked on Jahiga. As she shoves her way through the throng, her attention is momentarily captured by a protestor deftly executing a series of swift martial arts moves on an unsuspecting agitator, effortlessly dodging and striking with precision. Quickly refocusing, she continues her pursuit. Amidst the tumultuous fighting, they finally confront Jahiga, who is attempting to slip away unnoticed to the side.

Elvir: *(firmly)* Jahiga!

Narrator: Jahiga freezes and turns to face Elvir and Cooper, surprise flickering across his face as he recognizes her. His eyes widen in disbelief, momentarily losing the aggressive demeanor he wore just moments before.

Jahiga: Wha di hell—? Elvir? Fi true, dat you?

Narrator: Elvir's expression hardens, her eyes narrowing with resolve. She takes a step forward, the intensity of her presence palpable.

Elvir: (*nodding*) It's been a while, hasn't it?

Narrator: Jahiga shifts uncomfortably, his demeanor suddenly uncertain. His bravado falters as he takes in Elvir's fierce gaze. The tension between them is thick, a stark contrast to the chaos erupting around them.



Jahiga: (*uneasily*) Well, mi look pon dat... Ha-ha... been a while, eh? Look at you — all grown up now. What yuh doin' here?

Narrator: Elvir steps closer, her gaze piercing and unyielding. The noise of the surrounding brawl seems to fade as her focus locks onto Jahiga, her voice cutting through the turmoil with a steely edge.

Elvir: I should be asking you the same thing. I'm here to protect these people and my neighborhood from you and my father's intimidation tactics.

Jahiga: Oh?

Narrator: Elvir continues to look at Jahiga with utter disappointment and disgust, her voice steady and unwavering.

Elvir: What's happened to you? Has it really come to this, letting yourself be degraded by my father?

Narrator: Jahiga scoffs and steps forward, his presence imposing and his expression hardening. The air around them crackles with tension, but Elvir and Cooper stand their ground, unflinching in the face of his challenge. Jahiga's eyes then narrow, his bravado returning as he sizes up Elvir and Cooper.

Jahiga: (*coldly*) Walk off now—or face di consequences.

Elvir: No chance of that happening, Jahiga.

Jahiga: (*sneering*) So yuh come back to protect these people, Elvir? Dat's rich—no pun intended, daddy's little girl. Best run off like yuh did before, otherwise you and yuh friend might get hurt.

Elvir: I never ran away, Jahiga. I left because of him, became a better person, and grew stronger. Now I'm back to stop cowards like you from ruining this place.

Jahiga: (*sneering*) Stronger? Ha—yuh wish. Yuh outnumbered and outmatched.

Elvir: (*then smirks*) I've faced worse than you. You'll be easily beaten.

Jahiga: (*stepping closer*) Yuh chat big, but mi waan see if yuh can back it up now.

Elvir: I do have a big mouth, and that hasn't changed one bit. But I won't allow you and my father to bully these people any longer. My father's reign of intimidation ends here.

Jahiga: Ohh, so yuh tink yuh a hero now, eh? But heroes fall, Elvir. An' yuh will too — same way di neighborhood an' dat likkle orphanage yuh love so much did fall.

Narrator: As the clashes between the protesters and agitators rage on in the background, two masked agitators step up beside Jahiga, standing menacingly at his sides. Their presence only seems to boost his confidence.

Jahiga: Las' chance, Elvir...

Elvir: (*glancing at Cooper*) If I've learned anything on my journey away, it's that when you're fighting for what's right, the odds don't matter.

Cooper: (*nodding*) Ready when you are, Elvir.

Elvir: (*fixing her gaze on Jahiga*) Either step aside, or we'll make you.

Jahiga: Go on den, try yuh luck. Mek wi see if yuh got skill... or if yuh jus' mouth runnin'.

Narrator: Elvir and Cooper draw their weapons and assume fighting stances. Jahiga notices Cooper wielding a mop and can't help but crack a mocking smile. The two masked agitators join in, laughing.

Jahiga: Ha-ha-ha... a mop? Fi real? Yuh haffi a joke, man!

Cooper: You'd be surprised what a mop can do in the right hands.

Elvir: Jahiga, you might want to watch out. My friend here has a real talent for cleaning up messes.

Jahiga: Hmph. Yuh get one chance fi run, Elvir. Now dat big mout' a yuh? It cost yuh—yuh a pay fi it now.

Narrator: Without another word, Elvir and Cooper brace themselves, the tension in the air thickening as the confrontation reaches its peak. The masked agitators crack their knuckles, ready for a fight, while Jahiga, with a cruel smile on his lips, pulls out a butterfly knife and stands poised for battle. Jahiga then lunges at Elvir, his movements swift and calculated, but she meets his aggression with equal ferocity. The sound of clashing metal and the shouts of combatants fill the air as the battle rages on. Despite the mocking laughter from his opponents, Cooper proves his prowess with the mop, landing solid hits and defending himself with unexpected skill. The two masked agitators try to overpower Cooper, but he deftly maneuvers around them, using the mop's handle to trip one and strike the other across the face. Meanwhile, Elvir remains locked in a fierce duel with Jahiga, their movements a blur of speed and precision. With a final, well-placed strike, Elvir disarms Jahiga, sending his butterfly knife clattering to the ground. To Jahiga's surprise and embarrassment, Elvir and Cooper stand victorious, breathing heavily but unscathed. The once-confident smirk on Jahiga's face is replaced by a look of shock and humiliation.

Jahiga:

How... how yuh coulda do dat?!

Narrator:

Just then, the distant sound of SWAT TROOPER patrol car sirens pierces the night, causing the protesters and remaining agitators, along with the two who fought beside Jahiga, to scatter in all directions. The chaos begins to disperse as people flee the scene, and a sleek, luxury car suddenly pulls up to the edge of a nearby sidewalk. Jahiga, recognizing the vehicle, quickly runs toward it and jumps inside as the rear door opens. Moments later, a man in his mid-50s with an Indigenous appearance, impeccably dressed and exuding authority and presence, steps out. Elvir's eyes widen in shock and recognition—it's her father, Elzon Harjo. They lock eyes, the weight of unspoken words hanging between them. For a moment, the world seems to stand still as father and daughter lock eyes, staring each other down. Cooper stands silently to the side, observing.



Elzon:

...So, you've returned home, my daughter. From the terrified look on Jahiga's face, I see you've kept up your training. I wouldn't expect anything less from you.

Elvir: *(firmly)* And I see you haven't changed at all. This ends now, Father. Call off the demolition of Flea Bottom Heights and orphanage.

Elzon: What? No hello for your father? It's been so long. Hmph. Figures. Well, Elvir, the plans remain the same, and nothing you do will change that.

Elvir: You're destroying lives, Father. This isn't progress—it's cruelty.

Elzon: *(then smirks)* Always the moral compass, aren't you? But in the real world, power and progress come at a price. You know this.

Elvir: Then I'll fight you with everything I have. I won't let you ruin these people's lives. I'm here to stay until that is accomplished.

Elzon: Oh, is that so? Do as you wish, Elvir. You're just one person against an unstoppable tide. *(pauses, then talks to himself aloud)* Hmm... Are you willing to risk everything for these people..? *(turns to face Elvir)* Maybe we can have some fun with this, you and I. Ha-ha-ha... This conversation is over.

Narrator: With a final, cold glance, Elzon turns and re-enters the luxury car. The vehicle speeds away, leaving Elvir standing in the street, her resolve unshaken but the confrontation far from over. The sound of SWAT TROOPER patrol car sirens grows closer as the scene continues to clear. As the car disappears from view, Ms. Penway comes running toward Elvir and Cooper, who are sheathing their weapons. The two turn to face her as she comes to a stop, her eyes scanning for any sign of injury.

Ms. Penway: Elvir, Cooper, there you are. Are you both okay?

Elvir: We're fine.

Cooper: Yeah, nothing we couldn't handle.

Narrator: Ms. Penway nods, her worry easing slightly. The tension in her shoulders relaxes, and she lets out a small sigh of relief. Her eyes flick between them, still concerned but reassured by their calm demeanor. Ms. Penway then notices Elvir lost in thought and gives her a questioning look, curious about what's on her mind. Elvir briefly meets her gaze before responding.

Elvir: ...I briefly had a run-in with my father.

Ms. Penway: You did?

Elvir: Yeah.

Ms. Penway: How are you feeling?

Elvir: ...Determined. We've got a lot of work ahead of us, but we'll see this through.

Ms. Penway: I understand. Well, we should get back inside before the SWAT TROOPERS show up.

Elvir: (*shaking her head*) Actually, Cooper, I think you should go back with Ms. Penway to the orphanage.

Narrator: Cooper and Ms. Penway look surprised by Elvir's request. Ms. Penway's expression changes from concern to curiosity as she waits for Elvir to explain.

Cooper: Why..?

Elvir: I need to go back to the patrol boat and wait for the others to return. I'll need to explain everything to them about what's going on.

Cooper: (*nodding*) That makes sense. You got it, Elvir.

Narrator: Elvir smiles appreciatively at Cooper before turning to Ms. Penway.

Elvir: I'll be back soon, Ms. Penway. You both go on ahead.

Ms. Penway: (*nodding*) Be careful, Elvir. You know we need you.

Elvir: I will, Ms. Penway. And don't worry, we're going to get through this together.

Ms. Penway: (*smiling warmly*) I know we will. Just stay safe, all right?

Narrator: Ms. Penway's expression softens as Elvir takes off, heading back toward Anahit's Northern Zone marina. She and Cooper exchange a brief, concerned glance before turning to make their way back to the orphanage, the weight of the situation hanging heavily on their shoulders. As Elvir runs, her mind races with uncertainty about the challenges ahead and her father's haunting parting words.

CHAPTER 4 – A SAVING SANCTUARY

- Narrator: Several hours later, the scene cuts to the cozy living room area of Woodworm Orphanage. Elvir is just concluding her detailed explanation of the dire situation to Dew, Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer. The group is seated around her, listening with rapt attention. Ms. Penway stands to the side, her face a portrait of mixed emotions, displaying both worry and hope. Beside Elvir, Betsy sits on a small, worn armchair, looking up at her with wide, innocent eyes, clearly absorbing every word.
- Elvir: ...and that's why I need to stay. This place, these people, are my family. I can't let my father destroy their lives and memories. We have to stop him and save the neighborhood and the orphanage.
- Dew: So, if I understand correctly, your father plans to demolish the neighborhood to build upscale condos and retail spaces, right?
- Elvir: (*firmly*) Exactly.
- Krista: And he's using his influence and money to push through the demolition without compensating the residents or offering them any relocation support.
- Elvir: Yes. He's even bought off the seneschal to ignore their petition.
- Lorenzo: And the residents, including the orphanage, are being forced out with nowhere to go. This is all happening in two weeks, right?
- Elvir: (*nodding*) That's right. We have to act fast.
- Vilmer: You mentioned earlier that the protesters are being intimidated by agitators hired by your father to break their spirits and force them to leave.
- Elvir: Yes. And the orphanage is in danger too. If we don't stop him, the children will be left without a home.
- Lorenzo: Your father is just another typical rich asshole.
- Elvir: A major one. You have no idea.

Lorenzo: And what's the deal with you and him? Why is your relationship so shaky?

Narrator: Elvir's demeanor then shifts abruptly. Her body tenses, and her expression hardens, becoming immediately defensive, signaling her reluctance to delve into that topic.

Elvir: That's not something I want to get into right now, Lorenzo.

Narrator: Lorenzo notices Elvir's discomfort as soon as he asks about her father. Sensing her unease, he realizes he's touched a sensitive subject.

Lorenzo: Hmm... For you to have left your father at the age of 12 and moved in here, he must have done something pretty bad. All right. We'll talk about it when you're ready.

Cooper: *(then faces Dew)* So, Dew, even though we haven't found Rena and Johnny yet, this is important. We need to do whatever we can to protect these people and their homes.

Dew: *(then inhales and exhales)* I agree, Cooper. This isn't just about Elvir's past; it's about doing what's right. We can't just walk away from this. Plus, Elvir has been there for us throughout this journey of ours. So yeah. *(then faces Elvir)* We'll stay and help save the neighborhood and the orphanage from your father, Elvir.

Elvir: Really?

Dew: Yes. Really. We'll catch up and find Rena and Johnny later.

Ms. Penway: *(voice trembling with gratitude)* Thank you. Thank you all so much. We couldn't do this without you.

Lorenzo: Not a problem. We're in this together.

Krista: Happy to be of service. This is bigger than any one of us.

Dew: Besides, we have a knack for taking down the corrupt. Your father won't know what hit him. Isn't that right, "Chosha's chosen?" *(then cracks a smile)*

Narrator: Hearing Dew's comment to Elvir, Ms. Penway's face reflects her confusion. She raises an eyebrow and, unable to hold back her curiosity, seeks clarification.

Ms. Penway: "Chosha's chosen"?

Narrator: Elvir gives Ms. Penway a nervous smile, unsure of how to respond. The rest of the party senses that Ms. Penway is unaware of Elvir's *Hozho* lineage. Noticing the tension, Vilmer steps in to interrupt.

Vilmer: *(then rising from the chair)* You know, after all the crazy things we've been through, I never imagined we'd end up fighting a former member of the Plenum, a real estate mogul, and the founder of an online chat forum. What an interesting change of pace.

Krista: It'll make for another epic story in our adventure log.

Lorenzo: Hah! This whole adventure feels like we're living in a movie or book. The action never seems to end...

Narrator: At that moment, Rena's talisman around Dew's neck emits a faint flicker, unnoticed by everyone in the room. An unsettling wave of *déjà vu* crashes over Dew, making it feel as though time is slowing. The rest of the party exchange tense, silent glances with Lorenzo, who breaks the silence with a nonchalant shrug and a smirk. Dew snaps out of his trance as Krista deftly resumes the conversation, seamlessly following up on Lorenzo's comments.

Krista: ...Yeah, I can see it now: "*The Heroes of Woodworm Orphanage.*" It has a nice ring to it, don't you think? I'm copyrighting that.

Cooper: Heh. That's a movie I'd pay to see. Ready the popcorn and soda.

Elvir: Sure, sure. And don't forget the slow-motion action scenes. We'll look so cool. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... Just make sure you get my good side.

Betsy: Hee-hee-hee... You're all so funny. Can I help too, Elvir? I'll be the best sidekick you've ever had.

Elvir: Of course, toots. Every little bit helps. We'll need all the support we can get.

Narrator: Ms. Penway glances at her wristwatch, noting how much time has passed. She then shifts her attention to Betsy, a gentle reminder in her eyes.

Ms. Penway: Betsy, I believe it's time for you to join the other children for the evening activities.

Narrator: Betsy, reluctant to leave, pouts but eventually nods. She gives Elvir a quick, affectionate hug before heading off. Ms. Penway, suddenly recalling something, turns her attention to Elvir, curiosity etched on her face as she prepares to ask her question.

Ms. Penway: Elvir, it just occurred to me—where have you been all this time, and how did you meet your friends here?

Narrator: Elvir turns and silently exchanges glances with Dew and the other party members, her mind racing to fabricate a plausible story for Ms. Penway. She is intent on hiding the true purpose of their journey.

Elvir: Oh, that... I've been in Llivisaca, earning a bob or two through trading. I recently happened to bump into Dew and the others there...

Narrator: Elvir hesitates, struggling to come up with a convincing story. Noticing her unease, Cooper steps in to elaborate and support her explanation.

Cooper: We were passing through while searching for two friends we lost track of during our travels.

Ms. Penway: Oh, I see. That's who Rena and Johnny are.

Elvir: Exactly. After getting along so well with Dew and the others, I decided to join them. It's been quite the adventure, more like a circus, really. And eventually, we found ourselves here. Funny how things work out, huh?

Ms. Penway: Well, it's good to have you back, Elvir, and to see you've made such good friends.

Elvir: Yep. I'm chuffed to have met them. And thank you all again for doing this, guys. I mean it...

Lorenzo: So, what's the plan now? How do we go about stopping your father..?

Narrator: Before Elvir can respond, Ms. Penway steps forward with a warm smile, ready to speak.

Ms. Penway: If I may, I have rooms available for each of you. You've had a long journey, and you shouldn't stress over this right now. I'm sure this matter can be tackled with fresh minds in the morning.

Elvir: Ah. You're right, Ms. Penway. We're no good to anyone if we're pooped. It's been quite the day.

Dew: Agreed. We'll get a fresh start in the morning.

Ms. Penway: Fantastic. *(then turns to Elvir)* Elvir, I trust you can still find your way around the orphanage. Not much has changed.

Elvir: *(nodding)* Got it.

Ms. Penway: Good. And I'll have the caretakers show your friends to their rooms.

Dew: Thank you, Ms. Penway. We appreciate it.

Lorenzo: Yeah, it's been a long day. It'll be nice to sleep in a bed that doesn't move for a change. It sure beats sleeping on that patrol boat.

Cooper: Same here. Thanks for the hospitality, Ms. Penway.

Krista: *(smiling)* Thank you.

Vilmer: Thank you for your kindness, Ms. Penway.

Ms. Penway: You're all very welcome. I'm just glad Elvir has such good friends to rely on.

Narrator: Two caretakers then step forward into the living room and guide Dew, Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer to their respective rooms. As the group heads off, Elvir lingers for a moment, exchanging a look of deep gratitude with Ms. Penway. The warmth and understanding in their eyes reflect the bond they share.

Elvir: *(softly)* Thank you, Ms. Penway, for everything.

Ms. Penway: *(smiling warmly)* No, thank you and your friends, Elvir. Now, go reacquaint yourself with the place and enjoy the evening my dear.

Narrator: Elvir nods and starts to explore the orphanage, her steps filled with a mix of nostalgia and determination. Meanwhile, the others settle into their rooms, taking in the cozy, welcoming atmosphere of their temporary home. On the first floor, Elvir finds herself in the kitchen, where the aroma of baked bread and

simmering stew fills the air. The room is bustling with activity as children and caretakers prepare dinner. Elvir smiles warmly at the sight of a young female orphan struggling to knead dough while a caretaker, who is cooking, patiently guides her small hands.

Elvir: Need a hand..?

Orphan 1: (*grinning*) Yes, please, Elvir!

Narrator: Elvir steps in, effortlessly kneading the dough with practiced and fluid movements. Orphan 1 watches in awe, trying to mimic her technique. The caretaker gives Elvir an appreciative nod before moving on to stir a large pot on the stove. The children and caretakers, recognizing Elvir, greet her with warmth and excitement, happy to see her back.

Caretaker 1: Elvir! It's so good to see you again. The kids missed you.

Elvir: It's good to be back. (*then cracks a smile*)

Narrator: Elvir then wanders into the meeting room, a space filled with mismatched chairs and an old, worn-out table. She notices a group of children huddled around a board game, their faces lit with excitement and concentration. Elvir chuckles softly as she watches them strategize and compete, their laughter filling the room. Moving on, she finds herself in the classroom, where the remnants of the day's lessons are still visible on the chalkboard. The room is empty now, but Elvir can almost hear the echoes of eager voices and the rustling of papers. She runs her fingers along the desks, remembering her own time spent in this room, learning and dreaming of adventures beyond the orphanage walls. In the dining room, the long tables are set for dinner, the clinking of silverware and chatter of children creating a comforting hum. Elvir exchanges greetings with a few of the caretakers setting up the place, their faces lighting up with recognition and warmth.

Caretaker 2: Welcome back, Elvir. The kids have been asking about you.

Elvir: (*smiling*) I've missed them too.

Narrator: Heading to the second floor, Elvir steps into the playroom, a space filled with toys, books, and colorful drawings pinned to the walls. A group of younger children is engrossed in a game of make-believe, their imaginations running wild. Elvir kneels down to join them for a moment, her heart swelling with affection as they excitedly include her in their fantastical stories. Next, Elvir visits the orphans' bedrooms. The rooms are small but cozy, each bed adorned with personal touches—stuffed animals, handmade quilts, and cherished mementos. Elvir takes a moment to tuck in a few of the younger children who have already settled in for the night, their sleepy faces glowing with trust and love. In one of the rooms, she finds Betsy already asleep, her small frame curled up under a soft blanket.

Elvir: Sweet dreams, little one.

Narrator: On the third floor, Elvir walks through the staff bedrooms, where the caretakers rest after their long days. The rooms are simple and functional, but the sense of dedication and care is palpable. She exchanges a few words with Ms. Penway, who is preparing for bed, thanking her once again for all she has done.

Ms. Penway: Elvir, it's wonderful to see you reconnecting with everyone. Your presence means so much to them.

Elvir: Thank you, Ms. Penway. It's good to be back.

Ms. Penway: Well, if you'll excuse me... it's time for bed. Don't stay up too late, okay?

Elvir: I won't. Good night.

Narrator: As Elvir continues her exploration, she encounters Dew in the hallway, leaning against a doorframe with a thoughtful expression.

Dew: Taking a trip down memory lane?

Elvir: Something like that. It's good to see everyone again.

Dew: I'm sure it is. There's no place like home.

Elvir: No place like it, indeed. Everything feels smaller, though. Or maybe I've just grown up.

Dew: Could be both. You seem more... settled. Not like when we first met.

Elvir: You mean less antagonistic?

Dew: *(grins)* Exactly.

Elvir: Well, you know what they say: a hero's just a villain with a change of heart.

Dew: And here I thought you'd say a hero's just a villain with better PR.

Elvir: That too. *(then smirks)* So, how are you holding up?

Dew: I'm well.

Elvir: Good. Hey, Dew. I'm glad you're here. I couldn't do this without all of you.

Dew: We've got your back, Elvir. Always. *(pauses, then looks around)* So, I take it Ms. Penway doesn't know about you being the last of the *Hozho*?

Elvir: No, I've never told her about that, and I don't intend to ever tell her about my time in the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* either. I want to spare her and the others the additional stress of knowing about such things. Dealing with the potential loss of their homes is hard enough.

Dew: Ah, I understand. Hmm... Do you ever think about what you'd be doing if you hadn't left?

Elvir: *(sigh)* Sometimes. But then I remember why I left in the first place and see how far I've come. No regrets.

Dew: That's the spirit. No looking back, only forward.

Elvir: Speaking of looking forward, what's our next move?

Dew: First, we rest. Then, we plan. Tomorrow, we take action. We'll stop your father and save this place. Together.

Elvir: Together. Thanks, Dew.

Narrator: Elvir briefly glances at Rena's talisman hanging openly around Dew's neck. A wave of familiarity washes over her again. She offers Dew an appreciative smile, then continues her exploration. A bit later, further down the hall, she comes across Lorenzo, who is admiring a series of old photographs on the wall. The photos capture various moments from the orphanage's history: children playing in the yard, past caretakers

with warm smiles, and group shots from holiday celebrations.

Lorenzo: These are good photos.

Elvir: (*then nods*) Yeah, they capture so many memories.

Lorenzo: They do. There's something timeless about a good photo. It's like a snapshot of a moment that never changes.

Elvir: It's comforting, in a way. Seeing these faces and places again brings back so many feelings.

Lorenzo: Any embarrassing childhood stories hidden in these memories?

Elvir: Oh, plenty. Like the time I tried to cook for everyone and almost set the kitchen on fire. Well, one of many times that is...

Lorenzo: That sounds like a story I need to hear in full detail later.

Elvir: Maybe, if you're lucky. So, what about you? Any embarrassing moments from your past?

Lorenzo: (*cracks a smile*) More than I care to admit. Like the time I tried to impress my master, Aquagonla. He had shown me a jumping technique, so I decided to test it by jumping off a 10-foot garage roof. It didn't end well.

Elvir: What?! Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... Bet you learned your lesson quickly.

Lorenzo: Oh, definitely. It was a perfect jump, but the moment I landed, I slipped and fell right on my tailbone. He had a good laugh when that happened. My ass was sore for three weeks. Ha-ha-ha... I've had my share of reckless moments. But hey, they make for good stories, right?

Elvir: Absolutely. And they shape who we are. Every scar has a story.

Lorenzo: Wise words, Elvir. Wise words...

Narrator: Elvir continues her exploration, leaving Lorenzo to admire the other photos on the wall. In a nearby hallway, close to the attic trap door, Krista has just finished helping a caretaker arrange some boxes. She

turns around as Elvir approaches, a warm smile spreading across her face.

Elvir: Hey, Krista. What are you up to..?

Krista: Just helping out with moving some boxes. Thought I'd lend a hand.

Elvir: That's kind of you. But you're a guest here.

Krista: It wasn't a problem. So, how about you? How's the trip down memory lane?

Elvir: It's been... emotional. It's good to see everyone again, though.

Krista: (*nodding*) I bet. You know, the situation with your father... that's tough.

Narrator: Elvir hesitates, her expression briefly clouded with uncertainty before she takes a deep breath and responds.

Elvir: It is. But we'll find a way to save this place.

Krista: We will. You've got a strong team behind you. And you're pretty tough yourself.

Elvir: Thanks. I just... it's hard to face him again after all these years.

Krista: I understand. Remember what I went through with Ketcy? It wasn't easy, but we found a way to work things out in the end.

Elvir: Yeah, I remember. You two had quite a rough patch for a while.

Krista: We did. After I left the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad* and his continued involvement with the gang, it was hard to see him go down that path. But it taught me that sometimes, you have to let go of the past to move forward. Holding onto anger and hurt only makes things harder.

Elvir: (*sigh*) It's just... I don't know if I can ever forgive my father for what he's doing... for what he has done...

Krista: And that's okay. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting or excusing what happened, whatever it may have been. It's about freeing yourself from the burden of that anger. It took me a while to realize that with Ketcy.

Elvir: (softly) I guess I'm just scared of what might happen if I let my guard down.

Krista: It's normal to feel that way. But you've got us here with you. You don't have to face him alone. And whatever happens, we'll handle it together.

Elvir: Thanks, Krista. Your advice means a lot to me.

Krista: Anytime.

Narrator: Krista then heads toward her assigned bedroom while Elvir briefly explores the attic, noting the old trunks filled with forgotten memorabilia, dusty supplies stacked in the corners, and cobwebs draping the rafters. The dim light from a single overhead bulb casts long shadows, giving the space an air of mystery and nostalgia. Afterward, she makes her way to a cozy lounge area furnished with plush chairs and warm lighting, where she finds Vilmer quietly reading. As Elvir approaches, he looks up with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Vilmer: Ah, Elvir.

Elvir: What are you reading?

Vilmer: Just some old journals. Helps pass the time. Reflecting on the past, you know.

Elvir: I can relate. This place holds so many memories for me.

Vilmer: Of course it does. Memories are precious, but we must be careful not to get too caught up in nostalgia. It can keep us from moving forward.

Elvir: That's true. How are you holding up with everything?

Vilmer: Oh, you know me. Just taking things one step at a time. This place reminds me of simpler times, before all the climbing and guano harvesting.

Elvir: Yeah, I still can't get over the guano harvesting.

Vilmer: Ha-ha... It's not as glamorous as mountain climbing, but it's honest work. And it keeps me grounded.

Elvir: Hmm... Hey, Vilmer. If you don't mind me asking, are your parents still around?

Vilmer: I don't mind at all. Yes, they're still alive, but they live outside of Mesovilla. We write to each other often.

It's been years since I've seen them. Maybe after this journey, I'll visit them.

Elvir: That's definitely worth considering. Erm, Vilmer...

Vilmer: Yes, Elvir?

Elvir: I'm not sure how to ask this without sounding intrusive.

Vilmer: What is it?

Elvir: I hope you don't mind me asking, but I heard from the others about your climb. They told me the entire story. It must have been really difficult losing Aldous, wasn't it?

Vilmer: (*somber*) It was. Losing Aldous was one of the hardest things I've ever gone through. But you learn to carry on. Aldous wouldn't have wanted me to give up. Sometimes, the hardest part is moving forward without them.

Elvir: I get that. I've been struggling with facing my father again. It's hard to move past everything he's done.

Vilmer: ...It's not easy, Elvir. But holding onto that anger won't help you. Trust me, I've been there. It's about finding peace within yourself and doing what you believe is right. That's all you can do.

Elvir: Thanks, Vilmer. That's really good advice.

Narrator: Elvir then leaves Vilmer to his reading and eventually makes her way back to the first floor, noticing several hours have passed. She steps outside into the backyard, where the night air is cool and refreshing, and the sky above is a blanket of twinkling stars. Finding a quiet spot, she sits down and gazes up at the heavens. The peacefulness of the moment allows her to reflect on the journey that brought her here and the challenges that lie ahead. A few minutes later, Cooper quietly approaches, sensing Elvir's need for companionship. He sits down beside her, and together they stare up at the starry sky in comfortable silence.

Cooper: (*softly*) It's beautiful, isn't it?

Elvir: *(then nods in agreement)* It really is. I used to come out here all the time, just to look at the stars and dream about the future.

Cooper: And now you're back, fighting for that future.

Elvir: *(sigh)* Yeah. It's strange, you know? Being back here, facing all these memories. But it feels right. Like this is where I'm meant to be, at least for now.

Cooper: We're all here for you, Elvir. Whatever happens, we'll face it together.

Elvir: *(nods)* That means a lot. *(then pauses, her gaze drifting upward as memories flood back)* ...On nights like this, me mum and I would gaze at the stars together.

Cooper: Your mom? Hmm. Where is she now?

Elvir: *(voice trembles slightly)* She... she got ill, Coop... and "moved on" from us... I miss her every day.

Cooper: *(in a hushed, almost disbelieving tone)* Are you saying she's... dead?

Elvir: Yes.

Cooper: I'm so sorry... *(thinking to himself)* ...I know that pain too well.

Elvir: *(a bittersweet smile forms)* Thank you. Yeah. She was a good mum.

Cooper: Do you mind if I ask how she passed away?

Narrator: Elvir pauses, her breath catching as she grapples with the painful memory. For a moment, she's unsure whether to reveal the depths of her sorrow. But as she looks into Cooper's concerned eyes, a sense of trust washes over her, giving her the courage to continue.

Elvir: It was from ALS. She eventually took her own life... it was that unbearable...

Cooper: *(expression softening, deep empathy in his eyes)* Damn. I'm so sorry, Elvir. Losing a loved one is never easy, especially like that.

Elvir: *(nodding, a tear escaping down her cheek)* It was... watching her fade away, knowing there was nothing I could do... it tore me apart. But she ended it on her own terms.

Cooper: *(then gently reaches out and squeezes her hand)*
 You've been through so much. But your strength, your resilience... your mom would be so proud of you.

Elvir: *(voice then steadies, finding comfort in his words)*
 Thank you, Coop. She always believed in me, and that's what keeps me going. I just hope I can make her proud.

Cooper: You already have, Elvir.

Narrator: Cooper offers Elvir a reassuring smile, their eyes locking in a moment of deep understanding. In that instant, a stronger bond forms between them, rooted in empathy, trust, and the early signs of love. Elvir's thoughts drift back to her mother, causing her to turn away as the memories wash over her like a bitter-sweet tide, each one a blend of joy and sorrow.

Elvir: Hmm...

Cooper: What's wrong..?

Elvir: Oh. I just remembered... when we would watch movies together – *"Angels With Filthy Souls"*, *"Chubby Rain"*, *"Bloodfist"*, *"Psycho Kickboxer"*, *"Karate Cop"*, *"Lost Faith"*, *"Back in Action"*, *"Fight to Win"*, and *"Shazaam"*—the one Sinbad starred in... those were our favorites... and how we'd talk and laugh for hours... sometimes cry and hug too... we were always together... her and I were inseparable... She and I used to do karaoke together too.

Cooper: Yeah?

Elvir: Oh, she loved *Vennu Mallesh* and his songs, *"It's My Life, Whatever I Wanna Do,"* and *"U Love Me 2"*. *(then reflects further)* Hmm... We had this one song we sang often. You might know it. It's called, *"My Stick,"* by Bad Lip Reading. They're nice!

Cooper: *"My Stick"*? I've never heard of that song or that group.

Elvir: Well, you are missing out on some nifty bops. Would you like to hear it..?

Cooper: Sure.

Elvir: Awesome! Let me see... I'm trying to remember the lyrics... Hmm... it went a little like this...
*"My stick, my stick,
 My stick is better than bacon.
 Mmm-ah-ha-ha-hmmm
 You can't touch my stick.
 I don't wanna!
 Mmm-ah-ha-ha-phfrr
 Yeah, you want my stick!"*

Cooper: It's silly but kinda catchy. It's much better than listening to Snake Jazz or Opera.

Elvir: Oh, I hate Opera music. It's not just boujee, but it sounds like cats are in heat.

Cooper: Don't let Vilmer hear you saying that. Ha-ha...

Elvir: ...If anything, video game music is more tolerable.

Cooper: Hey. Video game music is music!

Elvir: But is it?

Cooper: Pfft. Anyway... great vocals you have on you. The practice paid off.

Elvir: Well, thank you.

Narrator: For a moment, a soothing silence envelops them as they continue gazing into the starry night sky. The tranquility of the moment is palpable, each lost in their thoughts. Then, Cooper breaks the silence, again, a question forming on his lips, one he has been curious about for some time.

Cooper: Elvir...

Elvir: Yes, Coop..?

Cooper: Why did you initially tag along with us?

Elvir: ...Like I said before, I wanted to be useful and do something good... to make up for all the bad things I have done... My time with the *Mantid Oscuro Sociedad*, I almost forgot who I was... I brought shame to my *Hozho* ancestors... I almost ended up like him... *(then clenches her fists, a mix of anger and regret in her eyes)* ...I'll never again allow myself to slip like that!

Cooper: Are you talking about your father..?

Elvir: Yes, him. Before my mum passed, he was never around... He was always so distant, so consumed by his work... consumed by power and greed... sure, he thought throwing money at things would make it better... but it didn't... it didn't save her...

Cooper: So that's why you were reluctant to speak about your father.

Elvir: *(solemnly nods)* Bah... So, Coop, since I've been nattering on about myself, let's change the subject. Tell me something about you.

Cooper: About me..? I guess that's fair... *(then takes a deep breath, glancing up at the stars as if searching for the right words)* Well, I had a modest upbringing... I didn't have many friends or even girlfriends growing up... it was mainly just me and my family... my Pa, when he cared or was able to...

Elvir: Oh? So... when's the last time you saw your family?

Narrator: Cooper pauses, the weight of the memories heavy in his eyes, revealing a profound sadness that has been buried deep within him for years.

Cooper: It's been a while... actually, both he and my mom... are dead.

Elvir: I'm sorry... I...

Cooper: It's okay... He's just some dead alcoholic military veteran, and my mom... she passed away while I was serving in SWAT TROOPER ELITE...

Elvir: Oh... oh, bloody hell...

Cooper: *(sigh)* ...What a mood killer, right..? Ha-ha... I'm sorry... it's hard for me to talk about my family, and yet you've opened up to me about yours...

Elvir: No, it's fine. Don't apologize... But I can see we definitely relate when it comes to our family issues... Um... It's probably best to talk about something else now... And, hey... If you ever need a chat about anything, I'm always here for you too...

Cooper: Are you?

Elvir: Always, Coop.

Cooper: Thanks, Elvir. (then cracks an appreciative smile) By the way... I do love playing video games as much as I love the music.

Elvir: Really? Any favorites..?

Cooper: Yes. "*Violence Fight*" is the greatest fighting video game of all time, in my opinion. And I also enjoy games made by LJN, Acclaim Entertainment, and Datasoft.

Elvir: Really? That's awesome.

Cooper: Yeah, it helps me relax and escape. There's something about getting lost in a good game, you know? Especially when everything around you feels chaotic.

Elvir: I get that. It's like having a little world where you can control things, where everything makes sense.

Cooper: Exactly. And there's something special about the older games. They remind me of simpler times.

Elvir: Simpler times... Yeah, I miss those. I think I'd enjoy that escape with you, Coop.

Narrator: Elvir and Cooper turn to face each other once more, their eyes meeting in a timeless gaze before Cooper speaks.

Cooper: I'd like that too, Elvir...

Narrator: As Elvir and Cooper share a moment of deep connection, their intimacy intensifies. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the distance between them narrows, their faces drawing closer until the space between their lips is barely a breath apart. Just as it seems they might kiss, the soft rustling of footsteps announces the arrival of one of the caretakers, who enters the backyard, interrupting the moment. Startled and embarrassed, Elvir and Cooper quickly turn to face the approaching caretaker, who holds a letter in her hand.

Caretaker 2: Oh, sorry to interrupt, Elvir. But someone stopped by a few moments ago, and left a letter for you. They said it was urgent. Here you go...

Narrator: Caretaker 2 hands Elvir a folded piece of parchment. She accepts it, her eyes scanning the familiar handwriting with a mix of curiosity and urgency, while Cooper stands beside her, eager to know what it entails.

Cooper: What does it say?

Narrator: Elvir continues reading the letter silently, her eyes narrowing as she absorbs the contents. After a moment, she looks up to respond.

Elvir: I need to head to Oyáte Plaza straight away.

Cooper: Where's that? And why?

Elvir: It's in the center here, in the Northern Zone. We're not far from there. As for why, I'll explain everything later.

Cooper: Wait. Shouldn't we get the others to come along?

Elvir: No, there's no need for that.

Cooper: Okay, but are you sure you don't need backup? It sounds serious.

Elvir: We don't have time to wait for the others. It is serious, but I already have someone I can rely on, and that's you.

Cooper: *(then grins)* Flattery will get you everywhere, Elvir. But seriously, what's so urgent that it can't wait?

Elvir: I'll tell you everything once we're there. Just know it likely involves something my father might be planning.

Cooper: *(then raises an eyebrow)* Your father again? That man never quits, does he?

Elvir: Nope, he doesn't. Now, come on, let's not waste any more time.

Cooper: *(teasingly)* Lead the way, oh fearless one.

Narrator: Elvir gives Caretaker 2 a grateful nod before quickly setting off with Cooper, leaving the orphanage and heading towards Oyáte Plaza. The cool, crisp night air is charged with an unmistakable sense of urgency. As they navigate the winding streets, their minds race with countless possibilities of what might await them at the plaza.

CHAPTER 5 – THE GAUNTLET OF ANAHIT



Narrator:

An hour later, the scene cuts to Elvir and Cooper arriving at Oyáte Plaza, a lively open square centered around a towering illuminated obelisk rising above a broad stone staircase. Elegant neoclassical buildings surround the plaza, their arched windows glowing warmly beneath the dark, star-filled sky. Terraced gardens filled with trees, flowering plants, and decorative lights climb toward the upper levels, while ornate lampposts bathe the stone walkways in a soft amber glow. At the heart of the plaza stands a large covered wooden stage facing a sizable late-night crowd gathered across the square. Cafés line the outer edges, their tables, chairs, and colorful

umbrellas still arranged beneath the surrounding buildings. Despite the late hour, Oyáte Plaza remains vibrant and crowded, with hundreds of people gathered around the stage as a gentle breeze carries the scent of the surrounding gardens through the warm night air. Elvir and Cooper approach the crowd gathered tightly around the hastily erected stage, where the steady murmur of conversation fills the plaza. Curiosity and anticipation ripple through the assembled citizens as their attention remains fixed on the brightly illuminated stage. Burgomaster Dyani Chee stands at its center, tall and imposing, flanked by his trusted advisors. Carrying himself with unmistakable authority, Dyani steps forward and raises a hand for silence. The conversations gradually fade until the plaza grows quiet. His commanding voice carries across the square as his gaze sweeps over the crowd, ensuring he has their full attention before beginning to speak.

Burgomaster Chee: Citizens of Anahit's Northern Zone, it is indeed late in the evening, and I commend your patience and resilience during these trying times. In light of recent events—the relentless protests and the sporadic acts of violence that have afflicted our community—I stand before you on short notice with a proposition to alleviate these tensions. The esteemed Elzon Harjo, with the full sponsorship of Anahit's Northern Zone government, has proposed a tournament—a grand spectacle designed to unite us all. This event will be a showcase of courage, skill, and honor. Rich in tradition and spirit, it promises not only to entertain but also to restore peace and harmony to our troubled zone.

Narrator: The crowd shifts uneasily at first, memories and emotions stirred by the mention of recent unrest. However, the announcement of a tournament quickly captures their attention and curiosity. A blend of apprehension and intrigue fills Elvir as Burgomaster

Chee continues speaking, his voice steady and commanding.

Burgomaster Chee: This grand tournament will unfold over a two-day period, commencing tomorrow evening and concluding the following day. Thirteen combatants have been carefully selected, each given the chance to compete for a staggering cash prize of 20 million Wertes, graciously provided by Elzon Harjo. Among you stands an individual—a person, as I have been informed, who has been a catalyst for the recent violence...

Narrator: The crowd reacts with gasps, exchanging suspicious glances with one another. Elvir raises an eyebrow, curiosity piqued as she wonders where Burgomaster Chee is heading with this revelation. Cooper stands silently beside her, equally intrigued.

Burgomaster Chee: This individual, much like many from their neighborhood, seeks to save Flea Bottom Heights and the Woodworm Orphanage. Here and now, this person will be given the opportunity to act as a representative and compete in the tournament on their behalf...

Narrator: The crowd erupts in a blend of shock and anticipation. Murmurs ripple through the assembly, creating a buzzing atmosphere of excitement and curiosity. Some faces light up with hope, while others reflect skepticism. Elvir narrows her eyes, her mind racing with the implications of what she has just heard.

Elvir: *(whispering to herself)* So, this is what he had planned... Okay, Father... I'll play along...

Narrator: Cooper glances at Elvir, his face etched with concern. Unbeknownst to her, her father, Elzon observes from the shadows of the crowd, his eyes fixed intently on her and then the stage. His gaze is a blend of curiosity and anticipation. Meanwhile, Burgomaster Chee continues to speak, his commanding voice resonating through the assembly.

Burgomaster Chee: Should she choose to participate and manage to sequentially defeat the thirteen chosen fighters and two surprise challengers, with each match lasting nine minutes and an eleven-minute respite following

each of the first thirteen matches, including one following the first surprise challenger thereafter, in this grueling survival mode... this Gauntlet of Anahit, the demolition plans for Flea Bottom Heights and Woodworm Orphanage shall be reconsidered. The one who bears the name Elvir... Do you accept this challenge? Step forward now, or forfeit in silence...



Narrator:

Elvir's heart pounds as her name echoes through the crowd. She takes a deep breath, her resolve solidifying with each passing second. With unwavering determination, Elvir steps forward, her posture straight and her chin held high. The crowd shifts their attention to her, anticipation building as she prepares to shout her response.

Elvir:

I, Elvir, accept this challenge!

Narrator:

The crowd erupts in a mixture of cheers and gasps, the air buzzing with excitement and anticipation. Some people applaud, while others exchange looks of surprise and admiration. Burgomaster Chee nods

approvingly, a slight smile of satisfaction crossing his face as he acknowledges Elvir's bravery. Hidden still among the crowd, Elzon watches with a smirk of satisfaction, his eyes glinting with a blend of pride and calculation as he sees her step into the challenge he had orchestrated. As the crowd settles down once more, Burgomaster Chee prepares to conclude.

Burgomaster Chee: Very well. With that settled, the tournament will begin here tomorrow evening. I urge everyone present to spread the word to your friends and family, as admission will be free. Rest assured; you will be thoroughly entertained. Depart now in peace, and may Chosha bless us all.

Narrator: As Burgomaster Chee and his staff begin to exit the stage, the crowd buzzes with excitement and speculation, slowly starting to disperse. Cooper turns to Elvir, his face a blend of pride and worry.

Cooper: (*softly*) Elvir, I can't believe you accepted the challenge. This is a trap. Your father is toying with you. I'm proud of you, but I'm also really worried. This tournament is going to be intense. Are you sure about this?

Elvir: (*determined*) I know he is, Cooper. But I have to do this. For the orphanage, for the neighborhood, and for everyone who believes in me. No matter the stakes. I won't let them down.

Cooper: Elvir, this is going to be tough. But the others and I will be with you all the way...

Narrator: As the crowd continues to disperse, Elvir and Cooper make their way out. Elvir's mind races with the enormity of the challenge ahead, but Cooper's supportive presence steadies her resolve. Off in the distance, Elzon watches them closely. He lingers for a moment, his gaze fixed on Elvir. A complex mix of emotions flickers across his face—pride, anticipation, and a hint of something darker. With one last lingering look, Elzon turns and melts into the departing crowd. The scene cuts to the following morning. Elvir and Cooper break the news to Dew, the rest of the party, and Ms.

Penway about the tournament and Elvir's decision to participate alone. Their faces reflect a mix of anxiety and concern, but they unwaveringly support Elvir's choice. She dedicates the entire day to rigorous preparation, honing her skills and fortifying her resolve. Meanwhile, Dew and the party fan out into the neighborhood, informing residents about the upcoming tournament. They urge everyone to attend, not merely as spectators but as fervent supporters of Elvir, rallying the community's spirit. As evening approaches and the sun sets, lights flicker to life, illuminating the arena in Oyáte Plaza. Several hundred people are in attendance, including Dew, Lorenzo, Krista, Vilmer, Ms. Penway, Betsy, and a few orphans accompanying them. The atmosphere is electric, a charged mix of anticipation and tension, as everyone awaits the start of the Gauntlet of Anahit. Elvir, with Cooper by her side as her coach, stands in her own holding area, separate from her opponents. Her heart remains steady and her mind focused as she gazes at the newly erected circular battle pit, ready to face the challenges that lie ahead. Beside the battle pit, Burgomaster Chee ascends the stage once more, his commanding presence immediately capturing everyone's attention. The stage, adorned with vibrant banners and ceremonial decorations, stands as a focal point. The crowd falls into a hushed silence, the air thick with anticipation as murmurs fade away. All eyes fixate on the burgomaster, awaiting his announcement with bated breath. The arena, now fully illuminated, casts an almost otherworldly glow on the scene, heightening the sense of impending battles.

Burgomaster Chee:

Let the Gauntlet of Anahit begin!

Narrator:

Then a wave of excitement ripples through the crowd. Elvir takes a deep breath, her heart pounding with a mix of determination and adrenaline. With Cooper's reassuring nod, she steps out from her holding area and into the battle pit. The crowd's eyes are on her, their collective gaze filled with curiosity and

expectation. The newly erected circular battle pit stands before her, its perimeter illuminated by warm lanterns casting a dramatic glow across the arena. The ground beneath her feet feels solid and firm, a stark contrast to the turbulent emotions swirling within.



As she walks forward, the cheers and whispers of the spectators' blend into a symphony of anticipation. Elvir's mind sharpens, focusing on the task ahead. She scans the arena, taking in every detail, readying herself for the challenges to come. The atmosphere is electric, charged with the weight of what lies ahead. Elvir stands resolute in the center, her fists tightly gripping her dual daggers, eyes locked on her approaching first opponent. Grigor, a towering figure infamous for his bone-crushing holds and unyielding grip that have left many opponents in shambles, steps into the arena. His muscles ripple with every movement, a testament to the countless hours he

has spent honing his grappling skills. He halts a short distance away, and as their gazes meet, the tension between them crackles. They exchange a few terse words before the battle begins.

Grigor: You don't stand a chance, girl. Once I get my hands on you, you'll be out like a light. Easiest payday ever.

Elvir: My mum always said never to judge a book by its cover. Fancy your chances, then?

Grigor: I don't just fancy my chances; I'm certain I'll flatten you like a crumpet. Enjoy the taste of defeat.

Elvir: Defeat, you say? Funny, I've always found it quite indigestible. Now, shall we get on with it?

Narrator: A siren blares, signaling the start of the fight. Grigor charges forward, his massive frame barreling towards Elvir with surprising speed. Elvir, light on her feet, sidesteps his initial attack, her dual daggers gleaming under the arena's moonlight. She counters with a swift strike, aiming for his side, but Grigor blocks with his forearm, the force of the impact sending a shock-wave through the crowd. Grigor's grappling technique becomes evident as he attempts to close the distance, trying to get a hold on Elvir. His hands reach out like iron clamps, aiming to ensnare her in a crushing grip. Elvir dances around him, her agility and precision keeping her just out of reach. They circle each other, the air thick with anticipation, both warriors poised for the next move. Grigor lunges again, this time feinting left before swinging right. Elvir narrowly avoids his grasp, her movements a blur of speed and grace. The fight is intense, each strike resonating with the weight of Elvir's determination. She draws on her training and memories of her past, knowing that one misstep could mean her defeat. Grigor's frustration grows as he struggles to land a decisive hold. In a moment of tactical brilliance, Elvir decides to use an unconventional counter. As Grigor charges in once more, she acts swiftly and strikes him comically on the head with the hilt of one of her dual daggers, catching him off guard. The impact is unexpected,

and the crowd erupts in laughter and cheers as Grigor drops to the ground, dazed and defeated.

Elvir:

Boink. And just like that, you're out and flat on your back. Better luck next time, mate.

Narrator:

With a confident smirk, Elvir turns her back on the dazed Grigor, leaving him sprawled on the ground. The siren blares once more, signaling the end of the match. She strides purposefully towards her holding area, ready to await her next match, the cheers of the crowd echoing in her ears. Elvir's second opponent is a nimble and acrobatic fighter, renowned for his quick reflexes. As they circle each other, Elvir notices his overconfidence. Seizing the moment, she suddenly stops and makes a funny face, sticking her tongue out at him. Confused and distracted, he stumbles, giving Elvir the perfect opportunity to sweep his legs out from under him with the hilt of her dagger. The crowd roars with laughter as he lands unceremoniously on his backside, utterly defeated. The third opponent, a novice fighter with some natural talent but little experience, is swiftly outmatched by Elvir's speed and skill. The match is almost comically brief; Elvir effortlessly dodges his clumsy attacks and lands a series of precise strikes. With a dramatic flourish, she delivers a double-legged kick to his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He collapses in an undignified heap, drawing laughter and cheers from the delighted spectators. Elvir's fourth opponent is an archer who, despite the rules, skillfully incorporates his archery into close combat. Elvir finds herself dodging rapid arrows, each one narrowly missing its mark. Determined to maintain his distance, the archer fires a quick shot, but Elvir ducks just in time, the arrow whizzing past her head. Utilizing her agility, Elvir quickly closes the gap, making it difficult for him to use his bow. With a deft move, she knocks the bow from his hands, sending it flying into the crowd.

Elvir:

Oops! Looks like you're unarmed now!

Narrator: Forced into a purely hand-to-hand fight, the archer struggles to keep up with Elvir's relentless attacks. She lands a flurry of comical, light jabs and playful slaps, quickly wearing him down. Finally, with a swift kick, she sends him sprawling to the ground.

Elvir: Looks like you missed your mark, Cupid.

Narrator: The crowd erupts in laughter and cheers as Elvir strikes a triumphant pose, her easy victory leaving everyone entertained and her opponent thoroughly defeated. Before the fifth and final match of the evening, Elvir and her opponent, Balzack exchange some words.



Balzack: I'll make you regret entering this tournament. You should've stayed out of it.

Elvir: Regret? Not in my vocabulary. I've got a neighborhood and orphanage to save, and you're not going to get in my way.

Balzack: You talk big for someone who won't last five minutes against me.

Elvir: Five minutes? Haven't you been paying attention to the previous fights?

Balzack: I saw them. They were child's play. I'm not like those other opponents.

Elvir: Good. I was starting to get a bit bored. Ready whenever you are. But don't be gobsmacked when you go down.

Narrator: With the sound of the siren blaring, the fight begins. Balzack, wielding a massive axe, swings at Elvir with powerful strikes. Elvir parries and dodges, her agility and training evident in every move. Balzack's strength and skill with the axe make him a formidable opponent, and for a moment, it seems like Elvir might be in trouble. Watching from the crowd, Dew and the party, along with Ms. Penway and the orphans, look on with concern. Meanwhile, Cooper watches anxiously from the holding area as the fight intensifies.

Balzack: What's the matter, lass? Losing your edge already..?

Elvir: Not quite. Just sizing you up.

Narrator: As the fight progresses, Balzack becomes increasingly frustrated by Elvir's ability to evade his deadly axe strikes. His movements grow sloppier, his anger getting the better of him. Seizing the moment, Elvir swiftly kicks him in the groin. He doubles over in pain, collapsing to the ground as the crowd erupts in cheers and laughter.

Elvir: Wham. Bam. Right in the knackers. Now go home, be a family man, and put an ice pack on that.

Narrator: Once again, the siren blares, marking the end of the match. The crowd's cheers grow louder as Elvir stands victorious, her triumphant pose exuding confidence and determination. Dew and the party, along

with Ms. Penway and the orphans, breathe a collective sigh of relief, their concern replaced with pride and admiration. From the holding area, Cooper's anxious expression transforms into one of ecstatic celebration as he pumps his fist in the air, shouting his support for Elvir.

Cooper: That's our Elvir! You showed him! Ha-ha... Yeah!

Narrator: Elvir pauses to bask in the applause, her eyes scanning the audience and briefly meeting the supportive gazes of her friends. With renewed determination, she turns and heads back to her holding area, her resolve now stronger than ever.

Elvir: *(whispering to herself)* One step closer to saving the neighborhood and orphanage. Let's see what tomorrow brings...

Narrator: As Elvir leaves the arena and reunites with Cooper, the crowd gradually settles down, their excitement still palpable. Whispers of her incredible victory ripple through the stands. Burgomaster Chee steps forward, raising his hand to address the audience.

Burgomaster Chee: Ladies and gentlemen, today's matches have reached their thrilling conclusion. I bid you all to return tomorrow for the continuation of this extraordinary tournament. Until then, carry with you the excitement of today's victories and the promise of more to come!

Narrator: The attendees begin to exit, abuzz with anticipation for tomorrow's matches. The night air is charged with the thrill of the battles yet to come, and Elvir's name is on everyone's lips as they eagerly discuss the next day's showdown.

CHAPTER 6 – TRIALS OF A HOZHO

Narrator:

The scene cuts to the following afternoon, where the sun blazes fiercely in the sky, casting a radiant glow over the bustling tournament arena in Oyáte Plaza. The air is electric with energy as spectators fill the stands, their conversations merging into a symphony of anticipation and excitement. Among the crowd are Dew and his party, along with Ms. Penway and some orphans. Having already delivered the opening announcement for the second day of the tournament, Burgomaster Chee is once again seated on the stage, flanked by his staff. The vibrant banners, striking against the daylight, flutter in the warm breeze. The enticing aroma of street food permeates the air, enhancing the festive ambiance. Meanwhile, Elvir stands just outside her holding area, her eyes closed momentarily as she takes a deep breath, centering herself amidst the noise and chaos. She can feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins, the roar of the crowd a distant hum in her ears. Cooper then approaches, a reassuring smile on his face.

Cooper:

Ready for round two?

Elvir:

(smirking) Born ready.

Narrator:

As the afternoon light filters through the gaps in the arena's structure, casting dynamic shadows on the ground, Elvir steps into the battle pit once more. The circular arena, now a familiar sight, is surrounded by the eager faces of the crowd. The warm glow of the lanterns from the previous night has given way to the stark light of day, illuminating every detail of the pit. Her sixth opponent approaches—a tall, imposing swordswoman named Falcia, renowned for her precise strikes and unyielding discipline. Her steely eyes lock onto Elvir's with a fierce intensity. Before their battle begins, the air between them crackles with tension as they exchange words, each sizing up the

other, their voices carrying the weight of the impending clash.

Falcia: Well-rested, I hope? Be prepared to be crushed by my awesome strength. You won't last more than a minute.

Elvir: Yeah, I slept pretty well. Took a good dump before all this. I'm feeling pretty light and raring to go. But just so you know, strength isn't everything. Let's see how you fare against strategy and skill.

Falcia: (*scoff*) Strategy and skill? That sounds like an excuse for the weak. It's power that wins battles, not clever tricks.

Elvir: (*raising an eyebrow*) Oh, is that so? I guess we'll see soon enough. Hope your sword is as sharp as your tongue.

Falcia: Don't worry about my sword. Worry about keeping up. I've broken stronger fighters than you without breaking a sweat.

Elvir: (*grinning*) Breaking a sweat? Sounds like you've been working too hard. Maybe it's time someone showed you how to fight smart, not hard.

Falcia: (*eyes narrowing*) I'll enjoy proving you wrong.

Elvir: (*stepping closer*) Bring it on, then. Let's give them a show they won't forget.

Narrator: Then, the loud siren pierces through the arena, signaling the start of the battle. The crowd falls silent for a moment, then erupts into cheers as the fight begins. Falcia charges forward, her sword gleaming in the sunlight. She swings with precision and power, each strike a testament to her strength and skill. Elvir dodges and parries, her movements fluid and calculated. The clash of steel against steel rings out, echoing through the arena.

Falcia: Gah-ha-ha... Is that all you've got? You'll need more than fancy footwork to beat me.

Elvir: Oh, I've got plenty more. Just getting warmed up.

Narrator: Falcia lunges again, her eyes blazing with determination. Elvir sidesteps, using Falcia's momentum against her. Elvir lands a quick strike to Falcia's side, then

another to her leg. Falcia staggers, momentarily off balance, but quickly recovers, swinging her sword in a wide arc. Elvir ducks and rolls, coming up behind Falcia and delivering a swift kick to her back. Falcia stumbles forward, barely managing to stay on her feet. Falcia then turns her head, giving Elvir a menacing glare.

Falcia: You'll pay for that..!

Narrator: The intensity of the fight escalates, both combatants moving with blinding speed. Sweat glistens on their brows as they trade blows, the sound of their exertion mingling with the roars of the crowd. Falcia's attacks grow more desperate, her precision faltering as frustration sets in. Her breathing becomes labored, her strikes wilder and less controlled. Elvir remains calm and focused, her eyes narrowing as she watches for openings. With each failed strike, Falcia's frustration mounts, her face a mask of fury. Elvir, on the other hand, is a picture of concentration, her movements deliberate and precise. She deflects a powerful overhead swing, spins away, and delivers a sharp elbow to Falcia's ribs, disarming her and sending her sword flying across the pit. The weapon clatters to the ground, skidding to a stop far out of reach. In an instant, Elvir's dual daggers are at Falcia's throat, the cold steel pressing lightly against her skin.

Elvir: (*huff*) (*puff*) Brains over brawn, every time. Looks like your strength wasn't enough.

Narrator: The crowd roars in approval as Falcia steps back, defeated. Her face is a mix of anger and grudging respect. Elvir lowers her weapon, offering a nod of respect to her fallen opponent. The siren blares again, signaling the end of the match, and the arena erupts in cheers and applause. Elvir stands tall once again, a triumphant smile on her face as she basks in the crowd's adulation. The air is thick with excitement, and Elvir knows this victory is just one step in her long journey ahead. Her seventh opponent wields a pinwheel weapon, spinning it menacingly. When he

lunges, Elvir sidesteps gracefully, avoiding the blades. She counters with a quick jab to his midsection, then hooks her daggers around his wrist and arm, forcing him to drop the pinwheel. With a swift twist, she brings him to the ground, immobilized. The crowd erupts in applause as he concedes defeat. Her eighth opponent, wielding a mace and shield, attacks with brute force. Elvir skillfully avoids her strikes, sidesteping and striking her shield arm with the hilt of her dagger, causing her to falter. Elvir then hooks her dagger behind the shield and yanks it away. As the opponent swings the mace in desperation, Elvir parries and strikes her wrist, disarming her. Before the opponent can react, Elvir delivers a precise blow to her temple, leaving her dazed and defeated. The ninth opponent, armed with a three-section staff, attempts to keep her at a distance. Elvir studies his movements, then suddenly rushes in, closing the gap. She parries his strikes with her dual daggers, disrupting his rhythm. With a quick motion, she hooks one dagger around the staff and pulls it out of his hands. Off-balance, he stumbles, and Elvir finishes with a swift, controlled cut across his chest, sending him to the ground. With each victory, Elvir's confidence grows, her focus sharpening as she advances through the tournament. The tenth opponent, Qalxan, is a former SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier and a transgender man, renowned for his disciplined and tactical approach. He strides into the battle pit with a calm, focused demeanor, gripping a bayonet. The crowd falls silent, eagerly awaiting the clash. Elvir meets him with a composed yet determined look, her dual daggers at the ready. The two fighters then exchange respectful words before the match begins.

Qalxan: I've served my country and faced real battles. This isn't personal, just the nature of the game. I respect your skill, but I've got a mission to see through.

Elvir: I appreciate the respect. Let's give it our all and see who comes out on top.

Narrator: Qalxan nods, acknowledging the mutual respect.

Qalxan: Your determination is admirable, Elvir. I wish we met under different circumstances. It'll be an honor to face a fighter of your caliber.

Elvir: Thank you. Likewise.

Qalxan: May the best fighter win...

Elvir: Agreed.

Narrator: The siren blares as Qalxan and Elvir circle each other, their eyes locked in a focused stare. Qalxan makes the first move, lunging forward with his bayonet in a precise, calculated strike. Elvir swiftly dodges, her reflexes honed from countless battles. Qalxan follows up with a series of rapid, disciplined attacks, each one aimed at testing Elvir's defenses. Elvir parries and counters, her dual daggers moving in fluid motions. The clash of steel rings through the air, each strike showcasing the skill and experience of both fighters. Elvir observes Qalxan's movements carefully, noting his tactical precision. She realizes she needs to disrupt his rhythm to gain the upper hand. Feinting to the left, she draws Qalxan into a committed strike. In a swift, agile motion, she sidesteps and uses the hilt of one dagger to knock the bayonet out of his grip. Qalxan, undeterred, quickly adapts and switches to hand-to-hand combat. His training is evident as he launches a series of well-placed punches and kicks. Elvir matches his intensity, her movements a blend of agility and strength. The two exchange blows, each pushing the other to their limits. Finally, Elvir sees an opening. She dodges one of Qalxan's punches and uses the momentum to spin around him, quickly getting behind him. With a swift, precise move, she brings one of her daggers close to his neck, stopping just short of contact. Qalxan freezes, recognizing his position. He raises his hands slightly in a gesture of surrender, breathing heavily but with a respectful nod.

Qalxan: You're a remarkable fighter, Elvir. Well done.

Elvir: Thank you, Qalxan. It was an honor to face you.

Narrator: The siren blares, and the crowd erupts in applause, acknowledging the display of skill and mutual respect between the two fighters. Elvir extends her hand, and Qalxan shakes it firmly, a sign of mutual respect and sportsmanship.

Elvir: ...And thank you for your service to our country.

Qalxan: My pleasure... and good luck with the rest of the tournament.

Narrator: Elvir and Qalxan exchange one last nod before parting ways. As Elvir walks back to her holding area, the adrenaline from the fight begins to wear off, replaced by a sense of pride and relief. She takes deep breaths, savoring the moment and mentally preparing for her next challenge. The eleventh match is against Bodaway, a seasoned veteran boxer renowned for his methodical and precise movements, making him a formidable opponent. His impressive record and unwavering confidence make him one of the most challenging fighters in the tournament. As Bodaway steps into the battle pit, his eyes glint with arrogance, and he smirks at Elvir, sizing her up with a dismissive glance. His presence exudes experience and confidence, built from countless victories.

Bodaway: By golly, you're top drawer. But you're no pro. I train for fights like this for a living. I'm undefeated, 161-0. I leave here 162-0 and much richer.

Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... We'll see about that, 'champ.' Let's go.

Narrator: The siren sounds, and Bodaway immediately closes the distance between himself and Elvir. His fists fly in a rapid series of precise jabs. Elvir, nimble and alert, dodges and deflects with her dual daggers. Bodaway's punches are relentless, his experience evident in every calculated movement. He steps in with a powerful right hook, but Elvir ducks under it, spinning to his side and slashing at his arm with her dagger.

Bodaway grunts, more surprised than hurt, and retaliates with a quick uppercut. Elvir narrowly avoids the punch, feeling the rush of air as it passes her cheek. She counters with a swift kick to Bodaway's shin, destabilizing him momentarily. She uses this opening to slash at his side with both daggers, drawing a line of crimson. Bodaway roars, his confidence shaken but not broken. He lunges forward with a barrage of punches, forcing Elvir on the defensive. She parries with her daggers, the sound of metal against flesh filling the air. One of his punches grazes her shoulder, but she doesn't flinch, using the momentum to spin and deliver a backhanded strike with her dagger, cutting across his chest. Bodaway, panting and bleeding, throws a desperate haymaker. Elvir sidesteps, using his chest to propel herself into a high-angle senton bomb, landing on him with precision and force. Bodaway crashes to the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Exhausted and battered, he struggles to rise, but his body gives out, and he collapses back to the ground.

Elvir: ...Now you're 161-1, 'champ.' Sorry to have blemished your record. Guess there's a first time for everything. You lose. Next.

Narrator: The siren then sounds, signaling Elvir's victory. The crowd erupts in cheers as Elvir raises her daggers triumphantly, ready for the next challenge. The twelfth match features a preppy young prodigy named Spiethley, renowned for his innovative fighting techniques using a golf club and ball as his weapons. Spiethley, dressed in a tailored golfing outfit complete with argyle socks and a visor, steps into the battle pit with a confident stride, a golf bag slung over his shoulders. His every movement exudes calm, calculated precision. Setting the bag down with practiced ease, Spiethley selects his favorite club, a custom-made iron with a polished sheen. He then places a tee on the ground with meticulous care and carefully positions a gleaming white golf ball atop it. His

movements are deliberate, almost ritualistic, as if performing a well-rehearsed routine. He looks up at Elvir, who is perplexed by the unusual choice of weapon but remains on guard, her daggers gleaming in her hands. Spiethley's eyes twinkle with a mix of amusement and confidence as he addresses her.

Spiethley: You know, Elvir, I'm the best at what I do. Ready for a lesson in precision?

Elvir: I hope you're not just a one-trick pony. Let's see what you've got.

Narrator: As the siren blares, Spiethley skillfully uses his golf club and ball to keep Elvir at bay. He swings the club with a fluid grace, sending the ball whizzing towards her with surprising speed and accuracy. Elvir, ever nimble, dodges and deflects, her movements a blur of agility. Spiethley's attacks are relentless, each swing of the club accompanied by a sharp crack as the ball flies towards Elvir. He combines his golfing prowess with deft footwork, keeping a safe distance while launching his precise assaults.

Spiethley: Not bad, but you can't dodge forever. Fore!

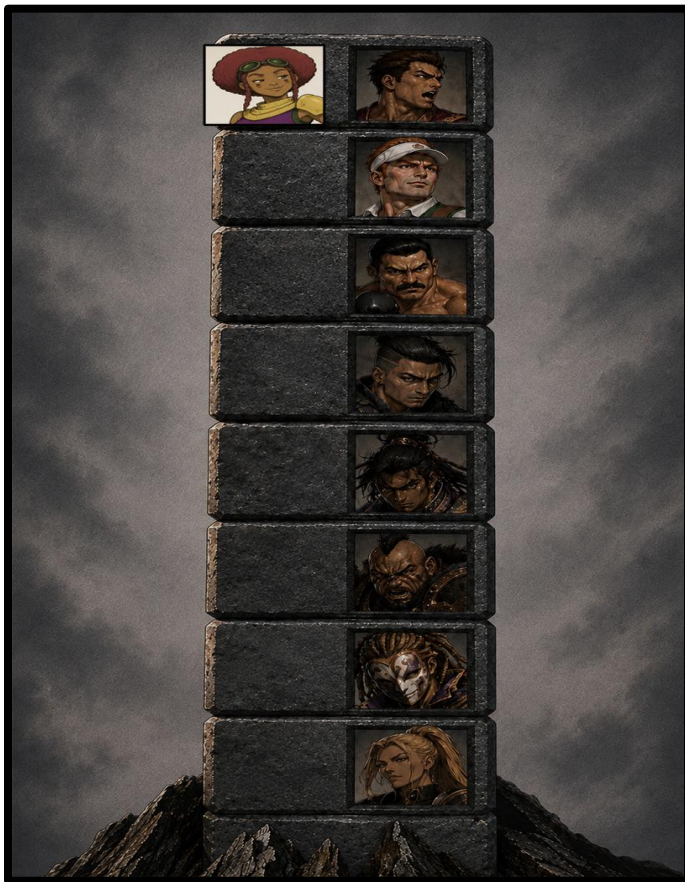
Elvir: You're right. Let's end this.

Narrator: With a determined glint in her eye, Elvir closes the distance, weaving through Spiethley's attacks with a series of swift, acrobatic maneuvers. She disarms him with a well-timed strike to his wrist, sending the golf club clattering to the ground. Seizing the moment, she delivers a final, decisive blow, securing her victory over the preppy prodigy.

Elvir: Looks like you're out of bounds. Better luck on the next course, mate.

Narrator: Elvir then turns her gaze from the defeated Spiethley to the cheering spectators, a confident smile playing on her lips. She sheathes her dual daggers with a fluid motion and begins to walk off the battlefield, her steps purposeful and steady. Her posture radiates strength and readiness, each stride carrying her closer to the next challenge. As afternoon gently transitions into evening, casting a warm golden hue over

the arena, the atmosphere becomes charged with anticipation. Yamaton, the thirteenth fighter, enters the battle pit with a confident stride. His agile and precise movements immediately catch Elvir's eye, evoking a sense of familiarity. It's as if she has encountered him before. As Yamaton positions himself in the pit, a realization dawns on Elvir. She recognizes him as one of the protesters she saw two days earlier—the man wearing a blue baseball cap and blue hoodie who fought against the masked agitators. They exchange words, their voices carrying tension and determination, setting the stage for their impending match.



Elvir: Hold on a tick... Weren't you among the protesters I saw two days ago? Yeah, it was you. You were the one in the blue baseball cap and hoodie, kicking those masked agitators' arses. What are you doing here?

Yamaton: Never mind that, and forget about them. It's a lost cause. I'm here for the money.

Elvir: What?! So, you've already given up? That's rather sad.

Yamaton: Sorry you feel that way. But that cash reward is my ticket out of this dump. It's time I put myself first. You're in my way!

Elvir: Money over principles, eh? That's a bit of a shame.

Yamaton: Whatever. In the end, it's about survival. And I won't let anyone block my chance for a better life.

Elvir: Well, I'm not going to let someone who's abandoned doing what's right stand in my way.

Yamaton: "Doing what's right" doesn't pay the bills. This fight is my opportunity to finally break free. Get ready.

Narrator: The siren blares, igniting the arena with intensity as the battle unfolds. Elvir and Yamaton circle each other, their movements a strategic ballet of skill. Yamaton immediately puts his Taekwondo expertise on display, unleashing a series of swift, precise kicks that test Elvir's defenses. His rapid footwork, spinning attacks, and powerful high kicks force her to remain constantly on the move. Unfazed, Elvir responds with agile precision, wielding her dual daggers with lethal grace. As the battle intensifies, Yamaton's elusive maneuvers and precisely aimed kicks target vulnerable spots, yet Elvir deflects and evades each attack with calculated finesse. The audience watches in awe as they navigate through the onslaught, the tension thick in the air. Sensing an opportunity, Elvir seizes it with a deceptive feint, forcing Yamaton into an over-extension. She swiftly closes in, her daggers' hilts landing a precise blow that staggers him. Despite his attempts to recover, Elvir maintains her advantage with a flurry of rapid strikes, leaving him disoriented.

Finally, Elvir incapacitates Yamaton with a decisive move, his body slumping to the ground. Standing over him, she catches her breath, a mixture of relief and determination evident on her face.

Elvir: ...If money's your escape plan, then it seems you'll be sticking around a bit longer. Better luck next time, quitter.

Narrator: The siren blares as the crowd erupts into cheers, recognizing Elvir's skill and resilience against a formidable opponent. Filled with elation at the prospect of saving her neighborhood and orphanage, Elvir walks back to her holding area, realizing she is just two fights away from achieving her goal.

CHAPTER 7 – A HOZHO’S REDEMPTION

- Narrator: After her eleven-minute respite, the scene cuts to Elvir standing in the battle pit, her body tense with anticipation for the fourteenth fight, where she will face the first of two surprise challengers. The crowd murmurs in excitement and unease, their collective gaze fixed on the battlefield. Dew and his party, along with Ms. Penway and the orphans, watch anxiously from the stands. Cooper, standing nearby, can barely contain his concern as Elvir’s previous victories have pushed her closer to saving their neighborhood and the orphanage. The atmosphere is charged with expectation as Jahiga steps into the arena, his eyes locking onto Elvir with a malevolent glint. Elvir is surprised to see him participating in the tournament. He smirks, confident and smug, knowing he has an ace up his sleeve.
- Jahiga: Well, well, Elvir. We meet again. Yuh ready fi anodda round?
- Elvir: Always ready, Jahiga. Prepared for another thrashing, are you?
- Jahiga: (*sneering*) Yuh maya beat mi once, but dis time? Mi got a likkle surprise fi yuh.
- Elvir: (*raising an eyebrow*) Whatever it is, it won’t stop me from beating you. Let’s get this over with.
- Jahiga: Oh, it’ll be ova ’fore yuh even know. Yuh guh be gaspin’ fi air.
- Elvir: You know, Jahiga, I always found your confidence amusing. It’s like watching a child play pretend.
- Jahiga: Ha-ha-ha... Yuh guh regret underrate mi, Elvir. Dis time mi nah hold back.
- Elvir: And neither am I. Bring your best, because anything less won’t be enough.
- Narrator: The siren blares, signaling the start of the fight. Jahiga wastes no time, lunging forward with a vicious swipe of his butterfly knife. Elvir parries effortlessly, her

movements fluid and precise. They exchange blows, the sound of clashing metal echoing through the arena. The crowd watches in rapt attention, every eye following their every move. Suddenly, Jahiga pulls back, a wicked grin spreading across his face as he subtly activates a *Poison Elementome* hidden in his hand. A faint, greenish mist emanates from it, swirling around Elvir.

Elvir: (cough) (cough) What... what did you do?

Jahiga: Ha-ha-ha... jus' a likkle t'ing fi even di odds. Yuh feelin' kinda weak, eh?

Elvir: You coward! Can't win without cheating, can you?

Jahiga: Coward? Nah, Elvir — mi jus' clever. An' yuh 'bout fi learn dat de hard way.



Narrator: The crowd erupts in a mix of outrage and horror as the poisonous mist begins to take its toll on Elvir. Dew and his party, along with Ms. Penway and the orphans, react with a mix of fury and fear. Cooper's face turns ashen as he watches Elvir struggle, his

anxiety mounting by the second. Elvir staggers, her vision blurring as the poison saps her strength, but she grits her teeth, determined not to let Jahiga see her falter.

- Krista: (*shouting*) Hey! That's cheating! Someone stop him!
- Ms. Penway: (*furious*) This is an outrage! How can they allow this?
- Lorenzo: (*seething*) That cheating fuckin' rat!
- Narrator: Lorenzo attempts to storm out of the audience stands, but Dew holds him back, preventing him from charging forward.
- Lorenzo: (*angry*) Let me go, Dew! I'm not just going to stand here while she's being poisoned!
- Dew: (*firmly*) Lorenzo, we need to let her fight her own battles. She'd want this.
- Lorenzo: What?! She's dying out there! We can't just do nothing!
- Dew: Elvir wouldn't want us to interfere. She's stronger than you think. We have to trust her.
- Lorenzo: But Dew—
- Dew: No, Lorenzo. This is her fight. Believe in her.
- Narrator: Lorenzo's eyes dart between Dew and the struggling Elvir, his body tense with conflict. Finally, with a heavy sigh, he reluctantly nods, accepting Dew's words, though his fists remain clenched in frustration.
- Vilmer: (*sternly*) There must be rules against this. They can't let it continue.
- Krista: (*concerned*) Come on, Elvir, you can do this! Don't let him win!
- Betsy: (*tearful*) Elvir, please be okay!
- Narrator: Despite the poison coursing through her veins, Elvir fights on. Her movements are slower, less precise, but her determination remains unshaken. Jahiga takes advantage of her weakened state, landing several blows that send her reeling. The crowd's outrage grows, their cheers turning to boos directed at Jahiga. Elvir stumbles but catches herself, her eyes blazing with defiance.

Elvir: (*panting*) You... think this will stop me? You don't know me at all.

Jahiga: Oh, mi know yuh well, Elvir. Dis end now...

Narrator: In a brief moment of clarity, Elvir glances towards the crowd and sees the faces of the orphans, especially Betsy, looking at her with wide, hopeful eyes. Betsy's tear-streaked face, full of innocence and trust, ignites a fierce protectiveness in Elvir. The memory of the children's laughter, their dreams, and the safe haven they find in the orphanage floods her mind. She knows she cannot let them down. Elvir finds renewed strength within herself. She dodges Jahiga's next attack, her movements becoming more fluid as the toxin's effects gradually diminish. The crowd senses her comeback and begins to cheer louder, their support bolstering her resolve. With fierce determination, Elvir counters Jahiga's next strike, her dual daggers flashing in the fading light. She delivers a series of rapid blows, pushing him back. Jahiga's smug confidence falters as he realizes she's overcoming the poison.

Cooper: (*shouting*) Come on, Elvir! You can do it!

Narrator: The crowd's support and Cooper's encouragement fuel Elvir's resolve. She presses the attack, her movements gaining speed and precision. Jahiga, now desperate, swings wildly with his butterfly knife, but Elvir dodges and parries with ease. With a final, decisive strike, she disarms Jahiga, sending his weapon flying across the pit. She follows up with a powerful kick to his jaw, knocking him to the ground. The siren blares, signaling the end of the match. The crowd erupts into cheers, their earlier outrage replaced with admiration and relief. Dew and the party, along with Ms. Penway and the orphans, cheer loudly, their faces beaming with pride. Cooper breathes a sigh of relief, his worry finally easing. Elvir stands tall, her chest heaving as she catches her breath. She looks down at Jahiga, who lies defeated and humiliated on the ground.

Elvir: Ruh-roh, Jahiga. I rather think my father won't be pleased with you losing to me yet again.

Narrator: Jahiga then begins to throw a tantrum, kicking and screaming like a toddler.

Jahiga: No! Dis nuh fair! Yuh s'pose fi loss! Aarrgggghhhh!

Elvir: Oh, quit your whinging, Jahiga. You lost fair and square. Cheers for giving it "your all". Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: Jahiga then pounds his fists on the ground, his face contorted with rage and humiliation. He kicks his legs and screams, drawing looks of disgust and amusement from the crowd. The crowd continues to cheer as Elvir walks back to her holding area, her head held high. She knows the final battle is yet to come, but with each victory, her determination only grows stronger. The atmosphere in the arena is electric, filled with the anticipation of the final showdown that will determine the fate of her neighborhood and the orphanage. The scene cuts to Elvir's holding area sometime later. Dimly lit, it is filled with the muffled sounds of the murmuring crowd outside. Elvir sits on a bench, her breathing steady but her body tense with anticipation. Cooper stands beside her, a comforting hand on her shoulder, his eyes filled with encouragement and worry.

Cooper: You've done great so far, Elvir. Just one more fight. You can do this. Go get 'em.

Narrator: Elvir nods, then rises from the bench. She faces Cooper, their eyes locking in a moment of deep connection. Without a word, she leans in and kisses him.

Elvir: Thank you for having my back through all of this...

Narrator: Cooper, smitten, watches as she cracks a smile and leaves the holding area with newfound determination. As she steps into the arena, she is greeted by an uproar of cheers and applause. Striding confidently forward, her heart pounds in rhythm with the crowd's chants. Upon reaching the battle pit, Elvir takes a deep breath, steadying herself as she awaits her fifteenth and final opponent. On stage,

Burgomaster Chee steps forward, his presence commanding attention. A sly grin spreads across his face as he prepares to make his announcement. The crowd falls silent, their excitement turning to a tense hush as his voice echoes through the arena.

Burgomaster Chee: Ladies and gentlemen, the moment you've all been eagerly anticipating has arrived. But before we unveil the final opponent, let us first commend the remarkable journey of one courageous fighter. Elvir has faced numerous challenges, demonstrating unparalleled skill, bravery, and determination. She has fought valiantly for Flea Bottom Heights and the Woodworm Orphanage, capturing our hearts and admiration...

Narrator: The crowd erupts in cheers and applause, their appreciation for Elvir's efforts echoing through the arena. Elvir stands tall, her expression resolute as she absorbs the crowd's support.

Burgomaster Chee: ...And now, the final opponent in this extraordinary tournament is none other than a man whose name is synonymous with power and influence. A figure who stands at the pinnacle of our province elite, and who has a deeply personal connection to our brave warrior. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you... Elzon Harjo!

Narrator: The crowd gasps in shock, murmurs rippling through the arena like a rising tide. From the shadows, Elzon Harjo steps forward, advancing towards the battle pit with a theatrical flourish that captivates every eye. His entrance is grandiose, his dual daggers glinting menacingly under the bright lights. He wears the *Hozho* chest plate, a relic revered by the order for its strength and spiritual weight. Its dark silver, speckled chest plate bears the ancient *Hozho* crest, etched small into the upper left and forged in the same color—a symbol of honor and heritage unseen by the crowd but unmistakable to Elvir, who recognizes its worth at once. Complementing it are gold-plated shoulder guards, reinforced armbands, and black gloves that enhance his combat readiness. Padded knee guards and sturdy boots complete the

ensemble, each piece adding to his imposing silhouette. Elvir's eyes narrow as she glares at her father, her anger and determination burning brightly. Elzon, with a mix of grudging respect and annoyance, meets her gaze, not entirely surprised she has made it this far. The tension in the arena is palpable as father and daughter prepare to face off in this ultimate showdown.



- Elvir: *(voice trembling with controlled rage)* So, it's come to this, Father. Your greed and ambition have brought us here.
- Elzon: *(smirking)* Indeed, Elvir. I must admit, I'm impressed you've made it this far. And you saved me 20 million Wertes. But don't think for a moment that sentiment will soften my resolve.
- Elvir: You've gone too far, Father. This whole tournament, the eviction scheme... it's all for your gain. How could you?

Narrator: Elzon's expression hardens, a flicker of something darker passing through his eyes.

Elzon: *(firmly)* This is about more than just money, Elvir. It's about legacy, control, and securing our family's future. The neighborhood needs to evolve, and so do you.

Elvir: Evolve? By tearing apart people's lives? This is dishonorable.

Narrator: Elzon's jaw tightens as he steps closer, his voice low and defensive, almost a growl.

Elzon: You don't understand, Elvir. This project wasn't just about constructing new commercial residences and businesses. No, no. I plan to also build a monument to honor your mum's memory. This is my way of making things right. For her.

Elvir: Honoring her memory? By ruining the lives of others? You neglected us—especially Mum. You were never there for her during her illness. And now you think a monument will ease your guilt? All she wanted—all I wanted—was for the three of us to be together. But you were too busy chasing your empire.

Elzon: *(anger flaring)* You don't understand the pressures I was under. The responsibilities. I was trying to give you both a better life.

Elvir: *(fiercely)* And what are you doing now? A better life doesn't come from tearing others down! Mum wouldn't recognize the man you've become... *(then glances again at the small Hozho crest etched into her father's chest plate)* Look at you, wearing that... like you still believe in their teachings. You've strayed so far from what it means to be a *Hozho* warrior.

Elzon: *(angry)* Don't lecture me on what it means to be a *Hozho*, child. Tut. You abandoned me to live in that orphanage with those strangers—people who weren't even your family!

Elvir: *(voice shaking with emotion)* I left because you let her die... and the orphanage has been a better family than you ever were..! *(pauses, her eyes welling up with tears)* When I left Anahit and settled in Llivisaca,

I almost lost myself, Father. I was so consumed by anger and pain that I nearly became like you. I did things I'm not proud of. It was only after I met my new friends—Dew, Cooper, and the others—that I found my way back. I vowed never to become like you, to never let greed and power corrupt me.

Narrator: Elzon's face flickers with a moment of regret before hardening again.

Elzon: (*coldly*) This is your last chance, Elvir. Stand down and walk away. You can't win this fight.

Elvir: (*with steely resolve*) I won't stand down, Father. I'm fighting for something bigger than myself. Something you seem to have forgotten.

Elzon: (*scoff*) Forgotten? I remember everything. I remember building this family from nothing, making sacrifices you can't even fathom. And what did I get in return? A daughter who ran away and a wife who... (*pauses briefly, feeling remorse*) ...who slipped away because I couldn't save her. Yes, I lost the two things I cherished most... (*then shakes his head, steeling himself*) But if you insist on standing in my way, then so be it. Don't expect any mercy, Elvir.

Elvir: (*determined*) Then let's finish this. I'll show you that true strength comes from protecting others, not tearing them down.

Narrator: Elvir and Elzon then draw their dual daggers and prepare themselves in a fighting stance. The siren blares, signaling the start of the final match. The crowd's roar swelling around them. Elzon moves first, his dual daggers slicing through the air with lethal precision. Elvir meets his attack head-on, her own daggers clashing against his in a shower of sparks. The metallic ring of their weapons echoes through the arena, mingling with the gasps of the crowd.

Elzon: (*smiling coldly*) Ready to concede, Elvir?

Elvir: (*focused*) Not a chance, you old coot.

Narrator: Elvir ducks under a vicious swipe, spinning around to strike at his right forearm but misses. Elzon retaliates with a swift counterattack, forcing her to leap back.

Their battle is a fierce dance of skill and endurance. Each move is calculated, each strike deadly. Sweat pours down their faces, their breaths coming in ragged gasps, but their determination never wavers. The crowd is transfixed by the sheer intensity of the duel. In a swift exchange, Elzon manages to knock one of Elvir's daggers out of her hand, taking it for himself, while Elvir simultaneously grabs one of Elzon's fallen daggers and uses it against him, the unfamiliar weapon feeling strange in her grip.

Elzon: Ah, a trade. (*then smirks*) Do you really think you can wield my own weapon against me?

Elvir: (*gritting her teeth*) Watch me.

Narrator: Elvir and Elzon clash once more, the reversal of weapons adding a new layer of complexity to their duel. They trade blows, each adapting to the other's weapon, their movements a blur of speed and agility. Elvir lands a quick strike with Elzon's dagger, grazing his left forearm and causing him to drop her dagger. She attempts to roll and retrieve it, but Elzon kicks it far out of reach. He then swiftly disarms Elvir of the borrowed dagger, now wielding both of his original weapons with fierce determination. At this point, Elvir is left with only her remaining dagger, while Elzon holds both of his own.

Elzon: (*coldly*) This ends now, daughter.

Narrator: With renewed ferocity, they engage once more, the clash of steel ringing through the arena. In a daring move, Elvir disarms Elzon of one of his daggers, which skids off to the side, leaving him with only one. The battle reaches a fever pitch, each strike more desperate, each block more strained. They fight with everything they have, the weight of their shared history bearing down on them. Sweat drips from their faces, their bodies trembling with exhaustion. In a final, desperate exchange, they both manage to disarm each other, their single daggers skittering across the arena floor. For a moment, they stare at each other, breathless and determined. Then, with a surge of

strength, they dive for their original weapons, reclaiming them and rising to their feet. Elvir, with a burst of energy, launches into a series of rapid attacks, pushing Elzon back. With a final surge of strength, she disarms Elzon, sending his daggers clattering to the ground. She lands a decisive blow, sending him sprawling. Elvir stands over her father, her chest heaving with exertion. Her vision blurs, her body trembling with exhaustion. With the last of her strength, she collapses beside him, the world spinning around her. The Dew and the rest of the party, along with Ms. Penway, the orphans, the crowd, and Cooper from the holding area, fall silent, holding their breath in anticipation as they watch the scene unfold. Elzon turns his head to look at Elvir, his eyes filled with a mixture of pain and realization.

Elzon: Elvir... you've done well... *(huff) (puff)* I'm proud of you.

Elvir: Pfft. *(huff) (puff)*

Elzon: You were right... *(huff) (puff)* I was trying to mask my guilt. The other reason why I wanted to tear down Flea Bottom Heights and the orphanage was because it reminded me of you so much... *(huff) (puff)* Every time I passed by the bloody place, it pained me deeply knowing I had lost you all those years ago... but then you returned...

Elvir: ... *(huff) (puff)*

Elzon: I'm sorry, Elvir. I was so consumed by my ambitions that I lost sight of what truly mattered. I wasn't there enough for you and your mum. *(huff) (puff)* I deeply apologize for that.

Elvir: *(then eyes filled with tears)* I forgive you, Father. I just wish you had realized it sooner.

Narrator: Elzon nods, his own eyes misting.

Elzon: You won, Elvir. The neighborhood and the orphanage will stay as they are. However, I would still like to build a park as a monument to your mum, Chandra, to honor her memory in a way that truly reflects her spirit.

Elvir: *(manages a weak smile)* That would be nice, Father.

Narrator: The crowd erupts in applause, their cheers echoing through the arena as father and daughter lay side by side, the battle over, their hearts finally at peace.

Elvir: *(faintly)* Father, you may have strayed, but it's not too late to make things right. Start with this park, and perhaps, one day, we can rebuild what was lost.

Elzon: *(eyes filled with hope)* I will, Elvir. I promise. And I hope you can find it in your heart to help me. Together, we can honor her memory and make something truly beautiful.

Narrator: Elvir nods, her hand reaching out to grasp her father's.

Elvir: Together.

Narrator: The crowd continues to cheer, witnessing not just a victory, but a profound reconciliation. The scene cuts to the following evening, outside the weathered yet resilient Woodworm Orphanage. Under the dim glow of twilight, Elvir and Cooper stand resolutely at the entrance, ready to continue their arduous journey. Ms. Penway and Betsy stand beside them, their faces a tapestry of emotions—gratitude, sorrow, and unspoken hope. Dew and the rest of the group linger a few paces away, giving the farewell the gravity and respect it deserves.

Ms. Penway: *(voice trembling, eyes brimming with unshed tears)* Elvir, words fail to capture the depth of our gratitude. You've not only saved our home but mended our hearts. I wish you could stay longer, but I understand your mission's urgency. You need to reunite with your friends. Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.

Narrator: Elvir steps forward, her movements deliberate and laden with emotion, and envelops Ms. Penway in a warm, heartfelt embrace. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, capturing the bittersweet nature of the moment.

Elvir: *(softly, yet with unwavering conviction)* I'll come back, Ms. Penway. This isn't a goodbye; it's just a see you later.

Ms. Penway: *(attempting a smile through her tears)* You'd better, young lady. Or I'll come after you myself. Ha-ha...

Elvir: I wouldn't dare test you, Ms. Penway. Besides, I wouldn't want to miss out on that brilliant banana curry pizza of yours. Mmm.

Ms. Penway: Ha-ha... Oh, you cheeky thing! Just make sure you come back in one piece, all right? I'll have a slice waiting for you.

Narrator: Betsy steps forward, her small hand extending to grasp Elvir's.

Betsy: *(innocently)* You'll come back, right, Elvir? Promise?

Elvir: *(then kneels to her level, her eyes sincere)* I promise, Betsy. I'll be back before you know it.

Betsy: *(pouting a bit)* You'd better! And you have to tell me all about your adventures when you do.

Elvir: *(smiling warmly)* Oh, you can count on it, toots. I'll have stories that'll make your eyes pop out! Hey, before I go, you wanna hear a joke?

Betsy: Sure, Elvir.

Elvir: "What do you call a promiscuous potato?"

Betsy: What's that..?

Elvir: "A tater tot!"

Betsy: Hee-hee-hee...

Elvir: I knew you would like that. You always did love my jokes...

Narrator: Elvir and Betsy then move towards each other and share a tight, heartfelt embrace, holding on as if they could freeze the moment forever.

Elvir: *(still hugging Betsy)* I'll miss you...

Betsy: *(still hugging Elvir)* I'll miss you more, and can't wait to see you soon.

Elvir: *(still hugging Betsy)* You bet... Be good, or El Hee Hee Pushaw will get ya.

Narrator: Betsy pulls back just enough to blink up at her, curious.

Betsy: *(confused)* El Hee Hee... who?

Elvir: *(grinning wickedly)* Half-pop icon, half press secretary from the Shadow Zone. She spreads disinformation like fog on a swamp. She lies, she cheats—hee-hee, she moonwalks through your firewall and slaps your search history on a Billboard chart.

Betsy: That's... kinda scary...

Elvir: *(smirking)* Oh, it is. They say she once whispered a rumor so powerful, an entire zone canceled itself overnight.



Narrator: Distant thunder then rolls. Somewhere, a faint “Hee... hee...” echoes on the wind. Ms. Penway, standing just a few paces behind, raises an eyebrow at the odd exchange—but says nothing, her expression a mix of curiosity and mild concern. After a moment, Elvir and Betsy reluctantly pull back from their embrace, their eyes lingering on each other. Cooper steps forward, offering Ms. Penway a warm and appreciative smile, which she returns with a slight nod, still watching Elvir with a thoughtful gaze.

Cooper: Thank you, Ms. Penway, for everything.

Ms. Penway: *(then nods her head)* You're welcome, Cooper. Safe travels to all of you. And please take care of each other out there, especially Elvir.

Narrator: Cooper and Elvir exchange a brief, smiling glance before Cooper turns his attention back to Ms. Penway.

Cooper: *(firmly)* We will.

Narrator: Ms. Penway and Betsy wave goodbye to Dew and the party, who wave back warmly. After a lingering moment of farewell, Ms. Penway and Betsy turn and make their way back into the orphanage, the heavy wooden door closing behind them with a soft thud. Just as Elvir is about to depart with Dew and the party, a sleek, luxury car glides to a stop in front of them. Her heart skips a beat as she recognizes the vehicle. The rear door opens, and Elzon steps out, his expression marked by stern determination. He holds a package in his left hand. As he strides toward Elvir, she breaks into a surprised smile, unable to hide her delight at seeing her father again.

Elvir: Father. What are you doing here?

Elzon: Elvir, I'm glad I caught you before you left.

Elvir: What's wrong?

Narrator: Elzon then turns to Dew and the rest of the party, his voice becoming more business-like.

Elzon: My daughter told me about your ordeal, and especially about the friends you've been searching for. I reached out to some contacts around the province. A friend in Anahit's Southern Zone did see a woman and man matching their description.

Dew: Really..?

Elzon: Yes. Along with another man, they passed through the Southern Zone just a day ago, while the tournament was still taking place.

Dew: Another man?

Krista: Who could that be?

Narrator: Krista then turns to Lorenzo, who shrugs his shoulders with a puzzled expression on his face.

Vilmer: I wonder the same thing...

Elzon: My contact mentioned that your friends were asking if anyone had seen a group of masked, cloaked figures in the area. Interestingly, a group matching that description passed through just hours before you all arrived, referring to themselves as the *Bush of Life*.

Dew: That sounds about right...

Krista: *(then faces Dew and Lorenzo)* Honestly, I'm surprised we didn't encounter them while we were searching for Rena.

Lorenzo: Yeah. It seems they're really good at staying out of sight...

Narrator: Elzon pauses, his eyes narrowing as he processes the information.

Elzon: *(then faces Elvir)* When we discussed your journey last night, you mentioned that the *Bush of Life* has connections to the Söl Congruum, whom you and your friends encountered, correct?

Elvir: Correct, Father.

Elzon: *(nodding slowly)* Hm. Yes. Then it seems your three friends were last seen heading toward the province of Demmin—perhaps continuing their search for these *Bush of Life* cultists.

Narrator: Hope then ignites in the eyes of Dew and the party as they realize they now have a clear direction for their search. The anticipation of potentially finding Rena, Johnny, and their unknown companion brings a renewed sense of determination. However, upon hearing the mention of Demmin, Cooper feels a twinge of unease, with memories of past troubles in the province flashing through his mind. He skillfully conceals his feelings, not wanting to dampen the group's newfound optimism.

Elvir: Father.

Elzon: Yes?

Elvir: Will Jahiga be okay?

Elzon: His ego may have taken a hit, but he'll recover.

Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... I really did a number on him, didn't I?

Elzon: That you did. Ha-ha-ha...

Elvir: *(grateful)* Anyway, thank you again, Father, for going out of your way to do this.

Vilmer: We have a lead now. This is more than we had before...

Dew: Thank you, Mr. Harjo. This information is invaluable to us.

Elzon: *(nodding at Dew)* You're welcome... *(then starts talking aloud to himself)* Hmm... It's still strange that these *Bush of Life* aren't looking for—

Narrator: Elzon stops mid-sentence as he notices Elvir giving him a sharp look—a silent warning to hold his tongue. Dew tilts his head slightly, curiosity piqued.

Dew: Huh..?

Narrator: Elzon quickly collects himself, offering Dew a tight smile.

Elzon: Oh, it's nothing. *(then whispering to himself)* ...*Nothing any of you need to worry about... so it seems. Thank Chosha for that...* *(then faces Elvir)* Daughter, it has been many generations since the *Hozho* last battled the Sōl Congruum. As you know, the identities of those who carry on the *Hozho* mantle are not known and have not been heard from in recent history. I'm not sure why that is. I fear they may have been forgotten—or met an even worse fate. You and I may be the last of the *Hozho*, Elvir. But since you are in pursuit of the Sōl Congruum, I realized... you might need a little something to help you with that.

Narrator: Elvir raises an eyebrow in curiosity as Elzon carefully hands her a package wrapped in rich, dark fabric. With a blend of anticipation and reverence, she unties the wrapping. Her breath catches as she reveals the contents: two gold shoulder guards gleam boldly atop neatly folded layers of a grey-and-purple combat suit—form-fitting in design and cinched at the waist with a utility belt. Reinforced gloves, heavy boots, and her father's speckled *Hozho* chest plate lie arranged beside them—worn, yet enduring.

Elzon: You have demonstrated the strength and honor of our lineage. These are now yours. Our ancestors would be proud to see you carry this mantle.

Narrator: Elvir's eyes fill with tears as she takes the armor and shoulder guard, her hands trembling slightly. The weight of the items, both physical and symbolic, presses on her as she absorbs the significance of her father's gift.

Elvir: *(voice choked with emotion)* Thank you, Father. I will wear this with pride and honor.

Elzon: I know you will. Also, take this too...

Narrator: Elzon reaches into the right pocket of his dress suit and pulls out a neatly folded bundle of 10,000 Wertes, handing it to Elvir. She accepts it gratefully, her eyes widening at the unexpected gift.

Elvir: Thank you.

Elzon: It may not be 20 million Wertes, but I figured you and your friends could use it. I'm truly grateful you came back. Our time together after the tournament, even though it was short, meant more to me than you know.

Narrator: Elvir nods, a tight smile on her face, as a tumult of emotions churns within her. Memories of the tournament and their shared moments flood her mind, mingling with the anxiety and hope for the journey ahead. She clutches the armor and the money tightly, feeling the deep bond with her father strengthening in this bittersweet farewell. Elzon then places a hand on her shoulder.

Elzon: I believe in you. Remember, no matter the distance, we are family. We will meet again to rebuild what was lost. May Chosha bless you and your friends. Be safe, Elvir.

Narrator: Elvir gives her father a final, heartfelt nod before turning to Dew and the party. They can see the resolve and newfound strength in her eyes. Elzon watches her for a moment, pride evident on his face, before heading back to his luxury car. As he opens the door, he takes one last look at Elvir, his

expression a mixture of love and admiration. The car's engine purrs to life, blending with the early evening sounds of the city, as Elzon drives away, leaving Elvir standing tall and determined.

Elvir: *(then inhales and sharply exhales)* ...Let's go, my squad. *(then cracks a smile)*

Narrator: The party then starts making their way back to Anahit's Northern Zone marina. While Dew and the rest of the party move ahead, Cooper lingers behind with Elvir, walking side by side. A sense of dread about returning to Demmin gnaws at him. Elvir glances over at Cooper, noticing his silence. Cooper quickly conceals his unease behind a calm facade and gives her a reassuring smile. He then gently takes Elvir's hand, their fingers interlacing in silent solidarity. The two walk hand in hand, savoring each other's presence in their shared moment of tranquility. As Dew and the party passed through Flea Bottom Heights, the scene transformed into a heartwarming spectacle. Neighbors they encountered, along with others emerging from their homes, waved enthusiastically, shouting their thanks to Elvir. Their voices blended into a powerful chorus of gratitude and encouragement, echoing through the streets with heartfelt appreciation, creating an emotional crescendo that resonated deeply with Elvir. Eventually, Dew and the party made their way back to the marina, where the atmosphere shifted from the warmth of heartfelt farewells to the tense urgency of their mission. The air buzzed with anticipation as they swiftly boarded the patrol boat, each member preparing for the journey ahead. As the vessel departed from the marina, it sliced through the water with unwavering intent, the rhythmic splashes against the hull signaling their steadfast progress toward the province of Demmin, in pursuit of Rena, Johnny, and their mysterious companion. The twilight sky darkened to a deep indigo, with the first stars beginning

to twinkle as the boat pressed onward, illuminated by the reflection of the crescent moon on the water.

CHAPTER 8 – RESIDUE OF DEMMIN

- Narrator: Dawn breaks, casting an eerie light over the barren landscape of Demmin. The patrol boat glides silently through the still waters, its hull cutting smoothly through the surface, leaving barely a ripple in its wake. The vessel moves with an almost eerie grace toward the southern shores of the province, the surrounding silence broken only by the faint hum of the engine and the soft lapping of the waves against the boat's sides. As it approaches the shoreline, the misty morning air clings to the water, shrouding the distant land in a hazy veil, making the desolate landscape ahead appear even more ominous and foreboding. Inside the cockpit, Cooper stands motionless, his gaze locked on the approaching land. His expression, carved by the chisel of time and loss, speaks of memories too painful to vocalize. Dew, sensing the weight of his silence, glances at Elvir, who meets his eyes with shared concern while her hands expertly guide the vessel. The hum of the boat's engine is the only sound, a dull vibration that mirrors the tension in the air. Nearby, Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer converse quietly, their words hushed, their attention repeatedly drawn to Cooper's prolonged silence.
- Lorenzo: (*in a low, concerned voice*) He hasn't said a word the entire trip.
- Krista: (*softly*) It's understandable, given that it's been so long since he's been home. Dew mentioned it to me and Elvir a few hours ago when we first noticed Cooper starting to act differently.
- Lorenzo: Ah, that's right. Cooper did briefly mention to me that he was from Demmin while Dew was still in a coma. How could I have forgotten? Wait, isn't Rena also from there?
- Krista: Yep. Hmm. If Rena is looking for those *Bush of Life* cultists, then she's definitely trying to find Thornton.
- Lorenzo: Yeah, she didn't travel all this way just because she was feeling homesick.
- Narrator: Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer turn their attention back to Cooper, who continues to silently gaze at the approaching

horizon. After a few moments, Vilmer breaks the silence by sharing his thoughts with the others.

Vilmer: ...Returning to a place where you've faced deep pain is never easy. We all have places like that... For me, as you all know, it had been a long time since I faced mine, until our paths crossed and we climbed Mount Illini together... I know that feeling all too well...

Narrator: Krista nods in agreement, the weight of Vilmer's words resonating within her. His gaze drifts toward the horizon, his voice carrying a melancholy that reveals the scars of his own past. The rising sun spreads a soft light over the landscape, giving it a faint, ghostly glow, as if the land is reluctant to fully wake up, burdened by the memories it carries.

Vilmer: (*quietly, almost to himself*) Demmin may be a shadow of what it once was, but the land remembers. The pain lingers in the very air, like an old wound that refuses to heal... But sometimes, facing that pain is the only way to start the healing process. We carry our scars, but they don't have to define us...

Narrator: A silent understanding passes between Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer before they return to their tasks. Dew's gaze shifts back to Cooper, whose rigid stance and unyielding stare betray a mind lost in the storm of memories. As the patrol boat approaches the Southern Zone, remnants of life in Demmin come into view. Though the area avoided the worst of the war, its scars are clear—cracked roads weave across the land, buildings stand half-restored, and vegetation struggles in the harsh climate. The air is thick with the scent of decay, a bitter reminder of lives left unfinished. The rising sun casts long shadows, intensifying the deep sense of desolation.

Cooper: (*whispering to himself*) Demmin... you've seen better days...

Narrator: The patrol boat docks with a soft thud, breaking the stillness of the early morning air. As Dew, Elvir, Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer prepare to disembark, they pause, turning toward Cooper, who remains a statue, his gaze still fixed on the distant horizon. His mind churns with images—his father, once strong, now broken by the grip of alcoholism and despair; his mother, whose stubborn refusal to leave despite the looming dangers ultimately sealed her fate. The weight of his father's

dying wish—to be a better man—presses down on him, threatening to crush him beneath its unbearable weight. Elvir steps forward, her presence a gentle anchor, pulling him from the whirlpool of his reverie. The boat rocks slightly, as if even the water itself trembles under the weight of his thoughts.

Elvir: *(softly, with genuine concern)* Hey, Coop. You okay..?

Narrator: Cooper blinks, the fog of memory beginning to lift as reality comes back into focus. The sound of lapping water fades, replaced by the rustle of wind through the desolate trees.

Cooper: *(clearing his throat, forcing a smile)* Yeah... just... thinking. Never mind. So... we're here. Let's get going...

Narrator: Dew steps forward, his hand finding Cooper's shoulder, the grip firm, grounding him in the present.

Dew: *(with quiet resolve)* Hey. I know it's been a while since you've been back here... especially with how things are now... But we're here for you. Whatever you need, we've got your back.

Krista: *(stepping in, her voice light but sincere)* And if the past gets too heavy, remember, you've got us to help carry it.

Vilmer: *(nodding in agreement)* The past is too heavy to bear alone. Together, it becomes manageable.

Lorenzo: *(with a reassuring smile)* Yeah, man. Together.

Narrator: A faint smirk tugs at the corner of Cooper's mouth, the first crack in his stony exterior. He turns to Dew and the rest of the group, giving them a silent nod, signaling his readiness to move forward. As they disembark from the patrol boat, Dew and the party step into the desolate streets of Demmin's Southern Zone. The buildings, mostly single-story and made of weathered brick, stand as silent witnesses to the relentless passage of time and the ravages of conflict. Windows, either boarded up or shattered, resemble hollow eyes that swallow the faint daylight. The wind whispers through the broken glass, carrying echoes of a long-gone era. The streets are eerily quiet and feel devoid of life, with the few people they encounter moving cautiously, avoiding the party's gaze. The very air is thick with the weight of history, each step echoing not just off the cracked pavement but through the haunted corridors of time. The silence around them is almost suffocating, filled with the unspoken pain of what has been lost,

endured, and can never be reclaimed. After some time, the group decides to rest briefly in the shadow of a crumbling building, its walls offering little relief from the heat and dust filling the air. The silence is heavy, broken only by the occasional rustle of clothing or the creak of old wood. Cooper sits apart from the others, staring at the ground, lost in his thoughts. The weight of the past feels like unbreakable chains holding him down. As the shadows grow longer and the sun rises higher, the light does little to lift the darkness in his mind. Finally, Krista breaks the silence with a quiet thoughtful comment about Demmin.



Krista:

...You know, back when I was a tour guide in Llivisaca, I often heard travelers talk about Demmin. They would always mention how vibrant and bustling it used to be—one of the most populated provinces, with more than two million people living here. They'd describe the lively markets, the beautiful parks, the grand festivals that drew crowds from everywhere, and the scattered patches of Celestia Lumidaisy, the rare and radiant flowers that were unique to Demmin. Those flowers

added a special beauty to the landscape. It was a place rich in life and culture, where the streets were always full and the community was tight-knit. But now... less than half of that remains.

Lorenzo: (*raising an eyebrow, surprised*) Really? I knew it was hit hard, but I didn't realize the population was cut by more than half.

Krista: (*nodding, her tone serious*) Yeah, the *Great Civil War* devastated a huge portion of Mesovilla, but Demmin was hit the hardest. The battles, the bombings from New Havenport forces, the aftermath... it's a wonder anyone survived at all. Most of the northern zone is uninhabitable now—it's nothing but a wasteland...

Elvir: (*glancing at Cooper, her voice tinged with sympathy*) That's a hell of a drop, innit? No wonder this place feels so bloody empty.

Krista: (*reflecting deeply*) ...Seeing Demmin like this, with my own eyes, is something else entirely. The stories don't really capture the reality of it.

Narrator: As Krista speaks, her words deepen the heavy reality of Demmin's devastation, hanging over them like a cold shadow. The wind stirs the dust, making the earth seem restless. Cooper remains silent, his expression unreadable, but the tension in his clenched fists says it all. Dew and the others exchange worried glances. The distant coo of a pigeon breaks the silence, a haunting reminder of the life that once was. Noticing Cooper's reaction, Krista softens her tone, almost apologetic.

Krista: I... I didn't mean to dredge up painful memories, Cooper. I just... sometimes the stories and numbers help me grasp the scale of what happened.

Narrator: Cooper finally looks up, his voice quiet yet steady, each word carrying the weight of countless unspoken sorrows. His eyes, once full of life, now seem clouded by the burdens he carries.

Cooper: (*with quiet intensity*) ...The stories and statistics don't reveal the faces, the lives lost. They don't show the families torn apart. For those who survived... it's a burden they carry... a burden I carry... every single day...

Narrator: The group falls into a solemn silence, the gravity of Cooper's words sinking in like a stone in deep water. Krista lowers her gaze, her earlier words now feeling hollow and inadequate in the face of the personal loss Cooper embodies.

Krista: (*low, filled with remorse*) I'm sorry, Cooper. I didn't mean to make it sound... impersonal.

Cooper: (*shaking his head gently*) You didn't. It's just... sometimes the silence speaks louder than any words. Let's keep moving. Okay...

Narrator: With that, Cooper rises, his face a mask of determination, strengthening the resolve of the others. They follow his lead and continue their journey into the heart of the Southern Zone. Dew, Cooper, and the party continue walking through the desolate streets of the Southern Zone of Demmin, drawing wary glances from the few residents they pass. As they approach a group of three residents, Dew overhears a snippet of conversation that catches his attention.

SZ Demmin Resident 1: (*low, urgent*) Did you hear about those cloaked and masked strangers? They came through the other day, heading north. Gave everyone the chills.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: (*nodding*) Yeah, they must have been with that cult I keep hearing about... the *Bush of Life*.

SZ Demmin Resident 2: Probably. But just the day after, three others passed through. They weren't like the cloaked ones...

Narrator: Dew and the party exchange quick glances before stepping closer to the SZ Demmin residents, interrupting their conversation.

Dew: (*calmly, but with urgency*) Excuse me. We're looking for two friends and someone who might be with them. You mentioned three

people passing through—what can you tell us about them?

SZ Demmin Resident 1: (*eyeing Dew and the party cautiously*) Friends of yours, huh? You don't look familiar. Not from around here, are you?

Dew: No, just passing through, looking for our friends.

SZ Demmin Resident 1: Okay. Yeah, the three were here just yesterday. One of them carried a scythe—she seemed real determined. She asked some questions, then they all headed north.

Lorenzo: (*nodding*) That sounds like Rena to me.

Narrator: Dew acknowledges Lorenzo's comment with a nod before continuing his inquiry.

Dew: And the other two with her? Was one of them, by any chance, wearing a gray dress suit and dark shades?

SZ Demmin Resident 1: Now that you mention it, yeah.

Dew: Can you tell me anything about the third person who was with them?

SZ Demmin Resident 1: A tan guy with a mustache, wearing a black hoodie... He was really quiet at first, but then he started making strange moaning noises. His smile was noticeable and flashy.

Narrator: Krista and Elvir exchange knowing glances, both seeming to recognize who this third person might be.

Vilmer: ...What was our friend looking for?

SZ Demmin Resident 1: She wanted to know if we'd seen any cloaked and masked figures pass through. I pointed them in the direction they went.

Dew: So, they went north?

SZ Demmin Resident 2: (*nodding*) Yeah, the northern zone.

Narrator: Cooper, familiar with the area, listens intently.

Dew: All right. Thanks for the information.

SZ Demmin Resident 1: Wait. The northern zone... it's not safe.

Lorenzo: What do you mean?

SZ Demmin Resident 2: The northern zone... it's cursed. Haunted by the war. The land is twisted, the air's poisonous, and the creatures... they're not natural. Most who venture there don't come back. Those that do... it changes them. Some say it makes you see your worst fears, and others... well, they're never the same after they return.

Vilmer: We appreciate the warning, but we've faced worse. We're prepared for anything.

Krista: (*determined*) Yeah. We can't leave them out there, no matter how dangerous it is.

Narrator: The three SZ Demmin residents exchange uneasy glances, their fear evident. SZ Demmin Resident 3, an older woman, looks at the party, her eyes then lingering on Cooper.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: (*curiously*) You. Something about you... tells me you're from Demmin. Am I right?

Cooper: (*nodding solemnly*) Yeah. I'm from Demmin, the Northern Zone. It's been a long time... and a lot has changed.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: Ah. So, you're one of the few who came back. This place... it's not what it used to be.

Cooper: (*nodding again, with a somber expression*) No, it's not.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: (*her gaze softening*) You must've left when things were still... normal. Before everything went to hell.

Cooper: (*sigh*) Yeah, you could say that. I was in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE then. But coming back... it's like I don't even recognize my own home.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: (*nodding*) First of all, thank you for your service... It's hard to recognize what's left. The war changed everything—families were torn apart, and lives were destroyed. Some of us stayed, holding on to whatever we could. We all did what we had to, just to survive after the mass relocations and attempts at

rebuilding. But seeing someone from the old days... it reminds me that not everything was lost. (*then with cautious optimism*) You know, with Interim Premier Janerio in charge, there's talk that things might finally start to change around here. Maybe we'll get the help we've been waiting for. It's about time someone in the capital paid attention. If Janerio can keep those promises, maybe Demmin can start to rebuild and become something more than just a memory.

Narrator: Cooper nods solemnly as SZ Demmin Resident 1 suddenly remembers something.

SZ Demmin Resident 1: Now that I think about it, that woman did mention she was from here too...

Dew: It looks like Rena, Johnny, and the other person are ahead of us. We'll need to move quickly to catch up.

Lorenzo: I'm ready whenever you are.

Krista: I'm right behind you. We don't have any time to waste.

Elvir: Let's crack on, then. No point in dawdling.

Vilmer: Every second counts. Let's forge ahead and not lose momentum.

Narrator: Although Cooper feels reluctant and the unease gnaws at him, he understands the urgency of their mission. After taking a deep breath, he nods and steps forward, ready to guide the party.

Cooper: Since I'm from here, I know this place better than any of you. I'll lead the way...

Dew: All right, Cooper. Lead the way.

Narrator: The three SZ Demmin residents nod, their eyes reflecting a mix of respect and pity. They step back, knowing that nothing they say will change Dew and the party's resolve.

SZ Demmin Resident 1: I wish we could change your minds, but it's clear you've made your decision. Don't expect

anyone here to give you a lift or rent you a vehicle; you'll have to go on foot from here.

Lorenzo: On foot?! (*sarcastically*) Oh, boy! Just what we wanted—more walking. How fuckin' delightful.

Cooper: ...That won't be a problem.

SZ Demmin Resident 1: All right.

SZ Demmin Resident 2: You'd think the authorities would do something, but they gave up trying to stop people from going into the northern zone a long time ago.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: All we can say, like we've told others before you... be careful. And if you find your friends, turn back as soon as you can.

Cooper: We'll be careful.

Elvir: Cheers for the heads-up. We'll keep our wits about us.

Krista: Thanks for the concern. We'll stay sharp.

Lorenzo: We got this. Thanks for everything.

Vilmer: Your warning's noted. We'll tread carefully.

Dew: Thanks for looking out for us...

Narrator: Dew and the party exchange final nods with the three residents before turning toward the northern zone. As the sun rises higher, the heat intensifies over the dry, neglected land. Moving northward, the landscape becomes more desolate. Buildings grow sparse, and the roads, marked by cracks and overgrown vegetation, show clear signs of abandonment. Dust fills the air, with each step stirring clouds that linger in the dry wind, foreshadowing the harsher conditions to come.

Elvir: (*glancing at Cooper, voice soft but concerned*) Well, this is it...

Cooper: (*nodding, his expression determined*) Yeah... Here we go.

Lorenzo: The sooner, the better. (*sarcastically*) I think I'm starting to miss that cold up on Mount Illini. Never thought I'd say that.



- Vilmer: *(then faces Lorenzo)* Oh, now you miss it? You were practically begging to get off that mountain. Now you're feeling nostalgic?
- Krista: Lorenzo's got a point, though. At least the cold kept the dust down. Here, it's like we're walking through a giant ashtray.
- Lorenzo: *(grinning at Krista)* Yeah, but I'd take freezing toes over eating dust any day. Besides, without the cold, we'd be sweating through our boots up there too.
- Dew: *(smiling wryly)* It's not that bad... just a little dust.
- Lorenzo: *(turning to Dew, annoyed)* A little dust? Yeah, right... *(then faces Cooper)* But Cooper, you weren't kidding when you told us back in Llivi-saca that you were from a hot place. This definitely beats their weather...
- Narrator: Cooper gives Lorenzo a faint smile before the group moves forward, the heat intensifying with each passing hour. Though Cooper's

pace remains steady and his resolve is clear, the tension in his shoulders and the tightness in his expression do not go unnoticed by the others. As they approach Tog Valley, the atmosphere changes—the air grows heavier, and shadows deepen as the towering cliffs obscure the light. The valley, once a crucial passage for those seeking to enter the northern zone, is now rarely traversed due to the dangers that await. The ground beneath their feet is cracked and uneven, with the lingering stench of decay filling the air. Cooper pauses at the shattered archway, his gaze fixed on what was once a well-traveled path, now abandoned and overgrown. After a moment, he takes a deep breath, steels himself, and steps into the valley. The others follow closely, their faces a mix of resolve, concern, and caution. The valley's oppressive atmosphere seems to close in around them as they disappear into its depths.

CHAPTER 9 – SWEEPING THROUGH

THE GLOOM

- Narrator: As Dew and the party traverse Tog Valley, it feels like they're descending into another world—a surreal and haunting landscape. The valley stretches out before them, a vast expanse filled with mountains of discarded clothing, textiles, and fabrics from all corners of the globe. The piles rise and fall like waves frozen in time, their colors blending into a chaotic mosaic. The wind sweeps through, carrying loose threads and torn pieces that dance eerily in the air, creating a ghostly atmosphere. Lorenzo surveys the scene, visibly taken aback by the sheer scale of what lies before him.
- Lorenzo: Just look at all this junk...
- Krista: Ever since the *Great Civil War* ended, the Mesovillain government has turned this place into a dumping ground for discarded materials from all over the world.
- Vilmer: (*shaking his head*) I've heard of Tog Valley, but seeing it with my own eyes... it's something else. A graveyard of forgotten things.
- Narrator: Elvir tries to lighten the mood, though a trace of unease lingers in her voice.
- Elvir: ...Well, if anyone needs a new outfit, now's your chance. Just try not to get too spooked by the creepy vibe.
- Narrator: Cooper pauses, slightly taken aback by Elvir's comment, and turns to face the group.
- Cooper: (*grimly*) Tog Valley is more than just discarded clothing and waste. It's a stark reminder of how much Demmin has lost, how much has been abandoned...
- Narrator: Cooper then turns away and continues ahead. The weight of his words lingers, casting a shadow over the brief moment of levity. The group exchanges glances, a silent understanding passing between them before they follow Cooper deeper into the valley. Elvir catches up to him, offering a small, apologetic smile as they walk side by side.

Elvir: Sorry, Coop. Just trying to keep things light. But yeah... this place does give me the willies.

Narrator: Cooper acknowledges Elvir with a nod as he continues walking. Krista then attempts to shift the tone.

Krista: You know, in another life, I bet this place could've been an amazing thrift shop. Vintage clothing from all over the world? Fashionistas would go mad for it.

Vilmer: (*with a wry grin*) Only if they don't mind a side of existential dread with their new wardrobe.

Elvir: 'Come for the fashion, stay for the nightmares.' Not exactly a winning slogan, is it? Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Vilmer: (*smirking*) I can already see the marketing campaign. 'Tog Valley: Where your style meets your deepest fears.'

Narrator: Dew, with a mix of seriousness and humor, interjects.

Dew: Let's not give anyone any ideas. The last thing we need is someone turning this place into a tourist trap.

Krista: Well, if that ever happens, I guess I'll finally be in high demand. Just what every tour guide dreams of—showing people around a post-war wasteland! Ha-ha...

Narrator: As Cooper walks ahead with a heavy heart, he quietly appreciates his companions' efforts to lighten the mood, recognizing their banter as a way to cope with the grim reality. He takes no offense and continues with determined focus.

Elvir: Maybe we should start our own line—'Battle-Worn Couture.' Who knows, it might just catch on.

Lorenzo: (*rolling his eyes, but with a hint of a smile*) Only you, Elvir, would think of launching a fashion line in the middle of a dump.

Vilmer: (*teasingly*) You'll need a better sales pitch than that. How about, 'Guaranteed to make you stand out... in a world where standing out could get you killed.'

Elvir: (*grinning*) Now you're talking! I'll crack on with the designs once we're done dodging whatever dangers lie ahead.

Dew: Just make sure the clothes are practical. Something that can survive a few rounds with whatever's out there.

Elvir: (*feigning seriousness*) Oh, absolutely. My designs are always apocalypse-proof, with the *Hozho* seal of approval. It's all about combining style with survival.

Krista: Ha-ha-ha... I'll take two of whatever you come up with. Just make sure they're in black—it's slimming and perfect for sneaking around.

Narrator: Cooper finally breaks his silence, a faint smile appearing before he speaks.

Cooper: Just don't forget the pockets. You'd be surprised how useful they are when you're running for your life. Ha-ha...

Elvir: (*playfully*) See? Cooper gets it. Fashion and function, that's the key.

Narrator: The party's lighthearted banter brings a brief moment of levity, easing the tension as they navigate the eerie landscape. But as they venture deeper into Tog Valley, the haunting atmosphere creeps back in, reminding them of the dangers that still lurk in the shadows. The valley seems endless, and with each step, the sense of foreboding grows stronger.

Lorenzo: (*soberly*) Jokes aside, we need to stay sharp. I've got a feeling this place won't let us pass through without a fight.

Vilmer: (*nodding*) Agreed. Let's keep our eyes open and our weapons ready. We don't know what's waiting for us out there.



Narrator: The party silently acknowledges the gravity of their situation and proceeds cautiously through the valley. The ground beneath their feet is soft and unstable, as if they are treading on the edge of a sinkhole. With each step, the earth shifts slightly, giving the unsettling impression that the very ground is conspiring to swallow them whole. Every movement is accompanied by the eerie sound of fabric shifting and settling—a rustling that makes the valley feel almost alive, as if it is breathing. As Dew and the party venture deeper into Tog Valley, the wind begins to pick up, whistling ominously through the narrow gaps between the hills and carrying faint, unsettling sounds—echoes of creatures that shouldn't exist. These creatures, twisted and mutated by the toxic fallout of the war, occasionally emerge from the shadows. Desperate and hungry, they are both vicious and cunning, lurking among the towering hills of discarded fabric, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Yet, Dew and the party remain ever vigilant, swiftly dispatching these threats with practiced precision. Sometime later, while navigating the treacherous terrain of Tog Valley, Cooper's eyes catch the glint of something partially buried in the sand and discarded clothing. He slows his pace, his gaze locking onto a broken video game console, its plastic casing cracked and weathered by time. The sight of it triggers a sudden flood of memories, pulling him back to a simpler, yet equally troubled, time in his youth. In his mind, he's back in his childhood home. A younger Cooper, no more than twelve, sits on the worn carpet of his small bedroom, engrossed in a video game. He wears a bulky headset over his ears, with the upbeat rhythm of dance music pumping from a Walkman beside him. The screen in front of him flashes with vibrant colors as he maneuvers his character through a digital world—his temporary escape from the harsh realities of his family's struggles. Behind him, the muffled sound of his mother's voice breaks through the music, nagging at his father, who is passed out drunk on the couch in the living room. Her words are sharp, cutting through the thin walls of their small house, laced with frustration and despair. But young Cooper blocks it all out, his focus entirely on the game, where he can control the outcome, where he

can be victorious. The game is his refuge, a place where the chaos of his life fades into the background. The memory is bittersweet, a reminder of the fragile solace he once found in pixels and melodies. The image of his younger self fades as he blinks, suddenly becoming aware of his surroundings again as Elvir's voice cuts through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present.



Elvir: Coop. Is everything okay..?

Narrator: Cooper glances down at the dilapidated console at his feet, a stark reminder of all that has been lost—not just the material possessions, but the innocence and the small escapes that no longer provide comfort. He then looks at Elvir, his expression carefully neutral before responding.

Cooper: Yeah, just... uh... forget it...

Narrator: Without another word, he turns and continues walking, his pace quickening. Elvir watches him for a moment, then glances down at the broken console. A knowing expression crosses her face as she realizes what might have caused his hesitation. With a sigh, she steps over the console and

catches up to him, with the rest of the party, who are slightly behind, following suit. As the hours pass and the late afternoon sun begins its descent, an unforgiving glare blankets the valley. The mountains of discarded clothing grow taller, creating a maze of fabric and shadows. As the light fades, it struggles to pierce the dense layers of textiles, leaving the valley shrouded in a dim, perpetual twilight. The sense of unease deepens as nightfall approaches, and the party quickens their pace, driven by the oppressive atmosphere. As they finally reach the end of the valley and step into the open, a sense of relief washes over them. The ruins of old buildings, half-buried in sand and debris, come into view—once vibrant homes and bustling businesses, now crumbling shells of a lost past. For Cooper, this place is painfully familiar. He stops, his heart heavy with sorrow at the sight of what was once his home. Memories flood his mind: echoes of laughter, the warmth of family, and the life that thrived here before the war. Now, only shattered remnants of those days remain, draped in silence and decay. Grief nearly overwhelms him, but he swallows it down, hardening his expression as he forces himself to move forward. He knows he can't afford to falter with the others depending on him. Taking a deep breath, he leads the party onward, hoping his moment of vulnerability went unnoticed. As they venture further into the northern zone, the ruins become more frequent, and the air thickens with the stench of decay. The buildings, though more intact, bear the scars of relentless conflict—crumbling walls and collapsed roofs telling the story of a place devastated by war. Dew and the party move cautiously through the desolate neighborhoods, their eyes scanning every shadowed corner, crumbling doorway, and abandoned alleyway for any sign of Rena and her companions. The streets are eerily quiet, with only the faint creaking of old wood and occasional gusts of wind stirring debris, intensifying the unsettling atmosphere. Night has fully settled over the ruins, and the sharp, biting air amplifies every sound as they press on, their resolve unwavering despite their growing fatigue. Suddenly, Elvir stops and points to a narrow alley, signaling the group to check that direction next. While they navigate the twisted

pathways, the stifling silence and oppressive darkness weigh heavily on their spirits. Dew and the party eventually come upon a gruesome scene: the bodies of several masked and cloaked figures sprawled across the ground, clear evidence of a recent fierce battle. They pause, taking in the sight and realizing that the unmistakable signs of struggle provide their first solid clue to Rena and her companions' whereabouts. Ever ready to lighten the mood, Elvir can't resist making a quip.

Elvir: (*with a smirk*) Looks like someone's been having a proper go at these lot—cut up like bad takeaway sushi.

Narrator: Lorenzo then notices the bodies riddled with bullets.

Lorenzo: ...and the rest are full of bullet holes.

Cooper: ...

Lorenzo: (*turning to Dew and Krista*) These must be the *Bush of Life* cultists we've heard so much about.

Krista: It's definitely them. They're wearing the same attire as the one who was on the tour bus I was working on before I met you all.

Narrator: Vilmer crouches beside one of the bodies, inspecting the wounds with a practiced eye.

Vilmer: Hm. These wounds are fresh—no more than a day old. We must be getting close.

Lorenzo: No doubt about it. Rena, Johnny, and their friend have been through here.

Elvir: ...It's like she's leaving us a trail of breadcrumbs. Violent, deadly breadcrumbs, but breadcrumbs all the same. Just hope they've left us some action. Wouldn't want to miss out on all the fun.

Dew: I'm sure there'll be plenty of that ahead. Let's keep moving—we're on the right track.

Narrator: The party exchanges silent nods of agreement and presses on. As time drags on, they fend off the occasional wildlife, but the relentless search starts to take its toll, slowing their pace as exhaustion begins to set in.

Krista: (*exhausted*) How much further can we go? We've been searching for hours with no luck.

Dew: (*focused*) We can't give up now. They're out there somewhere, and we need to find them before it's too late.

Elvir: *(sigh)* I don't know how much longer we can keep this up. I'm feeling knackered as well.

Vilmer: *(concerned)* Dew, she's right. We need to rest, even if it means delaying our search until tomorrow. We'll be no good if we collapse from exhaustion.

Dew: Hmm. I understand. We need to regroup and recover. Let's find a safer spot to set up camp for the night.

Vilmer: Agreed. Let's head toward that building up ahead. It looks sturdy enough to provide some shelter.

Lorenzo: *(grumbling)* Finally! Damn. I was starting to think Dew was more machine than man, never needing rest like the rest of us.

Cooper: *(quietly)* Yeah, good call...

Krista: At least we'll get a break soon. And let's just hope nothing catches up to us while we're resting.

Dew: *(firmly)* We'll set up a watch rotation. No one's sneaking up on us tonight.

Elvir: Sounds like a plan. My feet are killing me. A well-deserved rest will be just the ticket.

Narrator: Cooper nods slightly but doesn't respond further. The party adjusts their path, moving with renewed purpose to find a suitable location to rest. They push through the fatigue, each step a struggle against their aching bodies. After what feels like an eternity, they reach the remains of a large building, its walls mostly intact. It's clear that this was once a place of importance—perhaps a town hall or a community center. Now, it stands as another ruin, its purpose long forgotten.

Dew: *(weary but determined)* ...This will have to do. We'll camp here for the night. We need to be at our best tomorrow to continue our search. Let's get some rest.

Narrator: The others nod in agreement and slowly disperse, each finding a corner of the abandoned structure that offers some semblance of security. As they settle in, Dew and Cooper remain where they are, exchanging a knowing glance.

Cooper: *(gruffly)* I'll take the first watch.

Dew: Ah, just like old times in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE. *(then cracks a nostalgic smile)* All right, I'll relieve you in a few hours...



- Narrator: Cooper gives Dew a curt nod before moving to a position near a window, his silhouette blending into the shadows. The rest of the party settles down, exhaustion quickly pulling them into a restless sleep. Dew lingers for a moment, his eyes scanning the darkness outside before he finally lies down, trusting Cooper to keep them safe. The night stretches on, the silence of the ruins broken only by the occasional creak of wood or the distant howl of the wind. Cooper's eyes stay sharp, ever vigilant, though as the hours pass, his mind begins to wander. Unbidden, memories of his past, of the night he lost everything, begin to creep into his thoughts. From behind him, the faint sound of footsteps makes Cooper tense, his hand instinctively tightening around the handle of his mop. But as he turns, he sees Elvir approaching, her steps light and cautious, careful not to disturb the others.
- Elvir: *(softly)* Hey, Coop. Mind if I join you for a bit?
- Narrator: Cooper hesitates, his eyes narrowing slightly as he considers her request. But after a moment, he sighs and gestures for her to sit beside him.

Cooper: *(then returns his gaze to the darkened ruins outside)* Sure, but shouldn't you be resting?

Elvir: *(sitting down with a small grin)* Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd see how you're holding up.

Narrator: Cooper shrugs, his expression neutral, but there's a tightness to his jaw that Elvir doesn't miss. She studies him for a moment before speaking again.

Elvir: *(cautiously)* You know... you don't have to keep it all bottled up. We've all been through our own hells, Coop. You can talk to me.



Narrator: For a long moment, Cooper says nothing, his eyes fixed on a distant point beyond the ruins, lost in the shadows of his memories. Elvir waits, her patience a silent encouragement. Finally, Cooper exhales, his shoulders slumping slightly as he relents.

Cooper: *(barely above a whisper)* After graduating high school in late spring of 2000, and by the time my 17th birthday came around in November, I had joined the SWAT TROOPER ELITE with an age waiver. Once I completed basic training, I finally

returned home to visit my mother during my leave. When I got there, she was... well, still the same. Stubborn as ever. I begged her to leave and go to the refugee camp. The New Havenport Minutemen were growing bolder, their bombings more frequent. But she wouldn't listen... she just couldn't. She said she wasn't afraid, that she'd survived worse...

Narrator: Elvir's gaze softens as she listens, her heart aching for the pain Cooper has carried alone for so long.

Cooper: (*voice trembling*) I pleaded with her again, knowing the Helix Capital was planning a mass evacuation. It wasn't safe. But she refused to leave the house. It was where our family history was, where all our memories were... She just couldn't leave it behind...

Narrator: The silence between them is heavy, filled with the echoes of choices made and chances lost.

Cooper: (*low, as if confessing*) After my leave ended, I went back to base, thinking she'd be fine... But then... I got the news. They bombed the neighborhood. The whole block was gone... and with it, my mother. I couldn't... I couldn't do anything to save her. I should have forced her to leave... I should have done more.

Narrator: Elvir watches him, her heart breaking for the man before her, who has kept his pain hidden beneath a stoic exterior for far too long. She reaches out, placing a hand gently on his shoulder.

Elvir: (*softly*) It wasn't your fault, Cooper. You did what you could. Sometimes... sometimes people are just too set in their ways. It doesn't make it any easier, I know... but you can't blame yourself for her choices.

Narrator: Cooper closes his eyes, as if trying to block out the images that flash through his mind—the smoking ruins, the charred remains of the place he once called home. But Elvir's words, her touch, offer a small comfort, a reminder that he's not alone in his grief.

Cooper: I just... I just wish I could've done more. Maybe then...

Elvir: (*interrupting gently*) You did more than most, Coop. And she knew you loved her—that's what matters. That's what she'd want you to remember.

Narrator: They sit in silence for a while, the only sound the soft rustling of the wind through the ruins. The weight of Cooper's confession lingers in the air, but there's a sense of release too—a small step toward healing.

Elvir: You know... I used to think that letting people in was a weakness. That if I didn't let anyone get close, I wouldn't get hurt. But the truth is, Coop... it's the connections we make that keep us going, even when it feels like we've lost everything else.

Narrator: Cooper opens his eyes, meeting Elvir's gaze. There's a vulnerability in her words that resonates with him, a reflection of his own fears and regrets.

Cooper: Yeah... maybe you're right.

Narrator: Elvir smiles softly, the corners of her eyes crinkling in the dim light. She hesitates for a moment, wanting to ask about his father, to understand more of the pain he carries. But she decides against it, sensing that the time isn't right. Instead, she offers him a reassuring smile.

Elvir: (*softly*) You'll get through this, Coop. I'm here for you, just as you were for me. Don't ever forget that.

Narrator: For the first time in what feels like years, Cooper allows himself to believe those words, to hope that there's something beyond the pain. He nods, a small but genuine smile tugging at his lips.

Cooper: (*quietly*) Thanks, Elvir. I... I needed that.

Narrator: Elvir gives his shoulder a reassuring squeeze before rising to her feet, her usual playful grin returning as she prepares to head back to her makeshift bed.

Elvir: Anytime. (*teasingly*) But don't think this means we're off the hook. We still need to get started on 'Battle-Worn Couture.' I've got some killer designs in mind.

Narrator: Cooper chuckles, the sound low and rough, but there's warmth in it—a warmth that had been absent for far too long.

Cooper: (*grinning*) Count me in! I've always wanted to dabble in high fashion—just as long as I'm not the one modeling.

Narrator: Elvir grins at him, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

Elvir: Deal. Good night, and see you in the morning.

Cooper: Good night, Elvir.

Narrator: As she walks away, Cooper turns his gaze back to the window. The shadows outside seem a little less heavy now, softened by Elvir's quiet understanding. He takes a deep breath, still carrying the weight of his mother's death, though it no longer crushes him as it once did. The guilt of not fully keeping his father's promise—to take care of his mother—still lingers, a subtle ache that he can't quite shake. But as he looks out at the night horizon, the stars faintly shining above, he feels a bittersweet blend of guilt and hope—a small but significant step toward healing. In that quiet moment, Cooper allows himself to believe that, somehow, he might find the strength to move forward.

CHAPTER 10 – MOPPED UP MYSTERIES

- Narrator: The scene cuts to the next morning, where the early light bathes the campsite in a soft, golden hue. The party stirs, each member emerging from their makeshift beds, groaning and stretching their stiff limbs.
- Krista: (*exaggerated yawn*) Ugh, who knew sleeping on rocks could be considered a luxury? My back feels like it's been through a battle of its own.
- Narrator: Cooper, already up and packing his gear, lets out a chuckle.
- Cooper: ...Could've fooled me. I thought your snoring was the real enemy we had to deal with last night.
- Narrator: Krista shoots him a playful glare, feigning offense.
- Krista: That wasn't snoring; that was my battle cry to keep the bears and whatever else is out there away. You should be thanking me, Cooper. And good morning to you too. I see someone's feeling chipper.
- Narrator: Cooper grins as he stuffs his belongings into his pack.
- Cooper: Just trying to match your enthusiasm, Krista. You can't be the only one keeping the morale up.
- Narrator: As the party continues packing in silence, Lorenzo rubs his lower back, grimacing.
- Lorenzo: If only your battle cry worked on keeping away this morning stiffness. I feel like I've aged a decade overnight.
- Narrator: A ripple of laughter spreads through the group, easing the tension from the cold night. Dew, having been on watch earlier, approaches with a tired but relieved smile.
- Dew: Glad to see you all survived the night without me having to rescue anyone from their own snoring—or battle cries.
- Krista: (*grinning*) Don't worry, Dew. Next time, I'll let you have the honor. Just make sure you hit the right pitch. It's all about technique.
- Elvir: (*then stretches dramatically*) Ah, another glorious day in paradise, isn't it? Though I must say, where's the breakfast buffet when you need one? I fancy a full English, but I suppose we'll have to make do with... whatever it is we've got.

Narrator: Dew smirks, shaking his head as he glances toward the horizon, his thoughts turning serious.

Dew: (*grimly*) Let's hope today brings us closer to finding Rena and the others.

Cooper: (*nodding resolutely*) We'll find them, Dew, no matter how long it takes.

Lorenzo: (*with determination*) And once we do, we can finally get the hell out of this place... back to somewhere comfortable—and not scorching hot.

Krista: (*with a bright smile*) That's the spirit! We're too stubborn to let this place beat us. Besides, I've got plans that don't involve being stuck out here forever.

Vilmer: (*quietly confident*) The land may test us, but we're stronger than its trials. Together, we'll overcome whatever it throws our way.

Narrator: Dew takes a deep breath, his gaze lingering on the distant horizon where the first hints of dawn paint the sky with shades of pink and orange. The determination in his eyes is mirrored in the faces of his companions as they finish packing up their gear.

Dew: (*steely resolve*) All right. Let's move out.

Narrator: Cooper, with a determined nod, takes the lead, his steps confident and purposeful. The rest of the group falls in behind him, trusting his steady guidance through the challenging terrain.

Cooper: (*glancing back*) We've got a lot of ground to cover. They could be anywhere in the northern zone...

Narrator: The group exchanges nods, a silent agreement passing between them. They know the challenges that lie ahead, but their resolve is unshakable. Krista hoists her pack onto her shoulders, her bright smile undimmed by the daunting task ahead.

Krista: (*cheerfully*) Lead the way, Cooper. We've got some searching and finding to do!

Narrator: Elvir adjusts her dual daggers at her side, flashing a mischievous grin.

Elvir: Right then, off we go. Adventure waits for no one, and neither does breakfast.

Narrator: Lorenzo checks his brass knuckles, the weight of his responsibilities evident, yet his determination unwavering.

Lorenzo: (*with a nod*) Let's make today count. I'm ready to go...

Narrator: With Cooper leading the way, the party sets off, their figures gradually fading into the distance as they venture deeper into the northern zone. The sun climbs higher in the sky, casting long shadows across the rugged terrain. After hours of trudging through the labyrinthine urban ruins of the northern zone, Cooper, leading the way, notices something unusual in the distance—a group of four masked and cloaked figures huddled together in what used to be a park. His eyes narrow with suspicion as he signals to Dew and the others. The group halts to observe.

Cooper: Do you see what I see?

Dew: (*nodding*) ...I do.

Krista: (*peering ahead*) Could those be..?

Dew: Yeah. The *Bush of Life* cultists. They probably know where Rena is. Let's move in closer.

Narrator: The group stealthily advances, taking cover behind a large, crumbling stone structure—remnants of some forgotten monument. Dew signals for silence, gripping his bo staff tightly, the metal rod glinting faintly in the fading light. The group huddles behind the structure, ears attuned to the cultists' conversation.

BOL Cultist 1: (*muffled*) ...We're close... the vial is there...

BOL Cultist 2: (*nodding*) The location... we need to secure it before anyone else does. This is too important. The master demands it...

Narrator: Dew's interest piques at the mention of a vial and a location, though he also wonders if they know where Rena is. He's about to signal the group forward when Elvir, shifting her position, accidentally steps on a dry twig. The sharp crack echoes through the still air.

Elvir: (*muttering*) Brilliant...

Narrator: The cultists' heads snap toward the sound, their postures instantly tense and alert. Lorenzo turns to Elvir, his expression a mix of frustration and amusement.

Lorenzo: If we ever need someone to audition for the 'Loudest Thief in the Ruins' competition, you're a sure winner.

Elvir: (*defensively*) Oh, stuff it! That twig practically jumped under my foot. Stealthy little bugger.

Krista: (*grinning*) Well, if we're blowing our cover, we might as well do it with style. Shall I send them a 'hello' with my boomerang?

Narrator: Dew realizes there's no point in staying hidden. He steps out from behind the structure, the rest of the group following suit. Krista already has her boomerang in hand, twirling it nonchalantly as she smirks at the startled cultists. Vilmer readies his grappling hook, his eyes narrowing with anticipation. The cultists recoil in surprise, their hands instinctively reaching for their weapons as Dew approaches.

Dew: (*firmly*) We're not here to fight unless you make us. Where are Rena and her friends? Tell me now.

Narrator: The cultists exchange confused glances, clearly not expecting this confrontation. The tallest among them steps forward, his voice thick with suspicion as it echoes through his mask.

BOL Cultist 3: (*warily*) We don't know who or what you're talking about.

Lorenzo: (*snarling*) Bullshit..!

Elvir: (*taunting*) Yeah, don't try to fool us. We found the bodies of your comrades. Rena and her friends did quite a number on them. Now spill—where is she?

Narrator: The *Bush of Life* cultists exchange uncertain looks before coming to a conclusion, assuming the group is after the same thing they are.

BOL Cultist 1: (*to the others*) They're here for the vial...

BOL Cultist 2: (*menacingly*) Then they must not leave this place alive!

BOL Cultist 4: (*stepping forward*) The master won't tolerate failure. We finish them now!

Narrator: The cultists suddenly lunge, drawing their Xiphos swords as they attack. Dew spins his bo staff with practiced precision, the polished metal whistling through the air as he meets their assault with swift, lethal strikes. Krista's boomerang flies from her hand in a blur, arcing gracefully before slamming into a cultist's head and returning to her grip with a satisfying thud.

Krista: (*grinning*) That's one down!

Narrator: Vilmer swings his grappling hook with deadly accuracy, latching onto a cultist's cloak and yanking him off his feet. Cooper, wielding his mop, deflects a blade aimed at his head and counters with a swift jab to the attacker's gut. Lorenzo charges forward with brute strength, his brass knuckles smashing into a cultist's jaw with a sickening crunch. Elvir is a whirlwind of steel, her dual daggers flashing as she weaves in and out of the fray, her movements quick and fluid. She dodges a wild swing from one of the cultists and retaliates with a swift slash to his side.

Elvir: Is that all you've got? You're not even trying!

Narrator: Dew moves with calculated precision, his bo staff sweeping low to knock a cultist off balance before delivering a sharp strike to the side of his head, rendering him unconscious. The battle is fierce but brief. After what feels like an eternity, the four cultists lie on the ground, their cloaks tattered, their weapons scattered around them. Dew approaches the one who had spoken earlier, now groaning and clutching his side in pain. Dew's eyes are hard, his grip on the bo staff unyielding.

Dew: (*demanding*) Last chance—where are my friends?

Narrator: The cultist coughs, his mask askew, revealing bloodshot eyes that dart around in fear. He struggles to speak, his voice hoarse and weak.

BOL Cultist 3: I... I don't know who you're talking about...

Narrator: Dew grabs the cultist by his cloak, shaking him slightly but soon realizes the man's sincerity. The anger in his eyes softens into frustration.

Dew: (*more calmly*) Then what are you doing out here?

BOL Cultist 3: (*strained*) We're just here for the vial...

Dew: (*sharply*) Vial..?

BOL Cultist 3: The secret lab... it's west of here...

Narrator: Before Dew can press him further, the cultist's body begins to convulse violently. His eyes roll back, and foam bubbles at his mouth. Dew releases him in shock as the cultist collapses, lifeless. The other three cultists suffer the same fate, their bodies jerking spasmodically before going still.

Krista: (*horrified*) What the heck just happened?!

Lorenzo: Some kind of self-induced poisoning..?

Narrator: Vilmer kneels beside one of the bodies, carefully examining the cultist's wrist. He pulls back the sleeve to reveal a small, hidden compartment in the fabric—now empty, save for a trace of residue.

Vilmer: (*grimly*) They were carrying poison with them. This was deliberate—they'd rather die than be interrogated.

Narrator: Dew clenches his fists, frustration and confusion swirling within him. Whatever these cultists were after, it was serious enough for them to die for it. And now, there's talk of a secret lab, a vial, and something to the west. It's not what they came here for, but it's too important to ignore.

Dew: (*resolutely*) We'll have to postpone searching for Rena and the others. If this vial is what I think it is—the SKT virus T—we can't let it fall into the wrong hands. We need to find that lab.

Vilmer: (*nodding*) Agreed.

Elvir: (*facing Cooper with a smirk*) So, Cooper, any idea where these secret labs might be hiding? Or should we just follow the breadcrumbs?

Cooper: (*with a shrug*) No clue. But we'll find it, one way or another.

Dew: Then west it is...

Narrator: With a renewed sense of urgency, the party turns away from the bodies of the cultists and heads west, delving deeper into the desolate urban ruins. Hours later, amidst the maze of crumbling buildings and forgotten memories, Cooper is the first to spot them—a group of *Bush of Life* cultists lingering around a dilapidated building. Above the entrance, a faded neon sign reads "Glamorville Video," its colors long drained by time and decay.

Cooper: Looks like we've got more of our "friends" up ahead... (*pointing towards the video store*)

Elvir: ...And they're hanging around a video store?

Dew: (*skeptically*) A video store? That's the last place I'd expect to find a secret lab.

Krista: (*smirking*) Maybe they're just here for the nostalgia.

Lorenzo: If they're guarding it, there's more to this place than meets the eye.



- Elvir: *(grinning)* Well, there's only one way to find out. Let's give them a warm welcome.
- Narrator: The party moves into position, each member ready for the battle ahead. With a nod from Dew, they spring into action, catching the cultists off guard. The battle is fierce but brief, with the party's skill and determination quickly overwhelming their foes.
- Elvir: *(catching her breath)* They definitely weren't here to return their overdue VHS rentals.
- Dew: We're definitely in the right place.
- Krista: *(looking around)* Hmm... If I had to guess, there's probably something hidden in the back. We might want to check the adult section, just in case.
- Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... Of course, the secret lab would be behind the "Adults Only" section. Who'd think to look there..?
- Narrator: Dew nods toward the front door, signaling the group to move. They cautiously navigate the dusty aisles, passing rows of forgotten films and faded memories. The back of the store is dimly lit, with a faded sign indicating the "Adults Only" section. The shelves are covered in dust, the titles barely visible

under layers of grime. Along the edges of the shelves, faint but noticeable symbols are carved into the wood, their purpose unclear but clearly deliberate.

Krista: (*noticing and pointing to a piece of paper on the ground*) Hey, what's this?

Narrator: Cooper looks down and picks up a crumpled piece of paper lying near Krista's feet at the bottom shelf. He smooths it out, revealing a hand-drawn map of the store with symbols and arrows pointing toward the back section.

Cooper: (*showing it to the group*) It looks like someone left a map... and these symbols match the ones carved into the shelves here.

Dew: (*taking the map from Cooper*) This looks like it could be part of the security system. The *Bush of Life* cultists probably dropped it by accident. They must have known there was a puzzle to solve to get inside.

Vilmer: (*examining the carvings*) Yeah, and it looks like we need to match these symbols to something. My guess is they represent different film genres.

Krista: (*noticing some symbols are already aligned*) But look at this—some of these symbols are already in place. The cultists must have solved part of it before we got here. We need to finish it before they get whatever they're after.

Dew: Hmm... A reset mechanism must have triggered when the lab was locked down after the last group entered. That means the puzzle can be solved again, but we need to be quick.

Narrator: Realizing that some cultists may already be deep inside the lab, the group quickly works to solve the remaining parts of the puzzle. They match the symbols to the correct film genres—Action, Horror, Romance, and Sci-Fi—until the final piece clicks into place. A faint grinding noise follows as a section of the wall behind the shelves slides open, revealing a hidden passageway.

Dew: (*nodding*) There it is. We're in.

Krista: (*peering into the darkness*) Let's hope we're not too late.

Dew: (*with a determined smile*) We won't be. Let's go.

Narrator: The party steels themselves for what lies ahead as they step into the passageway, the air growing colder with each step. The passage spirals down into darkness, leading them deeper

into the secret lab. As they descend, the only sound is the ominous echo of their footsteps against the walls. They know the real challenge lies ahead—deep within the lab, where the remaining cultists are likely already at work. The temperature drops as Dew and the party venture further into the secret lab. What was once part of a bustling urban infrastructure now feels like a tomb—silent, foreboding, and heavy with a sense of dread. The walls, lined with rusting metal and faded warning signs, seem to close in on them as they proceed. Their footsteps reverberate through the narrow corridor, creating an eerie, rhythmic sound that heightens the tension. Dim emergency lights flicker sporadically, casting long shadows that dance ominously along the walls. The party notices the absence of any floor maps, a detail that unnerves them further, as it implies a deliberate effort to keep the layout a mystery. As they round a corner, they're met with a chilling sight—two bodies lying on the cold, metal floor, long dead and decayed.



Krista: *(gasp)* What the..?

Narrator: The corpses belong to mercenaries, their tactical gear aged and brittle, covered in dust and grime. Their flesh has long since decomposed, leaving only mummified remains. Their weapons lie beside them, rusted and useless. The way their bodies are sprawled suggests they didn't go down without a fight. Bullet casings, corroded with age, litter the floor around them, a silent testament to a desperate last stand years ago.

Vilmer: *(kneeling to examine the bodies)* Gunned down... point-blank. Whatever they were up against, it happened a long time ago. Seven, maybe eight years...

Elvir: Yeah. They're definitely dead.

Krista: *(frowning)* What happened down here?

Dew: *(firmly)* We'll need to keep moving to find out. Stay alert.

Narrator: The party carefully steps around the ancient bodies, their expressions grim. The deeper they go, the stronger the stench of decay becomes, despite the passage of years. As they continue down the dimly lit corridor, they stumble upon another grim sight—four bullet-riddled bodies of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers lying in a heap at the intersection of two hallways. Their uniforms, though tattered and stained, are unmistakable—these were elite fighters, once the pride of the Mesovillain forces.

Vilmer: *(examining the scene)* More bodies... These guys look like they've been dead just as long as the other two we found.

Krista: But why were they here?

Cooper: *(shaking his head)* SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers don't go down easy. Something big went down here...

Lorenzo: Maybe they got into a firefight with those mercs..?

Dew: Could be the case. Let's keep going... maybe we'll find some clues about what exactly happened here.

Narrator: With a final, determined glance at the fallen soldiers, the group presses on, the mystery of the long-dead SWAT TROOPER ELITE weighing heavily on their minds. After some time, they come across another room—this one in complete disarray. Furniture is overturned, and the walls are scarred with deep gouges, as if something massive and powerful had torn through. In the center of the room lies another corpse,

but this one is different. The body is mangled, as if it had been torn apart by something—or someone—inhumanly strong. Despite the passage of years, the evidence of violence remains disturbingly clear. The mercenary's limbs are twisted at unnatural angles, and the remnants of his face are frozen in a horrifying expression of terror.

Krista: *(whispering, shaken)* What kind... of thing could do this?

Elvir: Bloody brutal...

Vilmer: *(examining the gouges)* These marks... whatever did this had incredible strength. We need to be ready for anything.

Cooper: We've faced worse before...

Dew: *(steeling himself)* We're not getting any answers here... Let's keep moving, everyone.

Narrator: The party, unsettled but determined, moves past the mangled corpse and navigates the ruined room, the tension growing with each step. The dim light flickers above, casting ominous shadows that dance along the crumbling walls. As they venture deeper into the unknown, a distant, unsettling sound echoes through the corridor—a vague, disquieting murmur that suggests something sinister is stirring in the dark. They exchange wary glances, each silently bracing themselves for the unknown that lies ahead.

CHAPTER 11 - A SCRUBBING DREAD

Narrator: The unsettling echo from the corridor lingers in their minds, an unshakable unease that clings to them as they push forward into the dark. The deeper they went, the more oppressive the air became, thick with the weight of secrets long buried. They finally reached a smaller, dimly lit chamber. In the corner, slumped against the wall, lay another mercenary, his figure eerily still. Unlike the others they had encountered, this one had a stained, tattered field log beside him. Dew approached cautiously, his eyes scanning the room for any signs of danger. Kneeling beside the body, he carefully picked up the log, ready to uncover whatever grim details it might hold.



Dew: Maybe this will give us some answers, hopefully... (*then opens the log*) Let's see what happened here...

Narrator: The party gathers around as Dew begins to read the mercenary's field log aloud. Though the entries are faded with age,

they still paint a grim picture, detailing the mercenaries' journey, their mission to retrieve the vial, and the horrors they encountered within the lab.

Dew:

Mercenary Field Log

Day 1

"We've been hired to retrieve a vial from a secret lab in the Northern Zone of Demmin. The details are vague, but the pay is good, especially with the promise of hazard pay. There are six of us on this job—a tough crew, every one of them. The zone is a mix of intact buildings and ruins, courtesy of the ongoing war. At least I'll be able to chip away at my gambling debt with this gig. 'Double or nothing' sounded brilliant at the time, but now it's more of a running joke. And let's be real, mercenary work might pay decently, but it's not exactly known for its gold-standard health insurance. If I catch a bullet on this job, Remy's going to have to arm-wrestle the debt collectors over whatever's left of me. We'll start our search at first light."

Day 3

"After days of searching, we finally located the lab, concealed beneath what was once a Glamorville video rental store. The war has turned this area into a desolate wasteland—streets that were once bustling are now eerily silent, with buildings standing as ghostly reminders of the past. The directions we had seemed almost useless; the landscape had changed so much that everything began to blur together."

We encountered rubble blocking the street where the video store was supposed to be. It appeared that part of a nearby building had collapsed, scattering debris across the road. Clearing it to reach the store took longer than expected. With no signs of life around, everything looked the same—abandoned, lifeless, and eerie."

Gaining access to the lab wasn't straightforward—we had to solve a puzzle to unlock the door. It was one of those old-school security measures, probably designed to keep intruders out."

The lab itself was mostly intact, a strange oasis of functionality in a world that had ground to a halt. The equipment was still operational, as if oblivious to the chaos that had taken over above ground. We found the vial in a cracked containment unit and secured it, but something felt off. There was a foul odor in the air—a mix of rot and chemicals, like something had been left to decay for far too long. The others noticed it too. Concerned that the vial itself might have been compromised, we found some sealant tape nearby and wrapped it tightly around the vial to ensure its integrity before moving on.

As we were leaving, we ran into a squad of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers. Given the war and all the disorder it brought, it seems the entrance above must have been left open. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers likely stumbled upon it by chance, their curiosity getting the better of them. They must have mistaken us for New Havenport Minutemen because they opened fire without warning. It turned into a brutal bloodbath. We lost two men and were pinned down for a while, but eventually, we managed to take them all out. It's a damn shame—those soldiers were just doing their jobs.

Once the dust settled, I made a grim joke to the others: 'Well, at least with two fewer mouths to feed, there's more pay for the rest of us!' It was dark humor, but it got a few smirks. We're all battered and bruised, but we're still moving forward."

Day 4

"After the fight, the lab went into lockdown. The whole place sealed itself off—no way out. We must've triggered some security system during the fire-fight. The stench is getting worse, seeping into everything. My skin's starting to itch like crazy, though it's probably just from all the dust and grime. The team's on edge, and the battle really took its toll on us. We had to resort to basic methods to treat our injuries since we didn't anticipate running into any complications and forgot to bring Elementomes. We even checked the bodies of the gunned-down SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers, but they didn't have any Elementomes either. Just our luck. At least we've got the vial, and that's all that matters. Now, we just need to find a way out of this damn place."

Day 5

“Couldn’t sleep. Kept scratching all night. My skin’s red, almost raw. The smell—God, it’s like it’s coming from inside me. When I looked in the mirror, I thought I saw something move beneath my skin. Probably just tired. The others are starting to keep their distance. They think I don’t notice, but I do.

Guess I’m not winning any popularity contests here. The lab’s systems are still in lockdown, and there’s no way to communicate with the outside. We’re trapped.”

Day 6

“Everything is getting worse. The itching won’t stop, and the smell is overwhelming—it’s as if it’s lodged in my lungs. I saw something strange today. I thought I saw my brother standing in the corner, just staring at me. He’s been dead for years, but there he was, holding a giant jar of pickles and chomping away. I swear he winked at me. When I blinked, he was gone. Maybe it’s just the stress. Scratchy. Smelly. I can’t let it get to me. Mmm... I’m really craving some pickles right now. I’ll have to find some.”

Day 7

“The lockdown is holding, but we’re running out of options. I spent part of the night searching the lab for food, even pickles, but I wasn’t successful. Food is scarce, and the supplies we have are running low. I’m starting to see things... I can’t even trust my own eyes. Faces I know, faces I’ve lost—they’re all around me, whispering, urging me to give up, to let go. At one point, I thought the moon was in the room with me. It’s full tonight, bright as ever. I muttered something about it being full, and I could’ve sworn it replied, ‘Fuck you, bitch.’ I had to shake my head to clear it. I’m definitely losing it. Everything feels scratchy and smells awful. I can hardly breathe. The others... they’re starting to look like shadows, their faces constantly shifting. I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

Day 8

“They’re here. All of them. Watching me. Laughing. They keep asking why I didn’t save them, why I left them to die. My brother... he’s here, but his face is wrong. Twisted. He’s angry. Still eating those pickles. Mocking me. Blames

me. I know it's not real. I know it. But it feels so... so... Scratchy... smelly... I can't... I can't think... They're coming for me... I have to... I have to..."

Day 9

"Scratchy... smelly... It's everywhere. Can't see... can't breathe... They're inside me... Scratchy... smelly... Joke's on... Remy... he's not getting... his money now... Ha-ha... stupid Remy... scratchy... smelly..."

- Narrator: Dew closes the log, his face pale. The others exchange uneasy glances, the weight of the mercenary's final words heavy in the air.
- Lorenzo: That poor fucker...
- Elvir: Well, at least we know what happened to him... Blimey!
- Krista: What a terrifying fate he suffered...
- Vilmer: *(examining the surroundings)* The madness got to him, and it might have taken down the others we found earlier too. They didn't stand a chance, not against whatever twisted force was—or maybe still is—down here.
- Cooper: *(resolutely)* His team didn't make it, but if that vial is still here, the cultists will be just as desperate to get it. We need to find it first and get out before we end up like them.
- Dew: *(steadying himself)* We can't share their fate. Stay sharp. Whatever took them down could still be here, and we're not letting it get us.
- Narrator: Before moving on, Dew carefully folds the field log and tucks it into a pocket on his vest. The group continues their exploration, proceeding cautiously through the lab's twisting corridors. With each step, the atmosphere grows heavier, and a sense of impending doom gnaws at their nerves. Eventually, they reach another room, the door slightly ajar. Once inside, they notice that furniture and equipment had been used to barricade the room—likely an attempt to keep something out—but it has been disturbed. The items, now shoved aside as if by force from the outside, indicate that someone or something entered more recently. The scene is even more gruesome than before. Another mercenary lies face down on the floor, his body battered and broken, reduced to a skeletal frame draped in rotting fabric.

Lorenzo: Looks like those *Bush of Life* cultists were here recently...

Dew: Possibly.

Narrator: On a table beside the deceased mercenary lies an old letter, yellowed with age, and stained with blood. It appears to have been recently handled but left behind. Dew approaches cautiously, picking it up and preparing to read aloud.

Dew: Looks like they were here after all...

Krista: (*curious*) They're probably searching for clues about the SKT virus T vial...

Vilmer: That letter could hold some answers.

Cooper: (*focused*) If the cultists found it worth reading, it's worth a look. Let's see what they left behind.

Dew: (*calmly*) Let's find out what's in here. Maybe it'll shed some light on what we're up against.

Narrator: With the group watching intently, Dew begins to read the letter. The handwriting is shaky, and the ink is smudged in places, but the desperation in the words is unmistakable. The letter is written from the perspective of the long-deceased mercenary they're standing over—not the author of the field log—and it reveals the terrifying reality he faced in his final moments.

Dew: *"To Whoever Finds This,*

'If you're reading this, it means I didn't make it out. My name doesn't matter anymore—just know that I was one of six mercenaries sent here to retrieve a vial from this cursed place. What started as a routine job turned into a living nightmare. We thought it would be a quick score, in and out. But nothing about this place is quick or easy.

The trouble began when we found the lab, hidden beneath an old video store. At first, it seemed almost too easy. We solved the puzzles, got inside, and found the vial. But then everything went wrong. We were ambushed by a squad of SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers. They must've mistaken us for insurgents. We lost two men in the fight, but we managed to take out the soldiers. That's when Knox, our team leader, started to change.

It began with small things—Knox complained about itching, said he felt something crawling under his skin. We laughed it off, thinking it was just

nerves or stress. But soon, it became clear that it was something far worse. By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late. Knox wasn't Knox anymore. He became... something else.

He turned into a monster right before our eyes. I can't even begin to describe what he became—like something out of a nightmare, twisted and wrong. He tore through Marvin and Josh as if they were nothing. I was the last one left, and I knew I had to act before he killed me too.

I managed to trap Knox in the cryogenic stasis chamber in the lab. It was the only way I could think of to stop him. The vial—the source of whatever turned him into that thing—is still on him, locked within the chamber. If you find this place, do not, under any circumstances, open that chamber. If that vial gets out, it could unleash something the world isn't ready for.

This place is cursed. I've been bleeding out for who knows how long now, but I couldn't let that thing escape. I've barricaded the door as best I can, but I'm not sure how long it will hold. If you're smart, you'll leave this place and never look back. But if you're here to finish the job we couldn't, make sure Knox stays locked away, and that the vial never sees the light of day.

I don't know who you are or why you're here, but if you've come this far, you're probably not leaving without that vial. Just know that taking it out of here could unleash something the world isn't ready for.

This is where my story ends. I'm sorry for whoever reads this. I wish I could have done more. But now it's up to you. Keep Knox locked away. End this nightmare before it begins.

May you find more mercy than we did.'

—Hale''

Narrator: Dew lowers the letter, the weight of its words sinking in. The room falls deathly quiet as the group processes what they've just read—the final testament of a man who gave everything to prevent a nightmare from being unleashed.

Cooper: ...We can't let his sacrifice be in vain. We have to stop those *Bush of Life* cultists from reaching the chamber or getting their hands on the vial.

Vilmer: They'll unleash that creature if they do.

Krista: (*with a nod*) Right. We've got a job to finish. Let's make sure we're not the next ones leaving behind a warning.

Lorenzo: (*with resolve*) Enough with the warnings. We end this here and now...

Narrator: With the letter clutched in his hand, Dew nods and leads the party deeper into the lab, their resolve hardened by the mercenary's final words. Dew and the party cautiously continue navigating through the labyrinthine corridors of the secret lab. As they round a corner, Krista's sharp eyes catch sight of a floor map pinned to the wall, its ink faded but still legible in the dim light.

Krista: (*relieved*) Hey, over here! Finally, a floor map...

Cooper: (*nodding*) Good find, Krista. It's about time we caught a break.

Vilmer: I believe this is the first one we've seen in this whole mess.

Krista: Yeah, it is. Maybe now we can stop stumbling around like headless chickens. Let's figure out where we need to go.

Narrator: The group huddles around the map, their eyes scanning the layout of the lab. Dew traces a finger along the lines, pausing at a room labeled "Cryogenics."

Elvir: (*focused*) There it is—the Cryogenics room.

Dew: We're not far.

Elvir: (*cheerfully*) Right-o! No time to waste, everyone. Let's move before any nasties come our way.

Narrator: With renewed urgency, the party presses on toward the Cryogenics room, navigating the winding corridors. As they draw nearer, the silence was suddenly shattered by distant screams, the sounds of a violent struggle, and the ominous thudding of something heavy being thrown around.

Krista: Sounds like we're getting close...

Lorenzo: ...Are we too late? They might've already released that freak...

Narrator: Dew tightens his grip on his bo staff, his expression hardening with resolve. The party exchanges silent nods, each member steeling themselves for the imminent confrontation. As

they neared the door to the Cryogenics room, the chaotic sounds grew louder and more frantic—only to be followed by an eerie silence. When they finally reached the door, Dew pushed it open to reveal a scene of sheer carnage. The Cryogenics room resembled a blood-soaked battlefield. Cultists from the *Bush of Life* lay scattered across the floor, their bodies mangled and bloodied, their robes soaked in dark, coagulating blood. At the center of the destruction stood the mutated mercenary Knox, grotesquely transformed into a monstrous hybrid of human and plant. His once-human flesh had become rough, mottled, and corpse-like, riddled with lesions and hardened growths. Thorny vines and jagged, branch-like protrusions emerged from his limbs, shoulders, and back, while his face had deteriorated into a skeletal, almost skull-like visage. His pale, glowing eyes locked onto the party as they entered, a low, guttural growl rumbling from his throat.



Krista: By Chosha...
Cooper: We can't let this thing get away.
Elvir: (*gritting her teeth*) So much for a quiet day at the lab...

Dew: Get ready, everyone...

Narrator: The mutated Knox let out a roar—a twisted blend of rage and agony—as he charged at them with terrifying speed. Dew spun his bo staff, meeting the creature’s onslaught with a powerful strike that echoed through the room. The battle was fierce, each member of the party fighting with everything they had. Lorenzo’s brass knuckles landed with a sickening thud against the creature’s ribs, while Krista’s boomerang sliced through the air, striking Knox’s shoulder before returning to her hand. Vilmer’s grappling hook wrapped around the creature’s leg, yanking him off balance just long enough for Elvir to dart in with her dual daggers, delivering a series of precise slashes.

Elvir: (*grinning*) Come on, you ugly brute..!

Narrator: Despite their combined efforts, the mutated Knox proved to be a formidable opponent. His strength was overwhelming, his mutated body shrugging off blows that would have felled any ordinary man. As the battle raged, the creature suddenly reared back, his chest heaving as he released a cloud of dark, spore-like particles into the air. The spores drifted ominously toward the party, carried by an unnatural breeze.

Vilmer: (*alarmed*) Watch out for those spores..!

Narrator: The party reacted swiftly, dodging and weaving to avoid the deadly cloud of spores. Cooper, however, wasn’t as fortunate—though he evaded most of the spores, one landed on his skin, unnoticed by him or the rest of the group, its insidious effects quietly taking hold. As Dew and the party regained their footing, more spores drifted onto the lifeless bodies of the *Bush of Life* cultists scattered across the room. Moments later, the corpses began to twitch. The spores had taken root in the decayed flesh, reanimating the dead cultists like marionettes under Knox’s control. Their lifeless eyes glowed faintly green as they lurched to their feet, limbs jerking unnaturally.

Krista: (*eyes widen*) They’re getting back up..!

Narrator: Without hesitation, Dew struck down two of the reanimated cultists in a single fluid motion, his bo staff cracking through bone as they crumpled to the ground. The rest of the party quickly followed suit, dispatching the shambling corpses with

practiced efficiency. Krista's boomerang spun through the air, taking out three in one sweep, while Lorenzo's fists pulverized another. Within moments, the undead cultists were defeated, their bodies collapsing into lifeless heaps once more.

Lorenzo: (*smirking*) No problem. Now, back to the big guy.

Narrator: With the reanimated threat neutralized, Dew urged the party to focus their efforts on the mutated Knox, who charged at them again, fueled by animalistic fury.

Dew: (*yelling*) Don't let up! We have to bring him down—now!

Narrator: As Knox barreled toward them, the party sprang into action. In a final, coordinated effort, Dew led the assault, delivering a powerful strike to the creature's knee with his bo staff, causing it to stagger. Lorenzo and Krista followed swiftly, attacking in sync—Lorenzo's brass knuckles driving into Knox's chest while Krista's boomerang found its mark—forcing the monstrous creature to collapse to his knees, weakened and vulnerable. Despite feeling sluggish, Cooper tightened his grip on his mop and swung it with all his strength, landing a solid hit on the creature's back. As Knox began to recover, Vilmer expertly spun his grappling hook, the metal hook whistling through the air before striking the creature across the head, disorienting him further. Seizing the moment, Elvir leaped onto the creature's back, driving her daggers into the base of his skull with a fierce cry. Knox let out a final, tortured roar before collapsing to the ground, his body convulsing violently before finally going still. As the dust settled, Dew cautiously approached the fallen creature, his eyes vigilant for any signs of life. Knox's twisted form lay in a crumpled heap, his chest rising once before dissolving into a puddle of flesh. Amidst the remnants, a small vial wrapped in sealant tape rolled free, softly clattering against the floor. Dew knelt down, picked it up, and examined it closely.

Dew: This must be it—the SKT virus T vial.

Krista: (*relieved*) That's good. One less problem to worry about...

Vilmer: (*calmly*) With that danger behind us, at least we have the vial in our possession now. Let's make sure it stays that way.

Lorenzo: ...That's that. We've got the vial, so there's no reason to stick around. Hanging out here is just asking for trouble. I say we

get out while we can—before something else decides to come crawling out of the shadows.

Elvir: I'm with you, Lorenzo. Let's leg it.

Narrator: Dew carefully secured the vial in a pocket on his vest, his expression resolute. The others began to relax, the adrenaline from the battle slowly ebbing away, but their relief was short-lived. Cooper, who had been unusually quiet since the spores touched him, suddenly staggered as his vision blurred and a wave of dizziness overtook him.

Krista: (*concerned*) Cooper...? What's wrong?

Narrator: Before Cooper could respond, his knees buckled, and he collapsed to the ground, his body trembling as dizziness overwhelmed him. Elvir quickly knelt beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder, while Dew and Lorenzo moved to support his arms. Panic surged through the group as they noticed his eyes glaze over and his breathing grow shallow. They desperately urged him to stay with them, trying to rouse him.

Elvir: (*frantically*) Cooper! Hey, stay with us. Come on, don't do this..!

Narrator: Cooper's eyes glazed over as the spores' insidious grip tightened. He struggled to stay conscious, but the voices of Dew and the others became distant, barely audible whispers. With each passing moment, the light in his eyes seemed to fade, leaving them open but empty as his mind sank deeper into the void. Finally, he slipped into a catatonic state, leaving Dew and the party in tense, desperate silence.

CHAPTER 12 – “CLEANING HOUSE”

Narrator: The scene cuts to Cooper, who, while in a catatonic state, feels as though he is falling through an endless void. In his mind, his senses are overwhelmed by a whirlwind of colors and sounds that defy reason, pulling him deeper into an unresponsive trance, disconnected from reality. Suddenly, he is no longer in the lab. Instead, he finds himself floating in a vast, surreal river of beer, the golden liquid shimmering with psychedelic patterns. Strange, abstract shapes drift by, their forms constantly shifting and merging in a bizarre, other-worldly dance. The river carries Cooper along, the taste of hops and malt filling his mouth as he struggles to comprehend his bewildering surroundings.

Cooper: (*dazed*) What... what is going... on..?



Narrator: As Cooper drifted farther down the river, he noticed a small, glowing bag of Cheezy Claws floating just ahead, pulsating

with an eerie neon light. Above, the sky rippled like molten glass, with stars shimmering in wild, kaleidoscopic hues of pink, green, and violet. Suddenly, a giant, winged Chihuahua with a pickle-shaped body spiraled down, snatching the bag of Cheezy Claws with a mischievous grin before vanishing into the swirling mist, much to Cooper's dismay. The landscape around him undulated and spiraled, reality melting and bending into impossible shapes and colors. Just as Cooper felt himself dissolving into the madness of this fever dream, the scene twisted violently. He was no longer floating in the river of beer but was now standing inside an enormous, hollowed-out mop bucket. He struggled to gather himself, his mind reeling. Suddenly, his teeth started to loosen, then tumbled out, bursting into vibrant confetti as they hit the ground. A wave of panic surged through him, but before he could comprehend what was happening, the floor beneath him shattered, plunging him into a dark, pulsating labyrinth of sewers. He raced through the twisting, throbbing tunnels, the walls breathing in sync with his pounding heart. As he rounded a corner, he was confronted by his father, who loomed impossibly large, his shadow warping and contorting, blocking Cooper's path. Consumed by terror, Cooper spun around and ran, the darkness closing in like a living thing. Exhausted, he stumbled into a freight elevator, its gears creaking and groaning like the moans of a forgotten god as it lifted him higher and higher. When the doors slid open, he found himself back in the hallway of the holding area within the Helix Western Zone Court & Jailhouse. But everything felt off-kilter—distorted, as if seen through a fractured lens. He wasn't alone. A woman's voice echoed through the warped hallways, chanting about "beats," but her presence was felt rather than seen. Panic bubbled up, and he dived into one of the open cells, which morphed into a closet filled with hanging clothes that seemed to whisper and rustle as if alive. Holding his breath, every second stretched into an infinity of spiraling colors and sounds. Finally, he glimpsed another elevator, hidden in the ceiling and glowing with an ethereal light. Desperate to escape, he scrambled up and climbed inside just as the walls of the closet closed in, pulsing with a

heartbeat that matched his own. As the elevator began to ascend, waves of relief and anticipation washed over him, blending into a dizzying swirl of emotions. Then, without warning, the scene shifted once more, and he found himself standing in the living room of his childhood home. He quickly realized that his full set of teeth had returned to his mouth. The familiar worn furniture and faded wallpaper pulsed gently, a soothing contrast to the swirling chaos he had just escaped. In the center of the room, his father lay passed out on the couch, an empty bottle of whiskey clutched in one hand. The air was heavy with the stench of alcohol and regret. As Cooper watched, his father stirred, his bleary eyes slowly opening. He sat up, his gaze locking onto Cooper with an intensity that sent a chill down his spine.

Mr. Tyler: (*harshly*) So, you've come back, have you? Thought you could escape your promises, did you?

Narrator: Cooper felt a familiar pang of guilt deep in his chest, the weight of his father's expectations pressing down on him like a physical force. His father's voice was laced with bitterness, each word cutting deeper than the last.

Mr. Tyler: (*accusingly*) You promised me, boy! You promised to take care of your mother, to be better than I ever was. And what did you do? You failed, just like I knew you would.

Cooper: No... I... I tried. I did everything I could...

Narrator: But the words sounded hollow even to Cooper's ears. The guilt, the shame—it was all too much. His father's presence loomed over him, a dark shadow of his own self-doubt.

Mr. Tyler: (*sneering*) Tried? Tried isn't good enough! You think I don't know what it's like? The disappointment, the failure—it's in your blood. You'll never be anything more than what I was. A drunk, a coward... a failure.

Narrator: Cooper's heart pounded in his chest, the weight of his father's words crushing him. He felt like he was drowning in the memories, the guilt threatening to pull him under. But then, something shifted. A spark of defiance flared within him, a small but fierce flame that refused to be extinguished.

Cooper: (*resolutely*) No. I'm not you. I'm not a failure.

Narrator: Cooper's resolve hardened as he locked eyes with his father. The room around him began to shift, the walls melting away

into a vast, empty void. Now, it was just the two of them—Cooper and his father, who slowly rose from the couch. Towering over Cooper with an aura of menace, his father's form was distorted and monstrous, fueled by years of bitterness and self-loathing. Cooper's hand instinctively reached out, grasping the familiar handle of the broom that seemed to materialize from the shadows. It had always been there, a silent companion in his battles, both real and imagined.

Mr. Tyler: (*mocking*) What's this, boy? You think you can take me on with a broom? What are you going to do, sweep me away?

Narrator: Cooper gripped the broom tightly, feeling its weight in his hands. He took a deep breath, centering himself. The broom, more than just a cleaning tool or one of his weapons of choice, now felt like an extension of his will. With determination, he charged forward.

Cooper: (*smirking*) Maybe it's time I finally clean house for good!

Narrator: The battle begins as his father lunges at him, fists swinging with the weight of a lifetime's anger and disappointment. But Cooper is prepared. He spins the broom with precision, deflecting each blow, the bristles and handle moving in perfect sync with his body.

Mr. Tyler: (*sneering*) You think a few tricks will change anything? You can't escape what you've failed to do!

Narrator: But Cooper doesn't waver. He twists, sweeping the broom low before thrusting it upward with force. The impact sends his father staggering, surprise and rage flickering across his contorted face.

Cooper: (*defiantly*) I'm done running from your shadow..!

Narrator: His father's form flickers, dissolving into a ghostly figure, now clad in the tattered remains of his SWAT TROOPER ELITE dress blues uniform. He hovers in the air, a twisted echo of the man who once commanded respect and fear, now broken and incomplete. His face is half-shadowed, his eyes dull, clouded with defeat and regret.

Mr. Tyler: (*voice softer, almost pleading*) You know I didn't want this... I gave everything to my country, Cooper... I was a soldier. A hero... and this bottle was all I had left.

Narrator: Mr. Tyler's spectral form drifts around Cooper, trying to drag him back into the past, reminding him of the father who once

stood tall before alcohol consumed him. But Cooper stands firm, his heart steeled against the ghost's pull. With a swift motion, he swings the broom through his father's ethereal form, scattering it like mist in the wind.

Cooper: *(voice steady)* You chose the bottle, Pops. You gave up on me, on Mom... and worst of all, on yourself.

Narrator: Mr. Tyler's ghost falters, his voice growing faint, the remnants of a once-proud soldier dissolving into little more than a hollow whisper. Suddenly, the ghost reforms into something far more terrible. His father stands before him again, but now his body is shattered—his uniform, face, and entire being cracked and jagged like broken glass. The medals on his chest glint weakly, tarnished and meaningless, dangling from the shattered remnants of a man who once wore them with pride. Mr. Tyler's shattered form swings with fury, his jagged fists slicing through the air. Each strike, heavy with the weight of his father's disappointment, crashes down on Cooper like a storm.

Mr. Tyler: *(mocking)* What's wrong, son? All broken up..?

Narrator: Yet despite the pain, Cooper fights back, determined not to break under the pressure. Cooper then drives the broom into the cracks of his father's shattered form, each strike precise and deliberate, targeting the core of the man who once towered over him. His father staggers, fragments of his broken form crumbling away like fading memories.

Cooper: *(through gritted teeth)* You lost your fight, Pa! But I'm still here! I'm still fighting... even if I couldn't save her or live up to your expectations... I'm still here.

Narrator: As Mr. Tyler's shattered form crumbles, he quickly reemerges as a hulking, grotesque creature with a gaping void where its heart should be. His father's uniform hangs in tatters, the once-proud SWAT TROOPER ELITE insignia barely visible beneath the thick, oily shadow enveloping the beast. This no longer resembles his father in any way; it is now the Hollow Beast—an embodiment of the addiction that consumed him, the man lost inside the bottle.

Mr. Tyler: *(echoing from deep within the beast)* You'll never escape me, COOPER... you'll nEVER esCApe the gUILT...

Narrator: Mr. Tyler's Hollow Beast form lashes out with monstrous claws, its jagged limbs reaching for Cooper, trying to pull him into the gaping void in its chest. The air thickens with the stench of alcohol, suffocating as the Beast's hollow eyes lock onto him. Cooper breaks free from its grip, dodging the Beast's wild strikes as he rolls out of reach. With determination, he drives the broom forward, plunging it into the Hollow Beast's empty chest. The Beast roars, and in a final desperate attempt, pulls at the broom, still trying to drag Cooper into the void. But Cooper defiantly resists as Mr. Tyler's Hollow Beast form weakly taunts him.

Mr. Tyler: *(voice deep, distorted)* YOU'll never bE fREE, CoOPer... always haUNTEd by what YOU couldn't fix, WHAT YOU couldn't sAVE..!

Cooper: *(with fierce determination)* No... I won't be trapped by what I couldn't change anymore.



Narrator: Cooper forcefully yanks the broom free from the grip of Mr. Tyler's Hollow Beast form. With one final, powerful strike, he brings the broom down on the creature. The Hollow Beast

lets out a deafening cry as its once-imposing figure wavers, flickering like a dying flame before beginning to fade. The room around Cooper starts to dissolve, the oppressive atmosphere lifting as he confronts the deepest part of himself.

Cooper: (*firmly*) I did the best I could... and I forgive myself for what I couldn't do. I'm not perfect, but I'm not a failure. I'm my own man, and I won't let you—or anyone else—tell me otherwise.

Narrator: Suddenly, the void shifted, and he found himself back in his small bedroom, the familiar worn carpet beneath him. He sat cross-legged, engrossed in a video game, with a bulky headset firmly over his ears. Next to him, the Walkman rested quietly, the tape inside still turning, silently awaiting its cue to play. The room was dimly lit, with only the glow of the TV screen illuminating Cooper's focused expression. Posters of long-forgotten heroes and distant worlds clung to the walls, faded by time but still holding their place. The clutter around him—scattered game cartridges, old action figures, and an unmade bed—painted a picture of a life paused, caught between past and present. Cooper then paused the game, his fingers hovering over the controller. Slowly, he pulled off the headset, letting it rest around his neck. The silence in the room was almost suffocating, broken only by the faint hum of the TV. He glanced at the Walkman beside him, hesitating for a moment before fast-forwarding the tape slightly and pressing play. Justice's 'D.A.N.C.E.' blasted through the headset, loud enough that its upbeat rhythm spilled into the room, cutting through the quiet and bringing a spark of life back into the space. The music awakened something deep within him. Cooper stood up, his movements tentative at first, as if testing the limits of his small world. But as the beat took hold, he began to dance, his body moving to the rhythm, finding freedom within the confines of the room. The once-cramped space transformed, each spin and step turning the familiar surroundings into a stage for his expression. He danced with growing confidence, using every inch of the room—the bed, the dresser, the small patch of floor—as his stage. The walls that once felt so close now seemed to expand with his movements, the room growing larger with each step. The joy on his face was unmistakable, a rare

moment of pure, unfiltered emotion breaking through the layers of routine and memory. The dance reached its peak, Cooper's body perfectly in sync with the music, each movement precise yet vibrant with life. Then, with a final, powerful spin, he came to a stop as the music faded and he caught his breath. The room returned to its normal size, the illusion of space shrinking back, but the feeling of freedom remained. Cooper stood in the middle of his small bedroom, the silence returning but not as heavy as before. The Walkman still played, its melody now faint, as he looked around the room with a newfound sense of peace, as if released from the chains that once held him. The game remained paused on the screen, waiting for him to return, but for now, he simply stood there, letting the moment wash over him. Slowly, the room began to fade, its edges blurring as the light dimmed. Everything went black, but there was no fear—only a quiet acceptance. In the darkness, Cooper felt a weight lift and a calmness settle over him. The void was no longer empty; it was filled with a gentle, comforting silence as he embraced the peace that had finally found him. As Cooper drifted in the comforting silence of the void, a faint echo began to stir within him, gradually growing louder. The darkness that had enveloped him started to lift, giving way to flickers of light and sound. The distant, muffled voices of his comrades penetrated the haze, pulling him back from the depths. Slowly, his awareness began to return, the fog in his mind clearing as he struggled to reconnect with the world around him. Bit by bit, the void receded, and Cooper felt his senses sharpening, his mental faculties slowly coming back into focus.

Elvir: *(worried)* Cooper? Cooper, can you hear me..?

Dew: *(urgently)* Come on, buddy. We need you back here.

Narrator: Cooper's gaze gradually cleared, and the blurry faces of his friends came into sharp focus. The concern on their faces was evident, and their relief was almost tangible as he fully emerged from his catatonic state. With their support, he slowly sat up, regaining his senses and reconnecting with the world around him.

Cooper: (*groggily*) Ugh... what happened? Where's that giant, winged Chihuahua with the pickle-shaped body? It stole... the bag of Cheezy Claws I wanted...

Narrator: Dew and the party suppressed their laughter at the absurdity of Cooper's delirious mumbling. Krista then stepped forward to address him.

Krista: (*softly*) You were out of it for a while. We were really worried about you.

Lorenzo: It must have been those spores from the fight. They almost did you in.

Cooper: (*nodding slightly*) Um. Yeah.

Elvir: (*with a small smile*) Welcome back, Coop. We were worried we'd lost you there for a moment.

Vilmer: (*gruffly*) Good thing we used the *Light Elementome* on you. The worst of the effects seem to have worn off, but you might still feel a bit off for a while.

Narrator: Cooper rubbed his head, the remnants of the vivid hallucination still faintly lingering in his mind. He felt a new sense of clarity and strength but was aware that the spores' influence might not be entirely gone.

Cooper: (*reassuringly*) I'm okay... I think. Just a bit hazy.

Dew: (*firmly*) Easy there, no need to rush it. Let's give it some time.

Narrator: Cooper nodded and, with their help, slowly got to his feet. Although he felt lighter, a lingering sense of disorientation reminded him of the hallucinations' impact. As they exited the Cryogenics room, Vilmer spotted a crumpled piece of paper on a table that had been overlooked earlier. His curiosity piqued, he picked it up.

Vilmer: (*picking it up*) Looks like something worth reading.

Narrator: The group gathered around as Vilmer carefully unfolded the brittle, yellowed fax paper, its faded text still legible despite the wear. After a quick scan, he started reading the memo aloud to the party.

Vilmer:

"Memo

Date: September 2, 2000

To: The Team

From: Dr. Emmett Grant

Subject: SKT Virus T Vial Transfer and Safety Protocols

'The SKT virus T vial is scheduled to be transferred to our facility in the coming days. Upon its arrival, ensure it is placed in the containment unit immediately and remains there until further instructions are provided. Under no circumstances should the vial be removed or tampered with until official retrieval is confirmed. Handle the vial with extreme caution, as its contents are known to cause hallucinogenic effects.'

Celestia Lumidaisy, a rare flower found throughout Demmin, is the primary component of the SKT virus T formulation. This virus is known for causing hallucinations and mutations, making proper containment and careful handling essential.

Due to escalating tensions, we have been advised to prepare for a potential evacuation if the New Havenport Minutemen make significant advances in the Northern Zone of Demmin. Should evacuation become necessary, ensure the vial is secured and left behind in its containment unit. The facility may need to be abandoned, but the vial must remain undisturbed until official retrieval is possible.

Prioritize your safety above all else. Your well-being remains our highest priority.'

Dr. Emmett Grant"

- Narrator: A heavy silence settled over the group as they absorbed the memo's implications.
- Krista: *(softly)* It looks like the scientists evacuated this place a long time ago. Unfortunately, we can't say the same for the mercenaries and SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers we came across...
- Narrator: Vilmer fell into deep thought, his demeanor catching the attention of the rest of the party.
- Lorenzo: What's on your mind, Vilmer?
- Vilmer: ...Do you remember what the residents of the southern zone told us? They said anyone who returned from the northern zone was never the same. They mentioned that people confronted their deepest fears there... and that it changed them forever.

Lorenzo: Yeah, I remember. So, what are you getting at..?

Vilmer: At the time, I didn't think much of it, but after seeing what the SKT virus T does, it's starting to make sense. The Celestia Lumidaisy—the flower Krista mentioned earlier and referenced in the memo—combined with the harsh conditions in Demmin's Northern Zone, including the war-torn environment and fallout, must have amplified its hallucinogenic properties. It's not just affecting those who come into contact with it; it's intensifying the fears and traumas they already carry. The most vulnerable suffer the most.

Cooper: *(thinking to himself) It's as if the zone itself came to life, feeding off my inner darkness... Hmph. That was one hell of a trip...*

Narrator: The party glanced at Cooper, noting the pensive expression on his face but deciding to let him be. Elvir, ever the joker, turned her attention back to the group.

Elvir: It's a miracle none of us are having our own personal horror show right now.

Krista: *(smirking)* ...Or maybe we're just too stubborn to let some creepy flower get the best of us. *(then turns to Cooper)* ...No offense.

Narrator: Cooper then offered Krista a faint smile, showing he took no offense to her comment.

Lorenzo: Hm. Stubborn, huh? More like too exhausted to deal with any more weirdness today.

Elvir: You might be right about that. I've had my fill of 'weird' for one day.

Narrator: The group shared a brief, lighthearted moment before Vilmer resumed his reflections aloud.

Vilmer: It's remarkable that the rest of us weren't affected. Quite interesting...

Narrator: A moment of silence then follows before Lorenzo speaks up again.

Lorenzo: ...So, what's our next move? Are we just going to stand here forever?

Dew: Now that we have the SKT virus T vial, we should head back to the southern zone. Rena, Johnny, and their friend might have returned there by now, or they could have left this

province altogether. But there's no reason to linger here any longer.

Vilmer: That sounds like a wise decision.

Elvir: (*smirking*) But what about this place? Are we really just going to leave it like this? It feels like we're walking out of a horror movie.

Cooper: Let's make sure this 'horror movie' doesn't get a sequel. We should seal it up tight and let the government handle the cleanup once we contact Killbin.

Dew: (*nodding*) We'll do that. Okay, everyone, let's get moving.

Narrator: With their decision made, the party left the secret lab behind. They quickly sealed the entrance, and the hidden door inside the video rental store clicked shut, leaving only the cold steel barrier between the outside world and the dark secrets buried below. One by one, they emerged from the store into the desolate urban ruins of the northern zone. The heavy silence hung over them as they began their journey back toward the southern zone, their footsteps echoing through the emptiness. Unseen and menacing, a lone *Bush of Life* cultist with a handheld radio at his side watches their every move from the shadows. As evening settled in, the scene panned up to the sky, where the sun dipped lower on the horizon, casting a serene yet ominous glow over the landscape. As the light faded, the heavy silence lingered, broken only by the faint crackle of a radio coming to life, followed by a low murmur.

CHAPTER 13 – THE CAY’S CALL



Narrator: Several hours later, the scene cuts to Pomodoro Cay, a red-sanded cay surrounded by shallow coral reefs. Once a secret testing ground for experimental weapons used by the Mesovillain government, its violent past still scars the landscape, though resilient shrubs and jagged rocks have reclaimed the inland areas. Crimson sand, rich with iron oxide, lines the shoreline and parts of the cay’s perimeter, glimmering faintly under the moonlight like scattered embers of a forgotten blaze. The humid air carries the scent of saltwater and warm earth, mingled with a faint metallic tang from the long-abandoned structures. The crash of waves against the reef mixes with the distant cries of seabirds, but an unnatural stillness hangs in the air. Rena, Johnny, and Gaz weave cautiously through the dense undergrowth and rocky formations, their movements breaking the silence. Each step and rustle of

leaves echoes louder than it should, as if the cay itself is holding its breath. Moonlight filters through the thick canopy, casting twisted shadows across the uneven ground. Gaz grunts occasionally, swatting irritably at mosquitoes as he trudges along, before finally breaking the silence with a muttered complaint.

Gaz: (*grimacing*) Sheesh, this place is tighter than a nun's chastity belt... It's unbearable... And my legs are about to give out. Again. Ugh. Can't we take a break? Maybe a little nap? Clothes optional—depending on the mood.

Torrio: (*smirking*) Gaz, if flappin' your gums was a job, you'd be a millionaire. Now zip it before I make you an offer you can't refuse.

Gaz: (*raising his hands in mock innocence*) Fine, fine! But seriously, is this jungle gonna kill me, or are you two? 'Cause it feels like I'm gettin' squeezed from both sides here.

Torrio: (*glancing over his shoulder, voice firm*) You know the score, Gaz. I coulda left you to rot in Ganas Commune's jail. No one was comin' for ya. I'm givin' you a way out. You do this, your slate's clean. Capisce?

Gaz: (*groaning loudly*) Yeah, yeah... I was a bad boy. What a sweet deal. Honestly, I'd rather be tied to that wooden chair again, gettin' worked over by your mohawked buddy. Mmm... At least that was fun.

Torrio: (*grinning*) Oh yeah? I remember you enjoyed that a little too much. How 'bout I make you listen to the, "*Baby Shark song*", on repeat? Let's see who's beggin' for mercy then.

Gaz: (*shuddering dramatically*) Ohhh, nooo... Don't bring that up... That was... dreadful... (*then wipes sweat from his brow theatrically*) You know what? Never mind... Bein' out here ain't so bad after all.

Torrio: Ha-ha... Thought so. And you're welcome.

Rena: (*sharply*) Keep it down...! We don't need any unwanted attention.

Gaz: (*muttering*) I think I'd take the attention over this.

Torrio: (*glancing at Gaz*) You keep squawkin', and you'll get plenty of attention—none of it good.

Narrator: Rena stops suddenly, turning to Johnny with a playful smile.

Rena: *(teasing, voice light)* ...You know, considering it's only been nearly a week that you two have been around each other, you and Gaz act like you've been best friends forever.

Torrio: Friends with this clown? Forget about it. I'd call it more of a temporary alliance. Nothin' more.

Gaz: *(dramatically, waving his machete with flair, tone exaggerated and playful)* "Temporary alliance"? Pfft. C'mon, Johnny! You know it's destiny! We're like peanut butter and jelly—except I'm the fun peanut butter, and you're the grumpy jelly.

Torrio: *(groans quietly, but a faint smirk creeps onto his face)* Yeah, yeah. Whatever helps you sleep at night, pal. But I gotta admit, you've been kinda useful on this little thrill ride we've been on...

Gaz: Hah-ha-ha... I knew it. You do love me!

Torrio: Oh, geez...

Narrator: Rena shakes her head with a hint of amusement and resumes leading the group through the jungle. Johnny falls in step behind her, focused and alert. Gaz chuckles quietly, clearly entertained by his own antics. As the trio ventures deeper into the jungle, the weight of the moment grows with each step, the thick undergrowth and fading light closing in around them. With Gaz lagging behind, Johnny steps up beside Rena to speak with her.

Torrio: *(turning to Rena)* So, Rena... Your pals ain't gonna come lookin' for us, are they? I mean, this ain't exactly the kinda place you go for a stroll.

Rena: Hmm... Unlikely. Not unless Dew has woken from his coma. But they've already done enough. This isn't their burden—it's mine. All of this was my fault, and I'm going to set it right.

Torrio: *(nodding)* I get it. But don't forget—this ain't just about you anymore. You and your friends saved my Analia, and I owe you. So, whether you like it or not, I'm seein' this through, right to the end.

Rena: I know you do, Johnny. And I'm grateful... for your friendship. Always.

Narrator: As they continue walking, Rena's gaze drifts downward, her pace slowing. Her thoughts linger on Dew—his laugh, his stubbornness, the way he always found hope in even the bleakest situations. The image of him lying in a coma, fighting

for his life, sends a pang of guilt and worry through her. She pauses, staring blankly at the ground, a distant look clouding her eyes.

Torrio: (*frowning*) Hey, you all right? You look like someone just clocked ya. What's goin' on?

Rena: (*blinking, shaking herself out of it*) Huh? Oh... yeah. I'm fine.

Torrio: (*raises an eyebrow*) C'mon, Rena, don't gimme that. It's Dew, ain't it? You're thinkin' about him.

Rena: (*sigh*) Yeah... I miss him, Johnny. He shouldn't have been dragged into this. None of them should have.

Torrio: (*steps closer, voice softening*) Listen, Rena... from what I've seen, that guy's tougher than an overcooked steak. He's gonna pull through, no doubt. You know he wouldn't want you sittin' here beatin' yourself up over it.

Narrator: Rena gives a small, sad smile, her eyes still distant.

Rena: I know. I just... I wish I could do more. I feel so—

Torrio: (*then interrupts her off, waving a hand dismissively*) Helpless? Yeah, I get it. But sittin' around second-guessin' won't fix nothin'. Like you said, we got a job to do. We'll get through this, and you'll see Dew again. So, do me a favor—don't start gettin' all soft on me now, okay..?

Rena: (*nods, the hint of a smile returning*) Okay, Johnny... Thanks.

Torrio: (*grins*) No problem. Now, c'mon—pick up the pace, will ya? You're makin' me look like the energetic one here, and that's bad for my rep.

Rena: Ha-ha... Wouldn't want that now, would we?

Torrio: Damn right. I'm the laid-back guy, remember? All this extra walkin' around is crampin' my style.

Rena: (*smirks*) Right. Guess I'd better step it up before you start complainin' about your feet hurtin', old man.

Torrio: Ha-ha-ha... Hey, ease up with the 'old man' talk, will ya? I can still take down punks half my age, and don't you forget it.

Narrator: Rena and Johnny exchange a brief smile, their silent camaraderie clear without words, before continuing to walk side by side. Gaz remains lagging behind them, his footsteps dragging slightly. The jungle around them grows darker and more oppressive with each step. Gaz swats lazily at a mosquito, his gaze unfocused, while Johnny keeps his eyes sharp, scanning for any sign of movement in the shadows. Rena moves with

purpose, each step deliberate and confident. Together, they push through the thickening foliage, battling oversized leaves and tangled vines, until they emerge into a small clearing. Rena pauses, her eyes narrowing as she scans the open space. Johnny steps forward, his stance relaxed yet alert, and glances around before speaking.



Torrio: ...We're gettin' close now, huh?
Rena: We're close...
Torrio: Heh, looks like that info we squeezed outta that *Bush of Life* punk we nabbed after scrapin' with his buddies up in Dem-min's Northern Zone was right on the money after all, eh?
Narrator: Rena gives Johnny a subtle nod of acknowledgment. Gaz then stumbles into the clearing a few moments later, panting softly and wiping sweat from his brow.
Gaz: (*grimaces*) Sheesh, it was like a furnace in there... I thought we'd never make it out.
Torrio: (*turns to face Gaz*) Hey, Gaz. Thanks for finally joinin' us.

Gaz: (*rolls his eyes*) Oh, don't worry—I just wanted to give you two a head start. Wouldn't want to show off and leave you in the dust.

Torrio: (*smirking*) Yeah, sure, kid. Keep dreamin'... Anyway... (*then turns to Rena*) Gotta hand it to these *Bush of Life* mooks. Hiding out here, outta sight, outta mind. Clever. But they ain't smart enough to stay hidden forever.

Rena: (*nodding*) Exactly. It's only a matter of time now.

Torrio: (*grinning wider*) Yeah, and they've got no clue we're about to knock on their door.

Gaz: (*swatting at a branch*) Yeah, great... Too bad they didn't roll out a welcome mat and throw in a few lounge chairs for us, huh?

Narrator: A brief silence follows as Johnny glances at Gaz, shaking his head in clear annoyance, while Rena smirks, mildly amused by his comment. Just as the trio prepares to move forward, a sudden rustling shatters the quiet nearby. Rena halts mid-step, raising a hand to signal the others to stop. Instantly, they tense, weapons at the ready. The rustling intensifies, and from the shadows, the *Bush of Life* cultists emerge, their strange garb blending seamlessly with the jungle as they move in eerie synchronization. Spreading out as they advance, the cultists form a wide circle around the trio, slowly and deliberately closing in, as if they had been anticipating this encounter all along. Johnny tightens his grip on his sawed-off shotgun, while Gaz, uncharacteristically serious, adjusts his stance and swings his machete with renewed focus. Rena steps forward, her scythe poised and ready. Johnny spits on the ground, muttering to Gaz under his breath.

Torrio: Ah, just our luck... No lounge chairs or welcome mats, Gaz, but these goons sure look like they're part of the welcome party. Fan-freakin'-tastic.

Gaz: (*grinning, dramatically slashing the air*) Oh-ho! Well, things just got interesting. It's gonna get spicy up in here! Mmm...

Narrator: The cultists continue their unnerving approach, their movements perfectly synchronized. Their faces are hidden behind expressionless masks, shrouded in dark hoods that blend seamlessly with the surrounding shadows. Though their eyes are unseen, their intent is unmistakable. They advance

steadily, each step slow and deliberate, intensifying the suffocating tension in the air.

BOL Cultist 5: (*cold, mechanical voice*) They have arrived...

BOL Cultist 6: (*hissing*) The master said the Sōl Congruum knew they would come...

Narrator: One of the cultists glides forward, his masked face tilting slightly as he raises a hand with unnerving precision. Long fingers extend slowly from beneath the wide sleeves of his robe, the movement almost unnatural as he points directly at Rena, singling her out from the group.

BOL Cultist 7: YOU, will come with us... The Sōl Congruum demands it.

Rena: (*sarcastically*) Oh, is that so? But we were on our way anyway.

Torrio: (*sneering*) “Demands”, huh? Cute. Hey, bedsheets, how ’bout you take that demand, wrap it up real nice, and shove it where the sun don’t shine? Ain’t nobody takin’ her unless you wanna see how fast you can hit the ground.

Gaz: (*grinning, twirling his machete with flair*) Mmm... Johnny, always so direct! Me? I’m a little more easygoing. How about we skip the fighting and you just give us a tour of the spooky cult hideout? Snacks included, of course.

Torrio: (*smirking, giving Gaz a sideways glance*) Gaz, if you don’t button it, I’ll let these mooks take ya in as the appetizer. Maybe you’ll get that tour after all—from the inside.

Gaz: (*feigning shock, hand on chest*) Appetizer? Please, I’m more of a main course! But if they insist, at least offer a drink—fighting makes me thirsty.

Narrator: The cultists still advancing in perfect unison, then draw their Xiphos swords without hesitation, unfazed by Gaz’s banter. The tension thickens as the jungle seems to close in around them. Step by step, the cultists edge closer, their eyes locked intently on Rena.

BOL Cultist 8: The others hold no worth. Slay them where they stand...

BOL Cultist 9: Seize her...

Rena: (*eyes narrowed, voice steely*) So, you want me? Fine. Come and get me.

Torrio: (*cracking his neck, gripping his shotgun tighter*) That’s how ya wanna play it, huh? Don’t say we didn’t give ya a chance to scam. Now you’re askin’ for it...

Narrator: Johnny swiftly fires his sawed-off shotgun, the blast hitting a cultist square in the chest, sending him flying backward and crashing violently to the ground. Despite this, the remaining cultists remain unfazed and charge toward Rena, Johnny, and Gaz in perfect unison, initiating the battle. Rena's scythe slices through the air, tearing through the cultist's cloak before cleaving flesh and bone. Johnny's shotgun roars with each blast, while Gaz swings his machete wildly, cutting through robes and striking down foes. The scene descends into chaos as the trio fends off the cultists, while more slowly emerge from the jungle. Amid the battle, as Gaz casually swings his machete to fend off the approaching cultists, he shouts to Johnny over the noise.

Gaz: *(swinging his machete, slicing through a cultist)* These guys go down easier than a cheap drink.

Torrio: *(reloading his shotgun, smirking)* Yeah, turns out they're not so tough after all. Easy pickings...

Gaz: *(grinning, ducking under a cultist's swing)* And here I was hopin' to skip the fighting and get straight to the snacks!

Torrio: *(firing a blast into a cultist, confused)* Wait, what..?

Gaz: *(rolling his eyes, slashing at another cultist)* Johnny, where are my snacks? You promised me snacks! *(then swings wildly)*

Torrio: *(blows away another cultist, smirking)* What the hell are you even talking about..? Snacks, huh? I'll make you another deal—survive this, and I'll get ya a nice big cannoli. But ya gotta zip it first.

Gaz: *(grinning, deflecting a strike and then slicing through a cultist)* Deal..! But seriously, is it just me, or is it getting crowded in here? These guys don't know when to quit!

Torrio: *(quickly reloads and fires another shot)* Good. More for the trash heap.

Narrator: Rena's scythe carves through two more cultists. As she pivots back-to-back with Johnny, she spares a glance at him, her eyes flashing with a mix of exasperation and dark amusement.

Rena: *(voice strained but teasing)* Reminds me of that one time... We were outnumbered ten-to-two, and you couldn't stop joking about 'group discounts' and 'early bird specials.'

Torrio: *(grinning through gritted teeth as he pumps the shotgun)*
Yeah, well, I was packin' a lot more heat and dealin' with a lot less headaches back then.

Rena: *(swinging her scythe in a wide arc, cutting down two more cultists)* ...And a lot less gray hair too.

Torrio: *(blows another cultist away, smirking)* Ha! You're one to talk, Miss 'Let's-charge-in-like-a-maniac.' But hey, at least this time, they ain't torched the joint—yet.

Rena: *(snorts softly)* Give them time...

Torrio: *(dodges a swing, firing back)* Yeah, remember that first gig we did together? We were boxed in real tight, and you just stood there smilin', askin' if it was too late to tell 'em to scram. I thought you'd either lost your damn mind or were just tryin' to piss me off.

Rena: *(shrugs, knocking a cultist off his feet)* Couldn't help myself—your face was priceless. Ha-ha...

Torrio: *(firing off another shot, smirking)* Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. You had some guts... You're lucky I didn't whack ya back then. Not that I could pull the trigger the first time, either... Then there was that time I tried playin' 'negotiator.' What the hell was I thinkin', tryin' to grease some palms and talk our way through?

Rena: *(grinning as she dodges a strike)* Right—then you stroll in with a bag full of fake bills, acting like a big shot, thinking they'd just roll over and let us through! I thought you were about to get us both killed.

Torrio: *(blows away another cultist, chuckling)* Yeah, yeah, I get it—real smart move on my part. But hey, it bought ya enough time to do your thing, didn't it? So, it ain't like it was a total bust.

Rena: *(rolling her eyes, then slashing through two more cultists)*
Sure, Johnny... if 'not a total bust' means you limping out with one shoe and me having to listen to you complain about it the whole way back.

Torrio: Hey, those were my favorite kicks. Took me months to break in a new pair! *(then shakes his head, smirking)* But like I said—get through scraps like these, and suddenly the odds don't seem so bad... *(then fires another shot, his voice softening)* But hey... we made a damn good team, didn't we?

Always managed to pull off a win, no matter how rough things got.

Rena: Yeah, Johnny... we did. I could always count on you to have my back.

Torrio: (*grins, eyes flashing with nostalgia*) And I could always count on you to turn every job into ten times more chaos than we needed... (*then quickly fires at another cultist*) But hey, that's what made it fun, right..?

Rena: It sure did, all things considered. After all, I decided to stick around and see where this crazy ride would take me after you spared my life and helped me start over... And despite all the past mistakes I've made and the regrets I've carried, I can honestly say I wouldn't change a single thing about what we've been through together.

Torrio: (*pauses, then gives a small, genuine smile*) I'm glad I didn't shoot you.

Rena: Ha-ha... Me too, Johnny. Me too...

Narrator: Rena's lips curve into a brief smile, but it quickly fades as another wave of cultist's bursts through the trees, shattering their fleeting moment of respite. The trio, now standing back-to-back, struggles to fend off the relentless swarm closing in from every direction. Gaz swings his machete with surprising ferocity, his dramatic flourishes cutting through robes and limbs with vicious efficiency. Sweat pours down his face, but his eyes blaze with a defiant glint as he hacks his way through the chaos, refusing to give an inch. Johnny's sawed-off shotgun roars above the din, each blast sending a cultist flying back, only for more to fill the gap. He reloads quickly, but his movements slow as he glances down at his dwindling supply of shells. His jaw tightens. Each shot is now deliberate, the booming retorts growing less frequent. When his shotgun clicks empty, Johnny mutters a curse and loads the last few shells, his eyes hardening as he knows they'll have to count. Rena's scythe arcs in a deadly rhythm, cleaving through the attackers with brutal precision. Blood sprays across the crimson sand with every swing, yet she remains steadfast, unwavering in her resolve. The cultists' synchronized movements tighten the circle around them. Each step forward feels like two steps back as the trio's defenses

stretch to their limits. Despite their efforts, the cultists press in closer, suffocating their space and piling the odds against them. Gaz's breath grows heavier, but his grin remains defiant. Johnny's shotgun barrels smoke as he fires another round, scattering the front line. He brushes his fingers over empty pockets, his grip tightening on the shotgun, ready to use it as a club. Rena's eyes flick to him, noticing his change in stance. She adjusts her position, swinging her scythe in wider arcs to cover him. The cultists surge forward, overwhelming numbers closing in, suffocating the trio under the weight of their assault. Every strike becomes more desperate, every move a fight for survival. Just as the cultists press in for the final blow, the screen fades to black, leaving their fate uncertain.

CHAPTER 14 – A GLIMMER OF HOPE, A SHROUDED FOG

Narrator:

The scene cuts back to the Southern Zone of Demmin the following morning as Dew and the party return from Tog Valley. Sunlight seeps through a thick haze, casting a muted glow over the desolate area. Venturing deeper into the heart of the zone, they navigate alleys lined with scorched, crumbling buildings standing shoulder-to-shoulder with long-abandoned shacks and makeshift homes. Eventually, they reach a quiet marketplace just beginning to stir to life. The faint aroma of freshly baked bread and grilled meats hangs in the air. Stalls made from repurposed scrap metal and wood stand in uneven rows, their vendors quietly setting up for the day ahead. Produce, clothing, and trinkets are laid out on rough-hewn tables, their muted colors blending with the worn, weathered facades of the surrounding structures. A few early risers move about, their faces reflecting a blend of wariness and distant hope, like specters in the half-light of dawn. As Dew and the party make their way through the somber market, a familiar voice cuts through the quiet. Turning as one, they spot an older woman—one of the residents they spoke to when they first arrived in the Southern Zone. They stop as she approaches them.

SZ Demmin Resident 3:

(raising a hand cautiously, eyes narrowing with recognition) Ah, good morning. Back so soon..?

Dew: *(then offers a faint smile)* Hello, again. And good morning. Yeah... things didn't quite go as planned up north.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: *(tilting her head, concern flickering in her eyes)* You didn't find your friends?

Dew: *(shaking his head)* No.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: I'm sorry to hear that... but I'm glad you all made it back in one piece. Very few do, as I mentioned when we last saw one another... *(then glances at Cooper, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studies him)* Hmm... You know... there's something different about you.

Cooper: *(raising an eyebrow)* Different? How so?

SZ Demmin Resident 3: *(tilting her head, a small, knowing smile forming)* Last time I saw you, you looked like you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Now... I don't know. You don't seem as gloomy. Like you've shed some of that burden. Did something happen out there?

Cooper: *(pauses, his expression softening slightly)* Yeah, you could say that. Had a few close calls, faced some things I wasn't ready for... but I guess I came out the other side a little stronger.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: *(nodding slowly)* I can see it. There's a lightness about you now—something that wasn't there before. Whatever you went through, it looks like you overcame it.

Narrator: Cooper then gives SZ Demmin Resident 3 an assuring, warm smile as she nods with satisfaction. She then pauses, as if recalling something.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: Oh, wait—I almost forgot. Your friends... I remember now... They did come back through here.

Dew: They did?!

SZ Demmin Resident 3: Yes. My apologies. I blame my old age. Haha...
 Yes, a few hours after you all left for Tog Valley, they were seen coming back from there... Barely stayed long enough to catch their breath before heading out again. I was told they took off in a boat they had sitting aside on shore.

Dew: (*gritting his teeth in frustration*) Ugh. Of fuckin' course we would just miss them.

Cooper: (*frowning deeply*) ...They must've doubled back once we were gone.

Vilmer: We were right here. If we'd stayed just a bit longer...

Elvir: (*sigh*) Typical, innit? Always missin' each other by a bloody hair's breadth. It's like we're chasin' our own tails, I swear!

Lorenzo: (*crossing his arms*) Figures. So, what now?

Krista: (*glancing at Dew*) Yeah, what's the plan..?

Dew: (*then rubs the back of his neck, deep in thought*) I don't know... but at least we know they're alive. That's something.

Narrator: SZ Demmin Resident 3 then interjects softly.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: ...Well, while you're still working that out, there's someone you might consider visiting—Dr. Scotlynn Pilo Sloane. She's a retired scientist and inventor who helped us rebuild here in the Southern Zone after the war.

Lorenzo: Why would we need to talk to her..?

SZ Demmin Resident 3: Well, she might have crossed paths with your friends while they were here. Even if she can't help with that, she can still provide you with some useful weapons and accessories.

Vilmer: (*thinking aloud*) Hmm... It's not like we have many options left anyway.

Lorenzo: (*crossing his arms, glancing at Dew*) She might be worth the visit, then... even if it's a long shot.

Dew: *(then pauses, deep in thought)* Hmm... Yeah, we've been hitting a lot of dead ends. Sure. Let's do it.

Krista: *(shrugging lightly, smirking)* At the very least, we'll get to meet the person who's been holding this place together. That's something, right?

SZ Demmin Resident 3: She has a small workshop just a few blocks from here. Mention that we spoke, and she'll know I sent you. She's a bit reserved, but once you get her talking, she's a wealth of knowledge.

Elvir: *(rolling her eyes playfully)* Sounds like we've got ourselves a side quest then, eh? Can't hurt to see what this old brainiac's got up her sleeve.

Cooper: *(smirking slightly)* Yeah, and maybe we'll finally get a break. Worth a shot.

Dew: *(then gives a firm nod)* We'll check it out. Thanks for the suggestion.

Krista: *(grinning warmly)* Thanks. We really appreciate it.

Lorenzo: *(nodding sincerely)* It's good to know there are still people like you looking out for each other.

Cooper: *(giving a respectful nod)* Thanks. We'll make sure to pay her a visit.

Vilmer: *(smiling appreciatively)* Much obliged. Your kindness won't be forgotten.

Elvir: *(winking playfully)* Ta, mate. We owe you one for this.

SZ Demmin Resident 3: *(smiling softly at their responses)* Take care out there. I hope Dr. Sloane can be of some help.

Narrator: With a renewed sense of purpose, Dew and the party depart, navigating through the narrow, shadowed alleys of the Southern Zone and following the resident's directions toward Dr. Sloane's workshop, the faint buzz of the

waking market gradually fading behind them. The scene then cuts to Aether's Keep, a secluded yet fortified retreat situated on a small, remote isle 175 miles away from the Executive Mansion Estate in the Helix Province. Aether's Keep serves as a strategic sanctuary for handling the most critical matters of state—a place where the Premiers of Mesovilla conduct sensitive affairs, far from prying eyes. Inside, the Executive Chamber radiates an aura of authority and control. The room is spacious but dimly lit, with heavy curtains draped over the tall windows. Thin, hazy beams of light pierce through, revealing the swirling mist that blankets the grounds outside. Interim Premier Killbin Janerio sits at a massive, polished wooden desk, staring out the window. His posture is tense, his gaze distant. Two *ISPYA* agents, dressed in black tactical suits with concealed holsters and earpieces, stand on either side of the room, their stances alert and eyes vigilant. An Executive Aide, holding a leather-bound folder, stands before Killbin's desk, nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Executive Aide:

(clearing his throat cautiously) ...Sir?

Killbin:

(without turning around, his gaze fixed on the outside) Yes, what is it?

Executive Aide:

(pausing briefly before speaking, voice wavering) I wanted to provide you with an update on the reunification ceremony, sir. The invitations have been sent to dignitaries from each province, and the majority have already confirmed their attendance. Security measures throughout the Executive Mansion Estate will be heightened, with additional personnel deployed for the event.

Killbin:

(turning his chair slowly to face the aide, eyes sharp and assessing) Heightened security...

Good. With all the attention this event will bring, we can't afford any slip-ups. Hmm... And what of Dew Wilder? Any new updates on him and his friends?

Executive Aide: *(shakes his head slightly)* None yet, sir. The last intel placed them heading towards Demmin. That was two days ago. There hasn't been any movement since.

Killbin: I see...

Narrator: The Executive Aide nods, and one of the ISPYA agents' steps forward, carrying a cup of coffee. The other agent remains by the door, his stance tightening as if sensing a shift in the atmosphere.

ISPYA Agent 1: *(setting the cup gently on Killbin's desk)* ...Sir, your coffee.

Killbin: *(then reaches for the cup, he takes a sip, eyes still clouded with thoughts)* Good coffee... very good... *(then sets it down and looks back at the agent)* What about former Secretary-Treasurer Cromwell and those hooded figures that freed him? Any new leads?

ISPYA Agent 1: *(glancing at his fellow agent before responding)* ...Nothing concrete, sir. Our teams have been stretched thin trying to track his known associates. It's as if he's gone completely off the grid.

Killbin: *(scowls, a flash of irritation crossing his face)* It's been two weeks since his escape... That slippery worm is out there somewhere. I want increased pressure on all fronts. We can't have any surprises before the ceremony.

Narrator: The second ISPYA agent, positioned closer to the door, suddenly places a hand to his ear-piece as a burst of static comes through. His expression tightens as he listens to the urgent chatter.

ISPYA Agent 2: *(urgently, voice low and strained)* Sir, we have a situation. There's been a security breach in

Killbin: the lower levels... reports are coming in—
armed intruders have engaged our guards.
(standing abruptly, his face paling) What!?

How did they get in here?

ISPYA Agent 2: *(drawing his weapon and stepping closer to the door)* I'm not sure, sir. But we need to
move you to a secure location...

Narrator: Before the agent can finish, the door bursts
open, and thick, swirling mist pours into the
chamber. Both agents raise their weapons,
but the sudden fog obscures their vision. They
step back cautiously, scanning for threats as
shadows move within the haze. The Executive
Aide freezes, staring at the mist, wide-eyed.

ISPYA Agent 1: *(yelling into the mist, voice steady but tense)*
Identify yourselves! You are in a restricted
area. Stand down or we will shoot!

Narrator: As the fog dissipates, three *Bush of Life* cult-
ists, wielding Xiphos swords, appear flanked
by the ominous figures of Myrrh and Clove—
the Crow Sisters. The agents tense, fingers
hovering over their triggers.

ISPYA Agent 2: *(eyes narrowing)* ...Who the hell are you peo-
ple?!

Myrrh: Who we are doesn't matter. What matters...
is that you step aside...

ISPYA Agent 1: *(gritting his teeth)* Not happening.

Narrator: The agents steady their aim, but before they
can fire, Myrrh and Clove move with inhuman
speed. In a single fluid motion, they un-
sheathe their concealed sickle swords, the
blades flashing briefly in the dim light. Myrrh
disarms Agent 1 with precision, following up
with a crushing blow to his head using the hilt
of her weapon. He crumples to the ground,
lifeless, his neck twisted at an unnatural an-
gle. At the same time, Clove cleaves through
Agent 2's weapon with a single stroke, then
drives her knee into his chest. The agent

stumbles back, wheezing for air, but Clove doesn't let up. She slams her elbow into his temple with brutal efficiency, knocking him unconscious as blood trickles from his nose. The Executive Aide stumbles back, clutching the folder to his chest, trembling in fear. Killbin backs away, his face ashen with shock, as Clove approaches slowly, eyes gleaming with dark amusement behind her mask. The other *Bush of Life* cultists stand silently nearby, watching intently, their masked faces betraying no emotion. Myrrh calmly wipes the blade of her sickle sword on a fallen agent's uniform before sliding it back into its sheath with a metallic click. Clove follows suit, smoothly sheathing her weapon with a deliberate motion, her focus never wavering from Killbin as she begins to address him.

- Clove: You could say we're here for a little... meeting. And we couldn't leave without seeing the guest of honor, now could we?
- Narrator: Myrrh then pulls out a small radio device from her robe and switches it on. A crackle of static is followed by the sinister voice of Thornton.
- Thornton: *Interim Premier Janerio... at last, we meet—though I must apologize for not being able to be there in person.*
- Killbin: *(eyes widening, voice shaking slightly)* Who... who are you?
- Thornton: *Ha-ha-ha... Come now. You may not be too familiar with me... but you certainly knew my brother.*
- Killbin: *(recognition dawning, his expression turning to one of dread)* Wait... are you... Thornton?
- Thornton: *Correct.*
- Killbin: *(voice trembling)* ...What do you want?

Thornton: *What I want... is you. You're going to help me lure out Dew and his little band of trouble-makers.*

Killbin: *(clenching his fists, trying to muster defiance)* Bait? You think I'll just let you use me like some pawn?

Thornton: *(voice dropping to a menacing tone)* Oh, you don't have much choice in the matter. The Crow Sisters and my faithful will make sure you stay... cooperative.

Myrrh: *(stepping closer, reaching out to trail a gloved finger along Killbin's arm)* ...You're not going anywhere, interim premier.

Killbin: *(recoiling)* You're making a mistake. The entire Mesovillain military will be down on your heads!

Clove: *(steps forward, producing a length of rope and beginning to tie Killbin's wrists together with practiced efficiency)* The *Bush of Life* fears no military, no government, and... certainly no pompous officials like you.

Narrator: The Executive Aide takes a shaky step back, eyes darting from Killbin to the cultists. One of the cultists notices the aide's movement and approaches menacingly.

BOL Cultist 10: *(grinning wickedly behind the mask)* Where do you think you're going?

Executive Aide: *(stammering, holding up his hands)* P-please... I'm just an aide... I don't know anything, I swear!

BOL Cultist 10: *(then looks back to Myrrh)* What should we do with this one?

Myrrh: *(then gives a dismissive wave)* Leave him. He is of no use to us.

Clove: *(glancing at the aide with mild disdain)* Run along... unless you want to become another prey.

Narrator: The Executive Aide hesitates for a moment, then turns and bolts out of the chamber,

almost tripping over his own feet in haste. The cultists and the Crow Sisters turn their attention back to Killbin, who glares at them defiantly despite the ropes binding his hands. Myrrh lifts the small radio device to the beak-like tip of her mask and speaks, her voice emanating in a low, distorted tone.



Myrrh:

Master, we've secured the target. Awaiting further instructions.

Thornton:

Perfect... Take him to the Underground Command Chambers beneath the main compound. We have much to discuss.

Narrator: The Crow Sisters and cultists seize Killbin by the arms, preparing to move him. He glances back at the unconscious *ISPYA* agent sprawled beside the lifeless body of his partner. Fear flashes across his face, quickly replaced by anger as his expression hardens.

Killbin: *(through gritted teeth)* Wait... how do you know where the Underground Command Chambers are?

Thornton: *Ha-ha... That's a secret...*

Killbin: *(eyes narrowing)* Unless...

Narrator: Then it hits him—sudden and undeniable. It was Thornton. He was the one who sent the Crow Sisters to break Sherwin out of custody. Killbin looks up at them, fury blazing in his eyes.

Killbin: ...It was you two. *You freed Cromwell.* And he's been working with you this entire time... *(snarling)* You won't get away with this!

Thornton: *(voice fading as they exit, tone dismissive)* Just watch and see... *It's all part of the plan.*

Narrator: The Crow Sisters and *Bush of Life* cultists lead Killbin out of the room, their footsteps echoing ominously as they disappear into the depths of Aether's Keep. The scene ends with the radio's crackle fading into silence, leaving the misty room eerily still.

CHAPTER 15 – “BEAM US UP, SCOTTY”



Narrator: The scene cuts to Dew and the party approaching a modest, single-story building nestled among the narrow, cluttered streets of the Southern Zone in Demmin. The soft crunch of gravel under Dew’s boots is the only sound as he leads the group toward the entrance. The structure’s façade is reinforced with weathered metal plates and patched wooden beams, built more out of necessity than for visual appeal. Above the doorway hangs a wooden sign, its paint chipped and the lettering faded but still legible: “*Dr. Scotlynn Pilo Sloane – Specialist in Weaponry & Accessories, Inventory.*” A faint, warm light glows from within, visible through the narrow windows and spilling softly onto the morning mist outside. Dew hesitates briefly, then reaches for the handle and pushes the door open with a soft creak. Inside, the workshop is surprisingly organized despite the array of equipment and contraptions scattered around. The gentle hum of machinery

fills the air, interspersed with the occasional beep of monitoring devices. Complex diagrams and notes are pinned haphazardly to the walls—some bearing intricate formulas, while others are rough blueprints. Shelves brim with peculiar objects—some mechanical, others chemical, and a few whose purpose is utterly indecipherable. Standing at a large workbench cluttered with tools and half-finished devices, an older Black woman with short, closely cropped natural hair tipped with warm brown tones, wearing a lab coat, pauses and turns toward them. Despite the workshop's dim lighting, she wears amber-tinted glasses, moving with deliberate confidence.

Dr. Sloane: *(softly, with a calm yet cautious tone)* I wasn't expecting any visitors this early... and unannounced, no less. Hmm... I don't recognize any of you. Who are you?

Dew: *(nodding respectfully)* Dr. Sloane, we apologize for dropping in like this. I'm Dew Wilder... *(then gestures to each in turn)* And these are my companions—Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir. We're passing through Demmin and were told you might be able to assist us.

Dr. Sloane: *(raising an eyebrow)* Passing through, are you? I see... Well, don't just stand there. Come in. There's no need to linger in the doorway.

Narrator: Dew exchanges a quick glance with Lorenzo, then steps further into the workshop. The rest of the group follows, spreading out slightly, their eyes wandering over the array of strange inventions and devices surrounding them. Sunlight filtering through the windows illuminates dust motes dancing lazily in the air, giving the room an almost ethereal quality.

Dr. Sloane: *(smiling faintly, tilting her head in the direction of Dew's voice)* So, you came on someone's recommendation? I'm curious—which resident thought I'd be of any use to you?

Lorenzo: *(scratching his head)* Uh... now that you mention it, she never did tell us her name.

Dr. Sloane: I see... *(smile then fades slightly)* Well then, how can I help you all?

Krista: *(glancing around, raising an eyebrow)* We've been hitting dead ends trying to track down some friends of ours. Maybe you've seen them around in the past three days?

Elvir: ...And we also heard you might have some weapons and accessories that could come in handy.

Dr. Sloane: *(turning to fully face them, resting a hand lightly on the edge of the workbench)* Interesting... Well, if it's weapons and accessories, you're after, you've come to the right place. *(then gestures to some nearby chairs, her voice softening)* As for your friends... perhaps I can be of assistance. Something tells me you're not just ordinary travelers. Please, take a seat and tell me everything I need to know.

Narrator: As Dew and the others settle into their seats, they exchange hesitant glances, silently weighing how much they should reveal. Despite their reservations, Dr. Sloane might be their best chance at gaining a new lead. Dew leans forward slightly, meeting Dr. Sloane's gaze, deciding to take a calculated risk.

Dew: *(nods, his expression serious)* We're not just wandering around aimlessly. We're trying to stop something dangerous—something that's already cost too many lives. We're looking for our friends who got caught up in it. One of them is a middle-aged woman named Rena—black hair, brown eyes, wears glasses, and carries a scythe. She's slender but... has a fuller figure... *(then pauses, gathering his thoughts)* Uh... And then there's Johnny, another middle-aged guy—short black hair, always wearing dark shades, usually dressed in a gray suit. They were with another man, someone we're not familiar with.

Dr. Sloane: Oh. Hm.

Krista: *(nodding, her voice guarded)* We've hit dead end after dead end. And whenever we get close, things get worse. The people we're up against... they're not just your average trouble-makers.

Dr. Sloane: *(leaning forward, her gaze narrowing)* You're talking about those *Bush of Life* weirdos that have been through here recently, aren't you?

Dew: *(nods)* Yes.

Dr. Sloane: *(scowling slightly)* They gave the residents a good scare. Those doomsday fanatics are a dangerous bunch. Anyone talking about bringing back the Söl Congruum can't be taken lightly.

Dew: *(surprised but keeping his voice neutral)* So you already know what they're after?

Dr. Sloane: *(scoffs softly, shaking her head)* Know what they're after? Doesn't matter. The idea of reviving an entity that's supposed to bring about the end of civilization is something no one should ignore... *(then leans back, her expression serious)* Even if they're only chasing shadows, the damage they leave behind is very real.

Cooper: *(stepping in, his voice tense)* ...And their leader has already proven what they're capable of. They've been gathering dangerous materials—things that could be used for more than just spreading chaos. If they get their hands on everything they need, they might actually be able to make it happen. That's what we're trying to stop.

Dr. Sloane: *(eyes widening slightly)* You think they have a chance of succeeding? *(then pauses, weighing her next words carefully)* And you're the ones standing in their way...

Elvir: *(crossing her arms, tone cautious)* Yeah, and it's been one close call after another. They're always a step ahead. Every time we think we've got them cornered; they slip through our fingers.

Dr. Sloane: *(then shifts her gaze to Elvir, narrowing as she studies her face, eyes widening in recognition)* Wait... those markings under your eyes... *(then she gestures gently toward Elvir's face, where four solid black cube-like figures are painted beneath each eye)* Those are the markings of the *Hozho*, aren't they? Chosha's chosen... My goodness.

Elvir: *(raising an eyebrow, offering a small smile)* Sharp eyes, Doc. Didn't think anyone still remembered what it meant.

Dr. Sloane: *(slowly shaking her head, still in awe)* It's hard to forget something so distinct and powerful. The *Hozho* markings are legendary—symbols of resilience and guardianship over things that most people couldn't even comprehend. *(then takes a deep breath, then leans back slightly)* Meeting you... it's like seeing one of those stories come to life. This is... surreal.

Elvir: *(uncrosses her arms slightly, her voice lowering)* Yeah, it's surreal, all right... but real enough.

Dr. Sloane: *(nods slowly, her gaze filled with respect)* Indeed... It's an honor, Elvir. You carry the legacy of those heroes with you. I'm... at a loss for words.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane's gaze lingers on Elvir for a moment longer, genuine respect and curiosity shining in her eyes. She then turns her attention back to the rest of the group, her expression softening with regret.

Dr. Sloane: I wish I had more to offer about your friends... but I haven't seen or heard of anyone matching their description recently. I'm truly sorry.

Dew: Damn... Well, at least we gave it a shot. *(sigh)*

Narrator: Dr. Sloane's gaze shifts slightly toward Dew and Cooper, her expression thoughtful as she studies them more closely. A flicker of recognition flashes across her face, and her voice drops to a more somber tone.

Dr. Sloane: There's something about you two... I can see it in your posture, the way you hold yourselves—how you react. You're not just traveling do-gooders... you're former SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers, aren't you? *(pauses as Dew and Cooper look at each other, momentarily caught off guard, silently confirming her guess)* I thought so... The discipline, the control, the way you're always assessing the situation—it's all there. The weight of war never truly goes away.

Dew: *(frowning)* War? So, you were involved in the *Great Civil War*, weren't you?

Dr. Sloane: *(nods slowly, a shadow passing over her expression)* Yes... I was involved. Back then, I thought I was doing something necessary. But the scars... they don't fade. *(sigh)* I thought I'd left it all behind... but seeing you both now, it's a harsh reminder of that time...

Narrator: The room falls silent. Dr. Sloane takes a deep breath and continues, her gaze distant as she recalls the painful memories.

Dr. Sloane: *(smiling sadly, nodding slowly)* ...I truly believed we were doing the right thing, that we were the key to ending the conflict once and for all. I worked alongside Duncan O'Brien and Ian Brundle in the Advanced Warfare Research Division of the Mesovillian War Department. Our mission was to develop weapons powerful enough to force a surrender. We built three nuclear devices—*Miasma*, *Effluvium*, and *Fetor*...

(then pauses, her face contorting with pain) They weren't just ordinary bombs. They were powered by unstable *Elementomes*—'*Oddments*,' as some called them. These volatile substances could destabilize matter at a molecular level, tearing apart anything in their path. Our designs were experimental... unpredictable. Then the order came — to drop *Miasma* on New Havenport... *(takes a deep, shuddering breath, gripping the edge of the workbench as if trying to steady herself)* I remember it vividly... the day we unleashed *Miasma*. It annihilated the province—obliterated everything in a flash of blinding light and ash. Millions, gone in an instant... New Havenport reduced to dust and ruin. Even after the airwaves went silent, the imagined cries of the lost echoed relentlessly in my mind...



Narrator: Dew stayed silent, letting Dr. Sloane's words settle. He didn't need a reminder of New Havenport—he'd been drifting in an escape pod long after the bomb fell. By the time he surfaced, the province was gone, replaced by a dark, smoldering sky. He could still recall the eerie calm as his pod bobbed on the

empty ocean, the horizon lit by the fading embers of a world destroyed. His nod was slow, almost imperceptible—a quiet acknowledgment of a horror he knew too well.

Dr. Sloane: ...Duncan blamed himself for every life lost. He... he took his own life not long after that. (*swallows hard, voice trembling*) And Ian... he disappeared soon after. One day he was there, brooding over our notes, and the next... he was just gone. No goodbye, no explanation. I think he couldn't bear to live with what we'd done... (*then shakes her head slowly, her gaze distant*) I stayed just long enough to see the other two devices, *Effluvium* and *Fetor*, locked away and decommissioned. But it wasn't enough. Nothing could ever atone for New Haven-port... (*lowers her head, voice thick with regret*) That's when I left the Mesovillian government. I couldn't bear to be a part of it anymore. So, I came here—to Demmin—to start over... to try and use what's left of my knowledge to rebuild instead of destroy. But no matter how much I do, the shadows of those devices never leave me... (*looks up slowly, sadness and guilt etched into every line of her face*) I can still see the fall-out... hear the cries of families torn apart. I relive it every night. *Miasma* should never have been dropped. *Effluvium* and *Fetor* should never have existed. We tampered with the fabric of nature itself... and paid the price. Even if those weapons are decommissioned, I'll never escape their echoes... or forgive myself for creating them. No matter how far we run, the past always finds us... The war may be over, but its consequences never truly go away.

Narrator: The room falls into a heavy silence, Dr. Sloane's words reverberating like a distant echo of a past filled with regret and guilt. The group exchanges somber glances, the weight of her confession settling in the air around them. For a moment, no one speaks, the gravity of her story hanging thickly between them. Then, one by one, they lean in, offering words of comfort and support.

Dew: (*voice low, his expression solemn*) You remind me a bit of Rena, one of the friends we're looking for... She's faced her past head-on, trying to set things right—just like you. No one should have to carry that weight alone. But you're still here,

doing everything you can to make amends. That's more than most would ever attempt.

Cooper: (*grimacing, his voice tight*) Yeah... a lot of people would've run from it all. Buried themselves in a bottle or tried to forget. But you're facing the ghosts of your past every day. That's a strength not many have...

Lorenzo: The war chewed you and your genius friends up, used you, then spat you out in pieces... (*then pauses, his voice rough and low*) All that fallout from the weapons—the damage they did, to you and everyone else... Damn, that's rough. (*then exhales sharply, his tone softening just a fraction*) I'm sorry you had to be put through that hell...

Krista: (*softly*) People here talk about what you've done for them. It doesn't erase the past, but... it's something. You could've shut yourself away, given up on everything. But you didn't. That takes courage.

Vilmer: (*quietly, voice reflective*) Most folks would've let guilt eat them alive or spent the rest of their days hiding from the world. Heh, I know something about that... But you're here, using what you know to help others. (*then shrugs, his expression darkening*) It won't bring back my home—New Havenport... or the others who perished... or erase the lies that followed. But at least you're trying to make a difference. That counts for something.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane's gaze shifted to Vilmer, her breath catching at his words. The sorrow in his eyes spoke volumes, each line in his face telling the story of wounds that hadn't healed. The mention of New Havenport made her chest tighten, a surge of guilt crashing over her as she realized how deeply her work had scarred not only the land but the people who once called it home. The pain in his voice was something she hadn't anticipated, and for a moment, she faltered beneath the weight of it all. But before she could gather herself to respond, Elvir's voice cut through the silence, offering a much-needed reprieve.

Elvir: ...The bloody devastation Miasma caused—I never thought I'd find myself standing in front of one of the people responsible... Look, I'm not one to get all sappy, but if you're really out here building things to help folks, then... well... at least

you're using that genius of yours for the right reasons now. *(then tilts her head curiously)* I do gotta ask... why the sun-glasses? We're indoors, and it's not like there's much light in here. No offense—just curious.

Dr. Sloane: *(pauses, a shadow crossing her face as she touches the frame of her sunglasses)* No offense taken, Elvir. It's a fair question. I suffer from Nyctalopia—night blindness. After the New Havenport nuking, I started having trouble seeing in low light conditions. Maybe it's my body's way of punishing me for what I've done... or maybe it's just a side effect of the stress and exposure to the *Oddments* we worked with. Whatever the reason, I can't see well in dim places anymore. The sun-glasses help reduce glare and keep things from becoming too disorienting.

Elvir: *(frowning her brows in surprise)* Night blindness, huh? Never considered something like that. That's rough... Sorry if I pried or brought up something sensitive.

Dr. Sloane: *(smiling faintly)* It's all right. I'm used to it by now. It's just another reminder that actions have consequences—even for those of us who never set foot on the battlefield...

Narrator: Elvir nods thoughtfully, falling silent as the weight of Dr. Sloane's words sinks in. The group shares a brief, solemn glance, their empathy deepening as they take in yet another layer of the burden Dr. Sloane bears.

Dr. Sloane: *(softly clears her throat, attempting to shift the mood)* But let's not linger on that. I've spent enough years in the dark—figuratively and literally. So. You're here for some weapons and accessories, right? Let me show you what I have...

Narrator: As Dr. Sloane moves toward a section of the workshop lined with various weapons and accessories, Dew and the others follow closely, their attention captured by the neatly arranged array of advanced technology. Some of the devices appear familiar—modified firearms, energy blades, tactical enhancements—while others seem to defy all logic. Before Dr. Sloane can begin her explanations, Elvir's gaze shifts to a medium-sized cylinder tucked away in the corner of the room. The device stands out with its sleek, metallic design and a series of softly pulsating lights running along its length.

- Elvir: *(tilting her head, nodding toward the device)* Oi, what's that gizmo over there?
- Dr. Sloane: *(turning, a faint smile playing on her lips)* Ah... you noticed that, did you? Silly me. I must've left it on again... *(then places a gentle hand on the device's surface)* This is something I've been refining for quite some time... my ongoing project—the Sky Warp.
- Elvir: *(raising an eyebrow)* Sky Warp? What does it do?



- Narrator: Dr. Sloane's smile broadens slightly as she turns toward the device, the soft hum of its internal mechanisms resonating in the otherwise quiet room. The Sky Warp's sleek surface reflects the dim lights of the workshop, and the rhythmic pulsation of its LEDs casts an almost ethereal glow across the metal exterior. Dew, Elvir, and the rest of the group watch intently, their expressions marked by a mixture of curiosity and intrigue.
- Dr. Sloane: *(tilting her chin up, a hint of pride evident in her tone)* It's a long-distance teleportation device—designed to send matter

to predetermined locations over vast distances. Would you like a demonstration..?

- Narrator: Before anyone can respond, Dr. Sloane picks up a small apple from the workbench and places it on a circular metal pad connected to the Sky Warp. The device hums louder as a series of dials and switches light up, casting an ethereal blue glow across the workshop. As Dr. Sloane adjusts the controls, the gemstones embedded in the machine's core—two *Time Elementomes* and three *Gravity Elementomes*—begin to resonate. A low vibration fills the room, causing the air to shimmer faintly. The energy output from the *Time Elementomes* shifts, creating a wave of distorted light that bends around the apple. The workshop falls silent as a dark sphere, no larger than a tennis ball, forms just above the apple. The sphere pulses with a deep crimson hue, the very fabric of space seeming to fold inward around it. It's as if reality itself is being stretched, drawn toward the small point of light at the sphere's center. The *Gravity Elementomes* emit a surge of energy, causing the sphere to expand rapidly, its surface swirling like liquid glass. A soft pop echoes through the room as a glowing ring materializes around the apple, its edges crackling with an electric blue light. The ring spins faster and faster, until it blurs into a single, solid plane, resembling a disc of pure energy. The apple begins to levitate, its edges blurring as the gravitational forces tug at it from all directions. The ring pulls the apple upward, and the dark sphere above it deepens, becoming a swirling vortex. A faint sucking sound fills the air, growing louder as the vortex stabilizes. The apple is now caught in the center, hovering weightlessly. With a sudden flash of light, the apple is drawn into the vortex, which collapses inward like an imploding star. The room is bathed in a brief, blinding brilliance, and then, in an instant, the vortex is gone—along with the apple.
- Krista: (*in a hushed tone*) Did that... really just happen?!
- Lorenzo: (*shaking his head slowly, eyes fixed on the now-empty metal pad*) Damn... it's gone.
- Narrator: Dr. Sloane, seemingly pleased by their reactions, turns to a nearby monitor and begins deftly adjusting several controls. A few seconds later, a small, blinking dot appears on a digital

map of Mesovilla, hovering steadily over an area labeled as the Cumbersome Plains.

Vilmer: *(staring at the monitor, eyebrows raised)* You actually teleported it... Just like that?

Dr. Sloane: *(nodding thoughtfully)* There it is... The apple's somewhere in the Cumbersome Plains. The Sky Warp works, as you can see, but... there's still one major flaw. I'm working on solving the reverse process, but it's complicated. Until I can bring things back, it's not truly complete.

Lorenzo: So, it's a one-way trip?

Dr. Sloane: *(grimacing)* For now, yes. But I'm confident I'll figure it out eventually. The problem is that once the object reaches its destination, it's imprinted with the gravitational and temporal signature of that location. It's like a stamp that marks it as being "there" now. When I try to reverse the process, the machine can't properly target it because it's no longer synchronized with the original signature it had when it left.

Vilmer: So, it's a matter of aligning the frequencies... like tuning in a radio station?

Dr. Sloane: *(snaps her fingers)* Yes, but much more complicated. The resonance frequencies of the *Time* and *Gravity Elementomes* change subtly after each use, especially in fusion configurations. It's like the machine is trying to pick up a signal that's constantly shifting and fading in and out. I think... I need to find a way to "reset" the apple's energy signature to its original state or at least neutralize the imprint. If I can do that, I should be able to bring it back. But doing so without destabilizing the wormhole or damaging the *Elementomes*... *(then she trails off, her expression thoughtful. Her voice softens as she glances back at the group, her eyes conveying a unique mix of vulnerability and trust)* ...I've kept the Sky Warp hidden for a long time. No one else knows—not the residents, not even the War Department. Well... that's not entirely true. Ian knew. But I'm sharing this with you because I believe I can trust each of you. I have a good feeling about you all... And because of everything you've shared about your journey and mission. Your willingness to confide in me, to reveal what you're trying to accomplish and the risks you're willing to take—it resonated with me.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane then powers down the Sky Warp as Dew and the party absorb her words, the weight of her confession sinking in. They realize the significance of what they're witnessing—the culmination of years of work, regret, and a level of trust not easily earned. A somber silence lingers, and one by one, the party begins to respond.

Lorenzo: (*gently*) Thanks, Doc. That means a lot.

Cooper: You have nothing to worry about.

Krista: (*nodding firmly*) Your secret... it stays with us.

Elvir: (*grins, leaning back*) No pressure, yeah? Just keep it quiet about the most mind-boggling bit of tech we've ever seen and pretend we didn't just watch an apple break the laws of physics. (*then smirks*) Easy peasy, right? It's not like we'll be thinking about it all the time or anything.

Dr. Sloane: Ha-ha... Ah, okay. But I trust you all. Besides, you're not the type to be rattled by a little mystery—not after everything I've learned you've been through.

Vilmer: (*with a cheeky grin*) Aye, life's full of mysteries. One more ain't gonna hurt us, right? (*then his tone shifts, more serious*) Just remember, this is bigger than us. Secrets like this... they carry weight. But we've got broad shoulders, don't we?

Narrator: Dew remains silent, responding with a simple nod. No words are needed—Vilmer's point is clear. Dr. Sloane's expression softens as she observes their unspoken exchange, warmth filling her eyes. She glances at Dew and the group, her smile deepening with appreciation. It's clear she's grateful—not just for their understanding, but for their promise to keep her invention secret and the reassurance that she can trust them. Suddenly, faint shouts and chaotic noises drift in from somewhere outside, their exact distance unclear. The commotion is marked by sporadic screams, followed by the sharp clatter of metal striking pavement. Dew's head snaps up, his expression tensing as he recognizes the unmistakable signs of trouble. The group falls silent, straining to determine the source of the disturbance.

Dr. Sloane: (*frowning*) What in the blazes is that racket..? Sounds like all hell's breaking loose.

Cooper: (*tilting his head, listening intently*) It's coming from a few blocks away, I think.

Lorenzo: *(ears twitching, head angled toward the noise)* Trouble... no mistaking that sound.

Elvir: *(grumbling, shifting her stance)* Hrrrrrmph! We can never catch a break, can we..?

Lorenzo: Nope. Nothing's ever easy for us.

Krista: *(nodding, voice tense)* It definitely doesn't sound good...

Vilmer: *(steadies himself, turning to Dew)* No, it doesn't... We should check it out. Someone might need our help.

Dew: *(nodding at Vilmer, then turning to Dr. Sloane)* Say no more, Vilmer. Doc, stay here and secure the workshop. Whatever's going on out there, we've got it covered.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane's brow furrows, concern clouding her eyes. She starts to speak but hesitates, catching their determined expressions. Even though she barely knows Dew and the party, what they've shared about their experiences and struggles is enough to show they're capable. With a reluctant sigh, she nods.

Dr. Sloane: All right... Just be careful out there.

Elvir: *(grinning and giving a small wave)* Don't worry, Doc. We'll be back before you know it. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: Dew and the party move quickly to the door and step outside, weapons at the ready. Dr. Sloane follows but stops at the threshold, concern lingering on her face as she watches them leave. Dew and the party emerge onto the narrow street, greeted by chaos. In the distance, just a few blocks away, people run in panic, fleeing the source of the conflict. Dew and the group move swiftly, weaving through the tight streets and alleys of Demmin's Southern Zone. As they arrive at the heart of the disturbance, overturned market stalls litter the area. The streets are now deserted; the residents and vendors having long fled from the scene. Amid the debris, eight *Bush of Life* cultists stand with their Xiphos swords drawn, waiting. Dew and the party advance, weapons at the ready.

BOL Cultist 11: *(grinning beneath his mask)* There they are...

Krista: *(groaning)* Of course, it had to be these guys again...

BOL Cultist 12: ...We've been expecting you...

Elvir: (*grinning mischievously*) I just love it when they do the whole 'we've been expecting you' bit. Really warms the heart, doesn't it?

Narrator: Dew glances briefly at Elvir, a flicker of amusement in his eyes, before refocusing on the cultists, his expression hardening.

Dew: Have you now? You've got our attention. What do you want..?

BOL Cultist 11: Give us... the SKT virus T vial...

Dew: No thanks, bro!

BOL Cultist 13: ...Then we will take it... from you.

Vilmer: (*shrugging and faces Lorenzo*) We can forget about reasoning with them, eh? Looks like it's about to get messy.

Lorenzo: (*smirking*) Messy? You know me by now... That's the way I like it.

Narrator: Then with wild, fanatical glee, the eight cultists charge at Dew and his team. But the party moves as one, their synergy perfect. Elvir darts forward, her dual daggers gleaming as they slice through the chaos, cutting down enemies with deadly precision. Lorenzo charges in, his brass-knuckled fists and powerful kicks knocking cultists to the ground. Krista hurls her boomerang, which sails through the air, striking multiple cultists before returning smoothly to her hand. Cooper, wielding his mop like a weapon, sweeps through the cultists, disarming and disabling them with swift, precise jabs. Vilmer swings his grappling hook, latching onto a cultist and yanking him off balance before engaging another. At the front, Dew, calm and methodical, spins his bo staff, delivering powerful and precise strikes. The cultists fall quickly, overwhelmed by the party's flawless teamwork. One by one, they are dispatched until only a single cultist remains standing. The last cultist struggles to regain his footing, wheezing as he raises a hand, trying to halt the inevitable.

BOL Cultist 13: We have failed our Master... but the plan proceeds as expected...

Lorenzo: What the hell are you talking about..?

BOL Cultist 13: Ha-ha... The Interim Premier... Killbin. We've taken him hostage.

Cooper: (*eyes widening*) Taken hostage?!

BOL Cultist 13: ...At Aether's Keep. If you want him alive... bring us the SKT virus T vial. You'll find a way there, won't you? Don't be late— (*then sneers, clutching a device on his wrist*)

Narrator: Before the party can react, the seven fallen cultists on the ground begin convulsing violently. The last cultist activates a small device on his wrist, injecting himself with poison. Lorenzo rushes forward, attempting to stop him, but it's too late. A sharp hiss fills the air as the cultist's body jerks, wracked by the lethal dose. Within seconds, he collapses, lifeless.

Lorenzo: (*gritting his teeth*) Damn. Again...

Elvir: Ugh. (*then throws her hands up in frustration*) Well, that bloke is dead... And Aether's Keep is out there somewhere—bloody far, I'd bet. (*glancing at Dew*) Even if we knew where it was, we wouldn't make it in time.

Cooper: Yeah, well, we don't have time to sit around guessing while the interim premier's being dragged off to who knows where. We need to move—now.

Krista: (*frowning, arms crossed*) Wait. Do any of you know exactly where Aether's Keep is? I don't.

Narrator: The party falls silent, their gazes shifting toward Dew and Cooper. Cooper notices the expectant looks and responds.

Cooper: (*shaking his head*) Even though I'm a former SWAT TROOPER ELITE, I've never been there. They don't exactly give out the coordinates to just anyone.

Krista: (*then glances at Dew*) I guess you wouldn't know either, huh, Dew..?

Narrator: A tense silence follows as the group exchanges frustrated glances, realizing none of them know the exact

location. Then, Dew's gaze shifts toward Dr. Sloane's workshop, a plan forming in his mind.

Dew: *(voice firm)* None of us may know where exactly Aether's Keep is... But maybe someone we just met can help us get there.

Vilmer: Yes. The Sky Warp... That's our only option now... *(glances at the fallen cultists)* I guess we'll leave the cleanup for the SWAT TROOPERS then... *(turning to Dew)* Let's head back to Dr. Sloane's workshop.

Narrator: Wasting no time, the group prepares to move, urgency propelling them as they hurry back to Dr. Sloane's workshop. Moments later, the scene cuts to the workshop, where Dew and the party burst through the door. Dr. Sloane, caught off guard, looks up in alarm, clearly surprised by their sudden return.

Dr. Sloane: What happened? Are you all right?

Dew: *(breathless but determined)* ...No time to explain. The *Bush of Life* cultists have taken Interim Premier Janerio hostage at Aether's Keep. We need to get there now.

Dr. Sloane: *(brow furrowing)* They did what? Aether's Keep? The interim premier has been taken hostage?

Dew: Yeah.

Dr. Sloane: You're all deep in some mess... But never mind that—Aether's Keep is hours away! How do you expect to—

Krista: The Sky Warp. We need you to use it to get us there.

Dr. Sloane: *(shaking her head, stunned)* What?! Absolutely not...! The Sky Warp hasn't been tested on living subjects—teleporting humans through a wormhole is far riskier and more dangerous than moving objects.

Dew: Well, consider us your first test subjects.

Dr. Sloane: Wha... No...

Lorenzo: We don't have a choice, Doc. If we wait, they'll kill him.

Elvir: *(nodding sharply)* We're willing to take the risk.

Dr. Sloane: *(glancing at each of them, conflicted)* Even if it works, I can only send you in groups. There's a chance you'll end up in separate locations... or worse.

Dew: ...We'll take that chance. Send us in pairs if you have to. Just get us there.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane hesitates, then nods reluctantly, moving to the Sky Warp's console and powering it up again. A low hum fills the room as the device reactivates. A few moments later, her hands move quickly as she begins to enter the precise coordinates for Aether's Keep manually, ensuring accuracy for the teleportation.

Krista: *(then tilts her head)* Hey, how do you even know all these coordinates, anyway?

Dr. Sloane: *(then cracks a smile)* ...Back when I worked for the government, I had access to classified geospatial data, including locations like Aether's Keep. Most people know about it, but only a few of us know exactly where it is.

Krista: Oh. Duh. Makes sense.

Lorenzo: Gotta be precise when you're bending space and time, huh, Doc..?

Dr. Sloane: Exactly. One wrong decimal, and you all could end up anywhere... All right. It's ready to go... I'll send three of you first. The rest will go in the second wave.

Dew: Understood.

Narrator: Dew and the party exchange glances, a silent agreement passing between them as they quickly decide who will go first. Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir step onto the teleportation pads, their faces calm but focused as the others watch anxiously. Dr. Sloane takes a deep breath and pulls the activation lever. The Sky Warp hums loudly, its core pulsing with blue energy that swirls around the trio, intensifying as the lights flash in sync with the machine's mechanisms.

Dew: *(glancing back at Cooper with a smirk)* We'll see you on the other side. Try not to miss us too much.

Cooper: *(raising an eyebrow)* Yeah, if you end up in the wrong dimension, don't forget to write.

Elvir: *(grinning)* I'll bring back a souvenir, Coop.

Vilmer: (*cracking a smile*) As long as we don't land in a volcano or something, it should be an easy landing. See you all soon...

Dew: (*serious, turning to Dr. Sloane*) Dr. Sloane, thanks for doing this. If this all works out, maybe we'll see you again...

Elvir: (*playfully*) Okay. Beam us up, Scotty.

Narrator: With a blinding flash, Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir vanish, leaving the workshop in tense silence. Dr. Sloane quickly resets the Sky Warp's controls, her hands moving urgently as she prepares the next group—Lorenzo, Cooper, and Krista.

Dr. Sloane: (*whispering to herself*) *I sure hope they make it...*
 (*then turns to Lorenzo, Cooper, and Krista*) Okay, you three, next...

Krista: (*turning briefly before the jump*) Thanks, Doc. You've done more than we could ask for. Wish us luck...

Lorenzo: (*glancing at the teleportation pads*) Eh. I'm not a fan of being sucked through some wormhole... But we gotta do what we gotta do. Here's to making it out in one piece...

Cooper: (*with a shrug*) Well, if something goes wrong, at least it'll be interesting. Guys, here goes nothing.

Narrator: The second group steps onto the pads, tension thick in the air. As Dr. Sloane pulls the lever again, a surge of energy fills the room. The Sky Warp hums louder, its gemstones—*Time* and *Gravity Elementomes*—resonating, creating a distorted wave of light around the trio. Gravitational forces tug at them, bending space and time. In a final burst of light, they disappear, transported through the wormhole. Dr. Sloane stares at the now-empty pads, concern etched across her face.

Dr. Sloane: May Chosha guide you safely...

Narrator: She lingers for a moment, her hands hovering over the controls, before slowly stepping back. Her gaze shifts to the monitor, hoping her invention has safely delivered them to their destination.

CHAPTER 16 – WORMHOLES, “TACTICAL FACE-PLANTS”, & A KEEP

- Narrator: The scene cuts to the exterior of Aether's Keep's main compound, where a swirling wormhole rips through reality with a thunderous crack. Its edges shimmer with an otherworldly glow, sparking wildly like untamed fireworks. From the chaotic vortex, Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir are violently flung out. Dew and Vilmer crash to the ground, landing awkwardly and groaning as they struggle to regain their bearings. Elvir, however, is expelled last with dramatic force, soaring through the air before landing face-first in the dirt with a muffled thud. The wormhole then collapses with a deep, guttural rumble, leaving the atmosphere heavy and eerily still. Concealed from the party's view, a broken surveillance camera clings to a tree just beyond the clearing where they landed. Its cracked lens hangs at an awkward angle while exposed wires flicker faintly with sparks—silent evidence of sabotage. Once an integral part of Aether's Keep's surveillance system, the camera has been rendered useless, likely another victim of the *Bush of Life* cultists' methodical destruction.
- Vilmer: *(then athletically springs to his feet, brushing himself off)* ...Right, well, that was an absolute banger. Ten out of ten, would ride again.
- Dew: *(picking himself up, then rubs his neck)* More like a cosmic catapult. I'm just glad my spine's still vaguely in the right postcode. Barely.
- Vilmer: *(grinning)* Could've been worse. At least we didn't end up swimming in lava. Though I reckon Elvir might prefer that over her current... situation.
- Elvir: *(muffled, still lying face-down)* Oh, brilliant. Just what I needed—high-speed wormhole travel, now with a deluxe dirt facial. Truly, I'm living the dream.

Dew: Ha-ha... *(then turns to offer Elvir a hand)* You all right there, “Chosha’s chosen”...? Need a moment, or should I grab a shovel?

Elvir: Oh, a wise guy, eh..? *(then grabs his hand, while still face-down)* No rush. I’m forging a deep, spiritual bond with Aether’s soil. Very grounding. Highly therapeutic. You should... try it.

Narrator: With an exaggerated groan, she pushes herself up, brushing dirt from her face with dramatic flair.

Elvir: ...Step one: get fired out of a wormhole like a human cannonball. Step two: eat dirt. Step three: radiate pure intimidation. Grrr... *(then glares at Dew and Vilmer)* Am I intimidating yet?

Dew: *(sarcastically)* Oh, absolutely. Terrifying, really. The dirt adds a certain... menace.

Vilmer: Hah. Anyway... Good thing is, the Sky Warp works, and we’re alive. I’d call that a win.

Elvir: *(then dramatically dusts herself off)* Speak for yourselves. I’ve swallowed half a flowerbed... *(glancing around)* So... any guesses where the others landed? Hopefully somewhere less splat-prone.

Narrator: Suddenly, another wormhole tears open with a groaning sound, reminiscent of an overworked engine nearing its breaking point. Lorenzo, Krista, and Cooper are unceremoniously ejected, landing in a tangled heap on the ground. The wormhole snaps shut behind them with a crackling pop, leaving the trio sprawled just meters from Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir.

Krista: *(groaning)* Are we there yet..?

Cooper: *(cough)* *(cough)* I think so... mostly.

Lorenzo: *(groaning, flat on his back)* Ugh... my back...

Narrator: Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir freeze, their gazes locking onto the trio who just crash-landed through the wormhole. Krista rolls off the pile, landing on her bottom, and sits up, still oblivious to Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir’s presence. A tense silence lingers before Vilmer breaks it with a smirk and a witty remark.

Vilmer: *(grinning)* Well, well—look who finally decided to join the party! Took you long enough.

Narrator: Hearing Vilmer’s voice, Krista gives a cartoonish blink and turns to see Dew, Vilmer, and Elvir. Her expression softens with relief.

Krista: Vilmer. Dew. Elvir. Oh, thank Chosha. You guys made it.

Elvir: (*smirking*) Naturally. Unlike you, we're professionals.

Dew: Professionals, Elvir? Really? Coming from the woman who invented the tactical face-plant?

Krista: (*raising an eyebrow as she stands up*) The tactical face-plant..?

Dew: (*grinning wickedly*) Let's just say Elvir set the bar high for dramatic wormhole exits—straight into the dirt, no hesitation.

Elvir: (*deadpan, glaring at Dew*) Dew. Don't. I will end you.

Narrator: Vilmer steps forward to help Cooper to his feet.

Dew: Ha-ha-ha... Oh, come on, Elvir—it was beautiful. Poetic, even. Like a bird forgetting how to land.

Narrator: Cooper then sidles up beside Elvir, a mischievous grin on his face, and gives her a playful nudge.

Cooper: Tactical, huh? Was that... part of the master plan?

Elvir: (*mock-glowering, crossing her arms*) Of course, Coop. I was merely testing the terrain's stability—which, for the record, passed with flying colors. (*then pauses with a smirk*) So, who's volunteering to be the next crash-test dummy?

Lorenzo: (*then sits up, smirking*) Not me. I think I've already lost the gold medal for worst landing today...

Narrator: Amid the lighthearted banter, the group shares amused glances, the tension from their wormhole ordeal fading into a sense of camaraderie. Lorenzo groans as he begins to push himself up but pauses when Dew steps forward and extends a hand. With a steady pull, Dew helps Lorenzo to his feet. Lorenzo rolls his shoulders with a wince, taking a moment to compose himself before delivering another remark.

Lorenzo: (*dryly*) So, now that we're here... do we know where "here" is, or are we sticking with the usual plan of winging it and hoping for the best?

Dew: (*glancing around, then faces Lorenzo*) Oh, we're winging it. No question.

Krista: (*grinning*) Why mess with what works? Look at us—we're thriving.

Cooper: Thriving, sure...

Narrator: Suddenly, the faint, sporadic crack of gunfire echoes in the distance. The group instinctively turns their attention toward the compound ahead. Breaking the silence, Cooper resumes speaking.

Cooper: It looks like we know where we need to go now... and it's a lot of ground to cover. We're bound to run into more of those *Bush of Life* cultists. If we want to find the interim premier, we need to pick up the pace.

Lorenzo: Fast or slow, doesn't matter. Let's get in there and introduce these hands to some cultist heads.

Vilmer: Yeah. They're probably not expecting us this soon—or at all...

Elvir: *(then pulls out her dual daggers, twirling them skillfully with a wicked grin spreading across her face)* Exactly. Element of surprise—the best kind of party crasher... *(then faces Dew)* Ready to kick this off, Dew?

Dew: *(smirking and then draws his bo at the ready)* Always ready. All right, looks like we're off to see the wizard—down the yellow brick road. Let's move.



Narrator: With a final exchange of determined nods, Dew and the party set off along the winding trail, venturing into Aether's Keep. The path beneath their feet is smooth and well-maintained—a testament to meticulous care—but the dense forest pressing in on both sides creates an atmosphere of eerie isolation. Sunlight filters through the thick canopy overhead, casting shifting patterns of light and shadow that dance with every step. Unbeknownst to them, the party passes multiple shattered surveillance cameras, their cracked lenses and severed wires a grim testament to the cultists' advance. The *Bush of Life* cultists have been systematically dismantling Aether's Keep's security systems, leaving the compound blind to their incursion. Among the carnage, faintly sparking cameras cling to trees and lampposts, echoing the earlier damage spotted near their landing site. As they proceed, the faint sound of water lapping against the shore pierces the oppressive silence. Drawn by the sound, they take a brief detour from the main trail to investigate. Emerging from the dense underbrush, they reach the island's edge, where five motorboats are moored, bobbing gently in the water. The party exchanges quick, knowing glances.

Cooper: (*gesturing to the boats*) Well, now we know how they got here. Doesn't look like this leads anywhere useful, though. Dew, let's head back and keep moving forward.

Dew: (*nodding*) Agreed.

Narrator: With that, they retrace their steps to the winding trail. As they advanced, the distant gunfire became more distinct, each sharp crack breaking through the heavy tension in the air. The sound reverberated faintly through the trees, growing louder with every step toward the compound. Despite the distant noise, the path itself felt unsettlingly still, a foreboding contrast to the turmoil ahead. Before long, they stumbled upon a grim scene: a cluster of lifeless

bodies belonging to Aether's Keep staff, sprawled haphazardly across the dirt trail.

Krista: By Chosha...

Lorenzo: (*kneeling beside one of the bodies*) Damn it. These guys didn't stand a chance.

Elvir: (*gritting her teeth*) Bloody hell, those *Bush of Life* bastards really butchered them. (*sigh*)

Vilmer: (*scanning the area*) This is bad... just imagine how much worse it could've been if we had gotten here hours later.

Dew: (*nodding*) Agreed.

Krista: (*frowning*) Where is the security? You'd think they'd have a few guys posted out here too, right?

Cooper: (*shrugging*) I'm guessing they're all holed up at the main compound, considering all the gunfire's coming from that direction. Makes the most sense.

Vilmer: Then we may come across those who need saving...

Krista: And... hopefully, there are others who haven't met the same fate as them.

Narrator: The party shares a brief, somber glance before Dew responds.

Dew: Let's move quickly, then.

Narrator: The party continues pressing forward, their pace quickened and focus sharp. As morning turns to early afternoon, the group moves carefully down the trail. Time passes quietly, the sun climbing higher in the sky. Weapons in hand, they scan the shadows, alert for any sign of movement. Suddenly, a loud rustling erupts from the bushes. The party halts in unison, gripping their weapons tightly as the noise grows louder. From behind the trees, several *Bush of Life* cultists emerge, their Xiphos swords glinting menacingly in the dappled sunlight.

BOL Cultist 14: (*initially confident*) Ah, more staffers for us to— (*then voice falters, and his expression shifts to confusion*) Wait a minute...

BOL Cultist 15: (*squinting, realization dawning*) These aren't staffers...

Vilmer: (*smirking*) You'd be correct.

Elvir: *(outraged)* Do we look like staff to you? After what you've done to them—by Chosha, your sins will not go unpunished.

BOL Cultist 14: *(nervously, glancing at his comrades)* Are... are these the ones the Sisters warned us about?

Dew: *(narrowing his eyes)* Sisters?

BOL Cultist 15: *(still startled, pointing at the group)* It's them.

Dew: *(calmly gripping his bo staff, anger simmering beneath a faint smirk)* You've got a lot to answer for.

BOL Cultist 14: *(panicking)* How the..?! You weren't supposed to get here this fast!

Lorenzo: *(stepping forward, his voice cold)* Surprise. But don't worry—we'll make this quick. For you.

Narrator: Without further hesitation, chaos then erupts. Dew spins his bo staff with practiced precision, striking the nearest cultist in the chest and sending him stumbling backward. Elvir darts forward, her dual daggers flashing as they slice through another cultist's defenses. Vilmer, grinning widely, expertly swings his grappling hook, wrapping it around a cultist's ankle and yanking him to the ground. Krista steps back, her eyes narrowing as she winds up and throws her boomerang with a sharp whistle through the air. It curves gracefully, striking a cultist square in the temple before arcing back to her hand. She smirks as the dazed opponent drops to his knees. Lorenzo charges headlong into the fray, brass knuckles gleaming as he delivers a crushing blow to a cultist's jaw. The sound of impact echoes through the trees as he pivots to block another attacker, landing a brutal uppercut that sends the cultist sprawling. Though caught off guard, the cultists fight back fiercely, but the party's teamwork proves overwhelming. Elvir flips over a cultist, landing behind him and delivering a swift, decisive strike. Dew sweeps his bo staff in a wide arc, taking down two cultists at once. Krista's boomerang flies again, this time disarming a cultist before returning to her hand. Vilmer disarms another foe with a precise hook, while Cooper lands a perfectly-timed blow with

the handle of his mop, sending his opponent crashing into the dirt. Lorenzo sidesteps a desperate swing from the final cultist, grabbing him by the collar and slamming him into a tree with a sharp, dismissive growl. The cultist slumps to the ground, unconscious. With the cultists defeated, Dew and the party stand amidst the aftermath, catching their breath.

Krista: (*wiping her forehead*) That was a bit... (*huff*) (*puff*)... of a workout. Anyone else... (*huff*) (*puff*)... feel like we're just getting warmed up..?

Elvir: (*sheathing her daggers, smirking*) Warmed up? I'd call this a light stretch.

Vilmer: (*coiling his grappling hook, grinning*) If that were a sprint, they're out of shape. Unlike me.

Lorenzo: That's what happens when you bring toys to a real fight. They never had a chance.

Narrator: Cooper leaned casually on his mop, a grin spreading across his face as he glanced at the others.

Cooper: Next time, they should at least bring a mop. Might've evened the odds. (*then pauses, eyeing Dew's bo staff with a mischievous glint*) ...Or maybe a shower rod.

Narrator: Dew rolls his eyes with a soft chuckle, smirking at Cooper. Though his calm demeanor remains, tension lingers in his posture as his gaze sweeps the trail ahead.

Dew: Don't get too comfortable. (*his eyes narrow slightly*) Looks like we're on the right track...

Narrator: As Dew's gaze lingers on the trail ahead, his expression shifts, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. Noticing the silence, Vilmer turns to him with a curious frown.

Vilmer: Dew. What's on your mind?

Dew: (*thoughtfully*) ...I was just thinking—what did that cultist mean when they said the "Sisters" told them we were coming?

Vilmer: Hmm. Good question. Probably some lackeys of Thornton's.

Dew: (*nodding slightly*) Likely. Either way, we'll meet them eventually. And when we do, they'll answer for all of this too.

Narrator: Before anyone can respond, Krista's sharp eyes catch something unusual on the ground near one of the unconscious cultists—a small, tattered bag lying just off to the side.

Krista: (*frowning, pointing*) Hold on a second. What's that..?

Narrator: The others immediately snap their attention to where Krista is pointing. Lorenzo steps forward, crouching beside the bag. Carefully, he picks it up, opens it, and raises his eyebrows in surprise.

Lorenzo: (*holding it up for the party to see*) Zip ties. A whole bag of them.

Elvir: (*wrinkling her nose*) What's this, a bloody craft project? They weren't planning anything good with those, that's for sure.

Lorenzo: (*gruffly*) Yeah, and I bet it ain't anything pretty.

Krista: What a bunch of creeps...

Cooper: (*thoughtfully*) Hmm... They've probably used these on any staffers they caught—or the ones they were planning to grab.

Vilmer: (*grimly, glancing around*) Makes you wonder... how many did they already get?

Dew: (*firmly*) That's what we'll find out soon enough. But first, let's make sure these guys don't cause any more trouble.

Narrator: The party nods in unison, agreeing with Dew. Moving with practiced efficiency, they use the zip ties to bind the cultists' wrists and ankles securely. Once satisfied that the unconscious enemies won't follow, Dew straightens, giving the path ahead one final, critical glance.

Dew: (*nodding, voice steady*) All right. Let's move.

Narrator: The party pressed on, their footsteps crunching softly against the forest floor as the shadows of the towering trees grew deeper around them. The dense forest gradually gave way to carefully arranged shrubs and vibrant, blooming flowers. The air lightened, carrying the gentle murmur of flowing water. They moved cautiously as the path curved into a serene and expansive clearing: the Meditation Garden. At its

center, partially obscured by clusters of tall shrubs and overgrown foliage, stood a large fountain. Its cascading waters sparkled under beams of sunlight that filtered through the canopy above. Smooth stone paths wound through lush flower beds and shaded benches, exuding an almost unnerving tranquility. Dew slowed his pace, scanning the area, his grip tightening on his bo staff.

Dew: *(whispering)* Stay sharp.

Narrator: The party advanced in silence, weapons at the ready, with Dew leading the way. As they rounded a bend in the path, Lorenzo halted abruptly. His sharp gaze fixed on the fountain, partially concealed by the dense shrubs surrounding its base. He raised a hand, signaling the others to stop. Leaning slightly toward them, he gestured subtly toward movement near the fountain.

Lorenzo: *(whispering)* There—behind the fountain.

Narrator: The party froze, their eyes narrowing as they caught the faint movement. From behind the fountain and the overgrown foliage, nine *Bush of Life* cultists slowly came into view, their Xiphos swords glinting in the dappled sunlight. Shielded by the shrubbery and absorbed in their conversation, the cultists seemed confident in their isolation and oblivious to the party's presence. Behind the fountain, partially hidden by the same foliage, a group of five bound Aether's Keep staffers knelt on the ground. Their pale, drawn faces reflected terror and uncertainty. Some kept their heads down, trembling, while others darted their eyes around desperately, seeking hope in their dire predicament.

BOL Cultist 16: *(pointing at the staffers)* Keep them silent. The orders are clear—they must remain alive. But if they defy us, ensure they understand the weight of their insolence.

BOL Cultist 17: Oh, they'll behave... won't you? *(brandishing his sword threateningly)*

Narrator: While the cultists focused on their captives, Dew and his companions exchanged silent glances. Elvir turned to Lorenzo, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Elvir: So, do we knock, or just crash the party?

Lorenzo: Crash it. Always crash it.

Dew: No time to waste. Let's move.

Narrator: The party stepped cautiously into the open, emerging from the cover of the dense shrubs. Weapons at the ready, they moved with quiet confidence. One of the cultists, mid-sentence, froze as he spotted them, confusion flashing across his face before giving way to alarm.

BOL Cultist 18: (*startled*) What the—?! Who are you?

Vilmer: (*grinning, twirling his grappling hook*) Oh, just passing through. Thought we'd swing by unannounced.

BOL Cultist 17: (*snarling, drawing his sword*) You dare... defy the *Bush of Life*..?

BOL Cultist 16: (*steady, raising his sword*) Surrender now, and we might... let you live.

Elvir: Funny, I was about to say the same thing.

Krista: We're here to cut your little garden party short.

Cooper: ...And maybe leave a mess behind while we're at it.

BOL Cultist 16: (*sneering*) Brave words—for a group walking into their own graves.

Narrator: The garden froze in uneasy stillness before erupting into bedlam as the nine cultists split into three groups to attack Dew and his companions. At the center, Dew and Krista held their ground. Dew's bo staff spun deftly, deflecting a sword strike and sweeping a cultist to the ground. Krista's boomerang disarmed another attacker mid-charge, allowing Dew to land a decisive blow. The final cultist lunged at Krista, but she sidestepped and struck his temple, ending the fight. On the left flank, Cooper and Elvir moved with precision. Cooper fended off a cultist with his mop, delivering a jab and uppercut to incapacitate the attacker. Elvir's swift dagger strikes disarmed and disabled another opponent. Cooper tripped the final cultist, and Elvir knocked him unconscious with her dagger's hilt.

To the right, Lorenzo and Vilmer overpowered their foes with sheer force. Vilmer's grappling hook disarmed one attacker, allowing Lorenzo to deliver a crushing punch. Another cultist stumbled after Vilmer hooked his ankle, and Lorenzo finished him with a powerful uppercut. The final assailant attempted a sneak attack but was swiftly dropped by Vilmer and finished with Lorenzo's kick. With all cultists subdued, silence returned to the garden. The party regrouped; their coordinated efforts evident in the scattered, unconscious enemies surrounding them.

Elvir: *(sheathing her daggers with a smirk)* What a sorry lot. I've had tougher scraps with me shoelaces.

Vilmer: *(coiling his grappling hook)* They're lucky they didn't bring more friends. Would've been over even faster.

Krista: *(adjusting her grip on her boomerang)* True. More of them wouldn't have changed much—just would've been a bigger mess to clean up.

Cooper: *(leaning on his mop)* Good thing I brought the right tool for the job...

Elvir: *(snorts)* "Tool." Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: Cooper turns to Elvir with a knowing smile, clearly catching the innuendo in her comment. Elvir's smirk lingers, but Dew remains focused, already moving toward the captives. The rest of the group follows suit, working swiftly and efficiently to free the five prisoners. Though visibly shaken, the staffers cast wary yet grateful glances at their rescuers — their relief tinged with lingering apprehension.

AK Staffer 1: *(hesitantly)* Thank you, but—are you with the interim premier's detail? I've never seen any of you before, and... well, you don't exactly look the part.

Narrator: The party exchanged glances, a brief hesitation hanging in the air before Cooper stepped forward. Gripping his mop, he responded sharply.

Cooper: *(firmly)* ...Doesn't matter what we look like. We're here to get the job done. And yes, we're with the interim premier's detail.

Elvir: *(grinning)* Spot on. We might not look the part, but we get results.

Narrator: AK Staffer 1 shook their head, trying to process the situation, their apprehension softening. Meanwhile, Dew helps an AK staffer to their feet, his voice steady and resolute.

Dew: *(meeting their gaze)* We're here to bring everyone back safely—including the interim premier. I promise, we'll do whatever it takes. Do you know where they've taken him?

AK Staffer 2: *(shaking their head)* No... I'm sorry. They came out of nowhere.

AK Staffer 3: *(voice trembling)* One moment we were working, and then—they came out of nowhere, shouting orders and rounding us up. Then they brought us here.

Narrator: Dew nodded, his expression softening as he took in their shaken state.

Dew: *(reassuringly)* I understand.

Krista: *(with quiet concern)* Is anyone hurt?

AK Staffer 3: *(timidly)* No... just shaken.

Krista: *(offering a small, reassuring smile)* That's a relief. You're safe now—

Narrator: Before Krista could finish, Elvir stepped forward briskly, cutting her off.

Elvir: Right then. Off you go. Stay low, move fast, and don't stop until you're clear.

AK Staffer 1: Wait. Are you sure there aren't more of them out there?

Dew: Don't worry about it. We already dealt with the ones we ran into before finding you.

Lorenzo: Yeah. And if we run into more of those cultist bastards, we'll take care of them too. Trust me—they won't be in any shape to follow.

Krista: *(calmly)* You'll be fine. We've got this.

Cooper: *(nodding)* Stay quiet, stick together, and move quickly. Got it?

AK Staffer 2: Thank you... for saving us. We didn't think anyone would come.

AK Staffer 3: *(nodding quickly)* Yeah—thank you.

AK Staffer 1:

(glancing between them) Thank you again. Good luck out there... and please be safe.

Narrator:

With murmured thanks and lingering glances of gratitude, the five AK staffers vanished into the dense foliage, their hurried footsteps fading into the uneasy stillness of the garden. As the silence began to settle, the distant crackle of gunfire echoed once more through the trees, sharp and persistent. The sound lingered, a grim reminder of the skirmish still raging ahead. Dew turned to the others; his gaze steely. Moving with practiced efficiency, the party secured the unconscious cultists, ensuring they posed no further threat. Weapons ready and resolve hardened, Dew and the party pressed onward, leaving the subdued enemies behind as they ventured deeper into Aether's Keep.

CHAPTER 17 – INTO THE LION’S DEN

- Narrator: Minutes pass, and the soft bubbling of the Meditation Garden’s fountain fades into the distance as Dew and the party move with quiet urgency along the winding path. The air grows cooler as the trail dips downward, the dense forest gradually giving way. A faint salty tang rides the breeze, and the rhythmic crash of waves grows louder with each step. The secluded beach lies ahead—a stark contrast to the tranquil gardens they left behind. The path narrows, hemmed in by jagged rocks and branches that scrape against their shoulders. Golden sunlight filters through the thinning canopy, fractured and shifting as the ocean comes into view. The distant roar of the tide merges with the whisper of wind in the trees. The sporadic cracks of distant gunfire fade beneath the natural sounds of the beach as they approach. Dew raises a hand, signaling the group to halt. His sharp gaze sweeps across the beach below.
- Dew: (*quietly*) There. More of them.
- Lorenzo: No hostages? Good. That means we don’t have to hold back.
- Narrator: Six *Bush of Life* cultists are scattered across the sand, their Xiphos swords glinting faintly in the sunlight. Unaware of the approaching threat, they linger by the waves or stand in idle conversation. Their postures are casual, their masks turned toward one another, oblivious to the hunters closing in. The distant gunfire continues sporadically, a haunting backdrop to the growing tension.
- Krista: Should we go and introduce ourselves?
- Dew: (*curtly*) Quick and quiet.
- Lorenzo: (*grinning darkly*) Time to put these fools to bed.
- Narrator: The party moves with practiced precision, silently closing in on their targets under the cover of trees and rocks. Dew strikes first, his bo staff landing with

lightning speed to silently take down the nearest cultist. Mayhem erupts on the beach, though it's entirely one-sided. Krista's boomerang strikes a cultist square in the chest, sending him stumbling into the surf. Elvir swiftly eliminates another with her daggers, while Vilmer disarms an opponent with his grappling hook and knocks him down with a well-placed kick. Cooper sweeps a cultist's legs with his mop and follows up with a jab to the ribs. Finally, Lorenzo barrels through the last two cultists, delivering a brutal right hook to one and grabbing the other by the collar mid-turn, ready with an immediate response.

Lorenzo: (*snarling*) Thought you'd just stand around, huh? Bad call.

Narrator: Lorenzo then hurls the cultist into the sand, and as he struggles to rise, Lorenzo finishes him with a brutal uppercut that leaves him sprawled and unmoving. Within moments, the beach falls silent once more. The six cultists lie defeated and subdued, their swords scattered across the sand.

Krista: (*smirking*) ...That was over quick.

Elvir: (*shrugging*) Embarrassing, really. Might as well have sent scarecrows.

Lorenzo: (*adjusting his brass knuckles*) Ah. Another easy workout...

Narrator: Without hesitation, Dew and the party move to secure the wrists and ankles of the *Bush of Life* cultists with zip ties. After tightening the final restraint, Dew rises to his feet, his gaze sweeping across the beach.

Dew: (*firmly*) All right... We're good. Let's move.

Narrator: The party turns and begins their ascent along a stone-paved trail leading from the beach to the main compound. The path winds steeply upward, weaving through dense thickets of tall grass and scattered boulders. With each step, the sporadic crack of gunfire grows louder, as the compound looms larger ahead, its shadow stretching ominously across the trail. Hidden from the party's view, a surveillance camera—intentionally left active by the cultists—

silently tracks their movements along the trail. The scene cuts to a dimly lit surveillance room deep within the main compound. Seated before a bank of flickering monitors, a lone cultist watches the live footage of the party's cautious yet hurried advance. Their mask is cold and inscrutable, betraying no emotion. The steady hum of machinery fills the room, occasionally broken by the faint, muffled echoes of gunfire from outside the compound. Near the monitors, the lifeless body of an Aether's Keep security officer lies slumped against the wall, blood pooling beneath their still form. Their weapon rests just out of reach—a stark and grim reminder of their final, futile resistance. The flickering glow of the screen's casts shifting, eerie shadows across the room, emphasizing the contrast between the unmoving corpse and the party's deliberate progress displayed on the monitors. The cultist leans forward, gloved fingers gripping a handheld radio. The *Bush of Life* cultist presses the transmit button, their calm, measured voice cutting through the oppressive silence as they relay the party's movements to an unseen listener.

BOL Cultist 19: Unknown guests... six of them. One carries what looks like a shower rod. They've just left the beach. Six of ours have fallen... maybe more. These must be the ones we've been expecting. They're nearing the compound.

Narrator: For a moment, only static crackles. Then a woman's voice cuts through—sharp, cold, final.

Female Cultist: *Understood... The Crow Sisters will be informed. Withdraw from your post. Rejoin the others throughout the compound. Now.*

Narrator: The static from the radio faded, leaving the room silent except for the hum of the monitors. The cultist paused briefly, their gloved fingers twitching at their side. As if gathering their resolve, they rose and clipped the radio to their belt before leaving the room without a backward glance. Behind them, the monitors remained on, flickering with images of Dew

and the party advancing steadily toward the main compound. The scene then cuts to the dimly lit underground command chambers beneath Aether's Keep. Cold, reinforced metal walls enclose the space, their sleek yet oppressive design exuding a calculated sense of security. The faint hum of aging ventilation systems vibrates through the structure, accompanied by the occasional flicker of overhead lights that cast sharp, shifting shadows across the floor. At the center of the room, Killbin sits bound and gagged in a metal chair, his posture rigid with restrained fury. Three *Bush of Life* cultists stand guard over him, their masked faces betraying nothing as they grip their Xiphos swords in eerie stillness. Across the chamber, the Crow Sisters, Myrrh and Clove, linger near a large operations table, their dark robes cascading like ink against the pale glow of outdated monitors. The low static of the handheld radio crackles, still held firmly in Myrrh's grip, with Thornton's voice murmuring faintly through the device. The sharp echo of approaching footsteps reverberates through the adjacent corridor. A female cultist, clad in the same ominous robes as her brethren, strides into the chamber with swift, urgent steps. She halts before Myrrh and Clove, inclining her head respectfully before speaking.

Female Cultist: *(breathless yet composed)* Sisters... we have a problem. They're here. Now.

Narrator: Before she can finish speaking, Thornton responds, his tone calm yet intrigued.

Thornton: *Ah... Dew, the Hozho, and friends. So, they've arrived.*

Female Cultist: *(steadying her breath)* Yes, Master. It's them. They'll be upon us soon.

Narrator: A tense silence settles over the room. Killbin's head jerks up slightly, his eyes narrowing at the mention of Dew and his party. His fists clench against his bindings, but he forces himself to remain still, keeping his expression unreadable.

Clove: *(tilting her head, intrigued)* Already?

Myrrh: *(flatly)* That's impossible. They shouldn't have reached the Keep this soon...

Narrator: The Crow Sisters exchange glances, their disbelief barely concealed beneath their masks. Before they can question further, Thornton's voice cuts through the radio, his tone edged with amusement.

Thornton: *And yet... they have. Hmm... Interesting. No matter. Everything is still proceeding as planned. Soon... the SKT virus T vial will be in our possession—one way or another.*

Narrator: Killbin's gaze flickers between them.

Myrrh: *(low, serious)* What are your orders, Master?

Thornton: *We will need greater strength as Dew and his party draw near. Hear me now. The three who stand watch over the interim premier—you are summoned elsewhere. Rejoin the others without delay...*

Narrator: The three *Bush of Life* cultists standing watch over Killbin stiffen at the command. They exchange silent nods before swiftly sheathing their Xiphos blades and turning on their heels. Killbin's gaze follows them, his jaw tightening. Within moments, they disappear into the corridor, their footsteps fading into the unsettling quiet of the underground facility.

Thornton: *Myrrh, Clove... remain where you are.*

Narrator: Myrrh chuckles with quiet malice, adjusting her grip on the radio, her fingers trailing along its edges with slow, deliberate intent.

Myrrh: As you command, Master...

Clove: *(with quiet reverence)* Yes, Master.

Female Cultist: *(stepping forward, her posture tense)* And what of me?

Thornton: *(with a darkly amused tone)* You will stay with the Crow Sisters and extend a proper welcome to our arriving guests. As fate would have it, this will also give you the opportunity to settle that unfinished business with a certain party member...

Narrator: At Thornton's words, the female cultist remains unnaturally still. Too still. A flicker of something—recognition, hesitation?—flashes behind her masked

expression. It lingers for only a breath before she buries it beneath rigid composure, her voice steady when she finally speaks.

Female Cultist:

It'll be so, Master...

Narrator:

The radio remains on—silent but active. Thornton does not end the transmission. He lingers, listening and waiting. Clove turns to Killbin, tilting her head slightly. Her masked face betrays nothing as she studies him in silence. Then, finally, she speaks—her voice smooth, almost playful, laced with quiet amusement.

Clove:

(softly, amused) Hmph. You see too much for a man with no true power... *(then turns to Myrrh, her tone light but edged with menace)* Shall we correct this, sister..?

Myrrh:

(calmly, without hesitation) Let it be corrected.

Narrator:

Clove then draws out a blindfold, her fingers gliding over the fabric before flicking it toward the female cultist. Without pause, the woman steps forward and secures the cloth over Killbin's eyes. He stiffens, resisting briefly, but the restraints hold firm. With their task complete, the three figures melt into the shadows, vanishing behind flickering monitors and towering support beams. Now blindfolded, Killbin's breath tightens, instinctively held. Beyond his sight, a dim glow briefly catches the hilt of the female cultist's Xiphos—before darkness swallows it whole. A heavy stillness settles over the chamber, broken only by the low hum of the ventilation system. Myrrh and Clove's sickle swords remain hidden beneath their robes, their presence an unseen threat. The air thickens with anticipation as the confrontation looms just beyond the metal doors. The scene cuts to the main compound entrance, where the air hangs heavy with the stench of gunpowder, blood, and the acrid bite of smoldering electronics. The ground is strewn with bodies—a grim mixture of *Bush of Life* cultists and Aether Keep security personnel—twisted in death's final grasp. Some cultists still clutch their Xiphos swords, the blades glistening with drying blood.

Spent bullet casings glimmer faintly under the dim, flickering emergency lights. Dew and the party advance cautiously, their movements silent yet purposeful, eyes scanning every shadow for danger. The sharp cracks of nearby sporadic gunfire continue to echo through the compound. Vilmer kneels beside a fallen Aether Keep security officer, checking for any signs of life. Dew and the others pause, watching as Vilmer solemnly shakes his head. Without a word, the group silently agrees to press on. As they venture deeper into the compound, a sudden burst of gunfire erupts ahead, followed by a pained yell. Dew raises his hand, signaling the party to slow their approach. Rounding a corner, they come upon a chaotic scene: an *ISPYA* agent clad in tactical armor and three Aether Keep security personnel stand over the lifeless bodies of several *Bush of Life* cultists, their blood pooling beneath them. Nearby, a wounded Executive Aide, pale and clutching their injured arm, leans on a fourth Aether Keep security personnel for support. The aide's clothes are torn and bloodied, and his expression hardens with suspicion as he notices Dew and the party approach, his gaze flicking between them as if assessing their intentions. The aide's sudden change in demeanor draws the attention of the *ISPYA* agent and the three standing security personnel. They swiftly raise their weapons, aiming at Dew and his group, their expressions hard and unyielding. The security personnel supporting the aide tenses, shifting slightly to maintain balance while keeping one hand near their holstered weapon, ready to react if necessary but unwilling to abandon the aide.

ISPYA Agent 3:

(firmly, keeping their weapon trained on the group)
Stop right there! Identify yourselves!

Narrator:

Dew slowly raises his hands, adopting a calm and non-threatening stance. The rest of the party remains still, tense but ready to act if the situation escalates.



- Dew: *(calmly but with authority)* Easy now. We're not your enemies. We're here to rescue Interim Premier Janerio.
- ISPYA Agent 3: *(skeptical, eyes narrowing as they assess the group)* Rescue the interim premier? You're not with Aether Keep security.
- Lorenzo: *(smirking, gesturing at the fallen cultists)* Man, you think we'd roll with those freaks? Hell no. We ain't on their side, that's for damn sure.
- ISPYA Agent 3: *(maintaining their aim)* Again. Who are you? Who sent you?
- Dew: My name is Dew, and we're—
- Narrator: Before Dew can finish, the Executive Aide sucks in a sharp breath, his expression shifting from suspicion

to realization. He stiffens, blinking at Dew and his party before speaking, his tone firm with certainty.

Executive Aide: Wait... did you say your name is Dew? Dew Wilder?

Dew: *(nodding slightly)* Yes...

ISPYA Agent 3: *(glancing at the aide, still holding their aim steady)* You know him?

Executive Aide: *(nodding again, more assured)* Yes. I was briefing the interim premier about Mr. Wilder and his friends earlier—before all this chaos started. They're not enemies. They're here to help us.

Narrator: The tension eases slightly, though ISPYA Agent 3 and the three Aether Keep security personnel keep their weapons trained on Dew and his party, their guard still raised.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(narrowing his eyes)* All right, I've got some questions. This place isn't exactly somewhere you can just stroll into—especially not during a siege. So how did you get in? And how did you know the interim premier was in trouble?

Narrator: Dew and his party remain silent for a moment, exchanging brief glances as they consider how to respond without revealing too much. The ISPYA agent, the three Aether Keep security personnel, and the Executive Aide watch them intently, curiosity and suspicion etched on their faces. Finally, Elvir speaks up.

Elvir: Umm... *(then with a smirk, her tone light)* A little bird told us...

Lorenzo: *(stepping forward with a shrug, tone casual but confident)* We've got our ways. Let's just say we're good at being where we're needed.

Cooper: *(cutting in, his tone firm but calm)* We ran into some of the *Bush of Life* cultists while we were making our way here. They'd taken some of your staff hostage.

Dew: *(adding with a measured tone, his gaze steady on the agent)* ...We freed the staffers we could, secured the cultists, and cleared a path for them to escape. They should be safe now, but we couldn't stay to lock everything down.



Narrator:

The *ISPYA* agent's brow furrows slightly as they give a quick side glance at the Executive Aide, then back at Dew.

ISPYA Agent 3:

(voice cautious) That's some convenient timing... But what matters is that you're here to help... and you've already done us a favor. We can't waste any more time standing here. All right...

Narrator:

The *ISPYA* agent exhales sharply, their gaze lingering on Dew for a moment longer before gesturing to the three Aether Keep security personnel. Slowly, the agent lowers their weapon and holsters it. The security personnel exchange brief glances before following

suit, lowering their weapons with a collective sense of hesitation. The Executive Aide breathes a quiet sigh of relief, wincing slightly as the motion aggravates their injury. Dew nods subtly, acknowledging the shift in demeanor from the *ISPYA* agent and the three Aether Keep security personnel. Elvir's smirk softens into mild satisfaction, while Lorenzo crosses his arms with a small, approving nod. Cooper calmly scans the area for potential threats. Krista steps closer, her sharp gaze briefly assessing their surroundings, and Vilmer leans casually to one side with a faint smile.

Dew: *(calm but with a note of urgency)* Glad to see we're on the same page. Now, let's not waste any more time.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(nodding, tone firmer now)* Agreed.

Dew: So, where was the interim premier last?

ISPYA Agent 3: *(firmly)* The interim premier's last known location was the Executive Chamber before the attack. We lost contact shortly after that.

Narrator: As the words "Executive Chamber" hang in the air, the injured Executive Aide stiffens slightly. His gaze drops to the ground, and his voice is quiet when he speaks, tinged with guilt.

Executive Aide: *(quietly)* I... I was there when it started. With the interim premier.

Narrator: His uninjured hand trembles slightly as it grips the security personnel's arm for support. He exhales a shaky breath, forcing himself to continue.

Executive Aide: *(softly, bitterly)* I ran when the fighting broke out. I was going to get help, but... *(pausing, wincing slightly)* I didn't get far. Some of those cultists caught up to me. If it weren't for the *ISPYA* agent and security personnel,

I'd... *(voice falters, then steadies)* I shouldn't have left him. I should've stayed.

Narrator: The group falls silent for a moment, the aide's words heavy in the stillness. Dew glances at him, his sharp expression softening slightly before his tone turns resolute.

Dew: *(quietly but firmly)* What matters now is getting him back.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(nodding, tone steady)* Agreed.

Dew: *(nodding, his gaze sharpening)* All right. Where is the Executive Chamber?

ISPYA Agent 3: Since you're not familiar with the layout of the Keep, you're going to need me. I'm coming with you. Three of my men will join us to secure the route... *(then turns to the fourth security personnel)* Get the aide to a safer location. Regroup with us later if you can.

AK Security Personnel 1: *(nodding, already moving to support the aide)* Understood.

Narrator: The injured Executive Aide gives Dew and his party a faint nod of gratitude, his face pale but resolute as he leans on the fourth security personnel for support.

Executive Aide: *(quietly)* Good luck. And please bring him back safely...

AK Security Personnel 1: *(guiding the aide toward safety)* Let's move.

Narrator: The aide is carefully escorted away toward a safer location, his steps unsteady but determined. Meanwhile, the *ISPYA* agent turns their attention back to Dew and his group, gesturing for the three remaining security personnel to prepare themselves.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(firmly, with authority)* Stay close and stay sharp. We'll lead the way.

Narrator: Dew nods in acknowledgment before he and his party fall into step, following the *ISPYA* agent and the three Aether Keep security personnel into the Keep's interior, where the air

remains heavy with tension despite the diminishing threat of the *Bush of Life* cultists. The scene cuts to the compound's interior, where Dew and his party, weapons at the ready, moved swiftly yet cautiously behind the *ISPYA* agent and three Aether Keep security personnel. The dimly lit corridors were eerily silent, broken only by the occasional crackle of a distant radio, a faint reminder of the compound's unrest. As they advanced, each room—and a sprawling library—brought them face to face with *Bush of Life* cultists who stood no chance. Overwhelmed by the precision and coordination of Dew's party, bolstered by the expertise of the *ISPYA* agent and the three security personnel, the cultists were swiftly defeated. Amid the chaos, the group frequently stumbled upon the bodies of Aether Keep staff, security personnel, and fallen *ISPYA* agents. Each lifeless figure bore silent testimony to the devastation that had engulfed the compound. The air hung thick with the metallic tang of blood, mingling with the acrid stench of death. Dew and his party, accompanied by *ISPYA* Agent 3 and three Aether Keep security personnel, steeled themselves and pressed onward. At last, the group reaches the surveillance room. The cramped space is lined with monitors, most of them dark and inactive. A single screen flickers weakly, displaying a live feed of the compound's main entrance. The steady hum of machinery fills the room, amplifying the tense silence. Against one wall, the lifeless body of an Aether Keep security officer lies slumped, blood pooling beneath them. One of the security personnel cautiously approaches the body, kneeling to check for any signs of life. The others take in their surroundings,

weapons at the ready. *ISPYA* Agent 3 steps toward the panel beneath the active monitor, their expression hardening as they study the controls.

ISPYA Agent 3:

Let's see if any of these other cameras are still functional...

Narrator:

ISPYA Agent 3 begins working on the control panel, his fingers deftly tapping buttons as static flickers across the screens. One by one, he cycles through the feeds, searching for anything useful. The room remains tense, with the rest of the group scanning their surroundings for any signs of danger. Nearby, AK Security Personnel 2 kneels beside his fallen comrade. After a long moment, he looks up, his expression heavy with grief. Shaking his head toward Dew, the other security personnel, and the rest of the party, he speaks softly.

AK Security Personnel 2:

(quietly) ...He's dead. Those bastards...

Narrator:

The quiet words cut through the room like a knife, and a heavy silence falls. *ISPYA* Agent 3 exhales sharply, his shoulders slumping slightly as frustration flickers in his eyes. As the final camera feed dissolves into static, he steps back from the console, running a hand over his forehead.

ISPYA Agent 3:

(frustrated) Every camera in the Keep is offline except this one. I thought we might get lucky—maybe find the interim premier's location if he was moved. But... nothing. Damn it.

Dew:

(resolute) Okay. Then we keep moving.

Narrator:

ISPYA Agent 3 exhales sharply and nods, glancing back at the group.

ISPYA Agent 3:

Yeah. There's nothing else for us here. We'll have to check every room until we make it to the Executive Chamber. Let's go.

Narrator:

Dew exchanges a brief look with his party, their silent agreement clear. Without a word, the group turns toward the door. *ISPYA* Agent

3 takes the lead, followed by the three Aether Keep security personnel. Dew and his party fall into step behind them as they return to the dimly lit corridor. Their footsteps echo faintly as they cautiously advance, the tension mounting with every step. Pressing forward, the group encounters more *Bush of Life* cultists along the way. The confrontation is swift, as the cultists are quickly subdued. After some time, they finally reach the Executive Chamber. The heavy doors stand slightly ajar, a quiet unease settling over the group. The air inside reeks of metal and iron, a sure sign of blood. The scene within is nothing short of devastation. Shattered furniture litters the room, papers lie scattered like fallen leaves, and a faint haze of smoke clings to the air, a haunting echo of recent violence. Streaks of blood slash across the walls and soak into the carpet in jagged patterns. The group fans out, searching the room for any sign of the interim premier. Krista and Vilmer's attention is drawn to a dark pool of blood near the corner of the room. Their eyes follow a faint, smeared trail leading to the far side, where a figure lies motionless on the floor. As they cautiously approach, they notice the faint rise and fall of the figure's chest.

Krista: *(quietly, with a mix of shock and concern)* Oh! Is he breathing..?

Vilmer: *(uneasy, studying the figure)* Looks like it...

Narrator: Vilmer lets out a sharp whistle, signaling the rest of the group. They rush over to investigate, revealing the figure to be a bloodied and unconscious *ISPYA* Agent 2. His shallow breaths and faint pulse are the only signs he's still alive.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(kneeling beside the fallen figure, quickly assessing)* It's Agent Kingsman... alive, but just barely.

Narrator: ISPYA Agent 3 straightens up, stepping back as he processes the grim scene. Kingsman is critically injured, and the interim premier is nowhere to be found. The implications are clear, and a sinking realization takes hold.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(to Dew and the party, his tone resolute)* Hmm... There's only one place they could've taken him... the Underground Command Chamber... *(then turns to the Aether Keep security personnel)* Secure this area. Stabilize Agent Kingsman, and make sure no one gets in or out until we return.

AK Security Personnel 2: *(with a firm nod)* Understood. We'll take it from here.

Narrator: With the situation under control, ISPYA Agent 3's focus shifts back to Dew and his party.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(voice steady, resolve clear)* Let's move. Time's running out.

Dew: *(stepping forward, tone firm)* Right. Lead the way.

Narrator: Leaving the Aether Keep security personnel to tend to Kingsman and secure the chamber, Dew and his party follow ISPYA Agent 3 out of the Executive Chamber and back into the compound corridor, heading toward the Underground Command Chamber. As they move through the corridors toward the underground command chamber, Rena's talisman around Dew's neck flickers faintly once more—unnoticed by all, including himself. Suddenly, Dew halts in his tracks, while the rest of the group continues ahead. For a brief moment, the world around him plunges into silence, as if time itself is slowing. A familiar yet unsettling wave of déjà vu crashes over him again. Before his eyes, an image

materializes—a hooded silhouette slowly turning its back to him. He strains to make out the figure’s identity, but the vision repeats itself three times, each instance just as elusive as the last. Then, without warning, the trance shatters. Dew is jolted back to reality, his surroundings snapping into focus. As the haze of the vision fades, he notices Cooper standing nearby, staring at him with a mix of concern and curiosity. Meanwhile, the others and *ISPYA* Agent 3 remain unaware, continuing ahead without looking back.

Cooper: *(brow furrowing slightly)* Dew... are you all right?

Dew: *(blinking, exhaling sharply before shaking his head)* Yeah... I’m fine. It was... nothing.

Cooper: *(studying him, his expression tightening slightly)* You’ve said that before. And this isn’t the first time you’ve done this.

Dew: Uh... Not important.

Cooper: You sure?

Dew: Yeah. I’m sure...

Cooper: *(quirking an eyebrow, his tone shifting slightly)* Hm... You didn’t happen to see any big booty ghost bitches, did you?

Dew: *(snorts, shaking his head as he keeps walking)* Oh, this again... Hah... Yeah, sure. They waved at me on the way out.

Cooper: Ha-ha... And you didn’t call me over? That’s cold. But... after all, I do have witness testimony on my side now.

Dew: *(glancing at him, puzzled)* ...What?

Cooper: *(then places a hand on his chest in mock satisfaction)* Ah, that’s right. You weren’t there. Back when we were split up at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE academy searching for Rena, we came across an injured private—the same one who had been standing watch at the Boat Hangar entrance before we left. Mind you, a

highly trained professional, just like we were. And yet, he too confirmed witnessing what he believed to be an apparition of considerable... physical presence.

Dew:

Cooper:

(raising an eyebrow, unimpressed) Really?

(with the faintest smirk) Well, yes. The private was... rather adamant about what he saw. So. Big booty ghost bitches confirmed.



Dew:

(deadpan, shaking his head) Right. Because a private under extreme stress, likely mistaking Rena for a bootyful spirit, is your idea of proof. Cooper, I highly doubt it was any big booty ghost bitches.

Narrator:

Dew gives Cooper a long, incredulous look—his expression hovering somewhere between disbelief and mild irritation, as if trying to determine whether Cooper is actually serious. Cooper then delivers a snappy response.

Cooper: *(shrugging, unbothered)* I mean... why not? We've seen plenty of strange things on our journey. This is where you draw the line..?

Narrator: Dew then rolls his eyes, shaking his head slightly before responding to Cooper.

Dew: This is what keeps you up at night, huh? Unreal... Anyway, we should catch up with the others before they notice.

Narrator: With that, the two start walking and quicken their steps. Cooper walks with quiet satisfaction as they rejoin the group ahead.

CHAPTER 18 – BENEATH THE

BLACK WINGS

Narrator: Sometime later, Dew and his party, led by ISPYA Agent 3, reach a stairway and begin their descent toward the underground command chamber. Their footsteps echo softly against the metal walls, the sound growing louder as they near the bottom. At last, they step onto the lower level and halt before a reinforced metal door. Unlike one battered by forced entry, its surface remains smooth, though faint traces of recent use are visible—a subtle smudge near the keypad, slight wear along the edges. The air is thick with tension as ISPYA Agent 3 steps forward, his fingers brushing against a sleek panel beside the door. A faint green glow illuminates his face as he presses it, casting sharp shadows across his determined expression.

ISPYA Agent 3: *(low, muttering to himself)* This was accessed recently. The interim premier is inside...

Elvir: *(raising an eyebrow, gripping her dual daggers tightly)* And you have the code, right..?

ISPYA Agent 3: *(then glancing at her, a faint smirk forming)* I wouldn't be much of an agent if I didn't...

Narrator: ISPYA Agent 3's fingers glide swiftly over the keypad, entering a sequence with practiced precision. A sharp beep shatters the silence, followed by the loud hiss of the reinforced door as it groans to life, splitting at the center and sliding open at an agonizingly slow pace. Darkness spills forth, an oppressive void swallowing the party whole. Dew tightens his grip on his bo staff, exchanging a silent nod with

his team before cautiously stepping inside. The chamber is eerily still, the scent of aged paper and cold steel thick in the air. Their eyes scan the dimly lit space—until they see him. Killbin sits bound, gagged, and blindfolded but unharmed in a metal chair at the center of the room, his posture rigid. Though his breathing remains steady, the soft shuffle of approaching footsteps prompts him to tilt his head slightly. A subtle shift in his stance suggests recognition. Still, tension lingers in the faint twitch of his fingers—a silent warning of the danger lurking in the shadows. Then—click. A harsh amber light fills the chamber. A blur of movement erupts from the darkness. Three figures surge forward with lethal precision—the Crow Sisters and the Female Cultist. Moving in perfect synchronization, their weapons gleam as they slice through the air, curved sickle swords and a razor-sharp Xiphos poised to strike. Dew reacts instantly, swinging his bo staff upward to intercept a slash aimed at his shoulder. Steel clashes against metal, sparks flying as he absorbs the impact and shifts into a defensive stance. To his right, Lorenzo meets Myrrh head-on, crossing his brass-knuckled fists to block her sickle sword with a sharp clang. His arms throb from the force, but he redirects her blade and counters with a brutal punch. Myrrh twists, absorbing the blow on her forearm before pivoting into a counterstrike. Lorenzo barely evades, retaliating with a jab. She deflects it, forcing them into a rapid exchange—Lorenzo staying close, deflecting with his brass knuckles, while Myrrh weaves fluidly, searching for an opening. Nearby, Cooper tightens his grip on his mop as Clove lunges. He blocks her sickle sword, the impact

nearly wrenching it from his hands. Gritting his teeth, he redirects her strike and resets his stance. Krista hurls her boomerang across the room, forcing the Female Cultist to dodge as Vilmer and Elvir charge into battle. Dew presses the Cultist, with Vilmer now at his side, swinging his grappling hook and forcing her to reposition. Krista launches another throw with relentless accuracy. This time, the boomerang nicks the Cultist's side, drawing a sharp grunt as she staggers. Seizing the opportunity, Dew lunges with his bo staff. She barely deflects, but Vilmer's hook snaps toward her leg. She evades full entanglement but is forced onto the defensive. Krista readies another throw, but before she can release it, Clove lunges, sidestepping Cooper and striking at Krista. Krista barely dodges. Cooper moves to intercept, but Clove is faster, sweeping his legs and driving the blunt side of her weapon into his chest. He crashes to the ground, gasping. Before Clove can finish him, Elvir intercepts, her dual daggers clashing against Clove's blade. Now fighting in tandem, Krista and Elvir press her back. But Clove feints a retreat, then hooks Elvir's wrist, yanking her off balance. She slams Krista in the ribs, sending her stumbling. Before Elvir recovers, Clove's blade flashes toward her shoulder. Elvir barely dodges, but a shallow cut streaks across her arm. Clove's eyes gleam with satisfaction as she presses her attack. Meanwhile, Cooper groans, rolling onto his side as his vision clears. He pushes himself up just in time to see Clove relentlessly attacking Elvir, who holds her ground, while Krista, though still somewhat staggered, rejoins the fight to support her. For a moment, he grips his weapon, preparing to rejoin the fray—but

then his gaze shifts. Across the chamber, Lorenzo is locked in combat with Myrrh, struggling to gain the upper hand. Cooper exhales sharply, making his decision. Instead of re-engaging Clove, he pivots and rushes to Lorenzo's side, ready to assist. Meanwhile, *ISPYA* Agent 3, already in position, works swiftly to free Killbin amid the scuffle. Dew swings his bo staff in a wide arc, driving the Female Cultist backward, as Vilmer capitalizes on the opening and snaps his grappling hook at her weapon arm. She barely dodges, but the chain catches her sleeve, yanking her off balance. She slashes at it, but Vilmer pulls back hard, forcing her to adjust her stance. The Female Cultist quickly regains her footing and counters with a series of swift strikes. Dew blocks each one with practiced efficiency, his bo staff moving in controlled arcs. Vilmer stays on the move, watching for an opportunity to strike with his grappling hook. The fight remains evenly matched, both sides testing each other's defenses without giving ground. A few feet away, Lorenzo and Cooper work in sync to contain Myrrh. Lorenzo fights with relentless aggression, his brass knuckles hammering against her sickle sword with quick, forceful strikes. Cooper, maintaining distance, uses his mop to disrupt Myrrh's movements, controlling the space between them. Myrrh, swift and unyielding, weaves between their attacks, searching for an opening. Meanwhile, a now-recovered Krista and Elvir continue battling Clove in a deadly rhythm of steel and motion. Krista hurls her boomerang once more, forcing Clove to adjust her footing. The moment Clove shifts, Elvir closes in, her daggers flashing in rapid succession. Clove deflects each strike with

unnerving precision, though her focus momentarily flickers toward *ISPYA* Agent 3, who is now working through the final restraints on Killbin. The blindfold and gag are already removed. Killbin blinks rapidly, still adjusting to the light. With one final, precise cut, *ISPYA* Agent 3 slices through the last of the restraints. Killbin flexes his fingers, rubbing his wrists as the tension in his body shifts—no longer bound, but resolute. His gaze locks onto Dew. A subtle shift spreads across the chamber as their enemies take note of Killbin's freedom. The brief distraction disrupts the flow of the fight. Vilmer maintains his relentless assault on the Female Cultist, keeping her occupied. Sensing the shift, Dew spares a glance at Killbin. Their eyes meet—Killbin's gaze filled with silent gratitude. Dew gives a small nod in acknowledgment before clenching his jaw and turning his attention back to *ISPYA* Agent 3.

Dew:

(gritting his teeth) ...Get him out of here!
We'll handle this!

Narrator:

ISPYA Agent 3 hesitates only a moment before nodding, then turns to Killbin. He grips Killbin's arm and gestures toward the exit. Without a word exchanged, Killbin immediately rushes ahead, with *ISPYA* Agent 3 following close behind. The sliding door groans as it begins to close, sealing the battle behind them. Clove's hand darts to the hidden teleportation device on her belt, fingers pressing the activation switch—but nothing happens. Her eyes narrow as she glances at the now-sealed exit. Nearby, Myrrh, mid-swing against Lorenzo, attempts the same, but as her fingers brush over her own device, she realizes it's not working. A subtle, annoyed hiss escapes her lips as her stance momentarily

shifts before she refocuses on the fight. The clash of weapons fills the chamber as the battle escalates. The Female Cultist nimbly evades Vilmer's swinging grappling hook, twisting and ducking just as the hook whips past her.



Vilmer:

(gritted, frustrated) Grr... You're a slippery one, aren't ya..?

Narrator:

A smirk forms beneath the Female Cultist's mask as she fluidly flips her Xiphos, effortlessly deflecting another of Vilmer's swings. The impact drives the hook into the floor, momentarily pinning it and forcing Vilmer to disengage to retrieve it. Dew then surges forward, his bo staff crashing downward with brute force. The Female Cultist rolls beneath the attack, and the two engage again in a relentless exchange of strikes. Then, amidst the clash, Dew suddenly shifts his stance, twisting sharply to evade her

counterstrike. In that fleeting motion, his vest pulls taut for the briefest second, revealing a faint outline beneath the fabric—a bulge against his front pocket. The Female Cultist’s eyes flicker with recognition. Without hesitation, she lunges. Dew’s eyes widen, but before he can react, he finds himself locked in a brief yet vicious struggle at close range. Her hand moves swiftly, pressing against his vest as if grappling for control, while Dew resists, struggling to push her away. Unbeknownst to him, the Female Cultist plucks the sealant tape-wrapped SKT virus T vial free from his vest pocket. But in the same instant, Dew jerks his bo staff upward, smashing it across her face with brutal force. The impact is devastating. She staggers backward, her hood snapping free as her mask shatters, fragments scattering across the chamber floor. At that moment, Vilmer finally wrenches his grappling hook free from the floor, stepping back cautiously. Meanwhile, the battle comes to a sudden halt. Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Elvir—along with the Crow Sisters—hesitate, eyeing one another warily before gradually withdrawing, their weapons still at the ready. The Crow Sisters move first, swiftly retreating to the Female Cultist’s side. Dew and his party regroup, their focus shifting between the Crow Sisters and their now-unmasked opponent. The Female Cultist stands still, breathing heavily, her head slightly lowered, one hand brushing against her exposed face. Strands of long, vibrant red hair spill freely over her shoulders, catching the dim chamber light. Yet beneath the cascade of crimson, her other hand remains clenched—concealing the vial. Krista grips her boomerang tightly; fingers tense along its edges. Beside her,

Lorenzo flexes his brass-knuckled fists, his arms still aching from his clash with Myrrh. To the side, Vilmer methodically twirls the chain of his grappling hook around his wrist, his usual ease replaced by sharp focus. His narrowed gaze locks onto the Female Cultist's clenched hand, knowing she's hiding something. The tension in his grip suggests he's ready to strike at any moment. As the others remain locked in the uneasy standoff, Cooper, gripping his mop tightly, still feels the lingering ache in his chest from Clove's attack. But his gaze flicks briefly to Elvir, standing beside him. He notices the shallow cut on her arm, a thin streak of red still visible.

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir)* You good..?

Narrator: Elvir glances at him, adjusting her grip on her dagger as she flexes her fingers and subtly rotates her wrist, testing the wound's effect on her movement. She exhales sharply but brushes it off with a casual shrug before responding.

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* ...I'll live. Ain't the worst I've had, Coop. I'll heal up later—be good as new.

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir)* Right... And hey, thanks—for jumping in back there.

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* Yeah, well... Couldn't let ya get folded by a sickle-swingin' psycho, could I? Would've been tragic, that.

Cooper: *(whispering to Elvir, amused)* Hah. Is that so..?

Elvir: *(whispering to Cooper)* More than ya think, love...

Narrator: Cooper then gives Elvir a knowing smirk, the kind laced with familiarity and something unspoken. But despite the moment, their focus remains ahead—on the Crow Sisters and the unmasked Female Cultist. Dew, still gripping his bo staff, stares intently at the Female

Cultist, his expression darkening. Krista tenses beside him, her grip tightening on her weapon. Lorenzo exhales sharply, shifting his weight ever so slightly, ready to act. Vilmer stops twirling his chain, his muscles coiling in anticipation. Then—like a lightning strike—recognition floods Dew’s face. His body locks up, and disbelief flashes across his features as realization dawns upon him—he knows exactly who the Female Cultist is.



Dew:

(softly, almost breathless) ...Emily?

Narrator:

Emily’s eyes flicker—something fleeting and unreadable passes through them. Recognition? Regret? Yet, her expression remains guarded. Krista frowns, glancing between them before turning to Dew.

Krista:

(hesitant) Wait—Emily? *(realization dawning)* Is she the same one you were trying to visit back in Twin Pines..?

Narrator: Dew doesn't respond immediately. His jaw locks for a moment, but that alone is all the confirmation they need. Lorenzo exhales, shaking his head in disbelief.

Lorenzo: *(gritted)* Well, shit.

Narrator: Instinctively, Dew moves his free hand to his vest pocket. His fingers grasp at nothing. A cold weight settles in his stomach. His gaze snaps downward—then back up—to Emily. His pulse spikes. She's holding it. The SKT virus T vial. Before he can move, before he can react, Emily turns with deliberate, calculated ease. Extending the vial, she places it into Clove's waiting hand. The Crow Sister grips it with her gloved fingers, cradling it as though it were something sacred before tucking it away in an inner pocket of her cloak. Dew exhales through his nose, gripping his bo staff tighter. His knuckles pale from the strain, his chest tightening as disappointment cuts deeper than he expected. Around him, his party shifts uneasily, frustration clear in their tense stances. Losing another vial was a heavy blow, and they all knew it. Myrrh reaches for the handheld radio at her belt, unclips it, and lifts it close to her mask before speaking.

Myrrh: Master, we have the vial.

Narrator: A faint crackle precedes a low static hum before Thornton's voice cuts through.

Thornton: *Very good... I assume our friends are still standing on their feet? Let me have a word with them...*

Myrrh: Yes...

Narrator: As soon as Thornton speaks, Dew stiffens. His breath hitches, muscles coiling instinctively. A cold dread slithers down his spine, but he forces himself to stay still, swallowing the memories threatening to resurface. Clutching

the radio firmly, Myrrh raises it into view, allowing Dew and the rest of the party to see. Thornton's voice begins to murmur faintly through the device.

Thornton: *(mocking, smooth) Well, well, well... Dew. It's been a while. I see that little mark I left on you after our last encounter hasn't slowed you down one bit. Ha-ha-ha...*

Narrator: That voice—those words. They hit Dew like a punch to the gut. The control he had slips as the memories tear through him, dragging him back to that battle at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy, deep within the second-floor basement laboratory. Dew charges in, screaming, his bo staff slamming into Thornton's chest with brutal force. Thornton staggers, gasping—but it isn't enough. Dew's breath catches. His body locks up as the bastard sword pierces through him. His knees buckle. Blood spills—too fast, far too fast. He collapses. Rena's lips move frantically, but her voice is inaudible, swallowed by the chaos. Her hands tremble as she presses desperately against his wound, his blood slick on her fingers. A glass vial rolls across the floor. Thornton's smirk lingers as fog rises, his figure fading into the mist. Rena sobs, clutching Dew's hand. His vision blurs. His body grows limp. Then, in an instant, Dew snaps out of his trance, steadying himself before responding to Thornton.

Dew: *(low, dangerously steady) Where are you, Thornton..?*

Narrator: A pause lingers. The static hums before Thornton's voice cuts through.

Thornton: *Not there, unfortunately. I'm busy handling preparations for the Renascence. But why rush? This moment is far too... poetic, no..?*

Narrator: Dew's gaze flickers briefly to Emily. Meanwhile, Lorenzo, who had been watching the Crow Sisters with an unimpressed glare, exhales through his nose and folds his arms.

Lorenzo: *(flatly)* All right, so... what's the deal, you bird broads?

Narrator: The Crow Sisters tilt their heads in eerie unison, their voices weaving together like an unsettling chant.

Myrrh: *(whispery, poetic)* Once untainted flock, then burned away...

Clove: *(seamlessly continuing)* ...From the ashes, in shadow we stay...

Myrrh: *(cold, deliberate)* Cast aside, forgotten, buried...

Clove: *(with a sharp edge)* ...Left to struggle in a ruthless gale...

Myrrh: *(soft but weighted)* Witnesses to a slaughter soaked in sorrow...

Clove: *(eyes gleaming)* ...Spared by fate's cruel indifference...

Myrrh: *(low, resolute)* We remain to stalk the living...

Clove: *(with eerie conviction)* ...Seeking justice for our forsaken kin...

Myrrh: *(a hushed whisper, haunting)* No other flock will claim us...

Clove: *(a slow exhale)* We are all that remains...

Narrator: Then, in perfect harmony, their voices merge into a chilling proclamation.

Myrrh & Clove: *(solemn declaration)* We are the enforcers of the Söl Congruum's will... the claws that rend at the Master's command... guardians of the *Bush of Life*... We are the Crow Sisters...

Narrator: Lorenzo blinks at them, then exhales sharply, shaking his head.

Lorenzo: *(deadpan)* Yeah. That... uhm... explains everything.

Narrator: Elvir snorts, responding to them in a mocking tone.

Elvir: What, did you two rehearse that in front of a mirror or something? Sounds like you ripped it from some second-rate nursery rhyme book. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: Vilmer chuckles, idly wrapping the chain of his grappling hook around his wrist before chiming in.

Vilmer: Not exactly shaking in my boots here.

Lorenzo: What's next? You gonna flap your wings and caw at us? Ha-ha...

Narrator: Beneath her mask, Clove's grin stretches wider. Then, she lets out a soft, unsettling chuckle.

Clove: (*low, whispery*) The little prey sneers and jeers... but soon, we'll be the ones it fears...

Lorenzo: (*smirking, unfazed*) Oh, yeah? So far, we're still standing... and last I checked, rhyming threats didn't do much damage either.

Narrator: Clove's grin lingers, her gaze unreadable beneath her mask, but the briefest twitch of her fingers betrays a flicker of irritation. Meanwhile, Dew remains silent, uninterested in the exchange of words between his party and the Crow Sisters. His focus is locked solely on Emily. His gaze, steady and unyielding, searches her expression for answers. Then, at last, he speaks.

Dew: (*low, steady*) Emily. Why? How did you get caught up in all of this?

Narrator: Emily's expression tightens. Something flickers in her gaze—something buried deep, just out of reach. For a moment, it seems as if she might say something else, but then... her features harden.

Emily: (*steady, but with an underlying tremor*) I'm sorry for the deception, Dew... and for you to find out like this. I guess... maybe this is what fate intended. But it had to be done.

Narrator: Dew exhales, his grip firm around his bo staff. His voice is low, thick with hurt.

Dew: (*frustrated, pressing*) Had to be done?! Do you even understand what you're doing by handing them that vial? (*then his voice softens, almost pleading*) This isn't you...

Narrator: Emily then draws in a slow, controlled breath, forcing down the flicker of doubt that momentarily surfaces in her eyes.

Emily: (*low, controlled*) No, Dew. You're wrong. I know exactly what I'm doing. It's you who refuses to see the bigger picture.

Dew: (*firm, pressing*) Bigger picture? The *Bush of Life* are using you. They've filled your head with lies, Emily—

Narrator: Emily's eyes narrow. The softness in them is gone, replaced with something sharper, something unwavering.

Emily: (*voice rising, emotion cracking through*) No, they haven't. You're the one who's blind. (*heated, passionate*) This world is broken, Dew. It needs to be cleansed. A restart.

Dew: (*low, pained*) You seriously believe that...?

Emily: (*quietly, resolute*) Oh, but I do...

Narrator: Dew exhales, shaking his head as he struggles to steady his voice.

Dew: Emily... please. Open your eyes. Stop this now—

Emily: (*sharply*) No, Dew! You and your friends refused to see the truth! You rejected the salvation that was offered to you... (*then her voice grows fervent, desperate*) You think the *Bush of Life* are the enemy? What about the government that's been feeding us lies for years? What about the system that left so many to rot? (*then her voice hardens, eyes burning with conviction*) You—of all people—should understand.

Dew: ...

Narrator: Her words cut deep, lodging themselves in Dew's chest like a blade. Because some of them are true. Emily's voice softens—just slightly. A trace of pain lingers beneath the surface.

Emily: (*quieter, eyes searching his*) You were alive this entire time... but you never came back. Not when it mattered. Not when I needed you the most...

Narrator: The weight of her words crashes down on him, relentless, unshakable. He exhales sharply, his breath unsteady as he fights to find the right words. And then, at last, he speaks.

Dew: (*softly, broken*) I didn't come back... because I didn't want you to get caught up in what had to be done. I had to remain dead to the world... (*then his voice tightens, weary*) Zircon's tyranny had to end... all to avenge... them... even... her... Hoplyn... (*sigh*)

Narrator: Emily's breath catches—brief, fragile. The mention of Hoplyn strikes something inexplicably deep, a buried wound ripped open in an instant. But she shoves it down—forcing it into the fire that drives her forward. Her grip tightens around the hilt of her Xiphos, crushing hesitation beneath rising fury. Her jaw sets, her breaths slow and deliberate, pushing the ache away. Dew sees it—the wound laid bare—but presses on, his voice steady, edged with warning.

Dew: ...Emily, I'm sorry I wasn't there for you... I don't know what happened to you... but don't let this anger consume you...

Emily: (*sharp, unforgiving*) Now you're sorry..? Now you regret not coming back? Ha... Regret doesn't undo what's already been done, Dew...

Dew: Emily, please, just listen. Whatever they've told you, whatever promises they've made... it's all a lie. Thornton and the Söl Congruum aren't saving anyone.

Narrator: Emily's eyes flash. Something inside her fractures.

Emily: *(furious, voice sharp as steel)* Liar! This is the only way... the only way to make sure their deaths are undone...

Dew: *(softly, shaking his head)* Will it? And what about your son? He's still here, Emily. What kind of world are you leaving for him? And Hoplyn... do you really think this is what she would have wanted? More pain? More death?

Narrator: A flicker. A moment's hesitation. The mention of Hoplyn—her child—pierces through the armor she has built around herself. Her fingers twitch against the hilt of her blade. Her breath shudders. The weight of it threatens to break through her resolve. But then—she fortifies herself, reforging her grief into something sharper, something unyielding. Her eyes darken.

Emily: *(low, dangerous)* How dare you bring them into this... especially Hoplyn. *(quieter, voice like a knife's edge)* You think I don't know what really happened to my sister? You think I don't know the truth? *(exhales sharply, her grip on the Xiphos tightening, knuckles paling)* ...Thornton told me everything. How she and the others you served with truly died. How their deaths were buried—covered up with lies. It's unforgivable. *(quieter, laced with venom)* No. You don't get to speak her name... *(then lifts her Xiphos, its edge glinting in the dim light)* The Renaissance is nigh. Nothing will stop it. Not even you, Dew.

Dew: *(pleading, voice thick with emotion)* Emily, don't do this... this isn't what Hoplyn would have wanted...

Narrator: A final crackle erupts from the radio still in Myrrh's hand.

Thornton: *(calm yet commanding)* Enough... *It's been a pleasure hearing your voice again, Dew. Truly. And for that, I must thank you—you've delivered the final piece to set everything in motion. You were always dependable when it mattered most... (a slight pause, then colder) But your interference—along with that of your party—ends here. Emily, Crow Sisters, finish them. Then return to me with the vial at once... (then his tone deepens, almost reverent)* She commands it.

Narrator: Myrrh tilts her head slightly, as if savoring Thornton's words. Then, without hesitation, she presses the button on the handheld radio, silencing it. With slow, deliberate motion, she clips it back onto her belt, her masked face unreadable. Without a word, the Crow Sisters step forward, their movements unnervingly synchronized. Their sickle swords gleam in the dim light as they shift into position. Beside them, Emily assumes a fighting stance, her Xiphos poised and ready. Across from them, Dew and his party tense, weapons still drawn, their eyes locked onto their cultist foes. Then, just before the battle begins anew, the Crow Sisters chant one final verse.

Myrrh: *(whispery, rhythmic)* The dusk has sung its mournful cry...

Clove: The crows take flight, the lost must die... The Master's will, the shadow's plight...

Myrrh & Clove: Tonight, Dew and his allies die... beneath black wings, their fates shall lie...

CHAPTER 19 – A TAINTED CLOSURE

- Narrator: Then, the battle begins as the Crow Sisters and Emily charge at Dew and his party. Splitting off into pairs to confront their opponents individually, Cooper and Elvir move in perfect sync as they face off against Clove. Elvir's twin daggers flash low, slicing toward her legs, while Cooper swings his mop like a quarterstaff, keeping her on the defensive. Clove moves like a shadow, her sickle sword carving through the air with deadly precision. A brief pause—a moment of tension—an exchange of words.
- Clove: (*eyes narrowing behind the mask, locking onto Elvir's wounded arm*) Still sore, Hozho..? (*then her gaze shifts to Cooper*) Ah... You again, little mop wielder? Didn't learn your lesson the first time?
- Cooper: (*smirking, tightening his stance*) Oh, I learned plenty. And for the record, I don't just use a mop—I use a broom too.
- Clove: (*stares, then scoffs*) Mop or broom, it's all the same— Swing too slow, you'll lose the game. Step too close, you'll taste the steel. Once I strike, you won't heal.
- Elvir: (*rolling her eyes*) Yeah, yeah. Cute rhyme, birdie. Now shut your beak and let's do this. (*then faces Cooper*) You ready..?
- Narrator: Cooper nods. Clove's grin sharpens behind her mask—then she lunges. The battle erupts, fast and relentless. Cooper swings high, forcing Clove to duck as Elvir slashes at her exposed side. She barely deflects, twisting into a counterattack. Her sickle sword whips forward—Elvir rolls clear as Cooper intercepts with his mop. Sparks fly as wood clashes against steel. Meanwhile, Lorenzo and Vilmer battle Myrrh. Lorenzo's brass-knuckled fists land heavy blows, but Myrrh moves with ghost-like precision. Vilmer's grappling hook forces her into tight quarters, but she twists away, slashing at Lorenzo. He blocks the hit with gritted teeth, the clash of metal ringing through the underground command chamber.
- Myrrh: (*cold, with a slight edge of amusement*) Those fists of yours are like steel. All the more reason to lob them off...
- Lorenzo: Feeling the pressure, huh..? (*then gives a smirk*)

Narrator: Vilmer circles to the side, twirling his grappling hook with a low whistle, eyes tracking Myrrh's every move. Lorenzo and Myrrh's eyes lock for a brief beat—tension crackling—before the fight surges back into motion. Weapons and fists collide in the dim, confined space. Vilmer swings his hook low, trying to catch Myrrh's leg, forcing her to shift her stance as Lorenzo presses forward with another brutal strike, cutting off her escape. Across the battlefield, Dew stumbles as Emily trips him. Krista intercepts, clashing with Emily in a flurry of strikes—boomerang meeting Xiphos. Emily presses hard, but Krista deflects each blow. Just as Emily moves for a finishing strike, Dew regains his footing and charges in, his bo staff forcing Emily back, separating them from the battle. The fighting then closes in. The Crow Sisters, forced together, find themselves surrounded. Krista's boomerang keeps Clove on the defensive as Vilmer's chain snaps toward her wrist. She dodges—but Lorenzo is already there, his fist driving toward her ribs. Clove twists away, but Elvir's dagger grazes close. Myrrh steps in, slashing at Lorenzo, but Cooper intercepts with his mop before sweeping at her legs. Myrrh leaps, but Krista's second boomerang forces an awkward landing—an opening Elvir seizes. The Crow Sisters fight back in perfect sync, their weapons flashing. Clove spins low, her blade nearly slicing Vilmer's leg. He leaps back, but Lorenzo surges forward, fists flying. She dodges one strike but takes another to the shoulder. Myrrh counters, her blade carving toward Krista—only for Cooper to block with his mop as Vilmer's grappling hook snaps toward her. She deflects, but the party keeps closing in, pressing their advantage. The Crow Sisters stand firm, refusing to fall. Dew and Emily remain apart—locked in their own battle.

Emily: (*low, eyes burning*) You're holding back, Dew. Why?

Dew: (*steady*) Because I'm not trying to kill you. Emily... stop this.

Narrator: Emily's expression hardens. Then—she surges forward, merciless. Their weapons clash in a brutal flurry. Dew counters, striking her shoulder—she staggers but retaliates, faster, sharper, desperate. Then—a final clash. Locked blades. Strength against strength.

Dew: (*pressing back*) You don't have to do this... It's not too late.

Narrator: Without responding, she lunges—her Xiphos aimed at Dew’s heart. Time slows. Dew reacts, his bo staff swinging upward, deflecting her blade. The force wrenches Emily’s weapon upward, driving it into her own side, piercing clean through. A sharp gasp escapes her lips as she stumbles, her breath unsteady, fingers trembling around the hilt. Dew’s eyes widen in shock.

Dew: *(reaching out)* Emily!

Emily: *(weak laughter, pained whisper)* Hah... of course... It’ll be so... Hurgh!

Narrator: Her knees buckle, but before she can collapse, Dew catches her, cradling her in his arms. Blood seeps from the wound where the Xiphos remains embedded, staining both their clothes, pooling beneath them on the cold steel floor. For a brief moment, the battle stills. Across the room, Myrrh and Clove exchange a glance—wordless understanding passing between them. They know this fight is over. Without hesitation, Clove reaches into her cloak and hurls a handful of small smoke bombs to the floor. A thick, choking fog erupts, swallowing the room in darkness.

Lorenzo: *(cough)* Dammit—they’re trying to escape!

Krista: *(cough)* I can’t see— *(cough)* *(cough)* where’d they go?

Vilmer: *(gritted)* To the door—don’t let them... *(cough)* *(cough)* get away..!

Narrator: Through the blinding mist, the Crow Sisters retreat, slipping through the underground chamber’s heavy steel door as it splits at the center and slides open.

Lorenzo: *(frustrated)* Shit. *(cough)*

Elvir: We need... *(cough)* to chase them!

Cooper: *(turning to Dew)* Dew! *(cough)* Come on, we have to—

Narrator: But Dew doesn’t move. He kneels on the floor, holding Emily close. Cooper looks to Lorenzo, unsure. Lorenzo exhales, conflicted, then gives a small nod. He knows Dew needs this moment—but they have to go. With a simple gesture, he signals the others forward. They hesitate, but then turn and chase after the Crow Sisters, disappearing through the doorway. As the smoke clears, Dew remains, kneeling on the cold chamber floor, cradling Emily in his arms. Her breathing is shallow, each breath weaker than the last.

Dew: *(soft, desperate)* Just hold on, Emily... I'll have to take the sword out... I'll heal you...

Emily: Ha-ha... *(shaking her head)* No... we both know it's too late for that. Let's just... accept it...

Narrator: Dew swallows hard, his grip tightening as her trembling fingers clutch his sleeve. His breath catches—his hands hover over the wound, wanting to act, but knowing he can't.

Dew: *(shaking his head, voice thick)* What?! No... I can't just—

Emily: *(soft, tired smile)* Dew... please.

Narrator: His chest tightens. Every instinct screams at him to fight, to fix this. His muscles tense, breath ragged, but then he sees her eyes—soft, steady, accepting. No fear. No regret. His resolve crumbles. His grip loosens, fingers curling into fists against his leg.

Dew: *(pained)* ...Damn it. *(then, his voice thick with emotion, his hand gently cradling hers)* Emily... I'm here for you. You won't be alone.

Emily: *(soft chuckle, followed by a cough)* Is that... so? Good. *(then exhales shakily, her voice quieter now, as if speaking more to herself than to him)* Hoplyn... she promised she'd come back... but she never did. *(then swallows, her throat tightening)* And that was... my fault.

Dew: *(gently)* How?

Emily: *(strained, her eyes distant)* She was so stubborn—so determined to make our family proud. And I... I encouraged her to join the SWAT TROOPER ELITE. I sent her out there... to die. *(then takes a slow, ragged breath)* Hoplyn's death broke my family... broke me. *(then closes her eyes briefly, as if reliving the moment)* I tried to stay strong, but I still felt empty for so long... Even Aspen couldn't fill that void... *(then forces a weak, trembling breath)* Then one day, he appeared... Thornton—and the *Bush of Life*. *(then her voice wavers)* What he offered... what he promised... for the first time, I had hope again... *(then another weak cough, her voice barely above a whisper)* He swore I would be reunited with Hoplyn once the world was made anew... and I truly believed... I was doing the right thing...

Dew: *(quietly, heavy-hearted)* Emily...

Emily: *(then her breath hitching, voice fading)* But look where... that got me. *(then she blinks slowly, her fingers twitching against Dew's arm, the last remnants of strength leaving her)* Hoplyn... I let you down... I'm... so sorry...

Dew: *(voice breaking, holding her closer)* Your sister knew the risks. We all did. *(then hesitates, swallowing against the lump in his throat)* But before she died... she asked me to tell you she loved you. *(softer now, almost reverent)* She was proud of you, Emily. You didn't fail her. *(then swallows hard, his grip tightening slightly)* If anyone did... it was me. She wanted me to come back and take care of you... and I'm sorry I didn't.

Emily: *(exhaling shakily, a faint smile on her lips)* Hoplyn said... that?

Dew: *(softly)* Yeah.

Emily: Hearing that... it means everything... *(then meets his gaze, her eyes softening, a flicker of peace washing over her)* ...Thank you, Dew.

Dew: *(swallowing hard)* I wish I had told you sooner... maybe all of this could've been avoided.

Emily: Ha-ha... *(breath catching)* Maybe... but... better late... than never, huh..? *(then her gaze shifts, sudden and urgent)* ...Dew, you need to know this... Thornton—he has the war-heads. *Effluvium* and *Fetor*.

Dew: *(tensing, focused)* What? The *Oddments*..?

Emily: *(then her voice weakening)* Yes... When you and your friends fought Thornton at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy... the *Bush of Life* took them. *(then takes a pained breath)* He plans to detonate them... in the upper atmosphere.

Narrator: Dew's pulse pounds in his ears.

Dew: *(low, serious)* Damn it. *(then, whispering to himself)* So that's what they were after... *(then, turning back to her)* Emily... why the SKT virus vials? Why were they so important to you all?

Emily: *(gazing through him, distant)* To rebuild... when the world is made anew... life will begin again. That's... what I was told...

Dew: *(narrowing his eyes)* That's what you were told..?

Emily: *(softly)* Dew... That's not all.

Dew: *(leaning in, tense)* What else?

Emily: *(a faint, knowing smile)* ...You always had a thing for that woman.

Dew: *(blinking, caught off guard)* Woman..?

Emily: *(a whisper, teasing even as her strength fades)* ...Your Sifu.

Dew: *(stiffens, looking away)* Rena?

Emily: *(soft laugh, barely a breath)* Ever since we were teens... you adored her. Spent way too much time with that lady...

Dew: *(uneasy)* Emily, this isn't—

Emily: *(smirking weakly, eyes dimming)* No point denying it... *(then exhales softly, gathering the last of her strength)* But listen—she's been taken... *(then a slight shudder runs through her body)* They're holding her... at... Sacred Haven... underground... missile silo complex... Pomodoro... Cay.

Narrator: Dew's breath catches in his throat.

Dew: *(low, resolute)* ...Rena's there?

Emily: *(nodding weakly)* Go... save your special lady. Stop Thornton and the Söl Congruum... my little stud.

Narrator: Dew tightens his grip on her hand, his chest aching with helplessness.

Emily: *(faint, breath fading)* Dew... take care of Aspen... my beautiful cum pet... he deserves better than this... *(then squeezes his hand weakly)* I know he'll be in good hands...

Dew: *(shaking his head, voice breaking)* Emily, stop... don't do this.

Emily: *(a gentle, tired smile, eyes fluttering closed)* ...It's okay. *(then a slow, trembling breath)* I get to see Hoplyn now... the right way... *(then her breath shudders, grip loosens)* ...You never really lose someone... if they live in your heart... Uggghhh... *(then dies)*

Narrator: Emily's body goes limp in Dew's arms, her hand falling lifelessly to the floor. A hollow silence fills the chamber as he cradles her head against him, staring down at her bloodied face. His jaw clenches as grief overwhelms him, tears streaming down his face.

Dew: *(broken, whispering)* Emily...



Narrator: The silence in the chamber is suffocating. The echoes of battle have faded, swallowed by the weight of Emily's absence. Dew remains on the cold floor, tears still streaming, his arms still wrapped around her now-lifeless body. His chest rises and falls in shallow breaths; his gaze locked onto her face. The blood on his hands is warm, yet she is growing cold. His grip tightens. And then—a memory resurfaces. The scene cuts—eight years ago, back on a beach in Twin Pines. Inside the lifeguard tower, the night air drifts through the open windows, carrying the scent of salt and the distant murmur of waves. The space is small—worn wooden planks beneath their feet, an old rescue float tucked in the corner, and a single bench along the back wall. It's familiar, safe, theirs. Dew leans against the railing, his back to the door, watching the moonlit ocean beyond. The space is quiet, but not empty. The air is thick with something neither of them has dared to put into words—not until tonight. Footsteps creak against the wooden floor. Emily steps inside, pausing just past the entrance. The light from the window catches the strands of

her loose hair as the wind gently tugs at them. Her posture is careful—perhaps unconsciously protective.

Dew: *(smirking slightly, without turning around)* ...You always knew where to find me.

Narrator: Emily lets out a small, breathy laugh—a sound that’s almost nostalgic, almost sad.

Emily: *(softly, teasing)* Maybe you’re just easy to track down.

Narrator: Dew finally turns, leaning one elbow against the railing. The smirk fades when he sees her expression. There’s something heavier in her eyes tonight—something he knows they can’t ignore.

Emily: *(quietly)* Hm. You and Hoplyn are leaving soon...

Dew: *(nods, exhaling as he watches the waves)* Yeah. A few more days.

Narrator: Emily shifts her weight, arms crossed lightly over herself—not defensive, just needing something to hold on to. She exhales slowly, glancing toward the open window, as if searching for the right words.

Emily: Dew.

Dew: Yeah..?

Emily: Do you ever think about what life would’ve been like... if things were different?

Dew: *(glances at her, curious but cautious)* What do you mean?

Emily: *(softly, fiddling with the hem of her dress)* If you weren’t leaving. If... if I wasn’t— *(then she hesitates, her hand drifting instinctively to rest against her midsection before she pulls it away)*

Narrator: Dew doesn’t look at her stomach, but he notices the way her hand lingers there for a brief second—subtle, instinctive. They both do. A silence settles between them, heavy with things left unspoken.

Emily: *(then inhales deeply, as if steadying herself)* I... love you, Dew.

Narrator: The words settle between them, fragile and irreversible. The confined space of the tower suddenly feels smaller, like the walls are pressing in around them. Dew tenses, his fingers gripping the railing behind him. He exhales sharply, dropping his gaze for just a second—long enough to gather his

thoughts, but not long enough to escape the weight of her words.

Dew: (*softly, but steady*) Emily... what about him?

Narrator: Emily's breath catches. She knew this was coming, but hearing it aloud still stings.

Emily: (*softly, looking down*) ...I love him too.

Narrator: Dew nods once—not in judgment, just in understanding. It's the answer he expected, even if it doesn't make this any easier.

Dew: (*gentle, but firm*) Then why are we here, Emily?

Narrator: Emily hesitates, gripping the railing tighter. When she speaks, her voice trembles—not with uncertainty, but with emotion.

Emily: Because what I feel for you... it never went away. And knowing you're leaving... knowing this is the last time we'll be together like this—I don't want to pretend it doesn't exist. Not tonight.

Narrator: Dew exhales slowly, rubbing a hand across his face. It's not frustration—it's restraint. He turns, resting his back against the railing, staring at the ceiling for a moment before finally looking at her.

Dew: (*softer, shaking his head slightly*) Emily... you have a future. A family. Someone who's waiting for you.

Emily: (*low, almost pleading*) But he'll never be you.

Narrator: The words hit harder than they should. Dew closes his eyes briefly, swallowing down the ache building in his chest. This isn't fair—to her, to him, to the man she's going back to. And yet, he can't bring himself to dismiss it. Not when he knows she's telling the truth.

Dew: (*quiet, steadying himself*) I won't be the reason you walk away from that.

Narrator: Emily closes her eyes, pressing her lips together. Not to hold back tears—just to hold herself together.

Emily: (*softly, after a long silence*) I'm not walking away from anything. I just... I needed to have this moment. With you.

Narrator: Dew looks at her, really looks at her. Then he nods. A quiet understanding passes between them—no promises, no regrets. Just this. The air between them is charged, not with expectation, but with finality. Emily takes a small step forward, closing the last bit of space between them.

Emily: *(low, knowing this is the last time they'll ever be this close)*
Please... just this once.

Narrator: Dew hesitates. He shouldn't. He knows he shouldn't. But then—he does. Their lips meet in a kiss that is slow, tender, but heavy with everything unsaid. Years of longing, of what-ifs and almosts, of words neither of them dared to speak. For a few fleeting seconds, nothing else exists. Then—as quickly as it began, Dew pulls away. His forehead rests against hers, breathing heavy, eyes closed. His hands still cradle her face, as if memorizing every detail before he has to let go. For a moment, neither of them speaks. The lifeguard tower is silent except for the sound of the waves below. Then—Emily moves first. Slowly, she sits down on the bench along the back wall, leaning against it, staring at the night sky through the open window. Dew watches her for a moment before exhaling softly. Then, he sits beside her. Not too close, but not far either. Close enough for their shoulders to almost brush. A quiet wind drifts through the open window, stirring the strands of her hair. Emily shifts slightly, drawing her knees up and resting an arm over them. Her fingers brush against her midsection again—an unconscious gesture, neither deliberate nor concealed, just a quiet acknowledgment of what is.

Emily: *(softly, as if speaking more to herself than to him)* This moment... I'll carry it with me... forever... in my heart.

Narrator: Dew glances at her, then back at the stars. He doesn't respond. He simply sits beside her, breathing in the night, knowing that tomorrow will come and change everything. But for now, this moment is theirs. Then, the memory fades, dissolving into the cold reality of the present. Dew continues cradling Emily's lifeless body in his arms, his gaze fixed on her. His tears have dried, leaving his expression hollow and unreadable. After a long moment, he then gently lowers her body to the floor. Silence stretches around him—heavy, unbreakable—until his gaze shifts to something beside her. A device of some kind. He hesitates for a moment before picking it up and rising to his feet. His fingers trace its damaged surface, turning it over in his hands with cautious curiosity. Then—a low hum vibrates through the air. Before he can react, space folds around him, and in an instant, he is gone—

teleported a few feet away from where he stood over Emily's corpse. A flicker of intrigue crosses his face. Quickly, he deactivates the short-range teleportation device, his grip tightening around it. His mind races.

Dew: *(thinking to himself)* A teleportation device..? How did the Bush of Life cultists get their hands on something like this..?

Narrator: Suddenly—and to his surprise—the short-range teleportation device sparks and shorts out, becoming inoperable. Still holding it, he lets out a low, displeased grunt before slipping it into his pocket. His thoughts linger, but the weight in his chest pulls him back. His gaze returns to Emily. For a moment, he just stands there, unmoving. Then, with a slow breath, he steps forward and crouches down beside her once more.

A hand hovers over hers—hesitant—before he finally clasps it, just for a moment. His fingers tighten, then release.

Dew: *(softly)* You'll always be with me... in memory, in heart. Forever... Goodbye, Emily...

Narrator: He rises, his gaze heavy with grief, and turns toward the exit. An hour later, the scene cuts to the library within Aether Keep's main compound. The soft hum of fluorescent lights casts a sterile glow over the room. Rows of shelves line the walls, filled with books, tactical manuals, and aged records. It is the same library the party had fought their way through earlier, though now the violence has given way to an uneasy calm. The central table is cluttered with several closed books—some stacked atop one another—two open volumes, a newspaper, a candy bar wrapper, and a few empty water bottles. Among the books are a science fiction pulp magazine, *Incredible Tales* by Benny Russell; a murder mystery novel, *Mrs. Melville* by Ken Franklin and James Ferris; a fictional war novel, *In the Darkness of Shadow Moses* by Nastasha Romanenko; a dramatic literary work, *The House on Prospect* by L. Williams; and a classic science fiction novel, *A Match Made in Space* by George McFly. Faint murmurs of Aether Keep's security personnel at work drift through the air as the tension slowly eases. Dew stands by a window, gazing out over the keep. Below, security personnel round up the

last of the restrained *Bush of Life* cultists. Krista leans against the table, stretching her arms.

Krista: (*relaxed but weary*) Well... we made it. The keep is secure, the cultists are in cuffs, and the interim premier is breathing. Could've been worse.

Lorenzo: (*grinning lightly, slumping into a chair*) ...Could've been better. Those bird broads still got away with the vial.

Cooper: Yeah, but we know where they're headed now. I'll call that a win.

Elvir: (*sitting cross-legged on the floor, twirling one dagger, the other already sheathed at her side*) Pomodoro Cay...

Vilmer: (*nodding, resting against a pillar*) It's not over. But at least we know where the end is.

Narrator: Dew glances out the window again. Below, Aether Keep security personnel tighten their perimeter—but there's something more. A subtle shift. Tension hangs in the air. Urgency. Word has spread. Retaliation is inevitable. Killbin won't let this stand. Not after what happened.

Dew: Killbin won't waste time. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE will definitely hit Pomodoro Cay soon. Quiet. Off the books. (*then pauses, gaze sharpening*) But this isn't their fight to finish. Thornton and the *Bush of Life*... they're not just terrorists. (*then his voice lowers*) We need to be ready to move when they do.

Cooper: (*nodding*) I checked in—spoke with that Executive Aide we ran into earlier. Killbin's planning the strike within the next twelve, maybe sixteen hours.

Lorenzo: (*leaning back slightly, arms crossed*) And he's still giving us our own lane. (*then faintly grins*) Knows we'll get it done.

Cooper: Let them crack the gates. We'll finish what matters.

Narrator: A beat of silence. They all understand what lies ahead. But for this brief moment, there is relief—a pause before the final push. Dew turns back to them, stepping toward the table, his voice low but steady.

Dew: ...We've come a long way. We all know what's at stake. But before we move forward, I need to hear it from each of you. (*then pauses*) I know what we've lost. I know what this could cost us. (*then his gaze sharpens*) I need to know you're with me. Not out of obligation—but because you choose this.

- Narrator: Dew meets each of their eyes. Lorenzo leans forward slightly in his chair, brass knuckles resting beside him, and speaks up first.
- Lorenzo: I thought taking down Zircon would be the end of my fight. Avenging Estiven should've been enough... but it wasn't. *(then pauses, voice steadier)* Because this was never just about him. Not anymore... *(glances at Dew, and then the others)* It's about making sure no one else loses what I lost. It's about stopping anyone from tearing this world apart—like Zircon did... like Thornton will. *(then his gaze softens)* And you all—you gave me a reason to fight for something more than revenge. So yeah... I'm with you. To the end.
- Krista: *(still leaning against the table, fingers brushing her boomerang)* I thought loyalty to my brother was all I had. Even after I walked away from that life... from him... part of me wondered if I was wrong. *(then pauses, eyes softening)* But this journey proved something to me. Family isn't just blood—it's the people who stand beside you, who fight for you... who give you hope. *(then her eyes brighten slightly)* That's what you all are. I'm not looking back anymore. I won't let Thornton take this future away from us.
- Vilmer: *(standing near a pillar, his grappling hook resting against the wall)* I thought my world ended on that mountain when Aldous fell. I reached the summit alone, and it was the coldest place I've ever been. *(then breathes deeply, eyes steady)* But after years of self-exile... then meeting you all... you became my rope line. You pulled me back. You reminded me that life doesn't end with loss—it rebuilds. *(then his hand brushes the grappling hook)* Thornton and the *Bush of Life* want to cut that line—for everyone. I won't let them.
- Cooper: *(standing near the table, arms folded, then loosening slightly)* I spent my life trying to outshine a ghost—my Pa. I thought being a soldier would fix what was broken. But it was never about him. *(then he looks around at the group, his burden visibly lighter)* It's about doing the right thing. For our families... for those we lost... and for those still here. *(locks eyes with Elvir briefly, then Dew)* We're not just surviving anymore—we're taking our future back. Together.

Elvir: *(sitting cross-legged, the unsheathed dagger now at her side, voice calm but resolute)* I lost myself when I joined the *Man-tid Oscuro Sociedad*. I thought drowning in power and wealth would fill the void—after my mum’s death... and my father’s neglect. But all it did was make me forget who I was. *(then she looks at Dew and the others, her voice steady and proud)* Then I met you all. And I remembered what it meant to belong... to protect. *(then she straightens, tone fierce, honoring her lineage)* When I returned to Anahit, faced my father, and saved the orphanage, I became THE *Hozho*. It’s who I am... *(then her grip tightens on her unsheathed dagger)* This is my holy duty—my choice to accept it. To finish what my ancestors began. To prevent the Renaissance and banish the Sōl Congruum—once again. *(then her gaze sweeps over all of them)* And I’ll see it through—with you.

Narrator: A brief silence follows. Each face carries the weight of their past, but the bond between them is stronger than ever.

Dew: *(voice firm, eyes resolute)* I started this journey to stop Thornton from getting his hands on the SKT virus vials. I saw what those mutations did—the destruction, the conspiracies, the greed behind it all. I couldn’t let that happen again. Not after New Havenport... *(then pauses, his hand brushing the talisman beneath his shirt)* But it became more than that. It became about protecting the people who stood beside me—the ones who gave me a reason to keep moving forward. The ones who showed me there’s a future worth fighting for—a future we all deserve. *(then he looks at each of them, his gaze lingering on Rena’s absence)* Rena... and all of you—you’re my “shining lighthouses.” This isn’t just about duty anymore. It’s about hope—our hope. Whatever happens next, we face it together. *(then a breath—quieter, but steady)* But before that... There’s a kid I need to see—back in Twin Pines. For Emily. And then—we go to Demmin. We need answers from Dr. Sloane.

Narrator: A brief silence follows. No questions asked. The party understands.

Dew: *(then, his voice sharpening with command)* We go to Pomodoro Cay. We save Rena. We stop Thornton and the Sōl Congruum. And we end this—once and for all.

Lorenzo: (*grinning, tightening his fists*) Damn right we do.

Krista: (*twirling her boomerang once, catching it confidently*) Let's finish this.

Cooper: (*gripping his mop tightly*) For everything we've fought for.

Elvir: (*then eyes fierce, voice calm*) Together... as a squad. (*then gives a smirk*)

Vilmer: (*nodding, gaze steady*) Let's climb.

Narrator: Dew steps back from the table, his gaze sweeping over his comrades. Then, with quiet resolve, he steps forward and extends his hand over the table, palm down. The room holds its breath. Without a word, Lorenzo leans in first, rising slightly from his chair. His hand—thick with calluses, scarred from battles past—rests atop Dew's. Krista follows, her fingers brushing her boomerang before placing her hand—steady, determined. Cooper steps closer, his grip firm—his hands rough from labor and struggle, shaped by the journey that made him. Elvir stands from the floor, sheathing her dagger alongside its twin before stepping forward. She smirks faintly, laying her hand over the others—light, but sure. Vilmer pushes off from the pillar, crossing the room with quiet purpose. His palm, weathered and strong, rests atop theirs—grounding them like stone against the wind. Their hands press together—fingers tightening, knuckles white—gripping not just each other, but the weight of all they carry. A bond forged. A promise sworn. No turning back. Nothing left to say. Together, they raise their hands—high, united—then, slowly, let go. The scene fades to black.

CHAPTER 20 – ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS – CORRUGATED PIPE!

- Narrator: Several hours after departing Aether's Keep, Dew and the party are aboard a rumbling military helicopter slicing across the evening Mesovilla skyline. The interior is utilitarian— bucket seats, safety netting, hanging gear. The atmosphere hums with engine noise and the occasional banter. The drone of the rotor blades fills the cabin like a steady heartbeat. The wind outside howls faintly against the hull. Inside, the party finds small ways to pass the time. Lorenzo, Krista, and Elvir are knee-deep in a fiercely competitive game of rock-paper-scissors. Their rule? Winner stays in, losers sit out—and that means humiliation, heckling, and bragging rights galore. Vilmer sits slumped with arms crossed, eyes closed—but his breathing suggests he's only half-asleep.
- Elvir: (*grinning*) That's eleven wins for me. Admit it—I'm renting space in both your heads.
- Lorenzo: (*throwing again*) You're renting a tent. I'm about to evict you with pure muscle memory.
- Krista: ...Muscle memory doesn't work when you only throw paper.
- Narrator: They shoot their hands out—
- Krista = Scissors
 - Elvir = Scissors
 - Lorenzo = Paper
- Elvir: (*smug*) Snip snip.
- Krista: (*smirking*) Double scissors, baby. That paper's shredded.
- Lorenzo: Ugh. Again?! What are the odds?
- Krista: Better than your win record. You're sitting this one out, Paperboy.
- Narrator: Lorenzo flops back with exaggerated despair while Krista and Elvir reset for the next round.
- Lorenzo: (*grumbling*) Bullshit..! This game's rigged.
- Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk... (*then to Krista*) Ready to go..?
- Krista: Let's go, Queen of Hand Games. See if you can beat me in a scissors duel...

Narrator: As their game of rock-paper-scissors continues, nearby—toward the front end of the passenger bay—Dew sits beside Cooper. The steady drone of the engine dulls most of the cabin noise... but not completely. Cooper leans in, his expression serious, and speaks just loud enough for Dew to hear.

Cooper: ...Right before we took off, I had a quick chat with one of the Aether's Keep security personnel. Nothing formal—just off the cuff. But he mentioned a few of the captured *Bush of Life* cultists gave up some interesting stuff during interrogation.

Dew: (*turning slightly*) Yeah..?

Cooper: They're not just from Mesovilla. Some came from as far as Nordavia, Oriluz, Imvusha, Tianheiwajyoti... even Voroh.

Dew: Really? Hmph... That's one hell of a recruitment range.

Cooper: Also... a few survivors of the New Havenport nuking.

Dew: (*surprised*) New Havenport?!

Cooper: Yeah. Turns out those Crow Sisters we fought? They're from there too.

Dew: (*disbelief*) How the hell could anyone have survived that..?

Cooper: I know. Unreal, right..? But... most of the foreign ones passed through Llivisaca first.

Narrator: Slightly overhearing this, Krista perks up mid-round during her game with Lorenzo and Elvir. The three pause as she interjects into Dew and Cooper's conversation.

Krista: Well, that tracks. Tourists flood the place this time of year—big crowds, easy to blend in... even if you're rocking cloaks in hundred-degree heat.

Elvir: I bet they smell like feet and wet arse struttin' around like that.

Lorenzo: Makes me feel hot and sticky just thinkin' about it... (*then grins*) Speaking of heat—I've caught twenty-two straight Ls. That math ain't mathin'.

Krista: We've played fifty rounds already. You've lost twenty-two. That's almost half the time. I think that qualifies as a trend.

Elvir: (*then cracks a smile*) Maybe you're just bad at this, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo: What'd you say? Nah—run that back. It ain't over yet.

Elvir: (*tilting her head*) Oh? Still throwing paper like it's gospel?

Lorenzo: Tch. Consistency, baby. (*then mutters*) I was hot for, like, a moment there at the start. Then the universe turned on me.

Elvir: (*grinning*) Excuses, excuses. You've only played twenty-eight rounds. I think Krista's lapped you in wins.

Krista: Thirteen wins for me, to be exact.

Lorenzo: (*snapping upright*) Well, I ain't getting cooked and sidelined no more. Nah. We're running it back. Let's go.

Elvir: (*mocking*) Look at him. Man loses twenty-two times and still signs up for pain. You're a glutton, Lorenzo. A sweaty, stubborn glutton.

Narrator: The trio dives back into their game, hands snapping through rapid rounds as laughter ramps up again. Nearby, Dew sits quietly, his brow furrowed—still processing everything Cooper just told him. Cooper continues speaking.

Cooper: I can confirm Emily wasn't lying. There's definitely a missile silo buried under Pomodoro Cay. The cult calls it the Renaissance Lance. It's real—unmanned, armed with both *Oddment* warheads, and launch-ready. If Thornton pulls this off... and it detonates in the upper atmosphere...

Narrator: For a brief moment, a flicker crosses Dew's face. Behind his eyes, a vision—half memory, half omen—surfaces: the world consumed by flame. Oceans boiling. Skies burning. He then blinks it away.

Dew: (*quietly*) ...A global firestorm. Hm.

Cooper: Exactly. Atmospheric ignition. Chain reaction. End-of-the-world kind of stuff...

Dew: Hmm...

Cooper: What's on your mind..?

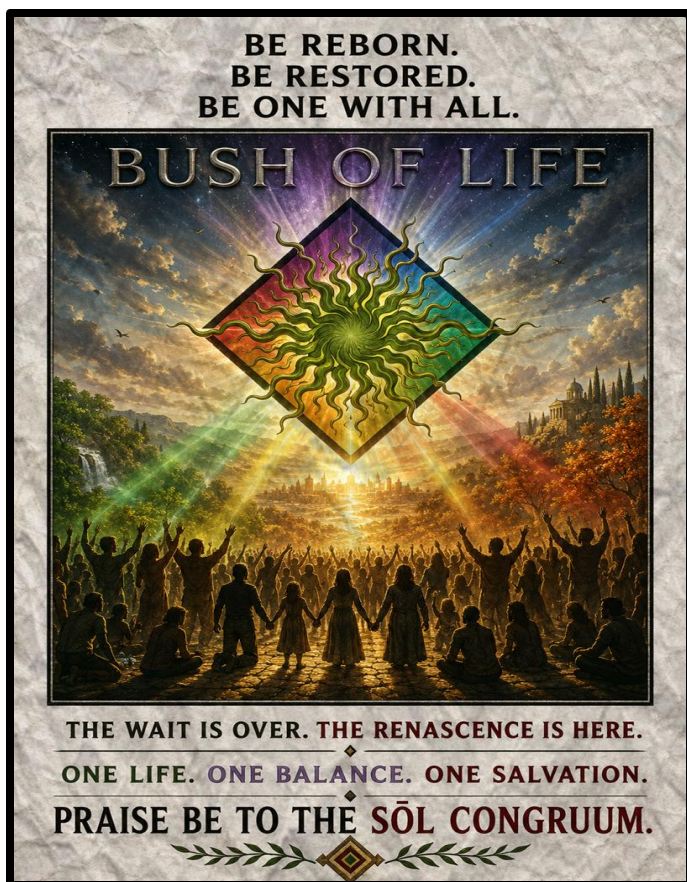
Dew: You know, I just realized... something still doesn't add up.

Cooper: What's that?

Dew: Thornton said the four SKT viruses were the keys to bringing back the Sōl Congruum. But if those *Oddments* are enough to destroy the world... what exactly are the viruses for, and how are they supposed to bring back the Sōl Congruum?

Cooper: Hey. You're right... Maybe they're part of the payload somehow. A biological component?

Dew: Maybe. Hmm... Well, whatever Thornton needs them for, Emily died making sure he got the last one. So, they have to be important...



- Cooper: Yeah... Oh—and another thing. One of the cultists said they've been holding a scientist hostage for over three months. Wouldn't say who or why.
- Narrator: Dew then instinctively checks his vest pocket. His fingers find the damaged teleportation device that once belonged to Emily, and he pulls it out.
- Dew: Was there any mention about this..? (*then presents the teleportation device in his palm*) I found this right next to Emily, just after she died. It definitely belonged to her.
- Narrator: Cooper's eyes narrow as he glances at the teleportation device in Dew's palm.
- Cooper: What's that..?
- Dew: It's a teleportation device.
- Cooper: A teleportation device..?

Narrator: As the word “teleportation” is mentioned, Krista briefly glances over. Her brow arches—curious—but she says nothing. Lorenzo and Elvir are too caught up in their match to notice. With a small shake of her head, Krista turns back to the next round, sliding easily back into the rhythm of their game. Meanwhile, Vilmer remains slumped upright, still asleep.

Dew: Yeah. Short-range, too. I accidentally activated it—and ended up a few feet from Emily’s body.

Cooper: Short-range? What the heck... They’ve got tech like that too?

Dew: Looks like it. It’s probably how the Crow Sisters slipped away so fast after the fight. They must’ve had one of these on them too.

Cooper: Seeing how we’ve encountered multiple *Bush of Life* cultists before—and none of them were pulling disappearing acts—I can only assume they’ve got a limited supply of those devices...

Dew: Hmm... Cooper, you think that scientist they’re holding captive might have something to do with it?

Cooper: Could be... (*then shakes his head*) But nothing about this came up in the intel I got.

Dew: I see... Interesting. I didn’t bring it up before because I figured I’d wait until we were back in Demmin to talk to Dr. Sloane directly. I had some suspicion she might be involved somehow... but hearing about that kidnapped scientist gives me a bit of relief. Still... it only makes this whole thing even more intriguing.

Cooper: Yeah. It does.

Narrator: Dew studies the device for a moment longer, then tucks it away. A breath hangs between them.

Cooper: Oh—and before I forget, I can confirm that a squadron of SWAT TROOPER ELITE were dispatched to quarantine the Glamorville Video store in northern Demmin.

Dew: (*nods, with mild relief*) Good to hear they’ll be securing it. Definitely didn’t want to risk any potential hazards slipping out of there. Anything else..?

Cooper: Yeah... The Aether’s Keep security personnel also mentioned that, once the SWAT TROOPER ELITE reaches the cay, they’ve

been ordered to track down and apprehend a potential person of interest connected to all this.

Dew: *(slightly puzzled)* Person of interest?

Cooper: That's all he called 'em. I asked who it was, but he wouldn't say. Said that information was being kept under wraps.

Dew: Hm... I see.

Cooper: Well... that's all I got, Dew.

Dew: Okay. Thanks for the update, buddy. Looks like we've got more to untangle than we thought...

Narrator: The drone of the helicopter persists—low and constant—as the conversation between Dew and Cooper tapers off, the weight of their exchange settling like dust in the corners of the cabin. Dew leans back, eyes flicking up to the ceiling, momentarily lost in the mechanical hum. Still seated beside him, Cooper shifts slightly—watching. Then, with a quiet breath and a far-off look, he speaks again.

Cooper: *(softly)* Back when we were serving in SWAT TROOPER ELITE during the war... before you and I ended up in the same unit... I couldn't tell you how many times I was moved around. New units, new locations, new messes to clean up. It was a part of the job, sure—but it always felt like we were just cards getting shuffled in someone else's game.

Dew: Knowing what we know now, how true that is... Yeah. One outpost to the next—mud, urban centers, jungles, then back again. Half the time, I couldn't even tell you where I was either... just marching orders, reroutes, and that same bitter coffee at every stop.

Cooper: Ha... Dew...

Dew: Yeah, Cooper..?

Cooper: You ever think about the ones who didn't make it? From those early rotations?

Dew: Them... and all the others. Sometimes. Some faces never really leave you. Even if you can't remember their names... you remember how they died. Even after finding out the war was built on a lie...

Cooper: Yeah...

Dew: ...What about you?

Cooper: I do too... Hmm. You know... Out of all those reassignments, all the bad pulls... I've gotta admit—ending up in your unit? Felt like dumb luck... or maybe Chosha tossing me a bone. I still think about it sometimes—how close I came to being just another casualty on the battlefield. *(softer)* Or... If I hadn't been injured during that black op... who knows where I'd be now?

Dew: Well... we know where it brought you. New Havenport changed everything—for all of us. And now... here we are.

Narrator: Their words settle like coals—quiet, smoldering, but still warm. Then, from the back of the cabin, Lorenzo lets out a triumphant cry that snaps Dew and Cooper's attention toward him.

Lorenzo: HA! That's nine in a row! The paper reign is over, baby! Elvir, hand me the crown!

Krista: Ha-ha...Well, look at that—Lorenzo finally got his groove back. Fun game, guys.

Elvir: *(grinning)* Bloody hell. Fluke win streak. I demand a rematch.

Lorenzo: Rematch? You've already won most of the rounds, "Chosha's chosen". Nope! Ha-hah! That's enough for me. I'm retiring while the getting's good.

Narrator: Lorenzo turns toward Dew and Cooper, ready to jump into their conversation. Behind him, Elvir sulks playfully in her seat, while Krista shifts her gaze to the window, watching the night sky slip past. Vilmer remains upright and fast asleep.

Lorenzo: So... what were you two talking about?

Dew: Just reminiscing.

Cooper: Hmm. Now that I think about it... you two never really went into the details of how you met.

Lorenzo: Oh. Yeah. I guess with everything that's happened since liberating Helix Capital, we never did get around to that, huh? ...Might as well tell you the story now.

Cooper: Sure.

Krista: *(turns from the window, dryly)* Story time, is it?

Elvir: *(sits up, mock suspenseful)* Ohhh, this better be juicy. Go on then, let's have it.

Lorenzo: All right. It was a little over five years ago. Helix Southern Zone. Nighttime. Me, Paca, and Lynch had just pulled off a heist—hit a delivery truck loaded with protein bars and

frozen pot pies bound for one of those overpriced chain grocers... *(then catches Elvir raising an eyebrow and Krista frowning her brow)* Yeah, I know—I mentioned them briefly while Dew was out. But in case it didn't stick: Paca, she was our tactician—sharp, fearless, always two steps ahead. Brilliant mind. Lynch... he was our wheelman. Quiet. Helped with tech when needed. Reliable—until he wasn't. Something dark started creeping in... then that happened... *(then leans back, voice heavier)* Ah... Doesn't matter now. We weren't just a crew. We were a family... until we weren't.

Narrator: Cooper exhales softly through his nose, avoiding Lorenzo's gaze. Dew glances down briefly, then taps his thumb twice against the side of his *Elementome* bracelet as both men quietly reflect on the fallen *Aurora Blade* members. Elvir then smirks, breaking the silence.

Elvir: ...The legendary *Aurora Blade* gang—liberators of microwave dinners? Sounds like quite the steal. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Lorenzo: Chicken and mushroom. Totally worth it. The folks we passed that haul to? Made their week. Anyway... the SWAT TROOPERS were on our tails. We ended up boxed in like rats in an alley—rifles aimed, nowhere to run. Things weren't looking good. The three of us were ready to throw hands. Then boom—outta nowhere, this guy *(gestures at Dew)* drops in, takes out two SWAT TROOPERS with a single swing. One second we're about to get lit up—next thing I know, some wild dude with a shower rod comes flying in like the ghost of bath time vengeance. Then things escalated fast—we handled our business and took out the rest together.

Dew: Did we ever... But Lorenzo—there's one thing you said wrong.

Lorenzo: Huh..? What's that, Dew?

Dew: It's not a shower rod. It never was.

Lorenzo: Ha-ha-ha... Come on, man, we all know what that thing is. Nothing to be ashamed of—it got the job done then, and it still does.

Dew: No. It's a corrugated pipe. *(glares slightly)* I pulled it out of a dumpster before I ever ran into you all.

Cooper: A dumpster pipe?!

Narrator: Everyone then stares at Dew—Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Elvir—frozen in stunned disbelief. A half-asleep Vilmer jolts slightly at the mention.

Krista: Wait... seriously?

Elvir: Oi. You've been beating down enemies with a trash pipe this whole time? That's somehow less insulting than if it really was a shower rod. Now I don't feel as bad— Back when we were enemies and clashed twice, no wonder it hurt like hell when you clocked me with that thing.

Dew: You're welcome..? Yep. Nothing special about it, really. Somehow... everyone I meet thinks it's a damn shower rod. And that's the legacy I've been stuck with. Well—now we can finally put that running gag to rest.

Vilmer: (*grumbling in half-sleep*) ...Still looks like a shower rod... Zzz... still better than that silly... mop and broom... Cooper carries... Zzz...

Narrator: Cooper turns toward the half-asleep Vilmer, jaw slightly dropped in offense. Lorenzo can't hold back his laugh.

Lorenzo: Ha-ha-ha... (*then turns to Dew*) Man, all these years and I had no idea. Well, hell—maybe that's what makes you so dangerous. Improvised justice. (*then turns to the rest of the party*) So, where was I..? Oh yeah—after the fight, Dew was being all mysterious, talking like his name didn't matter. I remember thinking, "Who the hell is this guy?" He saved our hides, then acted like he was about to vanish into the night like some lone vigilante.

Dew: Heh. I almost did... That is, until you tackled me before that downed SWAT TROOPER could get a shot off. Truth is... I might not be here if you hadn't done that.

Krista: So, you both saved each other that night.

Dew: Yeah. ...I felt like I owed him after that. That's why I stuck around. But over time... it stopped being a debt.

Lorenzo: (*nods*) Same here. I figured I owed you for showing up when it counted. Guess we both kept trying to pay each other back without saying it.

Dew: And somehow, that turned into something bigger.

Lorenzo: Crazy to think how it all turned out. And now? We've got more stories for days—thanks to this journey.

Narrator: Another brief quiet settles over the cabin—the soft thrum of the rotors, the wind brushing the hull. Then, Cooper shifts slightly and turns to Dew, eyes narrowing with curiosity.

Cooper: You know... there's something else I've been meaning to ask. You were there when New Havenport got hit. How did you survive getting nuked? Most people thought you were dead.

Narrator: Dew doesn't speak right away. His eyes drift downward. His hands rest on his knees—still, steady. A long breath escapes him before he responds.

Dew: I was just making it up to the rooftop of the biochemical research facility we raided. Thornton had just cut down one of Zircon's Guardsman— Then he took a full shotgun blast to the chest... Fell straight into the ocean. I thought that was the end of him.

Zircon was already evacuating. Mocked me. Told me the strike was en route— Said it was “for the greater good.” Said the public would believe the viral threat had been erased.

Lorenzo: (*dryly*) Sounds like something that asshole would have said.

Dew: I knew I had a few minutes—maybe less. I remembered an emergency launch room buried in the mountain—two levels down. Ran for it. Sealed myself in one of the escape pods.

Narrator: The party—save for a half-asleep Vilmer—leans in. The drone of the rotors deepens the tension, like a heartbeat under pressure.

Dew: Next thing I knew, the pod launched— Shot me down a hidden rail into the Mesovillain Ocean. Dark. Cold. Silent. When the nuke hit... I could feel the shockwave, even underwater. I blacked out—came to—then blacked out again. Drifted for nearly two days.

Krista: (*blinking*) And somebody found you?

Dew: Yeah. A fishing crew—once the pod resurfaced. Weathered old men. Thought I was dead at first. Didn't ask questions when I came to a few days later. Just healed me up... I wasn't with them long—then I moved on.

Cooper: That's when you made your way to Helix. To track down Zircon.

Dew: (*then nods*) He needed to answer—for the virus, for the lies... For everyone he murdered in that blast. My unit. My friends.

All in New Havenport.

Lorenzo: Well... we both got him in the end. He's gone now.

Cooper: But Thornton... (*shakes his head*) You said he died. And yet—he's alive. Leading a cult. For his girlfriend... Rena's daughter. The Söl Congruum.

Elvir: Well, Coop... odds are it was her that kept him alive, innit? Dragged him back from the brink—with hearts in her eyes and chaos in her veins. Love's started plenty of wars... Who's to say it can't end the world, too?

Dew: (*quietly*) Hmm... Before Emily died... she told me why they were after the SKT virus vials. She said... they were meant to rebuild the world—when it's made anew. But even as she said it... I could feel doubt in her voice.

Cooper: Now that you bring it up— that did come up during the interrogations. The captured *Bush of Life* cultists all claimed the same thing.

Elvir: (*tilts her head, brow furrowed*) Why is it... for some reason... I just don't buy that story. Hmm... I dunno.

Narrator: The cabin falls quiet again for a moment—until a creak and groan rise from Vilmer, who shifts, rubbing his eyes and rolling his shoulders like a man emerging from a hundred-year nap.

Vilmer: (*grumbling*) Hmph... Global annihilation, teleportation gizmos, and... pipes from dumpsters? Y'all sure know how to have a conversation when a man's trying to nap. (*then smacks his lips before peering around the cabin*) At least the ride's smooth. This chopper's a real luxury. No waves. No rattling. No ducking under low doorframes. Wish we'd had one of these earlier.

Elvir: (*then sits up straighter*) Hey! Hey! I run that boat. The patrol boat has been a flawless means of transportation—and it got us this far, didn't it? And it floats better than any of you would if I weren't piloting it. I'll take sea legs over sky guts any day.

Lorenzo: She's got a point. But still—nothing beats The *Tor*. That RV is peak comfort. Chilled air, warm beds, instant noodles. Best roadside naps of my life.

Krista: (*half-smiling*) Well... thank you, Lorenzo. I'm glad you appreciated my house on wheels.

Dew: Krista, all of us appreciated it.

Lorenzo: (*nods*) No problem, Krista.

Vilmer: (*gruff but warm*) Yeah. We've been lucky—RV, boat, tele-
porters, chopper... Not many folks get to bounce around the
world in that kind of style.

Cooper: ...Next step's obvious. We hijack a space shuttle and upgrade
to zero-gravity commuting. (*then cracks a smile*)

Elvir: (*smirk*) As long as I'm piloting it. None of you even know
what a rudder is.

Krista: Just promise next time you won't threaten to throw Lorenzo
overboard mid-docking.

Elvir: (*scoff*) He was pacing the deck, yelling "Hard left!" like a lost
seagull! I said stay clear of the controls.

Lorenzo: (*defensive*) Hey—my instincts were dialed in! I was just help-
ing!

Elvir: Your "help" almost got us introduced to the pier sideways.
Stick to scavenging pot pies and overthrowing the govern-
ment, Paper-boy.

Vilmer: Ha-ha... If we make it through this... (*then to Lorenzo and
Elvir*) I'm getting custom T-shirts made. "Driver" for Elvir.
"Backup Yeller"... and "Definitely Not Allowed to Touch Con-
trols" for Lorenzo.

Narrator: Laughter then breaks out—genuine and unforced among the
party. Outside, stars blink to life in the darkening sky, their
light reflected faintly on the Mesovillain Ocean far below.
The rotors hum steadily, slicing through the night as the heli-
copter stays its course toward Twin Pines.

CHAPTER 21 – THE WEIGHT OF A PROMISE



Narrator:

The scene cuts to just before midnight, as the helicopter descends onto a helipad in the southeast zone of Twin Pines—kicking up a swirl of dust and pine needles. Mount Illini’s dark ridge looms to the northwest, casting long shadows over the zone. As the aircraft settles, the engine idles down, and the rotor blades slow from a thunderous whirr to a steady mechanical hum. Inside the cabin, Dew and the two others wait in silence. Only after the final whines of the turbine fade does the pilot unlatch the cockpit door. He steps out, boots crunching on gravel as he circles around to the side. Moments later, the side doors

swing open—not by automation, but by his own gloved hands. Standing firm against the warm mid-night gusts, the SWAT TROOPER ELITE pilot—stoic beneath a military flight helmet, aviator sunglasses, and camouflage tactical flight gear—addresses Dew directly.

STE Pilot: ...Mr. Wilder. Steelwind-Three — your transport pilot. Good to finally put a face to the voices. Before you depart, I've got something that may come in handy for you and your party.

Dew: *(raising a brow)* Yeah..?

Narrator: The party exchanges a brief glance. The pilot unzips a pouch along his thigh and pulls out a rugged black case. Inside, a satellite phone gleams beneath a mesh strap, its frame reinforced with hard polymer. He opens the case and hands the device to Dew.

Steelwind-Three: ...Compliments of Interim Premier Janerio.

Narrator: Dew takes the phone, inspecting it as the others watch in silence.

Dew: A phone..?

Steelwind-Three: This isn't just field comms. Direct orbital uplink—tight channel encryption. You can use it to reach me —anytime. You'll find my number already preloaded. The Interim Premier's line is there too—receive-only. If he needs to contact you, this device will light up. GPS is enabled. Real-time tracking, no delays unless you're buried under canopy or cliffside.

Dew: *(nodding)* Range?

Steelwind-Three: Signal's solid as long as you've got open sky. Battery's topped off—good for the next 24 hours. And since I'm assigned as your personal lift—if you and your party decide to head somewhere else after this and trouble finds you while you're exploring, give me a call. I'll get you out.

Dew: Got it.

Steelwind-Three: *(then gestures toward the chopper)* I'll be here at the pad. When you and your party are ready to move, just check in.

Narrator: Dew gives a firm nod, slipping the satellite phone into an inner vest pocket.

Dew: Appreciate it.

Narrator: The Steelwind-Three walks off to the side and lights a cigarette, leaning casually against the cockpit door. The glow of the ember flickers briefly in the dark. Inside the chopper, Dew rises from his seat, then turns to face the rest of the party.

Dew: This shouldn't take long. Give it two hours, tops. After that, we head to Demmin. Sound good?

Elvir: For sure, Dewster.

Lorenzo: Don't worry about it, man. Go handle your business.

Krista: No problem.

Cooper: We'll be right here when you get back.

Vilmer: In the meantime, we'll swing by the same place from before—I recall they're open 24/7. Shouldn't take long to restock.

Elvir: Let's just hope they fixed that creaky freezer door. Last time it sounded like a yak... mid-orgasm.

Narrator: A beat of silence followed. The rest of the party collectively froze—some blinking, some grimacing—as if their brains were all trying to process what they'd just heard. The midnight air suddenly felt a few degrees heavier. Cooper tilted his head slightly, one brow rising with quiet curiosity, as if Elvir had just said something worth further investigation.

Cooper: Oh..?

Krista: Elvir, seriously?

Elvir: What? That freezer was moaning like it knew secrets. I've only heard sounds like that in back-alley massage parlors.

Dew: ...And now I can't un-hear that.

Krista: What the—?! Elvir, what kind of massage parlors are you even talking about?

Vilmer: And how do you know what a yak sounds like mid-pleasure? Is there something we should be worried about?

Lorenzo: Don't ask. Don't. I'm already regretting being here for this conversation.

Elvir: Oh, relax. Bit of cheeky banter never killed anyone. Besides... a girl's got to have her hobbies, yeah?

Cooper: Well, depending on the hobby... I might be open to a private demo. Minus the yak, of course. (*then arches his brow at her repeatedly*)

Narrator: Elvir faintly blushes—then recovers with a shameless grin. Dew, still slightly taken aback, blinks once before responding.

Dew: ...Riiight. A-anyway. I'll see you all soon.

Narrator: Dew gave a simple nod before heading off in the opposite direction. Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer exchanged glances, shaking their heads with quiet chuckles—equal parts amusement and weary acceptance. Elvir grinned without a hint of shame. Cooper, as ever, seemed genuinely entertained by her antics, a subtle smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Then, with unspoken rhythm, the five stepped off the helipad and disappeared into the modest streets of Twin Pines' Southeast Zone—while Dew turned down a quieter road alone, making his way toward the residential area. Sometime later, Dew slowed his pace as he approached a modest house on the corner of a quiet street. The mailbox out front read HOWARD, new lettering pressed over the faded name STANCHEZ, still faintly visible beneath. The neighborhood was still. Just the low hum of a few AC units and the occasional flicker of porch lights set on timers. The house looked recently touched up—fresh gray paint on the porch, window boxes full of red petunias, and two white rocking chairs sitting side by side, empty but inviting. Dew climbed the steps and stepped onto the porch, moving toward the front door. A light clicked on behind the curtain. The fabric shifted—just enough to show someone had spotted him. A few seconds later, the door creaked open. A Black woman in her mid-50s stood in the doorway. She had a short pixie cut, dark-framed glasses, and a warm, welcoming smile. Dressed in a sleeveless burgundy knit top and black pants, she regarded Dew with a mix of curiosity and cautious friendliness.

Arvella: (*softly*) Hello... can I help you?

Narrator: A tall, broad-built Black man stepped beside her. Long dreadlocks fell past his shoulders, framing a graying beard, while

rectangular glasses rested neatly on his face. Dressed casually in a white polo and dark pants, he wore an easy smile, though his steady gaze carried a quiet, protective attentiveness.

Greg: ...You looking for someone?

Dew: *(nodding)* Yeah. Sorry to drop in this late. My name's Dew Wilder... I'm a friend of Emily's.

Narrator: The name landed like a soft jolt. Something flickered behind Arvella's eyes—recognition, quickly followed by worry. Her hand tightened slightly on the doorframe.



Arvella: Emily... *(softens, voice lowering)* You're a friend of hers? Hmm... your name sounds familiar. I think she might've mentioned you a few times. But... *(then concern creeps into her expression)* We haven't heard from her in a few days. Is something wrong..? *(then searching Dew's face for answers)*

Dew: *(quietly)* I was hoping to talk to you both about that... and to Aspen. If that's okay.

Narrator: Greg looked at Arvella, and something passed between them—silent and instinctive. A decision made without words.

Greg: Oh. I see. Well, Dew... I'm Greg. This is my wife, Arvella. Come on in. Let's talk.

Narrator: Dew then nods and steps inside. The air was warm, carrying the scent of cinnamon, lemon cleaner, and something faintly herbal—maybe tea. Photos of just the couple lined the hallway—birthdays, anniversaries, vacation smiles. A few awkward school portraits had earned their place through love alone. The conversation that followed happened offscreen. Dew explained what needed explaining—simply, gently. Greg, standing beside Arvella, listened—arms crossed, head low, his face unreadable. Arvella sat quietly for a while, a tissue in hand she hadn't yet used—until she did. At first, it was just her eyes. Then came the soft, broken breath she tried to hold back. Greg noticed right away. He uncrossed his arms, rested a hand on her shoulder, and said nothing. She leaned into his side, and he stayed there with her—solid, present. They didn't ask for more. They didn't need to. They both now understood why he had come. Why he needed to see the boy. After a long pause, Greg finally motioned toward the back of the house. He walked Dew to the sliding glass door and opened it without a word. Dew stepped outside. The backyard was quiet, bathed in moonlight. A breeze rustled the grass and stirred the leaves overhead. At the far end, near the fence, a boy sat cross-legged in the grass, notebook balanced on his knee—his left side turned toward the house. His messy red curls caught the light as he sketched, softly humming to himself. As the door slid shut behind Dew, the boy turned his head toward the sound. He looked up—calm, curious—but something in his face said he knew something wasn't right. They looked at each other for a moment, unmoving. Dew moved forward slowly, stopping just short of where Aspen sat. Then he spoke.

Dew: *(gently)* Hey. *(then crouches, arms resting on his knees)* You must be Aspen. It's nice to finally meet you... I'm Dew. I'm a friend of your mom's.

Narrator: Aspen didn't answer right away. He just looked at Dew—head tilted, eyes steady. The pencil rested in his hand, forgotten. He kept studying him, like he was trying to figure out if this moment was really happening. Dew offered a small

smile—the kind that didn’t try too hard. Then he eased down into the grass beside him and continued.

Dew: *(speaking softly, steady)* Your mom... She was the strongest person I’ve ever known. And she loved you. So, so much. More than anything. *(pauses, searching for the words)* She’s not coming back, Aspen.

Narrator: The air grew still. Even the insects seemed to fall silent. Aspen let his pencil slip from his fingers and gripped the notebook tighter instead. He looked down at his unfinished drawing and spoke in a soft, hushed voice.

Aspen: Oh... so she’s dead, huh?

Narrator: Then, slowly, he lifted his eyes to Dew. Dew’s brows furrowed. His jaw tightened just slightly—grief flickering behind his eyes as he fought back a tear.

Dew: *(quietly)* I’m really sorry.

Narrator: Aspen’s lower lip quivered. His breathing turned shaky—short inhales, soft exhales—like he was barely keeping it together. He looked back down at the notebook, but whatever he’d been drawing didn’t seem to matter anymore.

Aspen: I kinda already knew. It felt weird in my stomach. Like... I could just tell. But... she told me she was coming back. She promised.

Narrator: Dew then shifted closer and gently placed a hand on Aspen’s shoulder. He didn’t speak; he just made sure the boy knew he wasn’t alone. For now, that was enough. They sat in stillness—until Dew finally spoke again.

Dew: *(voice calm and kind)* I know how you feel, Aspen...

Aspen: You... do?

Dew: Yeah. I was really little—about to turn seven—when it happened. *(sigh)* My mom and dad, Jibril and Cecilia... They died in a car accident. A drunk driver ran a red light. He didn’t make it either. I didn’t really get it at the time. One minute they were here... and then they were just... gone. *(pauses, letting the silence settle)* But I got lucky. My grandpa took me in. He was kinda stern—smelled like a peanut can full of loose change and bug spray. Heh. But he helped me through the hard stuff. Taught me how to laugh again, even when everything inside felt heavy.



Narrator: Aspen's lips quivered again, but still no tears. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, sniffed hard, then looked up.

Aspen: Was your grandpa mean?

Dew: *(smiling gently, voice warm)* Well... He once kicked over a snowman because he said it looked "too smug." But he also saved me once—from a mountain lion.

Aspen: Really?!

Dew: Yep. Fought it off with his bare hands, too.

Aspen: Whaaat? Wait... I know that story! My mom told me! It was when my late Auntie Hoplyn was little and went up Mount Illini with a friend. That was you, huh?

Dew: Oh. So, you know the story. Yeah, that was me.

Aspen: Your grandpa wasn't mean. He was awesome!

Dew: You're right... he was. He had a heart big enough to hold the whole world. He was my everything. My hero.

Narrator: Aspen stared at Dew for a moment, quiet and still. His fingers fidgeted at the edge of the notebook, pressing into the paper.

Aspen: *(softly)* I don't think I got a hero anymore. *(pauses, eyes lowering)* It was just me and Mom. And Slambert... my imaginary friend.

Dew: Oh yeah..?

Narrator: Aspen glanced off toward the shadows at the edge of the yard, like maybe Slambert was listening—and maybe, just maybe, that made it a little easier to say the next part.

Aspen: Mom always made everything feel... okay. Even when it wasn't. She'd say, "The world's big and weird, but we're bigger and weirder." And she always called me her cum pet. I don't even really know what that means...

Narrator: Dew cracked a smile, a soft chuckle slipping out before he could stop it. Aspen smiled too—small at first, then a surprised half-laugh escaped him, as if his body remembered joy before his heart could catch up.

Aspen: She was weird.

Dew: She was a good woman...

Narrator: Another brief silence followed. Not heavy—just still. Like the night itself was giving them space. Then Aspen spoke again, his voice quieter now, almost like he was afraid of the answer.

Aspen: So... what happens to me? Am I staying here with Greg and Arvella? I don't have anyone else.

Dew: No, Aspen. I'll be taking care of you.

Aspen: Really?

Dew: Yeah. Your mom wanted that. And I owe it to her...

Aspen: *(soft smile)* I guess you'll be my hero now...

Dew: I guess I will be. *(then gently smiles)*

Narrator: Aspen then places the notebook down on the grass, leans over, and hugs Dew, with his arms tight around him. Dew returns the embrace without hesitation—a full, heartfelt moment that's neither rushed.

Aspen: *(softly)* Thank you...

Narrator: Dew nodded as they held each other for a beat longer. When they finally pulled apart, Dew gave him a gentle look, then raised an eyebrow with curiosity.



Dew: So, Aspen. Tell me about Slambert. Lay it on me.

Aspen: Yeah. Slambert. He's a big green dragon. Tall. Strong. Brave. Talks all noble and serious, like he's in some kind of knight movie or something. *(then straightens up, mimicking him)* "Stand behind me, young squire! I shall face this treachery alone!" And then... he always asks, "Do you got tree fiddy?"

Dew: Ha-ha-ha... Three-fifty, huh? What's he trying to buy with that? Dragon-sized bubblegum? A giant sword from a pawn shop?

Aspen: *(grinning)* He says it's for "important dragon operations." *(then leans in, mock serious)* Probably snacks.

Dew: Oh, obviously. No way Slambert's saving kingdoms on an empty stomach. Gotta keep the blood sugar up when you're facing ogres and tax-collecting trolls.

Aspen: Hee-hee-hee... Last week he said he needed tree fiddy to build a "fortress made entirely out of nachos."

Dew: That's just sound architecture. Nachos are both delicious and structurally underrated.

Aspen: Yeah, but the cheese walls melted in the sun.

Dew: Rookie mistake. He should've used cold queso bricks and jalapeño mortar. Everyone knows that.

Narrator: Aspen snorted, and his laughter slipped out unguarded this time. Dew joined in, the two of them laughing together under the night sky, the heaviness of earlier beginning to loosen—if only a little.

Aspen: ...You're weird too.

Dew: Hey. The world's big and weird... But we're bigger and weirder.

Narrator: Dew cracked a smile after repeating that familiar phrase Aspen knew well. Aspen, understanding, grinned—and this time, the smile reached his eyes. Then a thought came to him, and curiosity tugged at his voice.

Aspen: Hey, Dew.

Dew: Yeah?

Aspen: You look kinda... different. Not in a bad way. Just not like all the other grown-ups I've seen.

Dew: Different, huh..? *(then pauses, then nods as it clicks)* Oh. Yeah, I get that. I'm mixed—like stacking all the best ice cream flavors into one cone. From what I remember... My mom? She always had music blasting. She'd dance while she cooked, wore big earrings, and her hugs smelled like cinnamon and coconut oil. My dad was smooth. Always playing R&B tapes, burning incense "to set the mood," and swore VHS looked better than anything. *(then nods toward Aspen's hair)* But you? That red hair, those eyes... you're all Emily. No doubt about it. So, tell me—what's an eight-year-old doing up past midnight?

Aspen: *(making a face)* Um... it's Friday. And summer break. Why would I be in bed? That's like... illegal.

Dew: *(grinning)* Touché. Guess I lost track of time... and a few other things too.

Narrator: They sat quietly together for a while, the wind teasing the grass and rustling the trees overhead. The moonlight painted everything in silver-blue.

Aspen: Are you gonna stay?

Dew: (softly) I want to. But there's something I gotta do first. It's super important...

Aspen: Oooh. Is it dangerous?

Dew: Let's just say... me and a few friends are on a top-secret mission to save the world. (*then stretches, brushing grass from his legs*) But don't worry—I'll be back. One or two days. Three if Slambert casts a guilt spell on me.

Aspen: (*mock serious*) Slambert hates flakes. He says they give dragons gas. Like... explody gas.

Dew: Ha-ha. Noted. I don't wanna be responsible for a fireball burp that takes out half the block.

Aspen: He says if you bring snacks, he'll forgive you if you come back late. But not raisins. Raisins are gross. They're like squishy bugs pretending to be candy.

Dew: Got it. Slambert's anti-raisin. I'll bring BBQ chips, blue raspberry juice barrels, and those peanut butter-jelly graham cracker sandwich things.

Aspen: (*gasp*) Those are my favorite!

Dew: Deal.

Narrator: They sat for another moment under the stars—the kind of silence that didn't need filling. Aspen leaned slightly against Dew's side—small, quiet, but present. Dew gave his curls one last ruffle—gentle, steady—then stood with a soft exhale, brushing the grass from his hands. Aspen stood too, looking up at him. Dew met his gaze, his voice dropping low, sincere.

Dew: You're not alone, Aspen. Not now. Not ever. I'll be back before Slambert even finishes his fortress of nachos.

Narrator: Aspen didn't answer right away. He just stepped forward and hugged Dew tight, small arms wrapped around his waist. Dew held him just as tight, one hand steady between the boy's shoulders. From the back door, Greg and Arvella stood watching, arms crossed, silent. Their expressions unreadable—but something in their posture had softened. When Dew looked up, Greg gave him a faint nod. A quiet

agreement. A shared weight. Dew gently pulled back from the hug and gave Aspen's shoulder one last squeeze.

Dew: See you soon, squire.

Aspen: Bye... hero.

Narrator: With a final smile, Dew crossed the yard and slipped back through the sliding door into the house. Moments later, he stepped out the front door of the Howards' home and onto the porch. As he walked away from the residence, the quiet of the neighborhood wrapped around him like a blanket. Only the low hum of porch lights and the whisper of wind through the trees kept him company. A sudden chirp from his satellite phone broke the stillness. He pulled it out and checked the signal—the pale screen casting a faint glow across his face. Without needing to scroll, he tapped the Pilot's contact. The line rang for a few seconds before there was an answer.

Dew: *(into phone, quiet)* It's me, Dew. I'm on my way back to the helipad now. I should be there in the next twenty to thirty-five minutes.

Steelwind-Three: *Roger that. I'll let the others know you're en route. See you soon.*

Narrator: The call ended with a soft beep. Dew slid the phone back into the inner pocket of his vest and continued ahead, his footsteps quiet on the pavement as the porch lights faded behind him. The scene then slowly panned upward to the star-scattered sky, deep into the quiet stretch of the night.

CHAPTER 22 – A FRAGMENTED LIGHT

- Narrator: Meanwhile, the scene cuts back to Pomodoro Cay—deep within the underground missile silo complex. Inside the dimly lit Launch Control Center, a heavy silence lingers. Rows of blinking consoles line the walls, their faint glow reflecting across the dark tiled floor. To the left, a large reinforced observation window overlooks the dormant Renascence Lance rocket, standing motionless within the adjoining launch chamber. Sherwin stands before the massive main console built into the far wall; his eyes narrowed in focus as he examines the large monitor displaying a live surveillance feed from Level Two's detention area. Onscreen, Rena lies unconscious on the cold floor of her cell. Nearby, Thornton stands before the observation window, his gaze fixed upon the Renascence Lance beyond the reinforced glass. Silent and imposing, the massive weapon mirrors the stillness within the chamber. Sherwin breaks the silence with a dry remark.
- Sherwin: Hm. Dr. Etteip has been out cold since the faithful dragged her in...
- Narrator: Thornton turns from the window, his expression unreadable, and faces Sherwin.
- Thornton: Considering the odds she and her two companions faced... she held her own. The other two... well, they'll be of no trouble to us... *(then pauses, glancing at the monitor)* Truly formidable... Still—even unconscious, she manages to be difficult.
- Sherwin: *(smirking)* Yes. Yes, that she does. But the real question is—how much longer can we afford to wait? If she doesn't wake up soon, we'll be bleeding time. Especially once we have the final SKT vial in hand. Even with our full research team, the synthesis process is delicate. One miscalculation—and the whole operation could collapse. She's the only one left who knows how to complete it flawlessly.
- Thornton: I'm aware. But Myrrh and Clove will return soon.
- Sherwin: Will they? We've had nothing but radio silence since they engaged those meddling nuisances. What if something went wrong?

Thornton: *(quietly, with certainty)* Hmph. Everything is unfolding as intended. She has foreseen it.

Sherwin: *(skeptical, but not defiant)* I certainly hope so, Nephew. Because—

Narrator: Just then, the doors to the Launch Control Center slide open with a hiss. The Crow Sisters—Myrrh and Clove—enter silently, halting a few paces from Thornton and bowing low.

Myrrh: *(reverently)* Master...

Clove: *(cool and measured)* We've returned—and not empty-handed.

Narrator: Myrrh steps forward, carefully presenting the SKT virus T vial, its casing glinting under the dim lights.

Myrrh: The last piece.

Narrator: Thornton accepts the vial, inspecting it closely. A flicker of satisfaction passes behind his mask.

Thornton: Magnificent. You've both served our cause well. *(then turning briefly to Sherwin)* You see, Uncle? Everything is proceeding as she had foreseen.

Narrator: Sherwin lets out a reluctant sigh of relief—just before Myrrh continues speaking.

Myrrh: *(somber)* Master, there's something you should know...

Thornton: *(turning to face Myrrh and Clove)* Go on.

Myrrh: Those who journeyed with us into Aether's Keep... most didn't make it. Captured. Slain.

Clove: Emily is presumed dead. Only a handful escaped with us.

Thornton: *(nodding solemnly)* Then their sacrifice was not in vain. They fulfilled their purpose... and ascended. But worry not—when the world is made anew, they will take their rightful place.

Sherwin: *(flatly)* ...Well. Until that happens... Those who were captured won't stay quiet. The Interim Premier won't let this go unanswered. Raiding the Keep and taking him hostage? That's not something he—or the Mesovillian military—will overlook. And as you've confirmed, Nephew... Janerio is well aware of my

involvement with the *Bush of Life* by now. They'll come. Sooner than we think.

Thornton:

Then... let them come. The military. Dew and his friends. And I'm sure the latter will attempt to rescue the good doctor. *(then smiles faintly)* But all their efforts won't matter. The energy shield grid will be fully operational before they arrive. No one will set foot on this cay—or fire upon it—without exhausting everything they have. *(then pauses and suddenly turns to his right, as if hearing a voice)* Hm? What is it, my love..? *(then leans in slightly, listening)*

Narrator:

Sherwin and the Crow Sisters remain silent, watching him. Though they cannot see or hear her, they understand what's happening: Elizabeth's apparition has returned—visible only to Thornton.



Thornton:

You'll handle it..?

Narrator:

A few quiet moments pass. Thornton gives a subtle nod—to the unseen presence of Elizabeth.

Thornton: ...Understood. It'll be so, my love. (*then turns his attention back to the monitor that displays Rena's still form*) Now... with all four SKT vials secured, the synthesis can begin.

Sherwin: And how exactly do you propose that? Even if Sleeping Beauty wakes, she's not about to collaborate over a casual chat. We may have to use forceful means to get her to comply. It worked on the other scientist...

Thornton: (*to Sherwin, barely above a whisper*) Ah... none of that will be necessary.

Sherwin: Oh?

Thornton: It will be taken care of. (*then gestures toward the monitor*) Just watch and see...

Sherwin: (*nods slowly*) Ah. Understood... Very well.

Thornton: (*then turns to the Crow Sisters*) Go. Ready the others. Be on standby... just in case. She demands it.

Myrrh & Clove: (*then in unison, heads bowed*) As you command, Master. It'll be so.

Narrator: The Crow Sisters then turn and exit the Launch Control Center. Thornton and Sherwin remain; their gazes fixed on the monitor—the reflection of Rena's unmoving body flickering faintly in Thornton's eyes. Inside her cell, the scene pans inward to Rena. For a moment, only the faint ambiance of Level Two's detention area can be heard. Then, almost imperceptibly, her fingers twitch, her shoulder shifts—a small stir breaking the stillness. The scene immediately cuts to her mind. Rena opens her eyes and finds herself standing in a child's bedroom—familiar, yet distant. The walls are pale, nearly bare, save for a shelf of neatly arranged children's books. A few old toys and two worn stuffed animals rest on the carpeted floor nearby, their presence softening the room with a fragile warmth. She turns slowly, taking it all in—the small desk in the corner, the neatly made bed, the small wooden lighthouse model resting on the nightstand. Recognition settles. This was Elizabeth's room—her daughter's bedroom, tucked away in the east wing of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy's

Research Facility, 1st-floor basement. The air is sterile and silent, like the rest of the facility. Yet seeing all of this again, Rena breathes shallowly, unable to decide if the sudden ache in her heart is grief, or longing. Then, from behind, a soft sound rises—gentle at first, almost hidden in the silence. A familiar melody drifts through the air, its source unseen.

???: *(sing-song, distant) "Ring a ring o' roses, A pocket full of posies..."*

Narrator: Rena stiffens at the sound, her breath caught in her throat. Slowly, she turns. The air behind her shimmers as a figure begins to take shape.

???: *(sing-song, closer now) "A-tishoo, A-tishoo, We all fall down..."*

Narrator: As the lullaby ends, the figure sharpens—hazy no longer, but clear and undeniable. Her daughter, Elizabeth, stands before her fully materialized.

Rena: *(eyes widen; stunned)* Elizabeth..?

Narrator: Elizabeth briefly stares at Rena, a smirk carved with equal parts resentment and buried curiosity before responding.

Elizabeth: You always gave me lullabies... never the lull. After you left, the songs stopped working. That's when I stopped sleeping. Well, hello... mommy's dearest.

Narrator: The two stand frozen, staring at one another. The silence between them hangs heavy, thick with all the years unspoken, until Elizabeth finally breaks it again.

Elizabeth: That lullaby... where did you learn it? I've always wondered.

Rena: Your... grandfather—my adopted father, Fred—sang it to me when I was a child. He said even warriors needed lullabies, that songs like this carried more than words. Warnings. Wisdom. Warmth. *(then her voice softens)* That's why I passed it on to you. I hoped it would mean something.

Elizabeth: Fred and... Bernice. My grandparents. I never did meet them—a shame. But as you see, Mother... I never forgot about the lullaby. Just as I never forgot so many other things.

Rena: *(then steadies herself)* Elizabeth... what is all of this? Where am I? Where are Johnny and Gaz?

Elizabeth: I couldn't tell you where your two friends are. Alive... dead... does it really matter? *(then shrugs)* As for us—we're standing in a memory of yours, mother. A rather fitting one, don't you think? Still playing the regretful mother. Touching.

Narrator: Elizabeth then turns slightly and notices the small wooden lighthouse model sitting on the bed nightstand. She is taken aback to see it again.

Elizabeth: *(softly, almost to herself)* The wooden lighthouse... what's this doing here? *(then turns to Rena)*

Rena: It's my memory, like you said. How could I ever forget it? I spent a week making that for your sixth birthday.



Elizabeth: You did...

Rena: I recall how overjoyed you were when I gave it to you. Do you remember what I carved into the bottom?

Elizabeth: *(then eyes harden)* Yes. I do. It said, “*My shining lighthouse.*” *(then bitterly)* But after you left... I smashed it into pieces. And I buried them.

Narrator: As the words leave Elizabeth’s lips, the small wooden lighthouse on the nightstand fractures with a sharp crack. Splinters race across its surface-like veins of breaking glass. The paint flakes, the wood warps, and in a breath, it collapses inward—shattering into jagged fragments that scatter across the floor. Rena’s eyes then sink to the splintered lighthouse model fragments scattered at her feet. Each jagged piece seems to echo her failure, her breath catching as she forces out a pained response to Elizabeth.

Rena: Elizabeth...

Elizabeth: ...What do you want me to say? That I kept it? That I clung to a lie? No. That lighthouse was just wood. It couldn’t protect me. It couldn’t bring you back.

Rena: Okay. I get it. What do you want, Elizabeth? Did you come to torment me again?

Elizabeth: *(then slowly starts circling Rena)* Maybe... just a little. But I’m also being efficient—playing out my fateful cosmic role. I’m here for what’s in your head. A little mining expedition.

Rena: *(tense, stepping back)* You’re here... for what’s in my head?

Narrator: Rena ponders this, realization dawning.

Rena: Wait. You’ve collected all four of the SKT virus vials... haven’t you?

Narrator: Elizabeth stops circling Rena, turns to face her, and gives a cold smile with a measured nod.

Rena: So, you’re ready to synthesize them... *(pained)* You really are gone, aren’t you?

Elizabeth: Gone? That’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one.

Rena: You’re not getting the SKT virus synthesis sequence from me. I won’t allow you to unleash that horror onto the world...

Elizabeth: Unleash... yeah. Hah. As if you could keep it from me anyway...

Narrator: A sudden ripple of static tears through the bedroom, warping the air. Ghostly medical schematics flare across the walls and ceiling—molecular diagrams, strands of code, the very synthesis sequence for the four SKT viruses that had lived only in Rena’s memory. Rena’s eyes widen as she watches, frozen. Elizabeth lifts her hand, slicing through the projections. The spectral data bends toward her, unraveling and coiling into her grasp. With deliberate poise, she draws it into herself, pressing her palm against her forehead. Rena staggers forward, her hand half-reaching out before falling uselessly to her side, powerless to stop her.

Rena: (*low, desperate*) Elizabeth, no—stop..!

Narrator: The diagrams collapse, sinking into Elizabeth’s essence—years of Rena’s knowledge, guilt, and memory burning as they fuse within her. Rena can only watch, helpless. For a moment, Elizabeth’s eyes tremble, her composure faltering—then they steady, cold once more. She exhales, steps back, shaken, before her mask of control settles. Slowly, she turns to face Rena.

Elizabeth: (*mocking, but hollow underneath*) Well, mommy dearest, I have what I came for. That didn’t take long, did it? Hmm...

Rena: (*voice low, ragged*) So... you got what you came for. This is it, then...

Narrator: Rena’s words hang heavy—no defiance, no accusation. Only the ache of a mother staring at what her daughter has become.

Elizabeth: Yes, it is, mother... Soon all will be made anew. Thank you. (*then glancing down, tone cooling*) Hmm... You know, I thought I’d feel more catharsis in this moment. After all these years. All the missed birthdays, the unanswered prayers, the silence... (*then shakes her head*) I still don’t.

Rena: (*pleading, voice breaking*) Elizabeth... I— I am so sorry.

Elizabeth: *(sharp, cutting)* Sorry? There you go again with that word. Sorry for vanishing from our lives? Sorry you left us with father? Sorry you erased us like a bad chapter in your story?

Rena: Elizabeth, don't say that. That's not true.

Elizabeth: Why not? It is the truth. For all of father's flaws, at least he was there. Yes, he was buried in his work—distant, controlling at times—but he was present. He was protective. And somehow... that was enough. But you? You gave yourself to countless others. Not as Irene Etteip, the brilliant scientist who ran away—but as Rena Cullen, the martial arts master and adventurer. You taught strangers how to fight, how to survive, how to face the darkness. And yet you were still a coward... because you never tried to come back. You gave those others everything Nathanael and I never had. And you still dare to think of yourself as my mother. Hah. *(then pauses, eyes narrowing as if sensing something from Rena's memories)* Speaking of giving yourself to others... you've developed quite the bond with those companions of yours along your little journey. But with him—Dew Wilder—it's different, isn't it? *(smirk widens)* Your pupil... your "shining light." Your lover. Tell me, mother—did that make it easier, in your mind, to forget about father? *(then steps closer, voice sharp)* He's barely two years older than me. Two years. Do you know how grotesque that feels? ...Though I'll give you this—he does have a firm-looking ass. Not as glorious as my beloved Thornton's, but still, not bad, Mother... *(then eyes narrow, sharp again)* Still... disgusting.

Narrator: Rena freezes, momentarily taken aback by Elizabeth's words. Then, slowly, she steps forward, pain beginning to etch itself across her face.

Rena: *(voice trembling, but steady)* Elizabeth... whatever you think of me, whatever names you call me... I am still your mother. Even after all the regret and mistakes I've made, that truth does not change. Not Dew. Not anyone. Nothing can erase that.

Elizabeth: Is that so? You say that so confidently... Let me tell you something. You ruined me. You left a hole, and I filled it with fury. I blamed you every time I had to comfort Nathanael and explain why you weren't there. Every time he asked if you'd come back...

Rena: *(softly, broken)* I was broken and afraid, Elizabeth... I know you hate me for that. But what has happened cannot be changed. I own that. I am truly sorry, Elizabeth...

Elizabeth: *(eyes shining, voice trembling)* I did hate you. For a long time. I hated what your absence did to us. *(then exhales)* But that hate got heavy. And I've carried it for too long. And you're right... You're still my mother. And even if it's just this once—before everything burns—I needed to say it to your face. Not to hurt you. Just... to finally let it out.

Narrator: Rena hesitates, then lifts a trembling hand. Elizabeth doesn't pull away as her mother's comforting palm settles on her shoulder. For a moment, a fragile bridge forms between them.

Rena: ...Does it really have to end like this? You can still come back from this.

Elizabeth: It is what it is, Mother. This is what you made. The girl who waited—the daughter who begged for a mother—she died. And now, beyond death, fulfilling my role as the Söl Congruum has filled that void with purpose.

Rena: *(softly, stepping closer)* There's still part of her left. I hear it in your voice... when you call me "Mother." She's still in there.

Narrator: At her words, Elizabeth stiffens, but doesn't pull away. For a moment, her composure falters—her lip trembles, her eyes gloss with the threat of tears. Rena sees it. A tiny crack in her daughter's icy demeanor.

Elizabeth: ...Sentiment is a virus. It clouds judgment. Don't tempt me to relapse.

Rena: I don't believe that. If it were true, you wouldn't be here, talking to me. Elizabeth... I know I wasn't there

when you needed me. But if this is the last time I see you, let me say it: I never stopped loving you.

Elizabeth: Oh, you would say that now, of all times...

Rena: Why not? Because you might believe me? It's true. That has to count for something, doesn't it?

Elizabeth: (*staring hard, voice flickering*) ...It almost does.

Rena: It's not too late. We can start over. Together. Without ending the world.

Narrator: Silence stretches. For a heartbeat, warmth flickers between them—but it fades as Elizabeth's composure hardens again.

Elizabeth: I believe you, Mother. I know you're sincere. (*suddenly cold, businesslike*) But I've taken what I needed. After this is over, you'll be spared when the world is made anew. Until then, you'll remain in your cell once you wake. Think of it as a gift... from daughter to mother.

Narrator: Elizabeth takes Rena's hand from her shoulder, gives it a gentle pat, then turns away. As she begins to fade, she stops once more.

Elizabeth: By the way, Mother... do you know why it was easy to find the SKT synthesis sequence? You buried it behind a memory of me.

Rena: That was... because you were always my hope. Even if I didn't deserve to say so.

Elizabeth: I know now, Mother. I know...

Narrator: With her back turned to Rena, a single tear slips down Elizabeth's cheek. She gives herself a moment before speaking one last time.

Elizabeth: (*with finality*) Goodbye, Mother.

Narrator: Elizabeth's form completely dissolves, like smoke in the wind. A violent tremor rips through the bedroom, the walls groaning and splintering as the memory collapses. The desk shatters, books scatter into ash, and the bed crumbles into dust. The world collapses around Rena until there is only darkness. Then—abruptly—she jolts awake, gasping for breath, sprawled on the cold concrete floor beside a narrow military cot bolted to the wall. In the far corner of the

cramped cell sits a small stainless-steel toilet with a compact sink mounted above it. Overhead, a dim fluorescent light hums faintly, casting a dull, sickly glow across the concrete walls. A sharp groan escapes her throat, followed by a ragged cough. She presses her palms against the concrete, slowly pushing herself to her feet, trying to steady herself. The room spins, her breathing uneven.

Rena: *(low, hoarse)* Ugh... damn it— *(then winces, letting out another pained grunt)*

???: *(voice muffled from the next cell)* You're awake... hey, are you all right in there?

Narrator: Rena lifts her head, her eyes narrowing toward the viewing slot in the solid steel door. The voice is male and close—coming from the neighboring cell beside hers. Along Level Two's detention block, eight reinforced cells line the wall, each sealed by a solid steel door with a narrow viewing slot. The other six doors remain closed, silent, and unoccupied. She slowly approaches the cell door and leans her back against it, her face slightly turned toward the viewing slot, then responds.

Rena: *(breathing heavily, forcing composure)* I... I'll get there. Just... give me a moment.

???: Take your time. No rush.

Narrator: She exhales, letting the dizziness ebb before speaking again.

Rena: *(steadier, though still weak)* Who... are you..?

Narrator: A pause follows. The voice doesn't answer right away—only the faint sound of shifting chains and movement echoing from the next cell. Rena steadies her breathing, waiting in the silence. The scene then fades to black.

CHAPTER 23 – TO BOLDLY FOLD

- Narrator: At daybreak, after a long night's flight, Dew and the party finally return by helicopter to Demmin's Southern Zone. The chopper descends toward a barren airstrip of hard-packed sand and scattered gravel. Dust swirls violently under the rotor wash, stinging their eyes and coating their gear in a fine grit. The helicopter thuds onto the uneven strip, skids biting into sand and stone. The automated side door rattles open as the party unstraps, their footwear crunching against the grit-strewn flooring. The SWAT TROOPER ELITE pilot leans back over his shoulder, voice raised above the pounding blades.
- Steelwind-Three: (*shouting over engine noise*) Here we are—Demmin's Southern Zone, just like you asked! I've gotta circle back and refuel—burned more fuel than expected on the trip in.
- Dew: (*steady, with gratitude*) Understood.
- Steelwind-Three: (*nods firmly*) Don't worry—I'll be in range if you need pickup. Just give me a call, and I'll be back when you're ready. Don't make me wait too long out there.
- Dew: You got it.
- Krista: (*smiling faintly*) See ya when we see ya.
- Vilmer: (*nods, voice steady and warm*) Stay safe up there.
- Narrator: With the party fully stepped off the helicopter, the pilot gives a sharp two-finger salute before throttling up. Dust lashes across the strip in stinging waves as the helicopter lifts away, banking east. The heavy thrum of its blades lingers for a breath before fading into the pale desert sky. The party lingers in silence, eyes following the chopper until it disappears beyond the horizon. The airstrip feels emptier now, the wind carrying only the hiss of grit skittering across stone. At last, they turn toward the rough road leading back into the Southern Zone's outskirts and the path to Dr.

Sloane's workshop. But before they can take more than a few steps, Elvir halts mid-stride, a sudden thought flashing across her face like a spark. Dew and the others notice at once.

Lorenzo: *(tilting his head, sensing hesitation)* Elvir, what's wrong? You froze up like you just remembered you left the oven on or somethin'.

Elvir: Oi, don't mind me... I just remembered I left something important on the patrol boat. Can't afford to leave it behind.

Dew: *(raising a brow)* Oh?

Elvir: *(nods firmly)* Yeah. It's really important, and I'll need it for our mission ahead. Trust me. It won't take long...

Cooper: *(stepping forward without hesitation)* ...Then I'll come with you.

Elvir: *(smiling wryly)* Okay, Coop.

Narrator: The party exchanges glances. Dew exhales, weighing the moment, then gives a slow nod.

Dew: All right. Elvir, Cooper—when we get inland, you two head for the docks. We'll continue to Dr. Sloane's workshop. Meet us there when you're done.

Lorenzo: *(half-grinning, folding his arms)* Man, you two better not be takin' too long. No hanky-panky detours, you hear? Unless you wanna come back with a story for the rest of us.

Elvir: *(grinning back, tossing Lorenzo a look)* Please. We don't have time for that—even if Coop begged.

Narrator: Cooper snorts, his embarrassment plain as he glances away, avoiding their eyes. Krista and Vilmer notice and pounce.

Krista: *(teasing, eyes narrowing with a grin)* Ohhh, I see that look—you can't even hide it, Cooper. You're giving yourself away. Besides, what's the big deal? It's obvious you two have had a thing for each other for a while now.

Vilmer: Ha-ha-ha... *(then amusingly shaking his head)* Don't be too hard on him, Krista. That's just young love

tripping over its own feet. Happens to the best of us... believe me, I remember.

Cooper: (*defensive, flustered*) No, no—I'm just going with her, that's all. Nothing more... at least for now. (*nervous*) Ha-ha... Can we focus, please?

Lorenzo: (*grinning wide, leaning in*) Focus? You're the one lookin' like a fox that just got caught sneakin' into a hen house.

Narrator: Vilmer bursts out laughing again, Krista doubles over with a grin, and even Elvir can't help but smirk at the jab. Cooper's ears burn, his protest only digging him deeper. Dew finally steps in, his voice firm but touched with amusement.

Dew: All right, that's enough. Save the clownin' for when this is over. We've got work to do. Let's move.

Narrator: The others settle, though Lorenzo still chuckles under his breath as Cooper rubs the back of his neck, his embarrassment plain. With unspoken understanding, the party then sets off from the airstrip and begins their venture inland. Once inside the Southern Zone's limits, the ruined streets rise around them again—weathered brick walls, hollow-eyed windows, and drifting dust swallowing their steps. Here, their paths divide. Elvir and Cooper quicken their pace, running ahead before veering off toward the waterfront docks where the patrol boat still waits. Their figures fade into the haze above brick and broken glass, while Dew, Lorenzo, Krista and Vilmer press steadily onward toward Dr. Sloane's workshop. The rising sun stretches long, sharp shadows at their backs, cast across cracked pavement and barren grit alike, as the Southern Zone slowly stirs awake. Sometime later, Dew, Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer arrive at Dr. Sloane's workshop. As the steel doors creak open, Dr. Sloane—who had fallen asleep hunched over her workbench—jerks upright at the sound of approaching footsteps. Startled, she blinks in disbelief, realizing that Dew and the others have returned. She rushes toward them, her lab coat flaring as she

crosses the dusty floor. Her expression is torn between astonishment and dread, as though she can't decide whether to embrace them or brace for the worst.

- Dr. Sloane: By Chosha..! So... it— *(then hesitates, breath faltering)*—it worked after all. *(relieved, voice trembling)* For a moment, I feared the Sky Warp had misfired—or worse, that it had killed you all... *(then places a hand over her chest)* But... you're alive. You made it back. How was it..?
- Lorenzo: *(gingerly rolling his shoulders, wincing as he recalls his rough exit from the wormhole)* Yep... still alive—though my back definitely caught the worst of that landing. Ugh...
- Krista: When I came out the other end of that wormhole, I crashed straight into a full-blown human pileup. Next time, I'm booking first-class wormhole travel. Ha-ha...
- Vilmer: *(grinning, arms crossed with a bit of swagger)* No complaints here—I actually had a pretty smooth landing.
- Dew: *(steady, reassuring)* As you can see, Dr. Sloane—we're all here, and still in one piece.
- Narrator: Her eyes scan the party—Dew, Krista, Lorenzo, and Vilmer—and then narrow when she realizes Cooper and Elvir are missing.
- Dr. Sloane: *(tense)* Wait. Where are the other two? Did something happen to them?!
- Krista: *(quickly, with a reassuring smile)* They're fine. Just doubling back to the docks. Elvir left something on the patrol boat—something she swears we'll need. They'll be here soon.
- Narrator: Dr. Sloane exhales shakily, relief softening her shoulders before she speaks again.
- Dr. Sloane: Oh... that's a relief to hear.
- Narrator: Dew steps forward, reaching into his pocket and pulling out Emily's battered and scorched short-range teleportation device. He holds it out for her to see.
- Dew: Can you tell us about this..?

Narrator: Dr. Sloane squints at the object in Dew's hand, curiosity overtaking her initial confusion.

Dr. Sloane: What is this..?

Dew: It's a short-range teleportation device. Well, it was—before it crapped out. Is this your work?

Narrator: Dr. Sloane arches an eyebrow before taking the device from Dew. She turns it over in her hands, studying it intently for a moment before responding.

Dr. Sloane: No... (*quietly, baffled*) This isn't mine. I only built the Sky Warp—nothing like this.

Narrator: Her sincerity is unmistakable. Dew, Lorenzo, Krista, and Vilmer exchange subtle glances, each silently confirming the same thought: she's telling the truth. Dew gives a short response.

Dew: Hmm... I see...

Narrator: Dr. Sloane's curiosity begins to eclipse her unease. Reaching into her lab coat pocket, she retrieves a small toolkit and carefully removes the device's outer casing. The soft click of loosening panels fills the room as she peers into its intricate wiring, her eyes narrowing in focused fascination. After a moment, she pockets both the toolkit and the detached casing, keeping the exposed inner framework cradled carefully in her hands.

Dr. Sloane: But... curious. The coil alignment—primitive, yet functional. (*then inspects the inner core*) Ah... a single *Time* and *Gravity Elementome*, both embedded side by side. Interesting. Whoever built this used principles similar to my own—and twisted them into a compact form. Hmm... where did you get this..?

Narrator: Dew begins recounting their recent mission—detailing the dangers of Aether's Keep and the rescue of Interim Premier Janerio.

Dew: (*to Dr. Sloane*) So, here's the rundown: the Sky Warp worked—just not gracefully for all of us. Elvir, in particular, ended up face-first in a flowerbed. Ha-ha... Anyway... once we regrouped, we discovered that the *Bush of Life* cult had completely sabotaged Aether's Keep's security systems—surveillance fried, guards

dead, the whole lot. We pushed toward the compound, ran into a few of their patrols—handled them—and freed a group of staffers being held hostage along the way. We linked up with an *ISPYA* agent and a few surviving guards, pieced together what was left of the security team, and learned that the interim premier was being held in the underground command chamber... We then made our way down there, freed him, and—

- Narrator: Before Dew can finish, Sloane lowers the device slowly. Her gaze sharpens, suspicion flickering in her eyes.
- Dr. Sloane: (*cutting in, voice edged with suspicion*) Tell me something, Dew... did you mention the Sky Warp—to the interim premier, or anyone else in the government?
- Dew: (*firm, without hesitation*) No. Not a word.
- Narrator: A flicker of relief crosses Sloane's face, quickly masked behind her usual scientific composure. She resumes studying the device as Dew continues recounting their infiltration of Aether's Keep.
- Dew: ...Then we hit some resistance—two cultists calling themselves the Crow Sisters... (*then hesitates, voice dropping*) ...and her. (*then briefly glances down before meeting Dr. Sloane's eyes again*) Yeah... (*then regains his composure*) Anyway, we took them down, but afterward, we learned something. Rena—and a scientist—are being held on Pomodoro Cay. Underground. In a missile-silo complex.
- Dr. Sloane: Pomodoro Cay?
- Dew: Yeah. Are you familiar with the place?
- Dr. Sloane: Not really... I've heard of it.
- Dew: Well... this next part, you're very familiar with.
- Dr. Sloane: What do you mean..?
- Dew: From what we learned, inside that silo sits the Renaissance Lance—launch-ready, armed with both *Oddment* warheads: *Effluvium* and *Fetor*. The *Bush of Life* plan to launch and detonate them in the upper atmosphere...

Narrator: The words freeze the air. Sloane's eyes snap up, horrified. She staggers back, gripping the half-disassembled device—the delicate circuitry trembling in her grasp as if sharing her shock.

Dr. Sloane: *(voice low, horrified)* *Effluvium... and Fetor.* Oh dear... oh dear... The *Oddments*— I thought they'd been disposed of years ago. I thought all that was behind me... but clearly not. *(then shakes her head)* ...That would be a global catastrophe. No... this can't be allowed to happen...

Lorenzo: *(firm)* We'll make damn sure it doesn't, Doc.

Dew: *(steady)* History won't be repeating itself today. Not on our watch.

Vilmer: *(low, dry)* Let's hope history got the memo.

Krista: *(smiling faintly)* If not, we'll just have to write a better ending.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane gives a faint nod to Dew and the party, still shaken by what she's just learned. The room falls silent for a moment. Her eyes drift back to the small teleportation device. She leans in, examining its components with renewed urgency. Then she speaks briefly aloud to herself.

Dr. Sloane: But this... *(then whispering to herself)* *So familiar... echoes of my own work... Who could have created this..? (then pauses, her expression shifting as realization dawns) Unless... it was him... Ian..?*

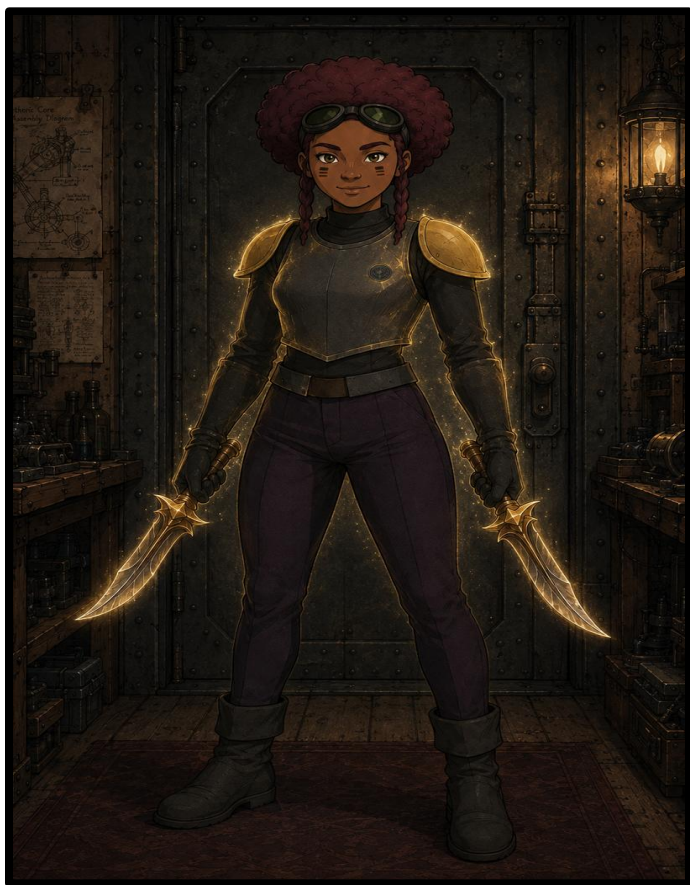
Narrator: Just then, the steel doors to the workshop creak open again. The echo of footsteps grows louder as Cooper steps inside, followed by Elvir—now clad in the gleaming, speckled *Hozho* chest plate that whispers of ancestry and holy duty. Two golden shoulder guards catch the light, and her gray-and-purple *Hozho* combat suit molds perfectly to her frame. She pauses as Dew, Dr. Sloane, and the others turn to look at her in silent awe before the moment inevitably breaks.

Lorenzo: *(grinning wide)* Ai yi yi—look at you, Elvir. Straight-up Power Rangers vibes. So... what's your Zord? A giant angry ferret? A cosmic taco? Don't leave us hangin'.

Krista: *(snorts, folding her arms)* Is it “morphin’ time,” Elvir..?

Lorenzo: *(deadpan)* Assumin’ we even got the budget for morphin’ sequences.

Narrator: Laughter from Lorenzo and Krista ripples through the room, easing the tension. Elvir rolls her eyes, but the corner of her mouth betrays a smirk. She adjusts the chest plate with a soft metallic clink, exhaling as if testing its weight.



Elvir: Tch. You two are just jealous you haven’t got one of these. *(then taps the chest plate)* Ancient *Hozho* craftsmanship at its finest. Bit heavy, though—feels like wearin’ a bloody car door.

Cooper: Ignore those two. Like I said before—you look incredible.

Vilmer: (*nodding*) Yeah. You look like you could take a rocket to the ribs and stroll it off.

Dew: Looking good, Chosha's chosen.

Krista: Elvir, don't mind us. We're razzing you—honest. You look great.

Lorenzo: Yeah—and ready to lay some hands on the *Bush of Life* and Söl Congruum. Straight up.

Dr. Sloane: (*stepping forward and smiling*) Cooper, Elvir—it's so good to see you both again.

Cooper: Likewise, Doctor.

Elvir: Missed me, did ya?

Dr. Sloane: Of course. Oh, by the way, I heard some of your party members' exits from the Sky Warp wormhole to Aether's Keep—yours in particular—weren't exactly graceful. My apologies for the bumpy ride.

Elvir: (*glaring playfully at Dew*) You told her about that, didn't you? Bloody hell.

Narrator: Dew smirks, and the party chuckles. Dr. Sloane's gaze then lingers on the *Hozho* chest plate and the small crest etched into the upper left — admiration tinged with unease. Behind the dark tint of her sunglasses, her expression softens, as if something unseen brushes against her senses. For a brief moment, the analytical calm she's known for gives way to quiet wonder.

Dr. Sloane: A holy relic that few will ever see this close in their lifetime... I can feel it — as if it's... radiating something. Just remarkable.

Elvir: Thanks. (*glancing down at the Hozho chest plate*) My father said our *Hozho* ancestors poured part of their own essence into each one when forging them individually. Guess that's why it feels "alive." (*then smirks*) Or maybe that's just the weight of it — or the pressure of such a holy duty. (*then, shifting tone*) Anyway — what's the verdict on that short-range teleportation gizmo?

Narrator: Dr. Sloane glances at the others, then raises the half-disassembled device in her hand.

Dr. Sloane: We were just discussing it. It isn't my doing. Whoever built this managed to miniaturize the Sky Warp framework I developed years ago.

Krista: So, who could've pulled that off?

Dr. Sloane: (*gravely*) If I had to guess—my old colleague, Dr. Ian Brundle, whom I mentioned when we last met. He's the only one who could've re-engineered my equations to this degree.

Vilmer: Right, that's the one you said vanished after the nuking of New Havenport, yeah? Just dropped off the map.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane gives a subtle nod before Krista, lost in thought, suddenly interjects.

Krista: Wait—I just thought of something. When we were in Aether's Keep, one of the Crow Sisters was fiddling with something on her belt. She panicked when it wouldn't work.

Lorenzo: Yeah, I saw that too. She kept smackin' it like it owed her rent money.

Dew: (*nodding*) Hmm... so the Crow Sisters had one of those too—and it failed because of the reinforced chamber walls.

Dr. Sloane: (*pacing, animated*) Sounds like it. The short-range model operates through microwave-frequency harmonic resonance between two localized energy points, generating a controlled micro-wormhole. If the device detects dense shielding—lead, tungsten, or reinforced alloys—it collapses the resonance field before the bridge can stabilize.

Lorenzo: (*incredulous*) So, it basically just says, "nah," if you try to teleport through a bunker wall?

Dr. Sloane: (*nodding*) Precisely. I'd surmise it would still function within such structures for short-range movement, but not through their exterior shielding.

Narrator: Dew's eyes then narrow slightly. The memory flashes back—Thornton darting around the laboratory at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy during their

confrontation, teleporting between attacks like a phantom. He exhales sharply, realization hitting as he blurts it out to the others.

Dew: That's why... Thornton — *(then to Dr. Sloane)* the *Bush of Life* cult leader we've encountered several times — he had one of those too.

Cooper: That would explain why he kept disappearing and re-appearing every time we ran into him.

Krista: So, then what's with the fog? It always showed up whenever he appeared or disappeared.

Dr. Sloane: *(thoughtful)* It could've been a reaction from the device itself — ionized discharge from the micro-worm-hole forming — or interference between the *Time* and *Gravity Elementomes*. Either way, that's likely what caused the fog effect you all observed.

Dew: I guess that makes sense...

Dr. Sloane: Hmm... if Ian was indeed behind these devices, I'd wager he was forced to create them — and built that failsafe deliberately. Limiting the teleportation would've been his way of preventing the technology from being abused.

Narrator: Suddenly, a shrill tone pierces the quiet — the satellite phone in Dew's inner vest pocket vibrates and beeps.

Dew: *(startled, grabbing the phone)* Hold up—the satellite phone's ringing. Must be the pilot.

Narrator: Dew then presses the receiver and switches it to speaker.

Dew: You're on speaker. What's the update..?

Narrator: Everyone leans in as faint rotor noise and gusts of wind crackle through the speaker.

Steelwind-Three: *(static, hurried)* ...Mr. Wilder, I'm calling to let you know—command has already begun the approach to Pomodoro Cay. Five landing craft, all loaded for an amphibious assault. But there's a problem...

Dew: Problem..?

Steelwind-Three: *Yeah—Cay's... (static surges; his voice fades, then cuts back in)* energy shield grid is active...

Dew: Really..?

Steelwind-Three: *Looks like the Bush of Life cultists had the foresight to reactivate it. Until that barrier's down, no one's getting through. Mesovillian forces are standing by until further notice. If I hear anything new, I'll call back. I'm heading back your way now. Sky's getting rough out here—*

Narrator: Static continues crackling, then fades into silence. The call ends. Dew slowly lowers the satellite phone, his expression uncertain. The workshop falls quiet as Dew, Dr. Sloane, and the rest of the party process the news. For a long moment, no one speaks—until Vilmer finally gives voice to the thought on everyone's mind.

Vilmer: *(rubbing his chin, thoughtful)* If they can't get through... maybe the Sky Warp can?

Narrator: All eyes turn to Dr. Sloane. She remains motionless for a beat, pondering the idea herself before she speaks.

Dr. Sloane: *(measured, analytical)* Theoretically... yes. The Sky Warp doesn't rely on direct transmission—it folds spacetime as I've mentioned before. A wormhole bypasses both physical and electromagnetic resistance, so the Cay's barrier shouldn't affect it. During my time with the government, I reviewed classified data on the Cay—its coordinates, limited schematics, even fragments of its silo layout. I was never permitted to visit—compartmentalization protocols—but I still have that data archived. With it, I can align the Sky Warp's jump vector to get you all to Pomodoro Cay.

Cooper: *(then crosses his arms)* What other choice do we have?

Lorenzo: It beats sitting here and waiting...

Vilmer: *(half-smiling, turning to Elvir, teasing)* Well... Maybe this time, Elvir won't face-plant into a flowerbed on entry.

Elvir: *(mock offense)* Oh, now you've got jokes. Pfft.

Krista: Ha-ha-ha... you two are hopeless.

Dew: *(steady, resolute)* Then that's our shot. Let's take it.

Narrator: Sloane nods briskly, pockets the short-range teleportation device, and moves to the Sky Warp's main console. Lines of green data cascade across the monitors as she accesses her encrypted files. Her fingers glide swiftly across the keys, pulling up the archived schematics for Pomodoro Cay.

Dr. Sloane: Once you arrive at the Cay, the energy shield grid generator will need to be disabled from within. It's likely housed somewhere in the underground silo infrastructure. (*then scanning the data*) ...Hmm. Of course. The schematics here don't mark any power-distribution nodes or control hubs—those sections are blanked out. Typical compartmentalization. Whoever classified these files didn't want even internal staff knowing where the generator was. You'll have to find it manually once inside. But once it's down, Mesovillian forces can proceed with their assault.

Narrator: She then retrieves a rugged laptop from the nearby bench and connects it to the Sky Warp's console via data cable. After several moments of rapid decryption, a confirmation tone sounds. The transfer is complete. Sloane disconnects the laptop from the console, then gestures for Dew's satellite phone. Dew hands it over. She connects the phone to the laptop via USB. A soft electronic chime follows, accompanied by steady data-transfer beeps.

Dr. Sloane: I'm transmitting the Cay's archived schematics—what little I had clearance for. The data's partial and may be outdated, but it should give you enough to navigate the silo interior.

Narrator: A progress bar flashes across the laptop screen. After a few moments, Sloane disconnects both devices and hands the satellite phone back to Dew.

Dr. Sloane: The blueprints are formatted for digital display. In addition, my contact ID has been automatically—and temporarily—synced to your satellite phone for the next twelve hours, along with all the data provided. After that, it'll expire—for security reasons. I'm sure you understand.

Narrator: Dew checks the contact list to confirm, then looks back to Dr. Sloane and nods.

Dr. Sloane: You may encounter localized anomalies—vent shafts, elevator wells, or alloy corridors that occasionally allow signals to slip through. If that happens, keep transmissions brief and expect interference.

Dew: Understood.

Krista: Well, guys... this is it. The final push.

Lorenzo: Let's get this shit done.

Elvir: Whatever happens next, we're in this together. *Bush of Life*, Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetable Man, Söl Congruum—right then, here we come.

Narrator: Dew nods in agreement with Krista, Lorenzo, and Elvir before turning his attention back to Dr. Sloane.

Dew: Dr. Sloane, thank you for everything you've done for us. When we find Rena, we'll also make sure that scientist—likely Dr. Brundle—is brought back safely.

Dr. Sloane: Thank you, Dew. And thank all of you. I'm glad I can finally put my scientific work to use for something that truly matters.

Vilmer: Assisting in saving the world from whack-job cultists? That's about as noble as it gets.

Cooper: *(pauses, reflective)* If I've learned anything from this journey, it's that the past may try to weigh a person down... but what matters most is how we face it—and how we rise above it. *(then cracks a smile)* Guess that's progress, huh..?

Dr. Sloane: *(smiling faintly)* Wise words, Cooper... and well-earned... *(then glances back at the Sky Warp console)* All right then. Now—let's prepare the jump. Same formation as before: two groups of three.

Lorenzo: *(grinning faintly)* Another wormhole ride... Ack. Be still, my aching back.

Elvir: Round two through the cosmic blender—to boldly fold! Woop-ooop-ooop-ooop-ooop!

Krista: Better than flying economy. Ha-ha... Hey. Speaking of flying... what about the pilot? He's probably going to be waiting at that airstrip for a while, wondering where we disappeared to.

Cooper: You're right, Krista—but if that energy shield grid is still up over the Cay, what help can he really be?

Krista: Still, we can't just leave the poor guy sitting out there, thinking we ghosted him.

Narrator: Meanwhile, Dew tries to re-establish contact with the Steelwind-Three through the satellite phone, but the signal doesn't go through. He frowns, then cuts into Krista and Cooper's conversation.

Dew: Not much we can do now since I can't reach him. How about this—once we're on the Cay, we'll try to make contact and let him know where we are. (*half-smirking*) Not sure how we'll explain that one, though. (*then briefly looks at Dr. Sloane, cracks a smile*) Minus obviously how we did it...

Vilmer: Yeah... not sure he's ready to process that one.

Narrator: Dew gives Vilmer a small smirk, pockets the satellite phone, and his expression hardens with resolve before addressing Dr. Sloane.

Dew: Let's do this, Doctor. Get us to Pomodoro Cay.

Narrator: Dr. Sloane moves to the Sky Warp's console and powers it up. As before, a low hum fills the room as the device comes online. A few moments later, her hands move swiftly over the controls, manually entering the precise coordinates for Pomodoro Cay. Once finished, she turns to Dew and the others, signaling that the system is ready.

Dr. Sloane: Coordinates locked. System's ready.

Narrator: Dew, Lorenzo, and Krista step forward and take their positions on the teleportation pads. Their silhouettes glow in soft blue as energy threads through the chamber's conduits. Dr. Sloane grasps the activation lever and pulls it down in one smooth motion. The Sky Warp responds instantly. Its core deepens from blue to white, the light rotating in layered spirals that build upon themselves until the air hums like struck glass. A faint tremor runs through the floor as the field stabilizes around the trio. The glow sharpens—dense, alive—rippling against their outlines until they blur at the edges. Dew glances between his

teammates. No words—only an understanding shared in the light. A sharp flash. And they're gone. Without hesitation, Dr. Sloane resets the Sky Warp's controls and signals to the next group—Cooper, Elvir, and Vilmer—who quickly step onto the pads. She steadies herself, then pulls the lever once more. A surge of power floods the room as the Sky Warp's twin gemstones—the *Time* and *Gravity Elementomes*—resonate in harmony, generating a shimmering distortion of light around the trio. Elvir winks at Sloane. Cooper salutes. Vilmer straightens, expression firm. This time, the energy rises faster. The field ripples outward, bending light into ribbons that twist and converge. A low, magnetic hum overtakes the air; the hair on everyone's arms lifts from the static. Space folds inward on the trio, the glow tightening—compressing—until it collapses with a burst of blinding white. The hum fades, the Sky Warp settles into stillness. Dr. Sloane stands motionless at the console, the fading glow reflected in her lenses.

CHAPTER 24 – INTERLUDE AT POMODORO CAY



Narrator: The scene cuts back to Pomodoro Cay as the morning sun hovers above the energy shield grid covering the entire cay. Suddenly, a wormhole tears open in staggered bursts of pale blue light, spitting out Dew and the party in two groups of three. This time they land with controlled footing, avoiding the clumsy crashes of earlier jumps as the crimson dust puffs gently around their boots. Each trio steadies themselves, eyes adjusting to the scorched expanse of the cay. When the final ripple of energy shimmers and collapses inward, the wormhole seals with a muted thrum — a soft, dying vibration that fades into the heavy stillness of the morning air. Dew looks around to check up on the other party members.

Dew: ...Looks like we're all here...

Vilmer: Ah. Another happy landing...

Elvir: Ah, that wasn't so bad... I didn't eat dirt this time. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk.

Krista: I didn't end up in a human pile. Better than I expected.

Lorenzo: And I didn't damn-near break my back this time... I'll take that as a win.

Cooper: Well, it looks like we all fared well this time around... So... this is Pomodoro Cay.

Lorenzo: Whew... it's stupid hot out here—hotter than Llivisaca and Demmin.

Krista: Yeah... that energy shield grid being up feels like someone microwaved the air.

Elvir: The only good heat like this does is it's great for the pores... terrible for the hair. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: They take in the terrain ahead: red sand stretching over uneven ground, broken by jagged rock and the rusted remains of Mesovillain test rigs half-buried in debris fields. Beyond that, dense undergrowth rises toward a thick inland canopy, its shadowed mass swallowing most of the island's interior. Above them, the energy shield grid bends the sunlight into a shimmering haze that makes the horizon ripple and distort.

Lorenzo: Yo... what's with the red sand..?

Vilmer: It's iron oxide.

Lorenzo: Hm? What the heck is that..?

Vilmer: Heat and saltwater... it'll do that. But these scorch marks—*(then points to the blackened patterns in the sand)*—this didn't happen naturally. By the looks of it, this place was a weapons testing ground. That's what cooked the soil and turned it red.

Lorenzo: Huh. Even the sand out here mad. Learn somethin' new every day.

Narrator: Vilmer cracks a small smile at Lorenzo's comment. Krista, still studying the tree line with narrowed eyes, finally breaks the silence.

Krista: That jungle ahead of us... looks like it wants to eat us alive.

Lorenzo: Heh... and it ain't even smilin' at us. That's never a good sign.

Elvir: (*goofy wobble*) Wouldn't that be somethin' — comin' all this way just to get eaten by shrubbery. Not exactly the heroic end I pictured... Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Vilmer: Relax. It's just plants. Worst they can do is poke you.

Elvir: Oh, sure— right up until one wraps 'round your leg and drags you straight into the dirt.

Krista: ...Thank you for that image, Elvir. Really comforting.

Elvir: It could be worse... you could have brain fog after rubbin' your bean while tryin' to wade through that mess. I imagine that wouldn't be fun.

Cooper: Heh. I once overheard a guy talking with a friend at one of my duty stations, back when I was still serving in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE, saying that a full can of Red Ram energy drink mixed with no-pulp orange juice clears those post-solo-session cobwebs right up. And what do you know—he was right. When I tried it, it felt like nothing even happened afterward. Ha-ha...

Narrator: A heavy pause settles over the group. One by one, they turn toward Cooper, all wearing the same expression—unsure how to respond. Dew arches an eyebrow. Krista freezes in place. Vilmer blinks twice. Lorenzo scratches his chin, while Elvir's eyebrows lift in intrigue as she nods. A dry gust skims across the red sand, stretching the silence just long enough to become uncomfortable before Cooper finally notices their stares.

Cooper: What? It's true... I probably could've done it six times in a day, drank that mixture, and been good as new.

Narrator: Cooper shrugs and offers a faint smile. The silence returns—until Vilmer clears his throat.

Vilmer: ...He's not wrong.

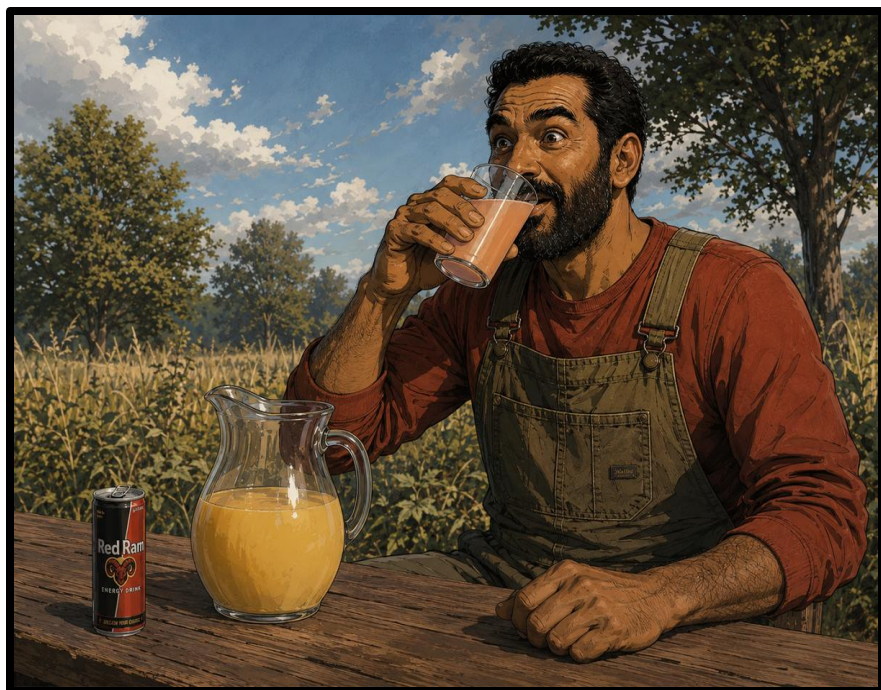
Narrator: Everyone slowly turns toward Vilmer.

Krista: Vilmer...

Vilmer: What? I'm just sayin'. Red Ram and no-pulp orange juice work.

Dew: ...How do you know that?

Vilmer: Because I tried it many times. When you're in seclusion, like I was, you get bored and quite creative. I happened to discover that combo by accident. It does clear your head—the one between your shoulders—right up.



- Krista: *(nodding her head, half-amused)* Okaayyy...
- Narrator: Then there is another pause—longer this time—before Lorenzo comments.
- Lorenzo: Man... why y'all just be tellin' on yourselves?
- Elvir: Now that's proper scientific research right there. Gotta respect it.
- Cooper: Thank you, Elvir. Thank you, Vilmer. See? Told ya. It's basically a life hack.
- Vilmer: ...A "life hack" that tastes like battery acid and raisins, but clears up post-nut regret like magic.
- Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...
- Narrator: Lorenzo clears his throat, clearly deciding this is not a conversation worth continuing.
- Lorenzo: ...Y-yeah, anyway—if anything grabs me, somebody better have a camera ready. I wanna see my "heroic struggle."
- Krista: Oh? More like dramatic flailing.
- Lorenzo: Hey—flailin' can be heroic.
- Krista: Sure. In your case, it'll just be loud.
- Dew: And messy. Definitely messy—and it would be a downer to watch.

Cooper: ...A downer like doing it six times in a day, without the Red Ram and no-pulp orange juice to clear your head afterward. Yep...

Dew: All right, that's enough of that... Ha-ha. Interesting remedy, though—I may need to keep that in mind and try it out someday. Well... we're here now. The *Bush of Life* cultists could be running patrols nearby. Keep your eyes sharp. Everyone ready?

Narrator: The party gives Dew a unified nod before moving out, stepping together toward the dense canopy ahead. Dew and the others press deeper inland, the canopy sealing them beneath a twisting lattice of shadow and humidity. The air thickens, growing still — too still — as the first hints of violence begin to surface along the jungle floor. Spent shell casings lie half-buried in red dust. Scorched ferns curl inward like burned parchment. A faint, metallic ribbon of gunpowder drifts between the trees. They come across the first bodies soon after. *Bush of Life* cultists lie slumped in stiff, awkward heaps — older kills, no more than a day old. Their blood has dried into dark crusts, and their skin has begun to dull under the humidity. Xiphos swords hang from limp hands or lie nearby. The wounds across these bodies are unmistakably varied: wide, forceful, sweeping slashes that cut deep into bone and armor — the kind Rena delivers with her scythe — mixed with shorter, sharper, more controlled cuts that belong to someone else entirely. Shotgun impacts blast through the rest. Dew and the party recognize the pattern immediately and silently acknowledge the handiwork of their friends Rena, Johnny, and the third person with them. As they press onward, they come across the next bodies — fresher ones, only hours old. Bright blood still pools across roots and leaves, the soil unsettled beneath them. Some cultists have slumped behind cover as if they'd tried to regroup; others dropped mid-stride in retreat. The wound pattern has changed again: shotgun blasts and those same smaller, controlled slashing strikes — but no heavy, sweeping arcs like before. Rena's signature blows are absent. One cultist leans against a tree, chest split by a diagonal strike — deep, powerful, but narrower than the kind Rena would inflict. Another

lies pinned beneath a gash that carved down into shoulder and ribs, the blood still tacky and fresh. The party slows. For a moment, no one speaks. Then Vilmer exhales through his nose, crouching to examine the disturbed soil and the angle of the wounds on one of the bodies.

Vilmer: (quietly) ...These last ones weren't Rena's. Just two people fighting — outnumbered... and running low on strength. Johnny... and the other person.

Dew: Hm... must've been after Rena was captured and taken in...

Vilmer: Most likely...

Narrator: Vilmer rises to his feet as Dew's jaw tightens. Dew gives a single nod, signaling the party to move on. Eventually, the signs of slain *Bush of Life* cultists fade, and the faint trail winds toward a natural break in the foliage. The canopy thins just enough for morning light to spill through, revealing a narrow passage framed by rust-stained cliffs. Vines hang like torn curtains along the stone, and as the party moves between the jagged walls, a shadowed opening emerges — a half-hidden limestone hollow rising from the gloom. Dew motions the party forward, and they slip into the limestone hollow with measured steps, their footwear whispering over the cool, powdery floor. The air shifts immediately—damp, mineral-heavy, tinged with the unmistakable hint of recent presence. Their eyes adjust to the dim, uneven light as they advance deeper between jutting stone columns and calcified drips that hang like frozen fangs. A few minutes in, the space widens into a cramped alcove where the remnants of a makeshift camp sit undisturbed. Dew and the party halt—just as Johnny Torrio, minus his sunglasses, bursts from behind a stack of limestone slabs, bruised, dirt-caked, and breathing hard, a shotgun braced across his body like a batter lining up the perfect pitch. Gaz steps in tight behind him, machete glinting in the weak light. Instinct kicks in: the party draws their weapons. The figure's silhouette is just that—an armed, battered shape in the half-dark. Johnny's eyes go wild for a moment, flicking from face to face, tightening his grip on the shotgun; Dew and the others are just as uncertain, unable to tell who's standing in front of them. Then the figure speaks—hoarse, strained—and Dew and the party immediately

recognize the voice, the familiarity cutting through the tension like a spark.

Torrio: What the—? Oh! It's you guys...

Narrator: Johnny's shoulders finally loosen as the shotgun dips toward the floor, the tension bleeding out of him in a long, shaky exhale. Dew and the others lower their weapons and surge forward, relief overriding every other instinct.

Dew: Johnny Torrio... so, we meet again.

Vilmer: Thank Chosha you're alive...

Lorenzo: Alive and lookin' like shit, bro. And without your sunglasses.

Torrio: Heh. Yeah, yeah... thanks, Lorenzo. Nice seein' you too. All o' you. So, the cavalry finally shows up, huh? Gotta say, I wasn't bettin' on that.

Narrator: Krista and Elvir angle past Johnny, catching sight of the second figure stepping into the cavern's filtered light. Gaz emerges with a wide, shameless, goofy grin. Krista and Elvir's eyes widen.

Krista: Gaz?

Elvir: Ooh... so you were the third one taggin' along...

Gaz: Hellooo, Krista. (*then eyeing Lorenzo and Elvir*) Oh, my two favorite torturers are here too. Ahh, the memories... the poundings... Mmm... that licorice-flavored jelly bean nailing me right in the left eye... ohhh, truly unforgettable. It's been ages, babes...

Lorenzo: Freaky-ass dude...

Narrator: Gaz flashes a pervy grin but suddenly freezes, squinting at Elvir's *Hozho* chest plate and updated attire before blurting out his confusion.

Gaz: Elvir... honey, what is this new gear? You tryin' to be a Voltron Paladin now? Where's your robot lion?

Narrator: Johnny turns as well, finally noticing the change.

Torrio: Hm... nah, nah. She's lookin' more like a Beetleborg — just one chrome plate shy o' the full getup. But yeah... nice new digs, kid.

Elvir: Hah. Thanks for noticing. And if you didn't know, I'm a *Hozho*.

Gaz: You're a *Hozho*?! The holy heroes?! Since when, darling?!

Elvir: (*smirking*) Since forever...

Torrio: Huh. Rena never mentioned that to us. I'll be damned...

Gaz: *(wagging his fingers, thoroughly entertained)* Ohhh, this just got delightfully interesting... *(then spots Dew and gives him a playful, flirtatious wave)* Mmm... well hellooo, handsome. Miss me..?

Narrator: Dew gives a small, exasperated nod that almost passes for a smile. Johnny huffs a tired laugh, still trying to process that they're actually all here before pressing further.

Torrio: Hey, Dew... Rena told me you were in a coma. What's up with that? And how the hell did you even know where to find us?

Dew: Well, I was in a coma—but that wasn't going to keep me down or stop us from continuing our journey. When I woke, I found a letter from Rena saying she wanted to handle this alone. I wasn't about to let her do that. We returned to the Ganas Commune, heard you'd left with her, and followed every rumor, every whisper, every trail until it led straight to Pomodoro Cay. So... here we are.

Narrator: Johnny squints—half suspicious, half impressed—before questioning Dew again.

Torrio: All right, tough guy... then tell me this. How'd you all get past that energy shield grid? Thing went up a few hours ago. I saw Mesovillian ships cruisin' the coast. Looks like those *Bush of Life* chuckleheads got it online faster than expected.

Narrator: Dew hesitates, glancing back at the others before answering.

Dew: ...During one of our stops, we interrogated a *Bush of Life* cultist. They told us everything. And as for the barrier—well, we—

Narrator: Before Dew can continue, Krista cuts in, eyeing Gaz.

Krista: Gaz. I thought you were supposed to be rotting in a cell back at Ganas.

Gaz: Oh, I was—tragically! But then Johnny here comes waltzing in with a better offer: freedom... with a side of bullets. Like I'm gonna say no to that..? Good thing it did happen. Me and Johnny have become the best of friends during all this.

Torrio: Tch. Yeah... somethin' like that. We've had each other's backs through all this. But don't go makin' it weird, Gaz.

Narrator: Gaz smirks, thrilled, leaning in with a mischievous sparkle. Lorenzo cuts in, shifting the focus back to Johnny.

Lorenzo: ...We saw them bodies on the way in. Y'all were runnin' a whole one-sided war out here.

Torrio: Nah. More like a botched rescue job. Those *Bush of Life* meatheads hit us hard while we were cuttin' inland. We fought 'til we couldn't, but Rena got dragged off. (*then shakes his head, jaw tightens*) ...We made it to a clearing—there's an underground missile-silo complex there. That's where they ambushed us. After she was taken, we fell back and holed up in this spot. Good for hit-and-runs... although I burned through every shell I had left. Shame the shotgun's just a metal stick now. But hey—the best part? These cultist clowns don't even know this place exists. Oh—and my sunglasses? Yeah... somewhere in all that mess, they got knocked clean off. No freakin' idea where they ended up. But the silo entrance? Forget about it. Too many guards. We tried.

Dew: Yeah... we already know about the silo. You think you can lead us there?

Torrio: (*nods*) Sure. But like I said—front door's a problem, even with extra hands.

Lorenzo: If the front way's the only way in, then we'll bust in that bitch. We ain't here to knock or be polite—we're here to get Rena and shut this doomsday circus down.

Cooper: Sounds like the front entry's straight-up suicide. Maybe barging in ain't the ideal plan...

Krista: Johnny and Cooper are right. Charging in head-on just gets us all killed.

Torrio: Unfortunately, it's the only way in. Trust me—Gaz and I already tried looking for another route. Nada.

Vilmer: Mm. Then it seems the universe insists on being dramatic. Fine. If the front door is the only door, we'll simply make sure it's their funeral, not ours.

Lorenzo: Damn straight, Vilmer! If that's how it's gotta be, then let's go crack some cultist skulls.

Narrator: While the others argue their way toward a plan, Elvir stands off to the side in silence—eyes narrowed, deep in thought. Dew finally steps in, cutting through the bickering.

Dew: Hm. How about this—let's get there first... and decide what to do next, okay..?

Lorenzo: Ah, hell... fine. Okay, man. Let's do that then.

Krista: Fair enough.

Vilmer: Yeah... all right. No harm in taking a look first.

Cooper: Agreed, Dew. It's better to scope things out first, then the proper strategy will present itself...

Narrator: Elvir gives a small nod—quiet, but resolute.

Torrio: All right, all right... sounds like a plan to me. We'll head that way, nice 'n steady.

Gaz: Mmm... yes, let's go! The band is back together again! Ooooh, somebody hold my hand in case I trip over somethin' heroic.

Narrator: Gaz's voice bursts through the hollow with theatrical enthusiasm, practically bouncing off the limestone walls. Johnny slowly turns his head toward him, giving him a long, flat stare—no words, not even a sigh. Gaz only grins wider, utterly unbothered. Johnny exhales through his nose, pinching the bridge of it before turning back to Dew and the party. His posture tightens into something sharper, more controlled—that quiet, streetwise edge slipping back into place.

Torrio: Yeah... so... whenever you're ready, Dew... let's go do this, huh?

Narrator: Dew looks over at the other party members, who give him reassuring, confirming nods. He turns back to Johnny and speaks.

Dew: Yeah. Looks like we're all ready to go. (*then glances down at Rena's talisman tucked beneath his shirt, pressing it lightly between his fingers*) Hold on, Rena... we're coming. (*then drops his hand, turns to Johnny*) Oh... hey, Johnny. Sorry about your sunglasses, by the way.

Narrator: Johnny blinks at him—once, twice—then huffs out a short, incredulous laugh.

Torrio: Ha-ha-ha... Oh, those? Yeah, they were one of my favorites. But... (*then reaches into his vest and whips out a fresh pair*) Please. You think Johnny Torrio walks into a warzone carryin' just one pair?

Narrator: He snaps the new shades open with a flourish and slides them onto his face like he's stepping into a slow-motion action shot. The others stare at him in

impressed disbelief. Dew just blinks at him, wide-eyed for a beat—then shrugs.



Torrio:

Narrator:

Follow me and Gaz, guys...

Johnny hefts his empty shotgun like a baseball bat, and Gaz—machete in hand, grin wide enough to shine—takes the lead toward the narrow passage exiting the limestone hollow. Dew and the rest of the party fall in behind them. Once they emerge back onto the cay, they follow Johnny and Gaz into the jungle that swallows them once more. Branches claw lightly at their clothes, red sand clings stubbornly to their boots, and the oppressive heat hums with the

relentless drone of cicadas—a vibrating wall of sound beneath the shimmering energy shield grid overhead. Just as they settle into a steady, focused pace, a sharp electronic trill cuts through the thick air. The group stops instantly. Dew reaches into his vest and pulls out the satellite phone. The caller ID flickers across the screen: STE pilot, Steelwind-Three. He signals for the others to wait, then lifts the phone to his ear and answers.

Dew: *(into phone)* Steelwind-Three, go ahead.

Steelwind-Three: *(strained, confused)* Mr. Wilder—finally. I've been trying to reach you for the last forty minutes, ever since I got back to the airstrip here in southern Demmin. What's going on? According to your GPS signature, you're no longer anywhere near Demmin. You're... you're at Pomodoro Cay?

Narrator: The others glance toward Dew, who's holding the satellite phone to his ear, unsure of how to react. Johnny looks back with a raised brow, while Gaz leans in like eavesdropping is a competitive sport. Dew steps off to the side as Steelwind-Three keeps talking.

Steelwind-Three: *(frantic)* Mr. Wilder, I dropped you all off a few hours ago. How in Chosha's name did you jump hundreds of miles across the map?! My gear must be malfunctioning or something...

Dew: *(interrupting, steady)* Your gear's fine. And yes—we're at Pomodoro Cay. We had... help getting here.

Steelwind-Three: *Help? How the—? What kind of help—?*

Dew: *(firm, stalling)* Uh... well... you see—

Narrator: A brief silence hangs in the air as Dew searches for his next words. The others watch him with growing uncertainty. Johnny finally leans in, unable to hold back.

Torrio: Dew... everything all right?

Narrator: Dew gives Johnny a quick, reassuring nod — firm, but clearly meant to shut down any further questions. A faint crackle of static whispers through the line before Dew continues responding to Steelwind-Three.

Dew: ...No. Never mind that... Listen—here's what matters: we're here, and we'll take down the energy shield

grid once we get inside the underground missile silo. When it's down, Mesovillian forces can move in. What I need from you is to relay our position—and our objective—to the Interim Premier immediately.

Narrator: Upon overhearing Dew mention the Interim Premier, Gaz quietly takes note, while Johnny stands nearby, muttering to himself.

Steelwind-Three: *(frustrated, bewildered)* Hold on—Mr. Wilder, you're asking me to report this in without telling me how you even got there. Jumping from southern Demmin to the cay isn't something you just... do. What am I supposed to tell command?

Dew: Just tell them we're here and moving to shut down that energy shield grid. That's all they need to know.

Steelwind-Three: *Hm... all right. Understood. I'll alert command. But listen—Pomodoro Cay is a restricted zone. Even as your pilot, I can't launch without clearance. Once command authorizes the flight, I'll head your way. Until then... you all stay alive out there, all right?*

Dew: Understood — and appreciate it.

Narrator: The satellite phone crackles as the signal begins to fade, the connection breaking in and out. Steelwind-Three manages to push through one final message before the call drops.

Steelwind-Three: *Looks like I'm losing signal again... but—roger that. I'll be in contact as soon as I can get through. Steelwind-Three out.*

Narrator: The call ends with a faint beep as the satellite phone finally loses signal. Dew lowers the device and slips it back into his vest. The party stands beneath the heavy canopy, eyes shifting between one another. Johnny, arms folded and eyebrow raised, speaks first.

Torrio: You know... even though I couldn't hear what that person—some kinda pilot, I'm guessin'—was sayin', it sure looked like you were sidesteppin' his questions about how you all got here. Mind finally tellin' us how that happened?

Gaz: *(leans in, theatrical whisper)* Oooh, Dew — very mysterious. Very clandestine. I'm utterly intrigued.

Krista: Let's just say... the trip here wasn't exactly your standard ferry ride. Ha-ha...

Lorenzo: Man... yeah. My back still ain't forgivin' me from that first jump, yo...

Torrio: First jump, huh? (*raises brow higher*) Interesting...

Vilmer: It's complicated. Some things don't need explaining.

Torrio: Really, now..? And speakin' of that pilot—how'd you even get one? You folks workin' for the Mesovillian government now or somethin'?

Dew: Not officially.

Cooper: But we're operating in... let's call it an unofficial capacity. And it's in the Mesovillian government's best interest that we succeed in stopping the *Bush of Life*.

Torrio: Huh. Well, that's somethin'. Why the hell didn't Rena tell me any of this? That woman and her secrets...

Dew: It's not like that. Everything happened after she parted ways with us—while I was still in the coma.

Torrio: (*slow nod*) All right. All right... that makes sense. Long as we ain't walkin' into somethin' we ain't gonna walk out of, I ain't pressin' it further.

Gaz: Ohhh, this just got so much more interesting. Very... If y'all got a *Hozho*, a pilot, and secret ways of transportation? Honey, imagine what else you're hidin'. (*gasp*) A magical wooden mask that goes "wooga-booga!" and makes you invincible for five seconds? Some kinda mythic triangle relic that grants wishes? Or a sword bigger than you are?! (*turns to Dew, hand on chest*) Because trust me, handsome — you could totally swing one at me. Mmm...

Dew: Yeah... uh-huh... anyway. We should keep moving.

Torrio: Yeah. We got a little ways ahead of us, but that Underground Missile Silo entrance? Shouldn't be too far now.

Narrator: Dew nods, and the party regroups around him, falling in behind Johnny and Gaz as the pair take the lead once again, guiding them deeper into the jungle toward the underground missile silo. Sometime later, they stop just short of the clearing. Crouched behind the brush at a distance, they spot two-armed *Bush of*

Life cultists standing guard at what appears to be the silo's access door—the entrance to the underground missile complex.

Torrio: (*squinting*) Yeah... that's the entrance. Huh. Would ya look at that—security's a lot lighter than last time.

Gaz: Only two of 'em? Honey, there used to be, what—six? Eight? Every time we did our little hit-and-run shuffle!

Dew: They must be focused on finishing the launch preparations—and synthesizing the viruses.

Krista: So... guys, did we all figure out how we're getting through the front door without alerting those guards?

Narrator: Elvir suddenly rises to her feet with zeal, a smirk spreading across her face as she steps forward.

Elvir: I've got it covered. Leave it with me, yeah..?

Krista: You got it covered?

Cooper: Ooh, I bet this'll be good.

Dew: Elvir, wait a minute—

Narrator: Elvir ignores Dew and the others, continuing into the clearing before disappearing from view. The rest watch her in silence, puzzled, until Lorenzo finally speaks.

Lorenzo: Aw hell... she's about to do somethin' stupid, ain't she?

Narrator: Dew responds with a silent shrug. The scene cuts to Elvir stepping out from the treeline into full view of the *Bush of Life* cultist guards—one armed with a rifle, the other with a shotgun. Red sand swirls around her boots as she dusts off her polished *Hozho* chest plate. From nowhere, she produces a black top hat, flicks it open like a stage performer, and settles it atop her head. She snaps her fingers twice, then launches into a tap—brilliant and cocky—breaking into song as the now-alert guards stare on in stunned silence.

Elvir: *"When life seems full of clouds and rain,
And I am filled with naught but pain,
Who soothes my thumpin', bumpin' brain?"*

Nobody!” (then points dramatically at the stunned guards, and bows)

*“When winter comes with snow and sleet,
And I’m left hungry, cold of feet,
Who says, ‘Here’s two bits—go and eat?’
Nobody!”*

Narrator: Elvir kicks into a faster tap—mock Charleston kicks, a sideways shuffle, red dust billowing like stage fog.

Elvir: *(ad-libbing, between verses)* C’mon, boys! Keep up! I’ve got one more verse before intermission!

*“I ain’t never done nothin’ to nobody,
I ain’t never got nothin’ from nobody—no time!
And until I get somethin’ from somebody, sometime,
I don’t intend to do nothin’ for nobody—no time!”*



Narrator: She finishes with a flourish, tips her hat, then hurls it at the guards like a distraction grenade before darting back into the brush. The two *Bush of Life* cultist guards—caught between applauding, laughing, and the sudden realization that she may be an intruder—

snap to attention and charge after her as they burst into the undergrowth leaving the entrance of the silo unattended. Elvir races back toward Dew and the others, who lie hidden in wait. She deliberately slows, allowing the two guards to close the distance. Only then do Dew, the party, Johnny, and Gaz realize what Elvir had planned all along, and they spring into action. The ambush unfolds in a blur of coordinated strikes: Krista hurls her boomerang, striking one guard's hand and forcing him to drop his shotgun before Lorenzo slams into him from the side, driving him into the dirt and knocking him out cold. Cooper jams his mop against the other guard's rifle, locking it in place, as Johnny swings the butt of his empty shotgun into the cultist's head, snapping it sideways and dropping him instantly. As it all unfolds, Elvir steps aside, watching calmly with Dew, Vilmer, and Gaz. With both *Bush of Life* guards now disarmed and unconscious, Vilmer kneels beside one of them, patting down his gear. He finds a keycard and holds it up for Dew and the others to see.

Vilmer: I suppose this'll be useful...

Narrator: Vilmer rises to his feet and hands the keycard to Dew. Nearby, Lorenzo spots a bandolier of shotgun shells tucked beneath the other guard's cloak and scoops them up before calling out to Johnny.

Lorenzo: Yo, Johnny. Catch.

Narrator: He tosses the shells. Johnny snatches them mid-air, grinning appreciatively.

Torrio: Ohhh, baby—Daddy's back in business. Thanks. (*then starts reloading his empty shotgun*)

Gaz: (*to Torrio*) That's right, Johnny... load it slow, sugar. Mmm... let me savor the moment.

Torrio: (*turning to Gaz, unsettled*) Gaz. No.

Gaz: Aww... (*then frowns*)

Narrator: Meanwhile, Lorenzo and Vilmer quickly zip-tie the two unconscious *Bush of Life* guards and drag them into the brush, concealing them from view. Nearby,

Elvir hops in place, clearly delighted by how flawlessly her plan worked.

Elvir: See? Plan worked like a charm. And you're all welcome! Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Cooper: I knew you'd pull it off.

Narrator: Cooper gives Elvir a high-five.

Gaz: Well—something fabulous happened out there, and I'm not mad about it.

Krista: Yeah—well—I can't argue with results.

Torrio: Thanks, kid.

Narrator: Lorenzo and Vilmer then walk over to rejoin the party, offering their input to Elvir.

Lorenzo: I guess that's why you're one of "Chosha's chosen", eh...

Vilmer: I never doubted you, young one...

Narrator: Dew gives Elvir a silent nod of approval, then gestures toward the clearing

Dew: Thanks to Elvir's shenanigans, the path's clear. Let's get moving, everybody.

Narrator: With the stolen keycard in hand and zero alarms behind them, Dew, the party, Johnny, and Gaz hurry to the clearing and descend a short flight of concrete steps into a recessed outer stairwell. The metal stairwell cover looms overhead, propped open, as Dew swipes the keycard and the now-unguarded silo access door unlocks with a muted click. One by one, they slip inside. Elvir brings up the rear, entering last with a prideful smile—almost like taking a bow—before the reinforced door seals behind her and she descends into the dim steel corridors of the underground missile silo to rejoin the others.

CHAPTER 25 – STIRRING THE HORNETS' NEST



Narrator:

The scene cuts to the interior of the underground missile silo complex, which greets Dew, the party, Johnny, and Gaz with a cold, stagnant stillness. Overhead lights buzz faintly, some flickering and casting uneasy shadows along the steel-paneled walls. Dew leads the way, pulling out the satellite phone and bringing up the archived schematics, their sharp, steady glow cutting through the dim, unreliable fluorescents above.

Dew:

(low, focused) Hm. It looks like the Access Portal is through this corridor... let's go.

Narrator: Dew continues leading the party—Johnny and Gaz included—down a narrow hall until they reach the lip of the Access Portal shaft. A grated staircase spirals downward, disappearing into a dim orange glow roughly thirty-five feet below. The group pauses, exchanging remarks as the stale air, echoing metal, and oppressive depth of the silo settle in before they descend.

Krista: Looks like a lot of stairs there... huh?

Dew: Yep. Sure is.

Elvir: Nyaaaaaahhhhhh! ...Blimey. Places like this are designed to make you regret leg day. Ugh. Right then—let's see how I fare lugging around all this gear.

Narrator: Lorenzo sniffs the air, his expression twisting with displeasure before commenting.

Lorenzo: Man... this place smells like a toolbox and a locker room had a baby. Straight foul.

Elvir: ...Or two robots having sex.

Cooper: Ha-ha... it does. Well, there's only one way in from here, and that's going down...

Gaz: Ohh. "Going down" into the depths... Mmm...

Narrator: Johnny gives Gaz a quick glance, then shakes his head at the sexually innuendo-laced comment. Dew then addresses the party.

Dew: Everyone ready..?

Narrator: The party nods and begins the descent, each step slow and deliberate. As they move deeper, the hum of silo machinery grows louder—a steady mechanical pulse vibrating through the steel walls. At the base of the stairs, the corridor opens into the Entrapment Area, now repurposed as a security checkpoint. Dew lifts a fist. Everyone stops in place. They lean in just enough to survey what lies ahead. A metal half-wall marks a control position at the far end, with five-armed *Bush of Life* cultists carrying rifles positioned behind it and along the reinforced walls, covering the only path forward. Vilmer makes a quiet remark to the others.

Vilmer: *(whispering)* Well... this complicates things.

Krista: *(whispering)* Nothing says “welcome” like a firing squad in the waiting...

Lorenzo: *(to Elvir, whispering)* You got any more distractions up your sleeve? ‘Cause we’re runnin’ real thin right now.

Elvir: *(to Lorenzo, whispering)* I don’t think another song and dance is gonna help us out here.

Narrator: Before Dew and the others can decide on their next move, a *Bush of Life* cultist on the far side glances up toward a convex security mirror mounted high along the side wall near the corridor’s corner. He squints, leaning forward slightly as subtle movement ripples across the warped reflection.

BOL Cultist 20: *(low, uncertain)* Huh? What’s that?

Narrator: Piquing the curiosity of another cultist, he steps closer, his gaze following toward the convex security mirror. In the curved glass, multiple distorted figures cluster near the stairwell entrance.

BOL Cultist 21: What the—wait a second... Intruders!

Narrator: Dew and the others flinch back in silent disbelief; aware they’ve been discovered but unsure how. A moment later, realization hits. Their gazes snap upward and to the side, catching the convex security mirror mounted high along the wall.

Torrio: Where the heck did that dome come from..?

Dew: Damn. A convex security mirror...

Krista: A what..?

Cooper: Old-school passive coverage. Predates surveillance cameras.

Krista: Uh. Okay. Um. Is that what that is? And we’re just noticing that thing now...

Cooper: Yeah. I didn’t see it either.

Narrator: Dew quickly puts away the satellite phone in his inner vest pocket, then turns to the others as the alerted, armed *Bush of Life* cultists prepare their approach.

Dew: ...It doesn’t matter now. There’s no turning back. We’ve got to move forward. Let’s take them.

Lorenzo: You’re speaking my language. *(then clenches his fist, the brass knuckles glinting)* Already on it.

Narrator:

Dew and the party break cover as one, weapons drawn. They surge into the open, closing the distance before the five *Bush of Life* cultists can fully react. Suppressed shots crack through the Entrapment Area, rounds snapping off reinforced steel as sparks scatter in the dim light. Dew and Lorenzo hit first. Dew's bo staff snaps up, knocking a rifle aside before slamming into a cultist's ribs and driving him back into the half-wall. Lorenzo is already there—his brass knuckles crash into the cultist's masked face with a brutal follow-up, dropping him hard to the concrete. To the left, Cooper and Krista move in tandem. Cooper slides low, sweeping a cultist's legs out from under him with the mop handle as Krista's boomerang arcs in from the side, cracking the cultist across the head with its blunt edge. The mask snaps sideways as he collapses. On the right flank, Vilmer's grappling hook snaps out, wrapping around a rifle and yanking it free. Elvir is on the cultist instantly—she darts in low, dual daggers flashing as she drives the disarmed cultist to the floor with a sharp, concussive strike, pinning him before he can recover. Johnny anchors the center. He raises his shotgun and fires a controlled blast, the thunderous report slamming one cultist backward and dropping him where he stands. The last cultist barely has time to turn before Gaz glides forward, machete flashing in a smooth, theatrical arc. The blade strikes clean, slaying him. With all the cultists seemingly down, Dew and the party begin to regroup. Unnoticed by them, the cultist Dew and Lorenzo took down—wounded and half-conscious—drags himself toward a nearby wall and slaps a recessed button before collapsing. A low, muted alert pulses through the surrounding corridors—subtle but unmistakable—as a single red-light flickers. Dew and the others immediately notice, remaining in their fighting stances with weapons drawn as the sound of approaching footsteps and shouted

voices echoes from the connecting corridor ahead. Moments later, eight more-armed cultists surge in, and the battle continues. Lorenzo charges in first, taking on two cultists at once. He barrels through them like a human battering ram, brass knuckles smashing into masked faces as Vilmer snaps his grappling hook past Lorenzo's shoulder. The cable wraps around a rifle and yanks it free, throwing one cultist off balance just long enough for Lorenzo to finish the job with a crushing body blow. Along the reinforced wall, Elvir moves in low and fast, dual daggers flashing as she engages a cultist head-on. Cooper steps in beside her, parrying a wild swing with the mop handle before slamming it across the cultist's arms. Elvir follows through instantly, driving the attacker down with a sharp, decisive strike. At the center of the checkpoint, Dew takes on two more alone. His bo staff spins into motion, deflecting rifle barrels and hammering into ribs and knees with brutal precision. One cultist drops, then the other—both disarmed and broken before they can recover. Off to the side, Krista and Gaz move together. Krista's boomerang ricochets off a cultist's mask, staggering him just long enough for Gaz to glide in, machete flashing in a clean, finishing arc. Johnny holds his ground near the corridor mouth. Two cultists rush him at once. He plants his feet, raises his shotgun, and fires twice—controlled, thunderous blasts that drop both attackers in their tracks. With the second wave of cultists defeated, silence settles in as the low, muted alert ceases and the single red light stops flickering. The party takes a moment to catch their breath. Dew pulls out the satellite phone again and checks the schematics. Elvir wipes the sweat from her brow and breaks the silence.

Elvir: Now that was a workout. Whew... bloody hell.

Lorenzo: Hah. That was just another warm-up for me.

Gaz: (*grinning*) Warm-up, huh? 'Cause I'm definitely feelin' a burn... and not just in my legs. Mmm...

Lorenzo: Easy, man. Save that energy—we ain't done yet.

Cooper: Looks like that's the end of them... for now.

Krista: They know we're here now. This place is going to be buzzing like a hornet's nest.

Vilmer: The path ahead looks clear... We should move quickly—before more of them show up.

Torrio: *(reloading his shotgun)* Yeah... good call. We made a lotta noise. Time to move, eh, Dew?

Narrator: Dew nods sharply in response to Johnny. He takes the lead again, and with weapons ready, nerves taut, and adrenaline still buzzing, the party slips deeper into the complex. Several minutes pass. Meanwhile, elsewhere within the underground missile silo—in a makeshift lab directly below the Launch Control Center—Thornton stands observing. Before him, a cabinet-sized synthesis unit hums steadily, drawing four SKT virus vials—C, A, G, and T—into a single central chamber. Inside, narrow channels pulse in steady rhythms as the genetic material is combined and processed. Several white-coated *Bush of Life* cultist scientists monitor the process in silence; their eyes fixed on synchronized readouts across multiple consoles lining the chamber. The room is bathed in a faint red glow, offset by the cold light of the consoles and readouts. The air is thick with disinfectant and the faint chemical warmth radiating from the SKT synthesis process. Suddenly, the handheld radio clipped to Thornton's belt beeps, catching his attention. He turns, unclips the radio, and answers the call.

Thornton: Yes? Report...

Myrrh: *Master... intruders have breached the Entrapment Area. Five guards are down. The reinforcement team was also neutralized.*

Thornton: Intruders..?

Myrrh: *Yes, Master. One of the survivors reported that one fought with a bo staff... another used brass knuckles... one carried a shotgun... and a female wielding dual daggers, wearing armor that looks like a discount VR Trooper. It could be Dew, the Hozho, and his friends...*



- Narrator: Upon hearing this, Thornton stiffens. The faintest trace of bafflement cuts through his usual composure beneath the mask as realization hits him about who these intruders are.
- Thornton: *(whispering to himself) It couldn't be... They reached the cay? Even with the energy shield grid up... impossible...*
- Narrator: For a brief moment, there is silence as Thornton looks over to Elizabeth's apparition, silently communicating with him. Myrrh then interrupts, speaking again over the radio.
- Myrrh: *Master..?*
- Narrator: Thornton nods at Elizabeth before responding.

Thornton: ...It's very likely them. It also seems they've grouped up with those other two that have been lingering around the cay. Hmm. Their first objective is obvious—they're here to rescue their friend, Dr. Etteip. They'll be heading for the detention area.

Myrrh: *Shall Clove and I converge on the detention area and intercept..?*

Thornton: Not yet. First—deploy the experimental bat and spider drones throughout the silo. Make them earn every step of the way.

Myrrh: *Yes, Master.*

Narrator: Thornton then turns slightly and signals to one of the nearby *Bush of Life* cultist scientists with a silent gesture. The masked female scientist nods and retrieves two glass vials—one containing a luminous violet compound labeled "AT," and the other a dark green counterpart labeled "CG," both highly volatile. Each vial bears the marking: "SKT DIMER—INTERMEDIATE SAMPLE. NOT FINAL." She carefully places them into Thornton's hand with calm, reverent precision before returning to her duties. Thornton then continues responding over radio to Myrrh.

Thornton: ...Also, assemble two squads of cultists and have them head to the detention area. You both will be joining them—but first... I will need you and your sister to report to the laboratory immediately. (*then with satisfaction*) WE have a gift for both of you—something to ensure that if Dew and his friends get that far, you will not be... inconvenienced. Consider it a temporary elevation. Until the synthesis is complete.

Myrrh: *It'll be so. We are on our way, Master...*

Narrator: Then the transmission ends. Thornton lowers the handheld radio to his waist, clips it back onto his belt, and folds his hands behind his back, once again observing the *Bush of Life* cultist scientists at work as the SKT synthesis process nears completion. Meanwhile, Dew and the party, along with Johnny and Gaz, press deeper into the bowels of the missile-silo

complex, forcing their way through the sprawling Cableway Tunnels of Upper Level 1 as experimental bat and spider drones swarm from the shadows, joined by squads of *Bush of Life* cultists pouring in. The fighting is relentless—Dew’s bo staff, Cooper’s mop, and Vilmer’s grappling hook swing and crack against cultists and drones; Lorenzo drives forward with brutal, close-range strikes as Elvir assists with her piercing dual daggers; Gaz cuts down more cultists, while Krista’s boomerang flies and Johnny’s shotgun thunders through the tunnels as drones burst into sparks. With the area cleared, the party carves forward, barely bruised, into the Crew Quarters and Living Area. There, narrow halls packed with rusted lockers and rows of cots become battlegrounds as cultists rush them in the cramped Bunk Room, only to be eventually cut down by the party. In the background, half-peeled from the concrete wall, an old avocado-green poster hangs crooked beneath a rusted bolt, bearing an almost resentful line of text: “WHO BUILT THIS SILO, A CARDIO COACH?” Pushing onward, Dew and the party storm through the Kitchen and Dining Area, clearing the last of the cultists with grim efficiency before descending the reinforced stairwell leading to the lower Cableway Tunnels of Level 2. As they continue, they face another wave of bat and spider drones, easily dispatching them as they pass a single service elevator, which the party takes note of, before reaching the entrance to the Detention Area. With the Level 2 Cableway Tunnel now cleared, Dew immediately takes the keycard from his pocket and swipes it across the panel. The reinforced door to the Detention Area slides open. Dew and the others quickly step inside, and moments later, the door slides shut with a deep metallic thud, sealing them in. Once inside, the party finds themselves in the Detention Intake Hall. The air changes immediately—cooler and drier, filtered through humming vents overhead. Several fluorescent panels flicker intermittently, their

harsh light casting rhythmic shadows across the steel-plated floor. Concrete walls, painted a dull gray, are lined with old conduit pipes and stenciled warning labels. The party remains still, cautiously taking in their surroundings, unsettled by the eerie quiet and the complete absence of guards. Dew's eyes narrow before commenting.



Dew: Hmm. It's way too quiet in here.

Cooper: Yeah... it's too quiet.

Lorenzo: What, no guards? Don't tell me we already wiped out all them hooded clowns up in here.

Elvir: *(rolling her shoulders)* Nah, Lorenzo... this is bare suspicious. This is the kind of quiet where you start hearin' creepy violin music in your head and suddenly remember every dumb thing you've ever done.

Torrio: Hah. I doubt it. There's probably more of 'em on the way—we're just overwhelmin' 'em right now. Best we move fast.

Gaz: (*eyes wide, delighted*) Ooooh... I love a dramatic setup. This is giving serious “final act” energy.

Torrio: Gaz... shut up.

Narrator: Dew lowers his bo staff to his side and pulls out the satellite phone again, quickly checking its schematics, the glow reflecting off his focused eyes.

Dew: Well... we’re definitely in the right place. Beyond this area, there’s another room, and after that... the detention cells.

Narrator: Dew then puts away the satellite phone, tightens his grip on his bo staff, raises it, and gestures forward. The others follow with their weapons raised, moving behind Dew as they enter the Equipment Storage/Evidence-Armory Chamber. Inside, they come across metal racks lining the walls. Restraint cuffs hang from hooks, along with three opened and emptied wooden crates. Dew and the party notice it immediately—leaning against the far wall, locked into a steel clamp—Rena’s scythe. The blade is unmistakable: long, curved, and deadly. Its dark steel surface catches the light with a faint, cold gleam. Krista comments.

Krista: ...It’s Rena’s scythe.

Cooper: That must mean she’s still alive. If she were dead, they wouldn’t bother storing it.

Torrio: Heh... that’s what I like to hear. Rena’s a tough broad. Ain’t the type to go down easy.

Dew: Right. Well... it’s time to take it back and return it to its rightful owner, then...

Narrator: As the others watch on, Dew steps toward the scythe secured against the far wall in a steel clamp. He briefly places his bo staff against a nearby table, then grabs the scythe’s handle. The steel clamp resists at first, then clicks as he forces it loose. He lifts the weapon with both hands. After securing the scythe and sheathing it, he retrieves his bo staff and turns to face the others.

Dew: All right... now we’re ready to head to the detention cell area...

Vilmer: ...Dew, wait.

Dew: *(then turns to Vilmer)* Hm..?

Vilmer: Before we proceed, I think it'd be a good idea to check this room for anything useful we can take. This might be our best chance to replenish our supplies.

Cooper: We might not get that luxury later on.

Torrio: Heh... trust me, kid. More ammo's never a bad thing.

Krista: It certainly wouldn't hurt. Who knows what lies ahead.

Elvir: I'm not complainin'. If there's anything useful in here, we'd be stupid not to take it. That's just good survival, innit?

Gaz: Yes! Looting time! Please tell me there's something shiny in here. If I find a grenade, I'm naming it "Destiny."

Lorenzo: Ah. And here I am, ready to get back into the action, tryna crack some more *Bush of Life* cultists' skulls... but yeah, they're right.

Dew: Yeah... why not? Let's do it. But let's make it fast, please. Rena is waiting...

Narrator: The party nods in unison and takes a moment to investigate the room, gathering items and accessories to replenish their inventory. Once they're finished, Dew and the others regroup and move toward the far exit of the Equipment Storage/Evidence-Armory Chamber. At the end of the passage, a reinforced security door stands between them and the detention wing. Dew steps forward, pulls the keycard from his pocket, and swipes it across the panel. A green light flashes. With a heavy hiss, the locking mechanism disengages, and the door slides open. Without hesitation, Dew leads the party through, entering the detention wing.

CHAPTER 26 – A CONFINED REUNION

- Narrator: Dew and the party enter the detention wing, a long, cold corridor where eight reinforced holding cells line the left wall. Each cell measures roughly eight by ten feet and is sealed behind a solid reinforced steel door with a narrow viewing slot at eye level, about six by twelve inches. The opposite side of the corridor is open, leaving a clear walkway that runs the entire length of the hall. At the far end—directly opposite the entrance they came through—another heavy security door stands shut. As the party steps inside, Dew suddenly hears a faint, muffled cough echoing from somewhere down the line of cells. His heart jumps. Without thinking, he rushes ahead of the others, Rena’s scythe gripped tightly in his hand as he passes the first four cell doors. When he reaches the fifth cell, he slows his approach. Dew leans closer to the narrow viewing slot and peers inside. The dim light reveals her sitting on the edge of the narrow bed. He then speaks softly to get her attention.
- Dew: (*quietly*) Rena...
- Narrator: Inside the dim cell, Rena lifts her head at the sound of the voice. For a moment she thinks she imagined it. Slowly, she rises from the narrow, wall-bolted military cot and walks toward the door to investigate. When she reaches the viewing slot and peers out, her eyes widen in disbelief. She catches her breath.
- Rena: ...Dew?
- Dew: Hey, Rena. Yeah... it’s me.
- Rena: (*shaking, stunned*) No... no, that’s not possible. You... you were in a coma...
- Dew: I know. But I woke up. Everyone’s here with me too. We came to get you out. Just hold on a second.
- Rena: (*softly, overwhelmed*) O-okay...
- Narrator: Dew gently leans Rena’s scythe against the nearby wall and pulls the keycard from his pocket. His hands tremble slightly as he swipes it across the panel beside the door. A small green light flashes. With a loud hydraulic hiss, the locking

mechanism disengages, and the heavy steel door opens. Dew slips the keycard back into his pocket as Rena steps forward, unsteady from exhaustion and disbelief. The moment she crosses the threshold, the weight of everything finally breaks through. She collapses into Dew's arms. He catches her, and she clutches him tightly, as if afraid he might disappear. The others finally catch up, slowing as they approach and quietly observing the two's heartfelt reunion. Rena's body trembles against Dew, her hands clutching his vest as if anchoring herself to reality while tears slowly stream down her face in relief. Dew wraps his arms around her tightly and gently presses his face into her hair.



Rena: *(voice breaking)* ...I still can't believe this...

Dew: I'm here... I'm here.

Rena: *(soft, overwhelmed)* I thought... I thought I might never see you again...

Dew: As if I was going to let that happen. Hah... Besides, like I told you before, I couldn't let you do all of this alone. We're all in this together. Remember?

Narrator: Rena pulls back slightly, still holding Dew's arms. She studies his face as if she's still trying to convince herself he's real. Her eyes flicker downward—and she notices the scythe leaning against the wall. Her expression tightens for a moment, then slowly softens.

Rena: ...You brought it.

Dew: Of course I did.

Narrator: Dew gives a faint smile. Then he gestures lightly toward the talisman necklace hanging around his neck, tucked beneath his shirt.

Dew: And this... I've been keeping it warm for you.

Narrator: Rena's eyes immediately settle on the talisman resting against his chest beneath the fabric. She reaches up, her fingers brushing it gently before letting her hand fall back to his waist.

Rena: Ha-ha... You gave that to me because your grandfather told you to give it to someone special... remember?

Dew: Yeah.

Rena: (*softly*) Well... you're special to me. It protected you... and it brought us back together. It belongs to you again. Keep it, my "shining lighthouse."

Narrator: Her lips tremble faintly. She steps closer, her hands tightening slightly on his collar. Then—without warning—Rena gently pulls Dew toward her, and they share a soft, relieved, romantic kiss full of longing. For a moment, the entire detention wing falls into stunned silence as the others, still standing nearby with their weapons in hand, quietly observe the tender moment. Cooper exhales through his nose, resting his hands on the mop he's holding, a small satisfied smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as Elvir casually leans against his shoulder, her dual daggers still in hand. Lorenzo scratches the back of his head awkwardly, his brass knuckles glinting faintly as he looks away for a moment, clearly trying to give them some privacy. Krista's expression softens warmly as she watches, her boomerang lowered at her side, relieved to see Rena alive and safe. Vilmer simply nods once, his grappling hook held loosely in his hand, his stoic face showing quiet approval. Johnny, with his shotgun resting across his shoulder, raises an eyebrow as if silently commenting on the timing,

while Gaz—machete in hand—grins widely and nods enthusiastically, as if silently cheering the moment on. Rena breaks the kiss and exhales shakily, her forehead resting against Dew's. Her voice is barely a whisper.

Rena: Dew... thank you...

Dew: Anytime, my "shining lighthouse." (*then smiles*)

Narrator: Dew squeezes her hand once—firm and reassuring. Then, as if they both suddenly remember the others watching, they release one another from their embrace and turn their attention back toward them to acknowledge their presence. Rena steadies herself beside Dew, and for a brief moment, she simply looks at the party—taking in the faces she thought she might never see again. Her expression softens as she addresses them.

Rena: (*talking aloud to herself*) You all really came... (*then nods*) ...Hey, guys.

Cooper: Hey, Rena.

Vilmer: Of course we did. You're like family, Rena.

Elvir: And family means dramatic rescue operations. It's practically tradition now.

Lorenzo: Yeah. Plus, when Dew woke from his coma, he immediately chose violence and wanted to find you.

Narrator: Rena blushes faintly at that, turning slightly toward Dew and shooting him a look.

Rena: ...I can imagine.

Narrator: Krista steps forward, unable to hold back any longer. A smile begins to form on Rena's face as she closes the distance quickly and pulls Krista into a firm, heartfelt embrace. Krista holds on tighter than expected, her grip lingering for a moment longer than usual.

Krista: (*quietly*) ...I'm so glad you're okay. We were all worried sick about you.

Narrator: Rena's gaze lowers slightly as the weight in Krista's voice settles in.

Krista: ...You really know how to disappear on people, you know that?

Rena: (*quietly*) ...I didn't want any of you caught up in this.

Krista: Too late for that.

Narrator: They continue their embrace for a moment longer before pulling back slightly from one another. Krista smiles in relief and briefly keeps a hand on Rena's shoulder before dropping it.

Krista: Next time you try to run off alone, I'm tying you to the group. Just so we're clear.

Rena: Ha-ha... Duly noted, my friend.

Narrator: Rena then turns her attention to Johnny, who approaches her with his shotgun at his side.

Torrio: ...Hey, kid.

Narrator: Rena steps forward and offers her hand. Johnny meets it, and the two pull into a quick, one-armed clasp—part handshake, part embrace—then release one another. Johnny gives a brief nod as they separate before continuing.

Rena: Thank Chosha you and Gaz are alive... I didn't know what to think after...

Torrio: Hey... you didn't gotta worry, see? We were always gonna make it outta that mess—and come lookin' for ya. (*pauses, smirks faintly*) Besides... you ain't exactly the type anyone just walks away from.

Rena: (*then nods*) Still... I'm glad you're here. Both of you...

Gaz: Absolutely, darling... we weren't about to leave you behind.

Narrator: Johnny then hoists his shotgun onto his shoulder, adjusting the strap as it settles.

Torrio: Just so you know—you owe me about three near-death experiences... and one very expensive pair o' sunglasses. Heh.

Rena: Oh? You've got plenty of those. Well... Ha-ha... I'll add the sunglasses to the list, then.

Narrator: Rena turns her attention to Elvir, her eyes immediately landing on the *Hozho* chest plate and new attire. She pauses briefly, tilting her head in curiosity before commenting.

Rena: ...Elvir?

Elvir: (*grinning wide, briefly striking a pose*) In the flesh. And upgraded, as you can plainly see.

Narrator: Rena looks her up and down—taking in the *Hozho* chest plate and its polished finish—then raises an eyebrow as her gaze returns to Elvir's.

Rena: Interesting new attire you've got going on there... Although, I have to admit... *(then gestures lightly)* Why do you look like a member of the Superhuman Samurai Syber-Squad?

Narrator: A brief beat of silence follows, then Lorenzo comments.

Lorenzo: Hah... nah, Krista and I said she look more like a Power Ranger...

Torrio: No way... more like one o' them Beetleborgs.

Gaz: Or a Voltron Paladin...

Elvir: *(then throws her hands up dramatically)* Oi—oi—here we go again! Ugh.

Rena: *(then smiles softly, respectful)* Ah... So that's what that is... I see. *(pauses, more sincere)* I didn't mean any disrespect. Ignore them. It truly is a remarkable sight... and an honor to stand in the presence of something so sacred and always by your side. My apologies.

Elvir: Hey, no harm done. You didn't cross any lines... *(then gestures lightly to the chest plate)* You know this isn't for show—I'm repping my ancestors, honoring my *Hozho* duties.

Rena: You've come a long way from that mischievous thief who stole my talisman in Llivisaca... now a holy *Hozho* warrior... Hm.

Elvir: I have. *(then smiles)* But, anyway... welcome back to the party, Rena. We all missed you.

Rena: I've missed you as well, Elvir. So, speaking of mischief, have you been staying out of trouble since I've been gone?

Elvir: Oh, mostly. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Rena: *(mildly amused)* "Mostly," huh?

Lorenzo: Man, that's a damn lie. She hasn't.

Dew: Not even close. But since you've been gone, Rena, I've actually taken a bit of a liking to Elvir's jokes and antics.

Rena: Is that so..?

Elvir: *(to Rena)* A bit odd, isn't..? I swear that coma did something to him.

Rena: Hah. I didn't see that one coming. Hmm... Now that you mention it... *(turns to Dew)* Dew, something about you seems different... stronger... more complete... *(then glances at each party member)* ...I sense all of you have become better versions of yourselves...

Vilmer: Yes, we have—and many stories to share with you from while you were gone. But it's good to have you with us again, my dear.

Rena: Thanks, Vilmer. It's good to be back.

Dew: Hey, Rena...

Rena: Yes, Dew..?

Dew: Aren't you forgetting something..?

Narrator: Dew gestures to Rena's scythe leaning against the nearby wall by her cell door. She turns and reaches for it. Her grip tightens around the weapon as she steps back beside Dew, casting him a brief glance, a quiet satisfaction settling in as it returns to her hands.

Rena: All right... it's good to have this back. Thanks for getting it for me. I'm good to go again.

Narrator: As Rena steadies herself, scythe in hand, Dew gives a faint nod. His attention shifts as he glances at the remaining three cells, then back at her.

Dew: Hey, Rena.

Rena: Yes, Dew..?

Dew: Were there any other prisoners being held here?

Rena: (*nods*) Yes. In the cell right next to mine—maybe the fourth or sixth one.

Dew: Hm. (*thinking aloud to himself*) Likely the sixth... (*then to Rena*) By the way, is his name Dr. Brundle?

Narrator: Rena's expression shifts—surprise, then curiosity.

Rena: Why, yes. Wait... how do you know his name..?

Narrator: Dew doesn't answer right away. Instead, he pulls the keycard from his pocket and steps past her toward the sixth cell. He swipes the keycard. The lock flashes green. With a heavy hiss, the reinforced door opens. Inside, the cell is dim and colder than Rena's. Dr. Brundle lies asleep on a narrow cot—his left ankle bound in a metal cuff, a three-foot chain running from it to the cot's frame. Dr. Brundle is in his mid-fifties, with a lightly unshaven face, a lean build, curly dark hair, and pronounced features. He wears a lab coat over a dark teal shirt, paired with dark trousers. He stirs as the door opens, his eyes flickering open.

Dr. Brundle: (*groggy*) ...Wha—? Who—?

Narrator: His eyes focus slowly on Dew as he steps into the cell. Confusion settles over Dr. Brundle.

Dr. Brundle: Who are you..?

Narrator: Dew's gaze drops to the restraint around Dr. Brundle's left ankle and the short chain running to the cot's frame. He then looks up at Dr. Brundle and addresses him.

Dew: ...Easy. I'm here with my friends to get you out of here.

Dr. Brundle: Are you..?

Narrator: From the doorway, Rena steps into view.

Rena: Dr. Brundle... it's okay. He's one of the friends I was telling you about earlier.

Narrator: Recognition dawns across Dr. Brundle's face as he hears Rena's voice and sees her for the first time.

Dr. Brundle: That voice... wait. You were the one in the cell next to me. Rena.

Narrator: Rena nods in silent acknowledgment.

Dr. Brundle: Ah... well. It's good to finally put a face to the voice.

Narrator: Dew pauses briefly, studying the chain attached to Dr. Brundle's ankle cuff as he formulates a way to free him. He then turns toward the cell entrance.

Dew: (*shouting*) Uh, Elvir—get in here. I need your help.

Narrator: Elvir, hearing this, hurriedly moves past the other party members and into the cell as Rena steps aside near the doorway to let her through. As Elvir steps inside, her *Hozho* chest plate briefly catches Dr. Brundle's attention—his eyes lingering for a moment, a flicker of curiosity crossing his face before he refocuses. Elvir immediately understands why she's needed, noticing the restraint around Dr. Brundle's left ankle. Dew gestures to Dr. Brundle, who shifts upright on the cot, keeping his shackled leg close and steady as they move in to free him. Elvir crouches beside the cot as Dew plants his bo staff across the chain to hold it steady while she positions one of her dual daggers against a link a short distance from Dr. Brundle's ankle cuff. Elvir applies pressure, working the metal at its weakest point. Dew shifts his grip, then brings the staff down with a sharp, controlled strike. The stressed link snaps with a metallic crack, freeing Dr. Brundle from the cot. A few links remain attached to the cuff around his ankle, while the rest of the chain stays fastened to the cot. Dew lifts

his bo staff as Dr. Brundle shifts his weight and rises from the cot, steady on his feet.

Dew: You good?

Dr. Brundle: Yes... I'm fine.

Narrator: Elvir steps aside as Dr. Brundle takes a few steps forward, the short length of chain still attached to the cuff around his ankle clinking softly. Dew gives a slight nod, then turns toward the doorway. The three quickly exit the cell, rejoining the others in the corridor where the rest of the party then gathers around them. Dr. Brundle straightens slightly, adjusting his posture as he looks between them, his gaze settling on Rena.

Dr. Brundle: It's good to see you're all right... not looking worse for wear, unlike me. Ha-ha...

Rena: Yes, I am fine. And hey... you don't look that bad yourself. I'm glad you're fine too.

Narrator: Dr. Brundle nods faintly, then looks to Dew and the others.

Dr. Brundle: ...Thank you. All of you. I wasn't sure I'd be getting out of here anytime soon.

Elvir: Don't mention it, yeah? Couldn't just leave you chained up like that.

Vilmer: You're safe now. That's what matters.

Lorenzo: Yeah, you good, Doc. No problem. Your friend's gonna be real glad we pulled up and got you out.

Dr. Brundle: My friend..?

Narrator: Dew gives a small nod, his expression steady.

Dew: Yeah. Let's just say she was a really big help in getting us here to rescue you and Rena.

Dr. Brundle: Really?

Narrator: Before Dew continues, he pauses for a brief moment and looks around at the other party members, who give him a subtle look not to divulge too much. He then glances at Rena, who looks slightly puzzled, and finally toward Johnny Torrio and Gaz. Turning his attention back to Dr. Brundle, he chooses his next words carefully.

Dew: Yes... a friend of yours you haven't seen in a long time—someone who was worried about you. Dr. Sloane.

Dr. Brundle: Scotlynn?!

Dew: Yeah... She's been helping us with... um... "transportation."

Narrator: Dr. Brundle's eyes narrow slightly in recognition. He gives a slow, understanding nod. Rena also notices the way Dew carefully chose his words, sensing the caution in his tone. Her gaze briefly shifts toward Torrio and Gaz, then to the others, who remain quietly composed, before returning to Dew and Dr. Brundle. She says nothing, trusting there will be time for answers later.

Dr. Brundle: ...Understood. Yes. Hm. So, I assume Scotlynn told you—and... *(then briefly eyes the other party members before re-turning his gaze to Dew)* some of your friends here—the details about us, huh?

Dew: Yeah... you could say that. And how you kinda just “disappeared” on her at the end...

Dr. Brundle: Ah. I see...

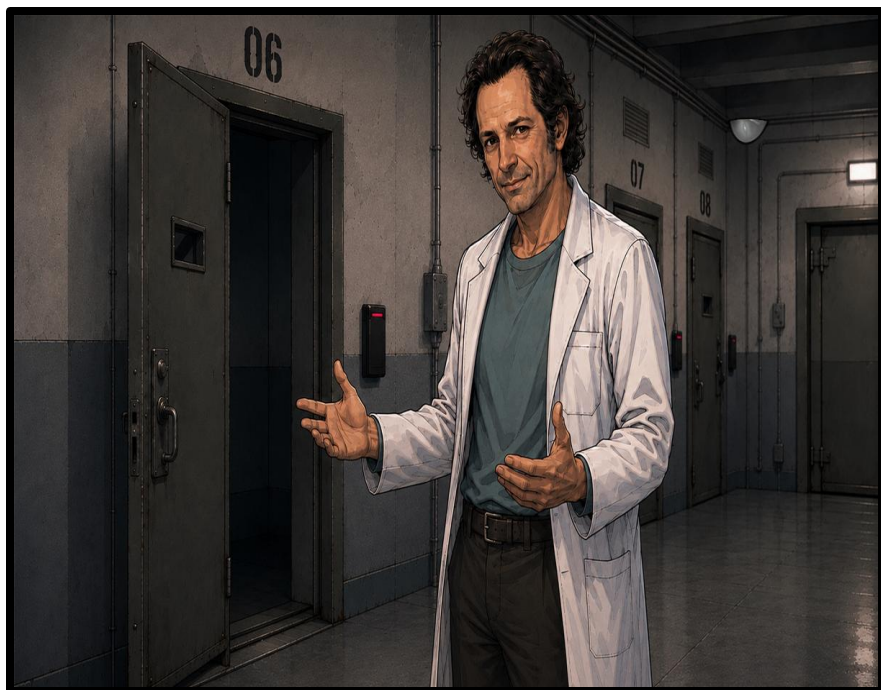
Narrator: Dew then folds his arms slightly, shifting his focus before questioning Dr. Brundle.

Dew: So, Dr. Brundle, how'd you end up here..?

Narrator: Dr. Brundle exhales quietly, his expression tightening as he carefully recalls the events.

Dr. Brundle: I didn't want to leave the way I did... but after all that guilt... for what we were responsible for... the ruin we brought... it was best that I moved on and was forgotten... as if none of it ever happened... So, after I left, I moved abroad. I eventually met a woman, settled down... and got married. Started a family. For a while, things were... normal. Then I did some, uh—freelance work. Private contracts, mostly. Some of it... less than legal. That's when they... the *Bush of Life* found me... *(then his eyes flicker downward for a moment before lifting again)* They took me. Brought me here. Forced me to build... *(then briefly glances at Johnny and Gaz before turning his attention back to Dew)* ...four short-range... “transportation” for them...

Narrator: Dew nods, signaling that he understands Dr. Brundle's implication. The rest of the party exchanges knowing looks, while Rena remains quietly aware, recalling her earlier conversations with Dr. Brundle during their time in captivity. Johnny appears nonplussed. Gaz, however, says nothing—his grin fading slightly as his eyes sharpen with quiet curiosity. Dr. Brundle then continues, revealing more.



- Dr. Brundle: Ah—yes... I almost forgot to mention this... (*then studies Dew and the others, certain*) though I suspect you may already know... At first, they had me assist in assembling that damn rocket—the Renaissance Lance—mainly the systems they couldn’t get working, before their own scientists took over...
- Lorenzo: Yeah, Doc... we already know about it.
- Dr. Brundle: I figured as much... Hm... and from what I’ve overheard from the guards—and what your friend Rena confirmed—it’s armed and ready to launch... though it seems they’ve been holding off... probably because of those “vials” they’ve been talking about... (*then to Rena*) That’s one of the reasons you were here, from what you told me, wasn’t it?
- Narrator: Before Rena can answer, Dew steps in, cutting her off.
- Dew: Hold on—Rena. You know about the Renaissance Lance?
- Narrator: Johnny and Gaz exchange a quick glance, then interject.
- Torrio: (*dryly*) Not just her. We know about the rocket too.
- Vilmer: Really?
- Dew: You do?
- Gaz: Well, yes, darling. This silo is clearly not decorative—it’s perfectly in line with what these lunatics have planned.

Torrio: (then to Dr. Brundle) Yeah... makes a lot more sense now. You ain't just some random prisoner, see?

Cooper: Since when—and how?

Rena: We learned about it back in Demmin's Northern Zone... We crossed paths with some *Bush of Life* cultists, and after we dealt with them, Johnny managed to get one of them to talk...

Torrio: That clown gave up the cay—and let it slip about the rocket—right before he checked himself outta the picture. Real considerate of him.

Rena: ...After that, we made our way here, trying to stop Thornton... (then briefly glances at Dr. Brundle, choosing her words carefully) and... yeah... to recover the three vials and prevent the launch... but I'm sure you can all piece together how that went... up until now...

Krista: ...Yeah—about the three vials. Ha-ha... So, funny story... the *Bush of Life* actually has all four now.

Rena: Oh, I know, Krista.

Krista: Huh? Wait—really? How?

Rena: "She" told me...

Narrator: Johnny's expression shifts slightly, immediately understanding whom Rena means. The others raise an eyebrow at her comment before quickly catching on, while Krista continues to ponder it. Gaz, however, remains confused before inquiring.

Gaz: "She"? Who's—

Krista: "She" ..? (then realization hits as she understands Rena is referring to Elizabeth) ...Ohh. Right... "her." Okay... yeah, that checks out...

Gaz: Wait, who are you two—

Narrator: Before Gaz can finish, Dr. Brundle lets out a strained exhale, drawing everyone's attention as he brings a hand to his mouth. His expression tightens as the full weight of everything—his captivity, the looming threat, and the time he's lost—begins to settle heavily on him.

Dr. Brundle: Gosh... I've been here for so long... I can't believe it's been three months... My family must be worried sick about me... (then inhales deeply and exhales, steadying himself) And if

they have all four of those vials... then that launch isn't far behind...

Vilmer: Hey, don't worry. You'll be back with them soon enough.

Lorenzo: Yeah, he's right, Doc. Those vials ain't gonna be an issue—and that rocket? Man, it's not even gettin' off the ground. We're all here now... we're shutting that whole thing down, for real.

Elvir: Easy, yeah? You're safe now. By my oath—and on my ancestors—that launch won't happen.

Narrator: Dr. Brundle pauses, his eyes settling on Elvir—then, almost instinctively, drifting back to her chest plate before returning to her face, as if trying to understand what he's sensing. There is something about her aura—calm, resolute, almost reverent—that quietly commands his attention. He says nothing, but the look lingers for a moment.

Rena: (*gently, stepping in*) She means it. (*reassuring*) You can count on me, Dew... all of us. We've got you—and everything else handled.

Dr. Brundle: Understood. (*then gratefully nods to Rena*) I owe all of you my thanks again... especially Scotlynn.

Dew: ...You'll have your chance to reunite with her—and thank her in person—once we get you out of here. But before we do... there's one more thing.

Dr. Brundle: Yes?

Dew: Let's just say one of those four “transportations” you were forced to make is already out of commission... and the other two didn't work as intended.

Dr. Brundle: Is that so? One destroyed... and the other two... hm. Then my failsafe worked after all...

Narrator: As Dr. Brundle finishes his thought, a sharp beep suddenly cuts through the corridor, followed by a heavy internal clunk as the security door opposite their entry begins to unlock. All eyes snap toward it as a low hydraulic hiss fills the air and the door slides open. Twelve *Bush of Life* cultists surge inside—Xiphos blades in hand—spreading into a tight formation that quickly occupies that end of the detention wing, halting several feet from Dew and the party. Without hesitation, Dew, the party, Johnny, and Gaz draw their weapons and settle into their fighting stances as Dr. Brundle remains behind

them. As both sides fall into a silent standoff, two figures slowly emerge from behind the line of armed cultists—the Crow Sisters, Myrrh and Clove. As they step forward, the heavy security door slides shut behind them with a resounding clang. They come to a stop at the front of the formation, silent and unwavering, their gazes fixed on Dew and the party. For a moment longer, the corridor remains consumed by silence—until Lorenzo breaks it.

- Lorenzo: ...You two bird broads again?
- Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk... Of course we'd run into them again.
- Cooper: Guess they couldn't get enough of us last time.
- Lorenzo: *(then to the Crow Sisters)* Y'all still on that creepy rhyme stuff or what..?
- Narrator: The Crow Sisters continue staring down Dew and the party, offering no response to Lorenzo's taunt. With a hardened expression and his weapons still drawn, Dew keeps his focus on the threat before them, then tilts his head slightly toward Johnny before speaking.
- Dew: Johnny, you remember that service elevator we passed on the way in here?
- Torrio: Yeah... I remember. What about it?
- Dew: *(quick, decisive)* Take Dr. Brundle. You and Gaz get him to the surface.
- Narrator: Johnny keeps his shotgun trained forward, eyes flicking between the Crow Sisters and the twelve-armed *Bush of Life* cultists, then back to Dew, weighing the call in a split second.
- Torrio: ...You sure about that, pal?
- Dew: Yeah...
- Narrator: Then without hesitation, Dew pulls the keycard from his pocket and presses it into Johnny's hand.
- Torrio: *(then takes it, frowning slightly)* ...Won't you need this?
- Dew: *(eyes forward, calm)* I'm sure we'll be able to acquire another one very soon. Go.
- Vilmer: *(calm, measured)* We'll hold the line here—get him out while you can.
- Rena: *(steady, reassuring)* We've got this, Johnny...

Narrator: Johnny exhales through his nose and gives a quick nod, lowering his shotgun from its aim as the others hold the line. With the keycard in his other hand, he turns to Dr. Brundle and gives him a quick gesture.

Torrio: C'mon, Doc. Field trip's over—time to move.

Dr. Brundle: (*rushed, grateful*) Understood... just get me out of here.

Narrator: Gaz steps in beside them, his machete resting casually over his shoulder.

Gaz: Don't worry—we'll get you out in one piece. Probably.

Torrio: Gaz.

Gaz: Oh, relax—a bit of flair keeps the nerves in check. You're welcome, Johnny.

Narrator: Johnny then lets out an annoyed sigh at Gaz. Before leaving, he pauses and glances back at Rena, who still grips her drawn scythe, its blade fixed on the Crow Sisters and the twelve-armed *Bush of Life* cultists.

Torrio: ...Hey.

Narrator: Rena tilts her head slightly, eyes still locked forward.

Rena: (*soft, steady*) Yeah, Johnny..?

Torrio: (*smirking, tired but sincere*) Don't go dyin' on me after I just found you again.

Rena: Ha... I won't. You better not either.

Torrio: Wouldn't dream of it.

Rena: See you when this is all over...

Narrator: Rena gives a small smile, and they share a brief nod—an understanding that says everything without another word. Johnny then turns sharply.

Torrio: Gaz—let's move.

Narrator: With Dr. Brundle between them, Johnny and Gaz break into a sprint down the corridor in the opposite direction from where they came. Reaching the reinforced security door leading back through the Equipment Storage/Evidence-Armory Chamber toward the intake area, Johnny swipes the keycard in his hand across the panel. A green light flashes—the lock disengages with a sharp hiss. The door slides open, and the three move through without breaking stride,

disappearing as it seals shut behind them with a heavy clang. The corridor remains locked in a suffocating silence. Dew and the party hold their ground, their eyes never leaving the two figures at the front of the armed throng of *Bush of Life* cultists. The Crow Sisters stand motionless—until, at last, one of them tilts her head and begins to speak.

Myrrh: (*low, measured*) Fleeing footsteps fade from sight... Sent away from death's cold bite.

Clove: (*soft, cold*) Bravery, you have... but it means nothing here— Your deaths will pass without a tear.

Cooper: Whose deaths? It won't be ours...

Narrator: A faint smirk tugs at Lorenzo's mouth as he rolls his shoulders, brass knuckles catching the dim light.

Lorenzo: Man... y'all really can't just talk normal, huh?

Vilmer: Certainly looks that way...

Elvir: Nyuk-nyuk... (*sarcasm*) Creepy poetry hour again. They don't disappoint, eh?

Narrator: The Crow Sisters remain motionless, giving no acknowledgment to what Lorenzo and Elvir said—until their attention shifts, settling fully on Rena as they finally take notice of her among the party.

Myrrh: (*soft, reverent, cold*) Ahh... the bearer of the Söl Congruum... The defiant mother—her life wrought with failure and regret, now risen to bloom... Freed from her cage... yet doomed to remain.

Narrator: A faint tension ripples through the party at her words—but Rena does not flinch. Her gaze remains steady, fixed on Myrrh as she responds.

Rena: (*firm*) Secondhand knowledge? I guess word about me gets around a lot... Hah. You're not wrong about who I was... and what I've become. But you are wrong about one thing... This isn't where it ends—and none of you or my daughter will get to decide how it does.

Dew: Enough with the rhymes and theatrics. You're not getting in our way. Thornton and the Söl Congruum will be stopped.

Elvir: ...If you unholy lamebrains really are set on going down for Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetable Man and the Sōl Congruum's will, then by Chosha and my *Hozho* ancestors, this is where you fall.

Narrator: Behind their masks, the Crow Sisters' eyes narrow ever so slightly—something between irritation and anticipation. Myrrh lets out a faint chuckle, followed by Clove. The two then turn to one another, exchanging a subtle nod for what comes next. Then, in unison, they slowly raise their arms.

Clove: You've come far... but no farther.

Myrrh: By the master's command—and the will of the Sōl Congruum... this is where your interference ends...

Myrrh & Clove: (*in chilling unison*) Purge them!

Narrator: The Crow Sisters then swiftly lower their arms in unison, signaling to the twelve-armed *Bush of Life* cultists, who immediately charge forward, rushing past the sisters. The Crow Sisters remain still, watching as Dew and the party engage them. The detention wing corridor erupts into chaos as the two forces collide head-on. The scene then fades to black.

CHAPTER 27 – IT’LL BE SO

- Narrator: Several minutes pass. The scene cuts to Johnny, Gaz, and Dr. Brundle sprinting down the Level 2 Cableway Tunnel, their footsteps echoing sharply against the reinforced walls. The hum of the silo grows louder here—deeper, heavier—as they make their way toward the single service elevator. A breathless Dr. Brundle stumbles slightly, the short chain at his ankle clinking with each uneven step. Johnny, still running, glances over at him, urging him on.
- Torrio: (*grim, steady*) Keep movin’, Doc. You’re doin’ fine. We’re almost there...
- Narrator: Dr. Brundle gives a slight nod and keeps running. As they round the corner, the single service elevator comes into view—a reinforced steel door with a worn control panel beside it. The three come to a stop. Johnny pulls the keycard from his pocket and swipes it across the panel. A green light flashes, and seconds later the doors slide open with a sharp hydraulic hiss.
- Gaz: Well, well... would you look at that—our grand exit from this delightfully dreadful little death trap.
- Narrator: But before the three can step inside, sounds of multiple approaching footsteps and faint chatter echo from the opposite end of the tunnel. Johnny turns his head, eyes narrowing. Seven *Bush of Life* cultists flood into view at the far end—Xiphos blades raised—charging straight toward them.
- Torrio: ...Ah, hell.
- Dr. Brundle: (*panicked*) They’re coming—
- Torrio: Yeah, yeah—I see ’em. (*then hesitates briefly, considering a stand, then shakes it off*) ...Forget this, we ain’t got time for their nonsense.
- Narrator: Johnny grabs Dr. Brundle by the arm and starts backing into the elevator.
- Torrio: Move it—inside, now!

Narrator: Gaz doesn't move. He lingers just outside the elevator, glancing over his shoulder—then back at the incoming swarm. A slow, almost theatrical grin spreads across his face.

Gaz: *(whispering to himself)* Well... curtain call, darlings...

Narrator: Johnny spots him, panic flashing across his face.

Torrio: Gaz—get in here!

Narrator: Gaz steps forward—then suddenly plants a hand on Johnny's chest and shoves him hard into the elevator. Johnny stumbles back into the wall, dragging Dr. Brundle with him. In one smooth motion, Gaz slaps the inner panel—hitting "Up." The doors immediately begin to close. Gaz slips back out into the corridor just before they meet.

Gaz: *(quick, almost playful)* It's been a blast, Johnny. But this is my stop... Get the doc outta here.

Torrio: The hell—?! Gaz, wait... Don't you—!

Narrator: The doors slide shut with a heavy clang, sealing them apart. Outside, Gaz turns and drives his machete into the keycard panel beside the door, smashing it apart. Sparks flicker—the reader goes dead. Inside, Johnny and Dr. Brundle scramble back to their feet as Johnny lunges for the inner panel, jabbing at the controls—but nothing happens. He grabs the seam of the doors, trying to pry them open with his bare hands, but they won't budge.

Torrio: Hey! Hey—open up! C'mon! Gaz!

Narrator: The elevator mechanism jolts—then begins its ascent, carrying Johnny and Dr. Brundle away. Johnny slams his fist against the metal door in frustration. Back in the corridor, Gaz turns fully toward the oncoming cultists. He raises his machete, rolling his shoulder loose.

Gaz: *(smiling, softer now, to himself)* Try not to miss me too much, Johnny. I've got some business to take care of here...

Narrator: Back in the elevator, Johnny stands there for a moment, jaw tight, breathing hard—eyes locked on the door as if he could still break through it. The distant sounds of combat begin to echo faintly through the shaft below—metal clashing, voices shouting—before being swallowed by the rising hum. Johnny and Dr. Brundle exchange uncertain glances. Johnny exhales sharply, running a hand over his face before tightening his grip on the shotgun, then mutters somberly to himself.

Torrio: ...Damn it, Gaz.

Narrator: The elevator continues its ascent—pulling Johnny and Dr. Brundle further away from the chaos below and leaving Gaz’s fate uncertain in the depths of the silo. The scene then cuts back to the detention wing as the battle continues between the twelve-armed *Bush of Life* cultists and Dew’s party, now split into two groups—Dew, Cooper, and Krista taking the left while Rena, Lorenzo, Elvir, and Vilmer push right—each group taking on six cultists. Dew’s bo staff drives attackers back in quick succession as Cooper deflects and sweeps with his mop, while Krista’s boomerang strikes and returns in tight, efficient bursts, allowing the trio to wear down and drop their six opponents. On the opposite side, Lorenzo barrels through with crushing blows, Elvir cuts down openings with swift dual-dagger strikes, Vilmer disarms and finishes cleanly with his grappling hook, and Rena controls the space with measured scythe arcs, overwhelming their six and bringing them down. The clash ends with all twelve cultists’ bodies scattered across the corridor as Dew and his party regroup, the noise fading—while the Crow Sisters remain still, silently watching. With their weapons still drawn, Dew and the party turn their focus back to the Crow Sisters.

Vilmer: (*calm, steady*) That’s twelve down... Hardly a warm-up.

Krista: (*grinning*) Hah. I was just getting into it.

Lorenzo: ...Got nothin’ to say now? That it? Or is that all y’all bird broads got?

Narrator: Dew then steps forward, subtly angling his bo staff toward the Crow Sisters.

Dew: Anytime you two are ready, let’s finish this...

Narrator: In perfect unison, the Crow Sisters draw their sickle swords and surge forward without a word. In a sudden distortion of air, both vanish—reappearing an instant later mid-lunge as they close the distance with precise coordination. Myrrh drives straight at Dew, her blade snapping toward him in a sharp, hooking arc. Dew pivots, meeting the strike with his bo staff and turning it aside before it can catch, while Cooper steps in at his flank, knocking away a follow-up with his mop and keeping the pressure off. At the same time, Clove barrels into Lorenzo and Vilmer, her heavier strikes crashing down

with force, the hooked blades dragging across their guard. Vilmer is forced a half-step back while Lorenzo holds firm, the two driven onto the defensive under the weight of her assault. Before Clove can capitalize, Elvir and Krista crash in from both flanks—Elvir darting low with quick, precise dual-dagger strikes while Krista’s boomerang snaps in and out, breaking Clove’s rhythm and forcing her to react. Meanwhile, Rena cuts in, intercepting Myrrh with a sweeping scythe strike that forces her to disengage and give ground. As Myrrh recoils, the blade glances across her waist, striking the short-range teleportation device fastened to her belt. Sparks erupt as the damaged unit tears free and clatters to the floor. Unaware of what she has hit, Rena advances—and Dew and Cooper immediately follow, closing in together. Dew drives Myrrh further off balance with his bo staff while Cooper stays tight at his flank, deflecting any counter and denying her space to recover. On the opposite side, Clove regains momentum, vanishing in a sharp distortion and reappearing at their flank, attacking immediately. Krista’s boomerang cuts through the air to disrupt her, but Clove blinks again—slipping out of range and reappearing within their formation. Elvir’s focus snaps to the device at Clove’s belt. As Clove attempts another reposition, Elvir times her movement, slipping inside her guard and striking the short-range teleportation device cleanly. The damaged unit cracks with a sharp pop and sparks violently, the casing begins to burn. Realizing the danger, Clove tears the device free and hurls it aside—creating the brief opening Lorenzo needs. Lorenzo drives forward, brass knuckles hammering with heavy close-range force that pushes her back, while Vilmer snaps his grappling hook forward, the line catching just long enough to disrupt her footing. Krista follows up with rapid boomerang strikes, cutting off her angles and keeping her on the defensive. Under sustained pressure, the sisters are forced back step by step until they reach a safer distance and regroup. Dew and the party do the same, tightening their formation as the clash resets. The Crow Sisters fall silent once more, their eyes locked on Dew and the party. After a brief pause, they lower their sickle swords and speak again.

Clove: ...So, it has come to this...

Myrrh: This act you've played... dissolves in vain... Now face what lingers... born of pain...

Clove: (*cold, quiet*) You fought with hearts content... you held the line... But fate was never yours... to redefine.

Myrrh: Our masters' gift... you cannot resist... Behold your end. No second chance exists.

Narrator: In the same moment, the Crow Sisters reach into their cloaks and withdraw two SKT Dimer—Intermediate sample vials. Myrrh holds the SKT-AT strain, a luminous violet compound, while Clove grips the SKT-CG strain, its dark green counterpart. Without hesitation, they step forward and drive the needles into each other's necks, injecting the samples simultaneously. The empty vials slip from their hands and fall to the floor—one shattering, the other rolling toward Dew and the party, whose weapons remain raised in guarded stances. They freeze for a brief instant. The rolling vial comes to a stop at Lorenzo's feet. He glances down, spotting the label. His brow furrows as he reads it aloud.

Lorenzo: "SKT DIMER—INTERMEDIATE SAMPLE. NOT FINAL. AT." ...What the hell does that mean?

Krista: (*uneasy*) That doesn't sound good...

Dew: (*low, tense*) Rena..?

Rena: (*focused, urgent*) A dimer means they've fused two strains into one. It doesn't make it stable—it makes the mutation more consistent... more controlled, but still volatile. (then her eyes narrowing toward the Crow Sisters) If they're using this... then the SKT virus synthesis is nearly complete...

Narrator: Dew and the party remain focused ahead on the Crow Sisters, who stand upright—breathing steady, eyes forward and unwavering. Then they speak once more.

Clove: (*quiet, almost reverent*) It's done... the thread is spun...

Myrrh: (*soft, certain*) No turning back... what's begun is begun...

Narrator: A faint tension ripples through their bodies.

Myrrh: We... Ugh... oFFer all... 'til nothing's left...

Clove: AnD... taKe nOTHing... in... Arggh... lIFe... or deATh...

Narrator: Their breathing deepens—slower, heavier.

Myrrh: *(strained, breaking)* WitnESS... what deVOTion be-
Comes...

Clove: *(faint, unraveling)* When all... is loST... and all... is
duST...

Myrrh & Clove: *(then in unison)* IT'LL... bE Soooo..!

Narrator: Suddenly, both Crow Sisters convulse as the interme-
diate Dimer variants take hold. Their sickle swords
slip from their grasp. Beneath their masks, their faces
swell and recede in uneven pulses—like something
straining to break free from within. The masks warp
with each surge, fine cracks spiderwebbing outward
as the pressure builds, recedes, then builds again—
until the strain overwhelms the structure and the
masks shatter, scattering across the floor. For a brief
moment, their faces are revealed—light warm-beige
skin, straight dark brows, almond-shaped dark brown
eyes, and high cheekbones, both women in their mid-
twenties, marked by old radiation burns, with uneven
scarring stretching across their faces and necks. Their
breathing fractures into ragged, uneven gasps.
Myrrh's body spasms in sharp, sudden jerks, her jaw
tightening as a low, restrained cry forces its way
out—warping into something inhuman as it escapes
her throat. Clove holds her composure for a moment
longer—teeth clenched, muscles locking—before it
breaks. A sharp, involuntary scream tears free, echo-
ing down the corridor—cut short as her body seizes
and begins to reshape. Their cloaks strain under the
sudden expansion—fabric splitting and fraying into
ragged strips as it clings to their distorting forms.
Myrrh's dark hair begins to shed as the SKT-CG strain
surges through her. Across her skin, blackened, hard-
ened growths form—pushing outward in clustered
patches and spreading rapidly along her arms, shoul-
ders, torso, and legs. Her frame lengthens, her height
increasing as bone shifts and locks into a new align-
ment. A jagged, chitinous exoskeleton forces its way
outward across her body in layered, insect-like plat-
ing, leaving much of her mutated flesh visible

beneath its irregular armored surface. From her back, four segmented, bone-like whips rupture free—forcing through the chitin in violent bursts. Each appendage forms in sections, vertebrae-like segments locking together as they extend outward with sharp, cracking snaps. The whips flex and coil around her with rigid, unnatural motion, their pointed tips twitching as they settle into place. At the same time, Clove’s frame swells outward as the SKT-AT strain floods her system. Muscle mass builds rapidly beneath her skin as her height increases dramatically, transforming her into a towering, heavily muscled figure. Her blonde hair sheds in ragged strands but remains long and uneven around her head and shoulders. Her shoulders broaden, her chest and limbs thicken, and dark, hardened growths spread across her increasingly distorted flesh. Her skin tears under the pressure of her expanding musculature—only to seal almost instantly into dense, reinforced tissue as her body continues to grow taller, broader, and more massive. With their transformation complete, the Mutated Crow Sisters stand before Dew and the party—towering, poised to descend upon them. Myrrh’s four bone whips coil and snap, extending and retracting in sharp, segmented motions like living weapons, while Clove’s massive frame shifts with slow, crushing intent—the air around her already beginning to ripple. Dew and the others hold their tight formation, silently taking in the monstrous forms before them. Dew then addresses the party.

- Dew: (*low, focused*) ...We can’t take both of them head-on like this.
- Rena: Yeah, you’re right. If we stay grouped, we’ll get overwhelmed.
- Cooper: Then we split into two teams—keep them separated.
- Narrator: A brief glance passes through the party—no hesitation. Dew nods once.
- Dew: I’ll take the one with the bone whips.



Narrator: Dew shifts his stance slightly, angling toward Mutated Myrrh. Cooper steps in beside him without a word, mop already braced. Krista spins her boomerang once in her hand, grinning.

Krista: Count me in with you, Dew.

Cooper: I'm with you as well. We'll hold her in place—don't give her room to move.

Narrator: Vilmer gives a small nod as he moves to flank.

Vilmer: Same. Everyone, keep your footing and watch her reach—I don't think we can afford any mistakes here.

Narrator: Across from them, Mutated Clove lets out a low, distorted exhale. Rena steps forward.

Rena: ...Then she's ours.

Narrator: Lorenzo flexes his hands inside the brass knuckles, stepping up beside Rena.

Lorenzo: Good... I was hopin' I'd get the big one.

Narrator: Elvir slides into position on the opposite side, dual daggers low, eyes locked in.

Elvir: Right then—let's bring her bloody down!

Narrator:

For a split second, there is stillness—until Mutated Myrrh strikes at Dew with one of her bone whips, the segmented limb snapping downward from above with a sharp, cracking sound. He reacts instantly, pivoting sharply and driving forward at an angle, his bo staff snapping upward to intercept. The impact knocks its trajectory off just enough. Rena, Lorenzo, and Elvir break formation and sprint toward the towering Mutated Clove. Cooper steps in hard beside Dew, bracing and redirecting the follow-up whip strikes, while Krista whips her boomerang across Mutated Myrrh's flank, striking at the chitin covering her elongated body and forcing her to turn and commit. Vilmer fires his grappling hook around one of her legs, anchoring and pulling to disrupt the towering mutant's footing. Mutated Myrrh is dragged off-line—cut off from Mutated Clove, who is now focused on Rena as she drives forward, her scythe sweeping low across the massive mutant's legs. Lorenzo crashes into Mutated Clove from the opposite angle, throwing his full weight into her lower body, while Elvir slips in from the other side, her dual daggers flashing across exposed flesh along her thigh and flank—enough to stagger the towering Clove a half-step and enrage her. Now, with the two Mutated Crow Sisters divided, the battle begins. Dew and his group are forced into a tight defensive rhythm by Mutated Myrrh. Looming over them, she attacks from above and at range, her four bone whips snapping and lashing downward in rapid succession, each strike precise and forceful. Dew blocks with his bo staff, Cooper braces and redirects the impacts, Krista repeatedly strikes the same point along Myrrh's lower chitin to weaken it, and Vilmer darts beneath the reach of her whips to deliver quick, close-range hits against her legs and lower torso—creating brief openings for Dew to drive stronger attacks upward into the damaged armor. Mutated Myrrh suddenly lashes out with a wide sweeping strike, her enormous

reach forcing the group back and reclaiming space around her. Cracks spread across her armor, exposing vulnerable tissue—but she doesn't slow down. Instead, towering above them, she unleashes a crushing, multi-directional assault as all four bone whips snap outward and downward in coordinated strikes, bearing down on them at once. Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer struggle to evade and deflect the barrage, barely containing the pressure, while Dew is left with only a brief moment to reset himself. Meanwhile, as Rena's group battles the massive Mutated Clove, she releases a distortion wave that throws off their senses—vertigo setting in and a sharp ringing dulling their awareness, causing their attacks to lose precision. Despite this, Rena, Lorenzo, and Elvir push through and continue their assault. Rena drives her scythe upward and across Clove's lower torso, Elvir's daggers strike exposed areas along her legs and sides, and Lorenzo's relentless blows hammer at her knees, thighs, and abdomen, gradually outpacing Mutated Clove's unstable regeneration. Her enormous body warps under the pressure, muscle and flesh bulging unevenly as her movements grow heavier and less controlled. In response, Mutated Clove abandons control and surges forward in a brutal charge, her massive frame bearing down on all three and forcing them to scatter before regrouping. Both battles within the detention wing escalate in parallel, with the towering Mutated Crow Sisters using their overwhelming size, reach, and strength against opponents forced to attack from below, while neither side gives ground.

CHAPTER 28 – A FABULOUS

TWO “DEATHS”

Scenario 1: "*Mutated Clove Falls First—Mutated Myrrh Follows*"

Narrator: As the battle against Mutated Clove continues, Rena and her group trade several heavy blows with the towering mutant, striking upward and targeting her lower body whenever openings appear. Mutated Clove grows further agitated and surges forward again. Her massive arms tear through the air above them—Rena and Lorenzo duck low as the impact blasts the wall behind them apart in a violent spray of debris. Elvir moves immediately, sliding in along the flank beneath Clove’s reach—her dual daggers flashing as she strikes fast, delivering multiple precise cuts into the same point along Mutated Clove’s thigh and lower side. Mutated Clove’s enormous body swells and collapses in uneven pulses, her regeneration struggling to keep up with the accumulating damage. Rena steps in, angling her scythe low before bringing it upward in several powerful arcs. The blade tears through Mutated Clove’s abdomen and lower torso, ripping through regenerating tissue before it can stabilize.

Mutated Clove: Y-you... W-WILL... N-not—

Narrator: Mutated Clove’s towering body begins to convulse—her regeneration over-spiking uncontrollably. Lorenzo steps in, shouting a command to Rena and Elvir.

Lorenzo: Now—NOW!

Narrator: Lorenzo rushes beneath Mutated Clove’s reach and slams his brass knuckles into the already-damaged section of her abdomen, delivering a rapid, punishing melee combination. The final punch lands with a sickening crack that echoes through the detention wing.

Mutated Clove buckles forward, one knee nearly giving way as her massive frame drops lower, leaving her dazed as her regeneration falters. In that opening—Elvir vanishes from Mutated Clove’s direct line of sight. A blur of movement—she rushes behind the staggering mutant and uses Clove’s lowered posture to spring upward, planting a foot against her back for leverage. Her dual daggers cross—then slice outward in a clean, decisive motion—cutting deep across the back and sides of Mutated Clove’s neck before Elvir drops back to the floor. Mutated Clove’s body jerks—her movements stuttering—regeneration misfiring as the damage compounds all at once. Rena pivots, plants her footing, and drives the scythe upward—burying the blade deep into the unstable core of Mutated Clove’s chest as the towering mutant remains hunched forward—delivering the fatal blow. On the other side, the battle between Mutated Myrrh and Dew’s group briefly halts as the moment draws their attention. They watch as Mutated Clove’s enormous body swells violently, then collapses inward—her flesh unraveling. She releases one final death rattle as her form continues to break down, dissolving into a thick, blackened sludge that splashes across the floor. For a moment, there is silence. Then—Mutated Myrrh unleashes an inhuman, animalistic scream—grief twisting instantly into rage—as it tears through the detention wing. Towering above them, she throws her body back as her four segmented bone whips snap outward violently, cracking through the air as they slam into the walls, two of the cell doors, the ceiling, and the floor—splintering steel and concrete alike. Each strike lands with sharp, snapping force, the vertebrae-like segments locking and recoiling with brutal precision. Rena, Lorenzo, and Elvir regroup with Dew and the others, bracing themselves to face her together. Rena steps in beside Dew, scythe still in hand, her grip tight but steady. How’s it going over here? You all right..?

Rena:

Dew: We're fine... (*sarcasm*) And, she's loads of fun... Ha-ha... (*then exhales*) But... we've faced worse.

Lorenzo: (*smirking, wiping blood from his lip*) Yeah? Man, I should've stuck with you, Dew—her sister was like fightin' a damn truck.

Elvir: (*dry, composed*) Quite. Though I'd argue the truck had better manners.

Vilmer: Seeing how you all just killed her sister, I don't think she's going to let up anytime soon...

Krista: She isn't a happy camper, that's for sure...

Cooper: (*gripping his mop, eyeing Mutated Myrrh*) Yeah, well—angry or not... she still bleeds. Let's remind her how that works.

Rena: Cooper's right... It's time we end this. Together.

Dew: (*then nods*) Together.

Narrator: Then Dew and the party move as one—surging forward to continue the assault against the towering Mutated Myrrh. Krista's boomerang slices upward through the air—striking Mutated Myrrh's shoulder with a sharp crack. Vilmer fires his grappling hook—latching onto one of the bone whips and yanking it off trajectory. Cooper drives in low beneath the reach of the others—his mop slamming hard across the back of Myrrh's knee, momentarily disrupting her footing. Elvir darts in from the flank—dual daggers flashing as she carves quick, precise strikes into exposed joints along Mutated Myrrh's legs and lower side. Lorenzo follows—closing the gap with raw force—his brass knuckles crashing repeatedly into weakened sections along her thighs, hips, and lower abdomen. Dew closes the distance, his bo staff cracking upward against her damaged exoskeleton several times. As Mutated Myrrh recoils and bends forward under the combined assault, Rena steps through the opening, her scythe arcing upward and across Myrrh's exposed midsection—cutting deep and forcing the towering mutant backward. Fractures spread, and pieces of chitin break away—clattering across the floor. Mutated Myrrh lets out an annoyed growl

before angrily addressing Dew and his party, her voice breaking and unstable.

Mutated Myrrh:

S-she's... Gonnnee... my-y... sw-wEEt sISTer...

Narrator:

Mutated Myrrh then snaps—her four bone whips explode outward all at once, striking downward and across the corridor in rapid, coordinated succession. Vilmer is hit first—thrown off his feet as a bone whip slams into his chest with a cracking impact. Krista tries to pivot—too late—she's swept aside, crashing hard into the wall. Cooper braces and takes a direct hit—his stance breaks as he's driven back and down. Elvir moves to evade—but another whip catches her mid-step, sending her sliding across the floor and tripping up Lorenzo, who falls onto his back. Dew holds his ground momentarily, raising his bo staff and blocking a succession of descending strikes, until the pressure builds and another whip slips through—forcing him backward and then down to one knee. Meanwhile, Rena continues deflecting a single bone whip with her scythe, each downward strike forcing her farther back. Mutated Myrrh slowly pulls back all four, the segmented lengths rising and coiling around her towering frame as her focus narrows onto Rena alone.

Mutated Myrrh:

(voice low, trembling with rage) ...YOU... Y-YOu... KILLED... m-MY S-s-sister...

Narrator:

As Dew and the party recompose themselves, Mutated Myrrh's bone whips tighten above and around her, their segments clicking into rigid alignment as she begins eyeing a single point on Rena's body to strike. Rena steps forward with her scythe raised, staring up at the towering mutant and taunting her.

Rena:

Yeah... I did. *(steady, cold)* If you want payback—come take it.

Narrator:

Myrrh lets out a distorted shriek—then launches two bone whips downward at once, their segmented lengths snapping toward Rena's chest with piercing force, while the other two remain coiled behind her,

ready to follow through. Dew, seeing this, runs frantically toward Rena and screams out her name.

Dew:

RENA—!

Narrator:

As the two bone whips surge down toward Rena, the detention wing door slides open and a figure burst in from behind her, calling out just as he closes the distance.

Gaz:

Don't mind me, beautiful...

Narrator:

Gaz quickly shoves her aside, putting himself directly in the path of the descending attack. One whip misses—but the other locks mid-strike, its tip hardening into a jagged point before driving downward and forward. It strikes Gaz squarely in the torso with such brutal force that, for an instant, it appears to have impaled him. The impact violently snaps him backward, flinging him across the corridor like a ragdoll. His body slams to the floor, motionless, his machete breaking loose from its holster and skidding a short distance across the floor. Dew, Rena—who scrambles back onto her feet—and the rest of the party look on in shock and horror at what they've just seen.

Rena:

...No.

Krista:

GAZ!

Elvir:

Bloody hell... no!

Lorenzo:

Damn, man—!

Dew:

..!

Narrator:

Mutated Myrrh looks down with annoyance, unable to strike Rena, then turns her attention back to Dew and the party. Rena shakes her head in a moment of silence for the fallen Gaz. She then raises her scythe as Dew and the others regroup into formation beside her. Mutated Myrrh towers before them once more. Dew, Rena, and the others, though exhausted, exchange silent looks—and without hesitation, charge forward, driven by fury and resolve to finish the battle. The party works in unison, attacking Mutated Myrrh from multiple angles and overwhelming her as her bone-whip strikes grow slower. They concentrate their attacks along her legs, lower torso, and fully

exposed pressure points where the chitin has broken away, gradually forcing the towering mutant lower as her damaged body begins to fail. With Mutated Myrrh finally buckling beneath the combined assault, the party presses the advantage. The final blow is delivered—Mutated Myrrh’s towering body locks, then convulses violently, her mass breaking apart as she mutters one last word.

Mutated Myrrh:

Gwaahhh... CLOVe... Ugggghhhh...

Narrator:

Then her enormous form collapses, disintegrating into the same blackened sludge that spreads across the floor beneath her.

Scenario 2: "*Mutated Myrrh Falls First—Mutated Clove Follows*"

Narrator:

As the battle against Mutated Myrrh continues, Dew and his group trade controlled, coordinated strikes with the towering mutant, steadily breaking through her defenses from below. Her four bone whips snap outward and downward in sharp, calculated bursts, each segmented limb cracking through the air with precision—Vilmer pivots and redirects one with his grappling hook while Cooper drives in low beneath her reach, his mop slamming hard across the back of her knee and lower leg to disrupt her stance. Krista’s boomerang slices upward across her shoulder, cracking through layers of chitin as Dew steps forward, his bo staff striking upward in rapid succession—each blow landing against already weakened points along her lower frame. Mutated Myrrh’s towering posture falters—her movements slowing as fractures spread across her exoskeleton. Her bone whips lash again—less precise now, more desperate, their segments snapping unevenly as control begins to slip. Dew steps in, tightening his grip.

Dew:

Now!

Narrator:

Cooper and Vilmer move at once—Cooper slamming forward with a heavy strike behind Myrrh’s knee while Vilmer spins his grappling hook, hooking and

tearing through two of the bone whips, forcing their segmented lengths apart. Mutated Myrrh buckles lower under the combined assault, exposing more of her damaged lower torso. Krista's boomerang returns, striking the same cracked section with a sharp, echoing snap. In that opening, Dew pivots and drives his bo staff upward with full force—shattering through the weakened chitin. Mutated Myrrh's body jerks—her bone whips freezing mid-motion, segments locking as the damage compounds all at once. Her elongated frame locks—then begins to convulse violently.

Mutated Myrrh:
Narrator:

Ugh! Cl—Clov—

Her towering form swells outward, then collapses inward—chitin breaking apart in jagged fragments as her body begins to unravel. The bone whips go slack, their long-segmented lengths collapsing and clattering lifelessly against the floor as she releases a distorted final breath—her mass dissolving into a thick, blackened sludge that spreads across the floor beneath her. On the other side, the battle between Mutated Clove and Rena's group halts, drawing their attention. For a moment, there is silence. Then Mutated Clove lets out a deep, guttural roar—her enormous frame swelling as her regeneration spikes violently. The air around her distorts as her breathing grows heavier, faster, unstable. Towering over everyone in the corridor, her head turns slowly—locking onto Dew below with unmistakable killing intent—as Rena, Lorenzo, and Elvir quickly regroup with him and the others. Rena steps in beside Dew, scythe raised.

Rena:

Looks like you handled things over here...

Dew:

(sarcasm) Yeah... she was loads of fun... Not much left of her now, as you can see. You okay?

Rena:

I'm fine... *(then glances at Lorenzo and Elvir)* We're all fine.

Lorenzo:

(to Dew) Man, I should've rolled with you—taking hits from that big-ass wall of muscle and rage? Felt like gettin' slammed by a whole damn truck.

Elvir: (dry, composed) Right... I'd say that's putting it rather mildly. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Dew: Hm. (then eyes Mutated Clove) ...Something tells me she didn't like us taking her sister out. Guess I just made things worse, huh?

Vilmer: I'd say restraint is off the table from this point.

Krista: Yeah... she's way past "not happy" now.

Cooper: (gripping his mop, eyes locked on Mutated Clove) Good. That means she'll make mistakes. And when she does—we make it count.

Dew: Cooper's right. Well... let's finish this—together.

Rena: (nods, steady) Yeah... together.

Narrator: The party surges forward as one—closing the distance beneath the towering Mutated Clove. Krista's boomerang arcs upward through the air, striking her at multiple points with sharp, cracking impacts. Vilmer fires his grappling hook, latching onto one of her massive arms and yanking it aside—tearing through flesh that immediately begins to regenerate. Cooper drives in low again, his mop slamming hard across her knee and lower leg, while Lorenzo follows with raw force—his brass knuckles crashing repeatedly into her thighs, hip, and lower abdomen. Elvir darts in from the flank beneath Clove's reach, her dual daggers flashing as she cuts into unstable sections along her legs and lower side. Rena steps through the opening, bringing her scythe upward in powerful, controlled arcs that carve across Clove's abdomen and lower torso. Dew moves in beside her, his bo staff hammering upward against the same weakened areas in a disciplined combination. Mutated Clove staggers slightly—but does not fall. Even surrounded, her immense height and bulk leave her looming over the entire party. She lets out a low, irritated growl before speaking, her voice breaking and unstable.

Mutated Clove: M-myrrh... she's g-gone... my-y... B-beAUt-tiFul sIS-Ter...

Narrator: Rage swells within Mutated Clove as one massive arm swings outward and downward with overwhelming force—faster than before—shattering the party’s formation. Vilmer and Krista are struck first, lifted off their feet and thrown aside. Lorenzo pivots—too late—and is hurled into the wall. Rena braces and takes the sweeping impact head-on, her stance breaking as she’s driven back across the floor. Elvir attempts to evade, but a follow-up backswing catches her mid-step, sending her sliding into Cooper as both crash down hard. Dew briefly holds his ground, raising his bo staff against a succession of crushing downward strikes—until the pressure overwhelms him. He’s forced back several feet and driven down to one knee. Mutated Clove steps forward slowly, each heavy step carrying her massive frame closer as her body swells with unstable regeneration. Her eyes angle downward and lock onto Dew, fixing on him with pure, unfiltered aggression.

Mutated Clove: Y-you... T-took... h-her... f-from... M-ME— Youuuuu... Die..!

Narrator: As Mutated Clove closes in, she raises one massive arm high above Dew, preparing to bring it crashing down with crushing force. At that same moment, the detention door slides open. A figure bursts into the corridor from behind Dew and, once close enough, calls out—just enough to catch his attention.

Gaz: Miss me, handsome...

Narrator: Gaz slams into Dew, shoving him out of the way and putting himself directly beneath the descending attack. Mutated Clove’s massive arm comes down—but not cleanly. The blow catches Gaz off-center, clipping him across the upper body with enough force to rip him from his feet and send him hurtling across the corridor. He crashes hard into the wall and drops instantly, motionless, his machete slipping loose from its strap and clattering onto the floor. For a brief moment, Mutated Clove stands over the point of impact—annoyed that her attack was interrupted. She

then lets out another enraged roar before turning back toward Dew and the others, who are regaining their footing. The party's attention shifts across the detention wing, where they spot Gaz lying motionless on the corridor floor. Shock sets in as they process what just happened—before the reactions finally break through.

Dew: ..!

Rena: ...No.

Krista: GAZ!

Elvir: Bloody hell...!

Lorenzo: Damn—!

Narrator: Dew lowers his head briefly, a silent moment of respect for the fallen Gaz. The pause is short—but felt. He exhales, steadies himself, then raises his bo staff once more as Rena and the others move in beside him, reforming their formation without a word. Though visibly worn, Dew, Rena, and the rest of the party exchange silent looks—each one understanding, each one resolute. A single nod passes between them. Then—without hesitation—Dew and the party surge forward toward the towering Mutated Clove, driven by fury and unwavering resolve. This time, their assault is sharper—more unified, more relentless. Every movement is deliberate. Every strike, purposeful. Rather than attempting to overpower her enormous frame directly, the party systematically attacks from below, concentrating on her legs, knees, hips, lower abdomen, and every exposed section weakened by the previous fighting. Mutated Clove retaliates—but her attacks are no longer clean. Her enormous swings slow. Her form stutters. The unstable regeneration that once sustained her now works against her, misfiring under the weight of accumulated damage. The party capitalizes immediately. Dew presses in beneath her reach, his bo staff striking upward with disciplined force. Rena follows through with powerful rising arcs of her scythe, cutting through weakened tissue along Clove's abdomen

and sides. Lorenzo closes the distance with raw aggression, his brass knuckles crashing into damaged sections along her thighs and lower body. Elvir moves like a shadow around Clove's legs and flank, carving into exposed tissue with calculated efficiency. Krista's boomerang snaps upward through the air, striking vulnerable points higher along her body, while Vilmer uses his grappling hook to wrench her limbs off-line and repeatedly compromise her balance. Cooper drives forward, anchoring the assault with grounded, crushing blows against her knees and legs. Step by step, they force her enormous frame backward. Her knees begin to buckle. Her posture drops lower as the accumulated damage finally robs her of the stability her massive body requires. With Clove forced down closer to their level, the party presses harder, leaving no space to recover and no time to adapt—until, at last, the final blow lands. Mutated Clove's body seizes—locking in place before convulsing violently. Her towering frame swells and contracts in erratic pulses as her regeneration spirals out of control. She struggles to maintain cohesion—her limbs twitching, her structure breaking down under the damage she can no longer repair. Before her inevitable end, she manages to force out one last, fractured word.

Mutated Clove:

Arrrgghhh... M-Myr... rrrh... Uggghhhh...

Narrator:

Her massive frame collapses inward—tearing apart from within as it loses all structural integrity. In seconds, her form disintegrates completely, dissolving into the same thick, blackened sludge that spreads slowly across the floor of the detention wing.

End of Scenario 1 & 2

Narrator:

In the aftermath of the battle, the detention wing falls into a heavy silence. The blackened sludge that was once the Mutated Crow Sisters now lies settled across the fractured concrete, with only a thin portion forced into the cracks. Around it, the bodies of

the fallen twelve *Bush of Life* cultists the party fought earlier lie scattered—some slumped against the walls, others collapsed mid-stride where they were struck down. Dew and Rena lower their weapons, and the others soon follow. Their eyes drift slowly across the detention wing toward the spot where Gaz was thrown.

Dew: ...Hold on.

Narrator: He starts forward, and Rena follows without a word. The others exchange brief, uneasy looks before moving with them, their footsteps echoing faintly across the battered floor. As they advance, Vilmer's eyes catch something along the floor—a lone keycard lying half-buried among the tattered pieces of one of the now-deceased Crow Sisters' cloaks. He slows just enough to scoop it up, gives it a brief glance, then tucks it away without comment before continuing. Dew and the party approach the spot and come to a stop. The wall is cracked—fractured from the impact. But Gaz's body is nowhere in sight—leaving the party in stunned confusion. His machete, however, remains—resting where it fell.

Krista: ...Where is he?

Lorenzo: ...The fuck?! Nah, nah—he was right here. He hit the wall—hard. There's no way—

Elvir: (*cutting in, composed but tense*) I saw it as well.

Narrator: Cooper narrows his eyes slightly, studying the floor before scanning the rest of the detention wing corridor.

Cooper: Yeah... he wasn't getting up after that...

Vilmer: And nobody came through either door after. Hmm...

Narrator: Rena steps forward slowly, her gaze fixed on the empty space. Her grip tightens slightly around her scythe.

Rena: ...No. (*then shakes her head in disbelief*) He was here. This makes no sense...

Vilmer: I wonder why he came back. He was supposed to be with Johnny and Dr. Brundle...

Krista: (*then shrugs*) Maybe they got split up...

Cooper: Could be... I just hope they made it topside.

Rena: Knowing Johnny, I don't doubt that they did.

Narrator: As the party considers this, Dew remains silent. He steps closer to the wall—kneeling briefly, running his hand along the cracked surface, then across the floor where Gaz should have been lying. His eyes narrow as he notices only a faint smear, barely visible in the low light. He pauses, then rises slowly and turns to the others, speaking in a low voice.

Dew: Weird...

Narrator: Another brief silence settles over the detention wing—thick, uneasy, and hard to shake. Dew and the others remain gathered near the cracked wall where Gaz's body should have been, each of them still trying to make sense of the impossible absence. Then, without warning, a sharp electronic ring cuts through the stillness. Rena's eyes widen slightly at the sudden sound as all eyes snap toward Dew. He reaches into his vest and quickly pulls out the satellite phone. The screen flickers faintly in the dim corridor. Rena's focus lingers on the device, a quiet hint of curiosity settling in.

Dew: *(to the party)* ...It's Dr. Sloane.

Narrator: Dew answers at once, activating the speaker as he brings the device up.

Dew: Dr. Sloane?

Dr. Sloane: *(over phone, faint through static)* Dew—thank goodness. The signal finally came back through. What's your status?

Narrator: Dew glances briefly at the others before answering.

Dew: We found that friend of ours. She's safe. And the other prisoner—yeah, it was Dr. Brundle. We freed him too. One of our allies escorted him topside to the surface to get him out of here.

Narrator: A brief moment passes on the line—then Dr. Sloane exhales softly, relief clear even through the interference.

Dr. Sloane: *Thank you... all of you. Truly. Thank you for saving him.*

Dew: Yeah... and before he left, he wanted me to tell you something. If you two didn't get the chance to see each other again in person... he was grateful to you.

Narrator: The line goes quiet again for a brief moment, save for the low hiss of static.

Dr. Sloane: *(softly) ...Thank you, Dew. I'm relieved to hear that.*

Narrator: The signal crackles harder, threatening to break apart. Dr. Sloane speaks again—quicker now, clearly trying to get the information out before the line deteriorates.

Dr. Sloane: *...Listen carefully—I reviewed more of the archived Pomodoro Cay silo data after you went in. I found something I hadn't uploaded before. There's a redacted section in the facility layout... and I believe it's the source of the energy shield grid...*

Narrator: Dew's expression sharpens instantly.

Dew: We're still in the detention wing right now. Can you tell us where to go?

Dr. Sloane: *Yes. From your current position, continue straight ahead through the corridor beyond the detention wing. Based on the archived layout, it should be about six rooms down, then to the left. The area is labeled Auxiliary Systems Node—Room 1.*

Narrator: Dew nods once, though she can't see him.

Dew: Got it.

Narrator: He then hesitates for only a second before asking the question already forming in his mind.

Dew: ...If we reach it... could shutting it down stop the rocket launch altogether?

Narrator: A brief crackle ripples through the line before Dr. Sloane responds, her tone steady and precise.

Dr. Sloane: *No—not entirely. The room you're heading toward doesn't power the entire underground facility. It's a contained subsystem—designed to regulate the energy shield grid. The system is sustained by multiple Wind and Thunder Elementomes. They're mounted in a panel—slot-based conduits feeding directly into the grid. The generator must be fully depowered; then the grid collapses. Once offline, you can proceed to*

remove them... but the silo itself will remain operational.

Narrator: Dew's face tightens slightly.

Dr. Sloane: *...The main power source for the rest of the facility is located elsewhere—in another section of the silo that was also redacted from the archives. I tried recovering more data on it, but I couldn't find anything usable.*

Dew: So, shutting this one down only drops the energy shield grid...

Dr. Sloane: *Yes. That's all it should do.*

Dew: All right... understood.

Dr. Sloane: *Once the signal improves again, I'll try reaching out if there's anything else I can assist with.*

Dew: Sounds good. And thanks, Dr. Sloane.

Dr. Sloane: *Good luck, Dew. All of you—stay alive down there.*

Narrator: The line breaks apart in a burst of static. Then the connection cuts out. Dew lowers the satellite phone and slips it back into his vest. The others watch him closely, waiting. Rena is the first to speak.

Rena: I've got to ask—when did you all get a satellite phone..?

Dew: On the way here. Dr. Sloane gave it to us before we came in. It's not just for calls, either—it works as a map too. That's how we were able to navigate the silo and find you.

Rena: Hm. That's a useful device.

Cooper: Very useful, considering how deep in this mess we are.

Krista: And a lot better than wandering around blindly hoping for the best.

Lorenzo: Yeah, no kidding. This whole place is already a pain in the ass—we don't need to be guessing too.

Vilmer: So... six rooms ahead, huh?

Elvir: Sounds simple enough. Which, knowing our luck, it won't be.

Narrator: A faint, humorless smirk crosses Dew's face. He then looks toward the far end of the detention wing—the direction Dr. Sloane indicated.

Dew: I'm not sure what the hell happened to Gaz... (*sigh*) but we don't have time to figure that out. We've got to keep moving and bring the energy shield grid down.

Rena: I think he'd want us to keep going... let's make sure his sacrifice isn't wasted.

Vilmer: I agree...

Lorenzo: Man was wild... (*then solemnly shakes his head*) but he held it down for us. We owe him that.

Elvir: Wouldn't be right to let it all be for nothing.

Cooper: Thank you, and rest in peace, Gaz...

Krista: Yeah—Rena's right. We keep pushing... for him. For everything else on the line. We've got this.

Dew: We do...

Narrator: Vilmer then reaches into his pocket before speaking.

Vilmer: Hey, I found this among the tattered pieces of one of the Crow Sisters' cloaks on our way over here... (*then presents the keycard and hands it to Dew*)

Dew: (*then takes the keycard and holds it*) Good catch, Vilmer. We'll definitely need this... So—are we all ready to move?

Narrator: The others nod in agreement. With their weapons still in hand and nerves stretched tight from everything that's happened, Dew and the party turn away from the cracked wall, the unanswered question of Gaz's disappearance, and his machete still lying on the floor. Leaving the detention wing behind, they move out together—heading deeper into the underground missile silo toward Auxiliary Systems Node—Room 1.

CHAPTER 29 – REQUIEM FOR THE FAITHFUL

Narrator:

After leaving the detention wing, Dew and the party move swiftly toward Auxiliary Systems Node —Room 1. They pass through several empty chambers without resistance until reaching the sixth. Rounding one final bend, they spot a reinforced door set into the left side of the corridor wall. A weathered placard beside it reads: “AUXILIARY SYSTEMS NODE — ROOM 1.” A faint mechanical hum pulses from within. Three-armed *Bush of Life* cultists stand guard outside—two carrying rifles, the third with a Xiphos blade at his side. They barely have time to react before Dew surges forward. He closes the distance in an instant, driving his bo staff hard into a rifle-wielding cultist’s chest and slamming her back against the wall. Before she can recover, he pivots and strikes again, cracking the side of her head and dropping her to the floor. At the same moment, Lorenzo plows into the second rifleman with brutal force. His brass knuckles crash into the cultist’s masked face with a heavy, crunching blow—snapping his head sideways and sending him crumpling to the ground. The third guard manages to draw his blade halfway before Rena steps in. Her scythe flashes in one clean, controlled arc—hooking his weapon arm aside and slicing across his torso. The cultist staggers, drops to his knees, and collapses forward. The corridor falls silent almost as quickly as it erupted. Dew steps over the fallen guards and reaches the door first. He swipes the keycard across the access panel. The lock flashes green, and the reinforced door slides open with a low hydraulic hiss. Without a word, the party enters. Inside Auxiliary Systems Node Room 1, the party moves

across a metal-grated platform before coming to a halt as they locate the energy shield grid generator—a tall, steel-framed structure embedded in the wall, its core glowing with a steady blue-white current. Mounted across its face, within a vertical transparent conduit panel, are several embedded *Wind* and *Thunder Elementomes*, each radiating a faint elemental shimmer through reinforced glass channels.

Rena: Looks like this is it...

Vilmer: All that remains is to depower it. Once that's done, the entire energy shield will collapse—then we can remove the *Elementomes* for safekeeping.

Narrator: Dew studies the generator, spotting the power control on its side. He steps forward and presses it. For a brief, suspended moment, everything goes still. Then—thud. The generator powers down completely. The ambient hum in the room drops to near silence. The scene briefly cuts topside as the energy shield grid enveloping Pomodoro Cay destabilizes in a cascading failure. Its once-seamless barrier flickers in fractured bands of light before collapsing entirely, exposing the cay to open air and outside access. Almost immediately, Mesovillian forces—previously staged beyond the cay's perimeter at sea—detect the grid's collapse and launch their long-awaited assault before the scene cuts back to the node room.

Dew: ...That did it.

Rena: The shield should be down now.

Vilmer: Which means the cay is exposed.

Cooper: And Mesovillian forces can finally move in.

Lorenzo: 'Bout damn time...

Krista: That's one problem handled...

Dew: ...Now let's get those *Elementomes* out.

Narrator: Elvir steps forward, raising a hand.

Elvir: Right—best leave that to me. I'm the only one here with gloves, yeah? Wouldn't want any of you getting fried handling those bare-handed—even if they're powered down. Besides, we don't have time to wait for them to cool off.

Narrator: Dew nods and steps aside. Elvir approaches the generator, scanning the transparent conduit panel where the *Elementomes* sit secured in their slots, faintly pulsing at irregular intervals. She reaches for the latch and disengages it. Then click—the panel unlocks with a sharp metallic snap. A soft hiss escapes as it opens, followed by a faint, unstable crackle. Heat radiates outward from within the conduit, the *Elementomes* still glowing with residual energy. Unfazed, Elvir reaches in with her gloved hand and pulls the first free. A sharp fizz sounds as she yanks it loose, the air briefly warping from the heat before she tosses it aside through the gaps in the metal-grated platform at her feet. One by one, she removes the remaining *Elementomes*—each release accompanied by a soft hiss or crackle—discarding them in quick succession. Once the last is thrown clear, she glances back at Dew and the others.

Elvir: ...That should do it.

Narrator: Dew stares at the now-silent generator, then toward the exit.

Dew: All right... that's handled. Let's keep moving and finish what we came here to do.

Narrator: The party responds with silent nods. With the generator offline and the conduit panel cleared, they turn and head back into the corridor, pressing deeper into the silo. Back topside, five fast-approaching Mesovilian landing craft surge across the surrounding waters in coordinated formation, cutting through the waves toward the shore. At the same time, the few *Bush of Life* cultists stationed topside on patrol notice the sudden loss of the shield and the incoming assault in the distance. They quickly radio for backup. Back on the cay's shoreline, the five-landing craft come to a stop. Ramps slam down, and SWAT TROOPER ELITE units, armed and ready, deploy in rapid succession, fanning outward and advancing inland in tight formation. Deep within the silo, throngs of rifle-wielding *Bush of Life* cultists, along with others carrying Xiphos

swords, rush toward a secondary service elevator. They pile inside with urgency as the doors begin to close and the ascent begins. Back on the shoreline, SWAT TROOPER ELITE units push forward with speed and coordination. Squads move in staggered formation, rifles raised, scanning the dense jungle ahead as they begin their inland advance. The service elevator ascends rapidly. Inside, the cultists brace themselves—some checking magazines, others gripping their Xiphos blades in tense silence as the hum of the lift echoes through the confined space. Across the red sand, boots tear into the soil as SWAT TROOPER ELITE units breach the jungle line, spreading outward with practiced precision. Hand signals flash between unit leaders as they prepare for imminent contact. Moments later, the elevator doors slide open. The cultists surge out onto the surface level, immediately breaking into a sprint through pre-cut jungle paths leading toward the coastline. Branches snap and foliage parts as they push forward at full speed. Meanwhile, back topside, Johnny and Dr. Brundle run through the foliage, with Johnny in the lead. He slows to a stop, and Dr. Brundle does the same. Johnny glances up, noticing the energy shield grid over the cay has collapsed. He gives a brief nod upward, signaling it to Dr. Brundle.

Torrio: Dew, Rena, and the others must've taken it down. Means reinforcements oughta be on the way...

Narrator: Seconds later, distant gunfire echoes across the cay.

Torrio: Heh... sounds like they're already here. Yeah—no way we're gettin' caught in the middle of that. Stay close behind me. I know a place we can lay low 'til things cool off.

Narrator: Dr. Brundle nods. The two immediately break into a sprint, Johnny leading him back to the same hollow where he and Gaz had taken refuge earlier. They slip inside without hesitation. Outside, the distant gunfire continues to echo across the cay—sporadic at first. Then it intensifies. Controlled bursts crack through

the air as SWAT TROOPER ELITE units engage advancing cultists emerging from the tree line. Return fire follows—less disciplined, but relentless. More cultists flood in from the jungle routes, reinforcing the push toward the defensive line as the distance closes fast. Before long, the shoreline transforms into a full battlefield. The red sand erupts under suppressive fire. Vegetation shreds under impact. The air fills with overlapping command calls, gunfire, and the chaos of the two forces colliding head-on. The scene cuts back to the makeshift laboratory, where the four-strain SKT virus synthesis is moments away from finalization. Inside the cabinet-sized synthesis unit, the unified SKT compound continues stabilizing within a single containment vial housed in the central chamber. Thornton remains standing, observing the process with his hands folded behind his back—until a sharp burst of static suddenly crackles from the handheld radio clipped to his belt. He unclips it and slowly raises it before answering the incoming call.



Thornton: Yes... report.

BOL Cultist 22: (*strained, urgent, gunfire in background*) *M-Master—! The energy shield grid—it's down! The cay's exposed—Mesovillian forces—!*

Narrator: Gunfire cracks through the transmission—shouting, overlapping commands, the unmistakable chaos of open combat bleeding through the signal. Meanwhile, the SKT synthesis has just completed. In the background, the *Bush of Life* cultist scientists continue monitoring the readouts, ensuring the converging viral sequences remain in alignment. They exchange satisfied nods before turning toward Thornton, who still stands observing them. The female cultist scientist from earlier gestures to him, signaling that the process was successful, while a few others tend to minor tasks nearby. Thornton gives a subtle nod—then his radio crackles with one final response from BOL Cultist 22.

BOL Cultist 22: *...the shoreline—requesting reforc—!*

Narrator: The transmission abruptly cuts out—swallowed by a burst of static. Silence returns. Thornton slowly lowers the radio and clips it back onto his belt, his expression unreadable beneath the mask. For a brief moment, he says nothing. Then a faint, almost amused exhale escapes him.

Thornton: ...So, Dew and his friends managed to bring down the energy shield grid after all. Hmph.

Narrator: Thornton turns slightly, his gaze drifting to his left—toward Elizabeth's unseen specter lingering beside him. She speaks to him briefly, unheard by the others in the lab. Thornton listens briefly and then responds.

Thornton: Yes, my love... It would seem the Crow Sisters have fallen... And Dew, your mother, and their friends are an efficient... determined bunch, aren't they..?

Narrator: Then comes a subtle pause as he continues listening to Elizabeth's specter. Moments later, a faint smile tugs beneath the mask.

Thornton: ...They will be coming this way soon... but they are too late to stop us now... I will instruct the faithful to proceed at once, as you command...

Narrator: He turns back toward the cultist scientists, his presence sharpening instantly—command reasserting itself. They straighten at once under the shift.

Thornton: Faithful... through your undying devotion and tireless efforts, the renascence now stands upon us, made manifest by the completion of the SKT synthesis. We see you. We honor you. Now—heed this call. All remaining data on the synthesized SKT virus—erase it. Destroy it. Let no trace remain. Once this sacred task is fulfilled, you will relocate to the secondary positions and join my uncle there. Prepare yourselves... for the renascence. This is her will... and her command.

Narrator: The cultist scientists exchange silent, acknowledging nods, then seconds later scramble to comply, the room shifting from observation to controlled dismantling. The female cultist scientist steps forward to the synthesis unit and retrieves the completed SKT vial, just as another scientist begins dismantling the unit itself. Meanwhile, others move swiftly—pulling storage drives, smashing them, while additional consoles are wiped clean of all data. Amid the chaos, the female cultist scientist approaches Thornton and places the synthesized vial into his hand. He takes it without a word. Thornton briefly studies the faintly glowing vial, murmuring to himself.

Thornton: (*low, reverent*) At last... It'll be so...

Narrator: He then lifts the vial slightly, turning it between his fingers as its faint glow reflects across the mask. Then his attention shifts once more to Elizabeth's specter as another pause follows while she silently communicates with him. His posture relaxes just slightly before answering.

Thornton: (*soft, almost intimate*) See you soon, my love...

Narrator: Thornton gives a slow, final nod—one of quiet satisfaction—before turning to the female cultist scientist,

who remains standing nearby, still and composed, her masked face angled toward him.
Thornton: *(calmer, deliberate)* Tell me... are you ready for the next phase? Ready to offer yourself as a sacrifice to her..?



Narrator: The female cultist scientist does not hesitate as she lowers her head slightly, giving a silent, nodding affirmation. Thornton watches her for a moment longer—measuring, confirming—while still holding the SKT synthesis vial in his grasp. The scene cuts back to Dew and the party as they push through several additional waves of Bat and Spider drone units, cutting them down with ease while advancing deeper into the underground missile silo. Eventually, upon reaching another corridor, they catch a brief moment of reprieve. Suddenly, the satellite phone in Dew's pocket emits a sharp electronic trill, slicing through the silence. Dew immediately reaches into his vest and pulls out the device. The screen flickers,

displaying the caller ID: Steelwind-Three. Dew answers without hesitation, activating the speaker.

Steelwind-Three: *...Mr. Wilder, this is Steelwind-Three. Do you read?*

Dew: *(into the phone)* Yeah. Loud and clear, Steelwind-Three—go ahead.

Steelwind-Three: *Copy that. Signal's finally stable. Be advised, I am currently en route to Pomodoro Cay—wheels up approximately forty minutes ago following command authorization. I've been monitoring open channels... picked up confirmation that your team neutralized the energy shield grid. Combat operations are still active on the ground, but your actions enabled the assault to proceed. That was a critical objective. Well executed.*

Lorenzo: *(smug, under his breath)* Heh... yeah, that's how we do.

Elvir: *(cheeky)* Oh, you're quite welcome—had to make sure those *Elementomes* stayed out of play too, didn't we?

Narrator: Dew glances briefly at Lorenzo and Elvir with a faint smirk, then refocuses on the satellite phone.

Dew: *(flat, downplaying)* Yeah... told you it wouldn't be an issue getting it done. ...Listen—there's something I need you to do.

Steelwind-Three: *Go ahead.*

Dew: We've got two allies topside—Johnny Torrio. Dark shades, gray suit, carrying a shotgun. And Dr. Brundle, a scientist who was being held here. They should be near the jungle perimeter, likely hiding out in a hollow. Make sure the SWAT TROOPER ELITE units know they're friendlies. The last thing we need is them getting caught in crossfire.

Steelwind-Three: *Understood. I'll relay it to command immediately—names, descriptions, all of it. They'll be flagged as non-hostile.*

Dew: Good... Also, we're still inside the silo, closing in on the *Bush of Life* cult leader. Let the Interim Premier know—we're handling it.

Steelwind-Three: *Copy all. I'll pass that along. My ETA is approximately one hour and thirty-eight minutes. Hopefully the party's still going when I arrive. Ha-ha...*

Dew: Hah. Anyway. We're about to continue from here in just a bit.

Narrator: A low hiss of static begins creeping into the line.

Steelwind-Three: *Okay. You and your team—stay alive down there, Mr. Wilder.*

Dew: We will. See you soon.

Steelwind-Three: *Roger that. Steelwind-Three, out.*

Narrator: The call ends with a faint crackle. Dew lowers the satellite phone and slides it back into his vest. The group stands in silence for a brief moment before Rena speaks.

Rena: ...So, you picked up a pilot while I was gone too.

Cooper: Yeah. Comes in handy—ever since that whole trip through Aether's Keep.

Rena: Aether's Keep..? *(then smiles slightly)* Yeah... I'm definitely going to need that story.

Dew: You'll get it, along with many others... *(then, firm)* All right. Let's keep moving...

Narrator: Without another word, Dew and the party regroup and push forward once more—deeper into the silo, closing in on Thornton. Sometime later, Dew and the party round a bend and step into another set of crew quarters, larger than the last and lined with metal bunks, scattered lockers, and personal belongings abandoned in haste. The space feels still, almost hollow—until a faint mechanical skitter breaks through the silence from the far end of the room. Suddenly, within view, Bat and Spider drones emerge, their metal limbs scraping along the floor and walls as their optics flare to life in sharp bursts. For a brief second, everything holds—then the Bat and Spider drones surge forward, rushing straight at Dew and the party as the room erupts into battle. The swarm attempts to overwhelm and harry them all at once, but Dew and the party quickly dispatch them through a coordinated team effort with relative ease. Minutes later,

the final drone lunged at Dew—he pivoted sharply and drove the end of his bo staff straight through its center mass. The machine jerked, then went still. Fragments of metal clattered to the floor, joining the remains of the other destroyed drones as the room settled. Elvir exhaled, rolling her shoulder as the rest of the party lowered their weapons.

Elvir: Blimey... annoying little buggers, aren't they?

Lorenzo: Yeah... like roaches.

Cooper: That looks like the last of them...

Narrator: As the group regathers, one of the damaged bunks shifts and partially collapses from the earlier impacts. A worn book slides off the top mattress and hits the floor with a dull thud, its pages splaying open. Something slips free and lands beside it. Dew notices.

Dew: Hm..?

Narrator: He steps forward and sees a Polaroid photograph lying face down. He bends to pick it up, turning it over to inspect it. The others drift closer, and for a moment, no one speaks. Rena leans in slightly.

Rena: ...A photograph?

Narrator: Dew holds it up just enough for the others to see. The image is old—slightly faded, its edges worn. Two teenage girls stand side by side, both with light warm-beige skin, straight dark brows, almond-shaped dark brown eyes, and high cheekbones—one with dark hair, the other blonde—smiling faintly at the camera. Behind them, a roller-skating rink glows under bright lights, a few teens gathered near the entrance. At the bottom of the Polaroid, written in pen, it reads: *Myrrh and I, Turbo Tunnel Rink — 1997*. Realization settles over the party, and Cooper's expression tightens before he speaks, the others following in quiet disbelief.

Cooper: ...That's...

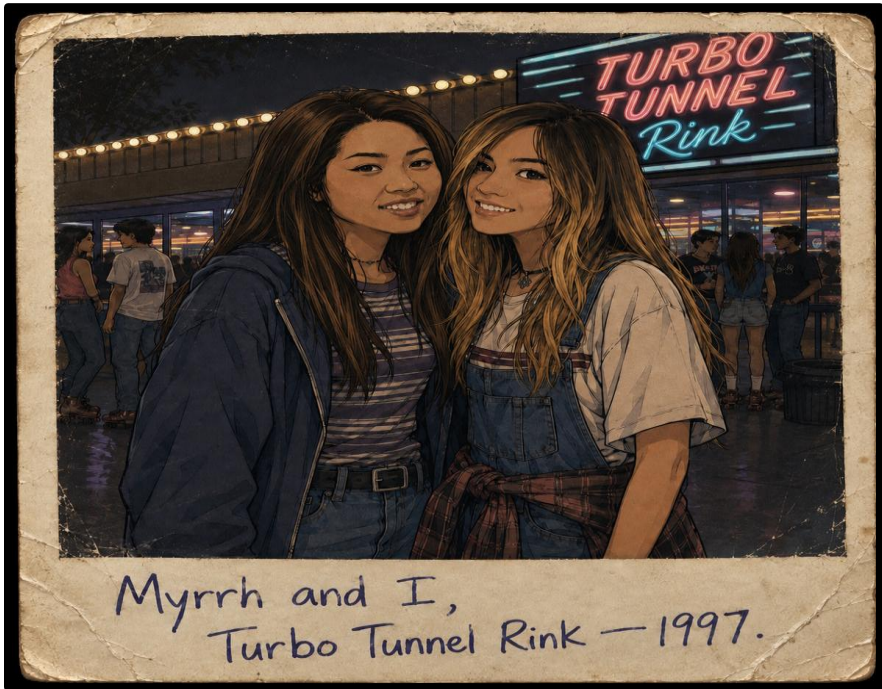
Krista: (*quietly*) No way...

Vilmer: ...The Crow Sisters.

Lorenzo: Damn... they really looked normal and happy...for real.

Elvir: *(softly, more serious than usual)* Before all this... didn't they?

Narrator: Krista studies the photo a moment longer, her gaze steady.



Krista: New Havenport... before the war... and the nuking.

Narrator: She doesn't finish the thought. Dew remains silent, giving a small shake of his head as he lowers the photograph. A brief silence follows—heavier than before. Rena exhales sharply, folding her arms lightly before speaking.

Rena: It doesn't change what they became... their misplaced devotion to my daughter... the countless innocent lives they've taken in her name... but it does show what they once were, a long time ago...

Cooper: Tragic...

Narrator: Dew glances down at the photograph one last time, then carefully tucks it into his vest.

Dew: ...Let's move.

Narrator:

With that, Dew and the party—still holding their weapons—exit the crew quarters through the commons area and find another reinforced stairwell. They descend several flights into the Level 3 lower Cableway Tunnels, with Dew leading the way as the others tighten their formation behind him.

CHAPTER 30 – “I’M COMING

HOME, ELIZABETH”

Narrator:

After making their way through several more corridors, Dew and the party finally reach the end of the winding passage. A reinforced laboratory door looms before them, sealed tight along its center seam. Dew doesn’t hesitate. He steps forward, pulls the keycard from his vest, and drags it across the panel on the right. A green light flickers, and with a deep hydraulic hiss, the door splits cleanly down the middle, each half sliding inward to reveal the space beyond—its interior washed in a dim, ominous red glow. With their weapons still drawn, Dew quickly tucks the keycard back into his vest, and he and the party cautiously move inside. Once within the makeshift laboratory, they are bathed in the dim red light. Off to the side, the cabinet-sized synthesis unit lies completely dismantled, its pieces scattered near the destroyed terminals and their components. A faint, acrid scent of chemicals and burned circuitry lingers in the stale air. At the far end of the room, standing with his left side turned toward them—calm and composed—waits Thornton. As Dew and the party begin to approach, a heavy thud suddenly echoes throughout the laboratory as the reinforced door behind them slams shut, its mechanical lock engaging and sealing them inside. The sound briefly draws their attention, but they keep their weapons trained. At the same moment, the scene cuts to the rest of the silo—every access point locking down in unison. The topside entrance seals, and both service elevators shut down. Thornton slowly turns to face them, a taunting grin faintly visible beneath his mask.

Thornton: Well, well... Dew Wilder, leading the charge with his trusty shower rod in hand—and the whole gang right behind him. You finally made it.

Narrator: An irritated Dew rolls his eyes before correcting Thornton.

Dew: That joke is played out. I told you before—it's not a shower rod. For your information, it's a corrugated pipe.

Narrator: Rena tilts her head slightly, letting out a soft, curious hum.

Rena: ...Hm.

Thornton: (*dismissively*) Hmph.

Narrator: Thornton's gaze slowly drifts across the group before eventually settling on Elvir in her *Hozho* attire. An irritated curl forms across his lips beneath the mask.

Thornton: Ah, yes... the annoying *Hozho* girl is here too. And look at you with the new outfit. That chest plate looks ridiculous on you... It's you who looks like the tin can of vegetables now. (*then aloud to himself*) At least his doesn't look like it'll fall off on him... Ha-ha...

Narrator: Dew and the others briefly raise an eyebrow at Thornton's last comment. Even Elvir pauses for half a second, visibly confused about who exactly he was referring to, before quickly brushing it aside as irritation overtakes her and she snaps back at him.

Elvir: Hrrrrrmph! Ridiculous?! Why, I'm gonna wallop you senseless for disrespectin' my *Hozho* ancestors' gear like that, Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetable Man! I still owe you for that punch you gave me back on Mt. Il-lini. Nyah!

Narrator: Lorenzo cracks his neck as he steps forward, a smirk spreading across his face.

Lorenzo: Yeah... and we still got unfinished business from the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy lab, remember?

Krista: You didn't exactly leave a great impression last time.

Thornton: Oh, I remember all of it... especially the "impression" left when your own boomerang smacked you right in the forehead.

Narrator: Krista rubs the spot on her forehead out of pure reflex before responding to Thornton's remark.

Krista: Ooooh... why, you little slimeball!

Thornton: Hah. All fired up, are we..? Don't worry... we'll get down to business shortly...

Narrator: Rena steps forward, her scythe lowered but poised to strike at a moment's notice. Her eyes carefully scan the room.

Rena: ...Elizabeth. Where are you? Show yourself.

Narrator: Thornton lightly gestures toward the ruined synthesis equipment behind him before slowly spreading his arms, almost cheerful and welcoming.

Thornton: Ah... *"Elizabeth isn't here right now. Please leave a message after the beep... Beep."*

Narrator: An uncomfortable silence settles over the room. Dew and the others stare blankly at Thornton as his giddy demeanor then gradually shifts back into a more serious tone.

Thornton: *(raising a single finger and wagging it slowly)* You're all too late. The Renascence... is at hand.

Narrator: Dew's expression hardens while the others exchange uneasy glances at Thornton's declaration. Elvir clenches her fists and defiantly fires back at him.

Elvir: Bullshit. I didn't hear no bell ring, Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetable Man! It ain't over yet, mate.

Thornton: Ha-ha-ha... but it is...

Narrator: Dew narrows his eyes at Thornton.

Dew: Thornton. I've got to know something... How are you still alive after what happened in New Havenport..? You should be dead.

Narrator: A brief silence follows before Thornton's posture shifts slightly—calm, deliberate.

Thornton: ...I should be, but as you can see, I am not. You really want to know how that is..? Sure. I'll give you that before your end... *(then he takes a slow step forward before stopping in place)* After injuring my dear late brother during a brief tussle, I was shot center mass by one of his Guardsmen with a shotgun... Then I was flung from the rooftop of the Mt. Darien Biochemical

Research Facility and plunged straight into the Mesovillian Ocean below. *(then, faintly amused)* Fate would have it, my bulletproof vest did its job. *(then his tone lowers, almost reverent)* When I resurfaced, I was broken... disoriented... barely conscious... drifting helplessly along the waves. Then came the nuke... I should have perished there... reduced to ash and steam... *(then his eyes widen slightly beneath the mask)* But in that moment... she appeared. The one I believed my brother had cruelly stolen from this world mere minutes earlier... my love, Elizabeth. Changed... transcendent... radiant beyond mortal comprehension. And with her celestial blessing arrayed around me... she shielded me from the inferno itself. Eventually, when I emerged from the waters... perhaps a day or two later... I had healed... reborn anew... I was baptized... no longer Thornton Videl, but a servant of the Söl Congruum, led ashore by my love. *(then his voice lowers further, almost entranced)* The skies above New Havenport had become a churning veil of black and crimson ash as towering pillars of smoke relentlessly climbed upward, while radioactive embers fell like dying stars across the shoreline. The sea itself was warm... poisoned... littered with burning debris and the hollow remains of ships drifting without purpose... And there, amidst the scorched ruin of humankind's arrogance... she walked beside me... untouched. Ever-present. Ethereal. Then, in time, we came across the few who had survived. Scattered. Starving. Hollow souls wandering aimlessly through the ashes of New Havenport... clinging desperately to the crumbling remains of a dead world. Some huddled beside burning wreckage for warmth... others knelt in the blackened streets, weeping for families already reduced to dust and shadow... They had lost everything. Their homes... their purpose... their faith in Chosha... and in humankind itself. But then... they beheld me. A man risen from the poisoned sea untouched by sickness... untouched by

radiation... walking calmly beside her divine presence, though hidden from their mortal eyes... *(then slowly spreads a hand outward)* To them, I was no mere survivor... I was a miracle. A prophet delivered forth from damnation itself. And they believed. Guided by her sacred will... we gathered the broken beneath her grace. We fed the starving. Sheltered the abandoned. Purified the lost. One by one, the hopeless fell to their knees before the truth and were reborn within it. Thus, the *Bush of Life* came into existence... first within the ruins of New Havenport... and then far beyond its poisoned shores. Those who listened... came willingly. Those who believed... surrendered themselves wholly to her will, joyfully spreading it in her name. And those too blind... too fearful... *(then eyes Dew and the party briefly)* ...Hmph ...to embrace the coming dawn were abandoned alongside the dying world they worshipped. *(then his voice sharpens with fanatic conviction)* The return of the Sōl Congruum. The cleansing of humankind's corruption. The rejection of Chosha's divine comedy that is reality itself... The undoing of this broken world... and the birth of a new world sanctified beneath our— *(then a faint smile forms beneath the mask)* —no... her “*shining lighthouse*”...

Narrator: Upon hearing this, the party's expressions subtly tighten as Rena's eyes narrow ever so slightly, a faint flicker of discomfort crossing her face at hearing the phrase twisted so reverently from Thornton's lips.

Dew: Dew scoffs, shaking his head before responding. Yeah? And how many people had to die for her perversions..? *(then his grip tightens around his bo staff)* ...Emily did. *(then his voice hardens)* My friend was taken from me... and her child... You took desperate people, filled their heads with false hope, twisted their pain, and marched them straight to the slaughterhouse.

Narrator: Thornton's expression darkens—not with anger, but with disdain.

Thornton: Still so narrow-minded... and now acting as though you lot had no hand in any of this... *(then he steps forward again, his voice colder now)* Emily. The Crow Sisters. All of the *Bush of Life* who have fallen... they offered everything willingly. It was not I, nor my love, who took their lives... it was — *(then his tone sharpens)* ...you, Dew, and your friends, who struck them down with your very own hands. You look upon loss... and call it tragedy. WE look upon their sacrifice... and call it necessary.

Dew: Necessary?! None of it was..!

Thornton: But all is in motion... And because of that, every death has led us closer to this moment... inch by inch... step by step... toward her new world once the Renaissance is complete... and we are almost halfway there...

Narrator: Krista's expression hardens with visible disgust, her fingers tightening around the edge of her boomerang, while beside her, Vilmer lets out a slow, irritated breath through his nose, his grip on the grappling hook growing firmer as Thornton's words echo through the makeshift laboratory. Lorenzo stares at Thornton with open contempt before finally speaking up.

Lorenzo: Man... I still see no difference between you and that asshole brother of yours. Just a different kind of crazy and cruel. And y'know what else y'all got in common..? You're about to end up dead real soon... just like him.

Narrator: Elvir briefly glances toward Lorenzo in agreement before turning her attention back to Thornton and following up without hesitation.

Elvir: The Söl Congruum nearly destroyed everything once before, and now you're helpin' it happen all over again! I won't feel bloody

sorry for you when we plant you dead flat on your ass once and for all, Tin-Canned Mixed Vegetable Man!

Narrator:

Despite Lorenzo's and Elvir's threats, Thornton's expression beneath his mask remains unchanged. Seeing this, Rena steps forward and makes one final attempt to reach him.

Rena:

Thornton... *(then lowers her scythe slightly, her voice quieter now)* You and my daughter clearly share a strong bond, and I can see that you truly love her... We may not know each other very well, but deep down, there's still a part of you that knows this isn't right. Like I told her... and I'm telling you, it doesn't have to end like this...

Thornton:

Are you trying to appeal to my better judgment, Mommy Dearest..? Save your breath. ...And still, you remain blind to her truth. My love, my flesh, my soul, and my devotion to her are unwavering... *(then places a hand over his chest)* I was chosen to stand beside her during humanity's cleansing and rebirth, and none of you will halt what is to come. The old world will perish, and from its ashes, her new world shall rise eternal.

Narrator:

Dew slowly steps forward beside Rena, planting the base of his bo staff firmly against the laboratory floor with a metallic clang.

Dew:

You know what I'm not "blind to"..? Last time you fought us, there were only four of us. Now, you'll be facing all seven. This ends here and now...

Thornton:

Oh? Ha-ha... Is that so, small fry..?

Narrator:

Dew's eyes widen, and Cooper's brow furrows slightly after hearing Thornton use Dew's old nickname for the first time in years. For a brief moment, flashes of old memories of their time in the SWAT TROOPER ELITE

hang between Dew, Cooper, and Thornton. Cooper then tightens his grip on his mop handle and coldly responds.

Cooper: ...No more speeches. No more dead innocents for Elizabeth's "new world"... It's time to put you to rest, Sergeant...

Thornton: Hmph. Then, it'll be so...

Narrator: Then, in one smooth motion, Thornton draws his bastard sword. The polished blade gleams coldly beneath the dim red laboratory lights as he raises it into an Ochs stance—high guard, poised and precise.

Thornton: (*calm, deadly*) Four or seven of you... it makes no difference. Witnessing your futile struggle against her will shall make your destruction all the sweeter... But worry not... as her servant, I shall grant each of you a merciful death... and then her new world will emerge undisturbed. She commands it... (then his eyes narrow beneath the mask) Now. Prepare yourselves... As... You will all... FALL DOWN!

Narrator: The makeshift laboratory erupts into violence as the first phase of the battle begins. Thornton lunges forward with terrifying speed, his bastard sword screaming through the crimson-lit air while Dew barely intercepts the opening strike with his bo staff. The impact sends a violent vibration through Dew's arms and forces him backward across the floor. Before anyone else can close in, Thornton vanishes in a distorted flash of light accompanied by an encasing fog, the portable teleportation device attached to his belt emitting a sharp mechanical whine as he instantly reappears beside Cooper. Cooper reacts immediately, swinging his mop upward with enough force to catch Thornton across the side of his shoulder. Thornton absorbs the hit, then deflects the follow-up strike with the flat

of his blade before driving a savage kick into Cooper's chest, sending him stumbling backward several feet. At the same moment, Krista's sharpened boomerang slices through the air toward Thornton's head. Thornton ducks beneath it just as the weapon whistles past him. In one fluid motion, he reaches beneath his trench coat and draws his service pistol, snapping it toward Lorenzo as he charges in from the left with brute force. Before Thornton can fire, Krista's returning boomerang smashes hard into the side of the handgun with a violent metallic crack. The impact violently jerks the weapon sideways in Thornton's grip, visibly denting the slide and damaging the frame. Thornton immediately realizes the pistol is compromised and tosses it aside onto the laboratory floor without hesitation. The boomerang curves cleanly back into Krista's hand while Lorenzo barrels forward, attempting to overwhelm Thornton at close range. Thornton pivots sharply, narrowly avoiding Lorenzo's punch before disappearing again in another burst of flickering light. The entire makeshift laboratory becomes a blur of movement. Thornton teleports relentlessly around the room, striking the party from impossible angles while the party struggles to pin him down. Elvir rushes him next, her dual daggers flashing in rapid succession as she unleashes a barrage of close-range slashes. Thornton blocks one dagger with his sword before twisting aside from the second, the blade grazing across the side of his trench coat. He immediately retaliates with a sharp backhand strike, dazing her and forcing Elvir backward. Vilmer quickly steps in, firing his grappling hook toward Thornton's chest, but Thornton disappears in

another flash just before the metal claw reaches him. A split second later, he reappears beside Vilmer and grabs the grappling line with his free hand, violently yanking Vilmer off balance toward him. Before Vilmer can recover, Thornton drives the hilt of his bastard sword hard into his midsection, doubling him over. Thornton then seizes Vilmer by the front of his vest and hurls him several feet across the makeshift laboratory, causing Vilmer to crash hard against the floor while still clutching the grappling hook before Thornton vanishes once more. A split second later, Thornton reappears directly between Dew and Rena, his bastard sword slashing outward in a wide horizontal arc. Dew quickly intercepts the strike with his bo staff while Rena narrowly leans back to avoid the blade passing inches from her chest. Thornton presses forward aggressively, forcing Dew backward with a series of brutal strikes before pivoting toward Rena and narrowly avoiding her scythe as she swings toward his side. Rena then sweeps her scythe low toward Thornton's legs while Dew attacks high simultaneously, attempting to trap him between them. Thornton narrowly twists between both attacks, his coat whipping through the tight opening as the weapons barely miss him. In the same instant, he performs a spinning double kick in midair, striking both Dew and Rena and causing them to stagger off balance before he vanishes. The sharp hum of Thornton's teleportation device echoes throughout the laboratory as he suddenly appears behind Krista just as she prepares to launch her boomerang. Before Thornton can strike, Cooper rushes in and swings his mop directly toward Thornton's

ribs. Thornton catches the attack against the flat of his blade, then drives his elbow hard into Cooper's jaw, staggering him backward once again. Lorenzo immediately charges in from the side, throwing a heavy punch toward Thornton's head. Thornton narrowly slips past the blow before slamming theommel of his bastard sword hard into Lorenzo's ribs, forcing a sharp grunt out of him as the impact knocks him off balance. But in that brief moment, Thornton leaves himself open. Krista quickly pivots and hurls her boomerang directly at him. The sharpened weapon slices across Thornton's collarbone with enough force to stagger him a step sideways. A low grunt escapes beneath his face mask as the blade tears across the armor and flesh underneath, visibly catching him off guard for the first time during the battle. The boomerang curves sharply through the crimson-lit laboratory before whipping back toward Krista's waiting hand. Thornton slowly turns his head toward her, his posture tightening. Before Krista can fully react, he suddenly rushes forward before vanishing. A split second later, he reappears directly in front of her and drives a brutal running knee upward into her midsection, lifting her partially off the floor from the impact. Krista gasps in pain as Thornton instantly vanishes before the others can retaliate. Despite facing the entire party at once, Thornton continues overwhelming them individually through sheer speed, precision, and aggression. Every attempted opening is countered almost instantly, and each advance forces the party members backward until Vilmer finally makes his move, firing his grappling hook directly across the room. The grappling hook slams hard into the portable

teleportation device mounted on Thornton's belt, partially tearing through its housing. Sparks erupt violently from the device as it crackles erratically, emitting bursts of unstable energy before sputtering uncontrollably. Thornton becomes visibly irritated and immediately staggers backward as another sharp burst of sparks erupts from the damaged device before it finally burns out completely. Thornton rips the ruined device from his belt and drops it onto the floor. Silence briefly settles over the room before Thornton slowly straightens himself, looking menacingly toward Dew and the party.

Thornton:

Tch.

Narrator:

Without saying a word, he removes his trench coat and lets it drop heavily onto the makeshift laboratory floor. A moment later, he reaches upward and removes his face mask and flash hood. His long black hair falls freely around his shoulders. Now with his face fully uncovered, there are no signs of scarring or deformities—only the face of a weathered, stern, and composed older man, his icy blue eyes appearing even more intense than before, burning with an almost unnatural focus beneath the makeshift laboratory's crimson glow. Dew and the party gather themselves, tightening their grips on their weapons as Thornton slowly raises his bastard sword once more. Without another word, the battle resumes as the second phase begins. Without the teleportation device, Thornton fights with even greater ferocity, relying entirely on raw combat skill, timing, and aggression. Elvir darts in repeatedly with her dual daggers, her movements fast and precise as she unleashes a relentless barrage of close-range slashes. Thornton parries each strike with brutal

efficiency before forcing her backward with a heavy shoulder check that nearly knocks her off balance.



Vilmer quickly follows, swinging his grappling line low in an attempt to snare Thornton's legs. Thornton steps over the line and drives forward, but Vilmer yanks it back and forces him to shift his footing. In that brief opening, Cooper rushes forward and swings his mop toward Thornton's hip. The blow lands solidly, causing Thornton to briefly flinch before retaliating with a vicious counter-slash that Cooper narrowly avoids by jerking backward at the last possible moment. Rena then closes in from the opposite side, her scythe cutting a sharp diagonal path toward Thornton's shoulder. Thornton twists away from the blade, but the motion forces him directly into Lorenzo's pressure as Lorenzo hammers forward with

heavy punches. Krista's sharpened boomerang repeatedly flies through the laboratory, forcing Thornton to constantly adjust his positioning while Dew clashes head-on against him, his staff and bastard sword grinding violently together as sparks shower across the laboratory floor. Despite the mounting pressure from all sides, Thornton refuses to break. The laboratory fills with heavy breathing, steel impacts, grunts of exertion, and the crackling hum of damaged equipment scattered throughout the room. Gradually, the party begins pushing Thornton further onto the defensive, forcing him to react to their coordinated assaults instead of controlling the battle entirely himself. Still, Thornton continues holding his ground. Whenever one member gains momentum, Thornton immediately redirects his attention toward them with ruthless precision, forcing them backward before shifting to the next target. Elvir is pushed out of close range by Thornton's swordsmanship. Vilmer's grappling line repeatedly forces Thornton to adjust, but Thornton keeps cutting away from each attempted bind. Cooper narrowly avoids several brutal counters while trying to reengage. Krista struggles to maintain clear throwing angles as Lorenzo continues pressing Thornton aggressively at close range. Rena keeps circling for an opening, forcing Thornton to remain aware of her scythe with every step he takes. Meanwhile, Dew remains directly in front of him. Again and again, the two collide in violent exchanges at the center of the makeshift laboratory, each clash forcing one or the other backward. Eventually, the battle slowly narrows. One by one, the others are pushed back by exhaustion, accumulated injuries, or

Thornton's relentless counters until only Dew remains standing directly before him. The two immediately clash again as Dew swings first and Thornton blocks. Thornton instantly retaliates with a vicious diagonal slash that Dew barely redirects with the center of his bo staff. The two continue exchanging blows at close range, each strike becoming faster, heavier, and more desperate than the last. Sparks burst violently each time their weapons collide. Then the two weapons lock together. Thornton leans forward, forcing his bastard sword downward while Dew strains to hold him back. Sparks spit between the locked weapons as both men glare at one another face-to-face. Suddenly, Thornton shifts his weight, releasing the sword hilt with his left hand. In one swift motion, he drives the hilt of the bastard sword upward toward Dew's chin with lethal force, causing Dew's eyes to widen in alarm. But Rena, recovering nearby and seeing the attack unfold, quickly charges in from Thornton's right side. With fierce determination, she swings her scythe downward in a brutal diagonal arc, the blade violently tearing across Thornton's torso as he recoils backward, ending the battle. Dew looks on in momentary shock before turning toward a panting yet visibly relieved Rena as Thornton's blood sprays across the makeshift laboratory floor. The bastard sword slips from Thornton's hand and crashes loudly against the floor. For a brief moment, Dew and the party remain silent, watching as Thornton slowly stumbles backward several steps, blood pouring freely from the massive wound carved across his body. His breathing weakens almost immediately. Thornton briefly glances downward at the blood soaking

through his torso before slowly lifting his eyes again. He grimaces toward Rena, then toward Cooper, and finally at Dew. A faint grin gradually spreads across Thornton's face as he looks off into the distance before giving his final response.



Thornton: ...Heh... Elizabeth... *(cough)* ...I'm coming home... *(cough)* *(cough)* honey... Ha-ha... Uggggghhhhhh...

Narrator: Then, with that, Thornton's legs finally give out beneath him. He collapses heavily onto the makeshift laboratory floor, the faint grin still frozen across his face as he succumbs to his fatal wound.

CHAPTER 31- “HELLO AGAIN, MOTHER”

Narrator: Thornton’s body lies motionless in the growing pool of blood beneath him on the makeshift laboratory floor, the faint grin still frozen across his face. Dew and the party remain where they stand within the dim crimson glow of the makeshift laboratory, exhausted breaths filling the stale air as the reality of the battle finally settles over them. Suddenly, a heavy metallic clunk echoes throughout the underground missile silo. All across the facility, reinforced security doors disengage in sequence. Mechanical locks retract with loud hydraulic hisses as previously sealed corridors, access gates, and internal service routes automatically unlock one after another. Yet the top-side blast doors remain sealed, and the service elevators can no longer be summoned from the surface, preventing anyone outside from entering the underground complex.

Lorenzo: ...What was that..?

Cooper: Hm. Sounds like the exit ahead has been unlocked...

Vilmer: Good. Nice to know we’re not trapped in here.

Narrator: Dew slowly exhales, lowering his bo staff slightly as the tension finally begins to leave his shoulders. But before relief can fully settle over the room, a deafening alarm suddenly blares overhead, erupting throughout the silo. A split second later, a low vibration begins to pulse beneath their feet. The makeshift laboratory lightly trembles at first, but within moments the shaking rapidly intensifies into a violent roar. A deep, thunderous force surges upward through the silo structure—strong enough to shake loose dust, debris, and fragments of broken equipment throughout the laboratory. Dew immediately steadies himself, tightening his grip on his bo staff as his eyes snap upward. Lorenzo plants his footing, his brass knuckles clenched tightly while he scans the

shaking room. Rena grips her scythe firmly, her expression tightening with unease. Cooper stumbles back a half-step, instinctively raising his mop defensively. Krista braces herself against a nearby destroyed terminal, while Vilmer drops down onto one knee after being brought down by the tremor, steadying his grappling hook at his side. Beside him, Elvir quickly lowers her stance, both daggers still drawn as the violent shaking continues. Then the scene cuts topside as the battlefield surrounding Pomodoro Cay has fallen eerily quiet. Gun smoke drifts across the shattered shoreline while the surviving *Bush of Life* cultists kneel restrained beneath armed guard. Several SWAT TROOPER ELITE units secure the area as others sweep the jungle perimeter for remaining hostiles. Then the ground beneath the cay's red sands begins to quake. SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers instinctively turn toward the center of the cay just as the earth violently ruptures open. The enormous Renaissance Lance rocket erupts upward from the underground silo in a roaring inferno of ignition flame and smoke, ascending rapidly into the sky. The sheer force of the launch sends shockwaves ripping across the cay as debris and ash scatter through the air, knocking several SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers off their feet. Moments after the rocket clears the cay, the massive camouflaged armored silo doors automatically slide back into place, once again sealing the launch shaft beneath the red sands on another part of the cay. Back on the shoreline, many of the remaining soldiers simply stare upward in stunned silence, while several apprehended *Bush of Life* cultists begin cheering with zealous joy at the ascending rocket as it climbs higher and higher into the atmosphere, its engine trail burning like a second sun against the darkening sky. The scene cuts once more to the jungle hollow, where Johnny and Dr. Brundle peer out from the concealed entrance. The distant roar of the launch echoes across the cay as both men

stare upward at the ascending rocket in disbelief and horror.

Dr. Brundle:

No... not again...

Torrio:

Fuck. This ain't good...

Dr. Brundle:

May Chosha have mercy on all of us...



Narrator:

The reflection of the ascending rocket burns across Dr. Brundle's horrified eyes. The scene cuts to the Ae-ther's Keep Underground Command Center, where Interim Premier Killbin Janerio stands before a massive radar screen, watching the incoming data stream with growing concern. Around him, smaller monitors flicker with telemetry readings, trajectory calculations, and launch confirmations as they update in real

time. Flanking him, two *ISPYA* agents and several SWAT TROOPER ELITE officers remain silent, their attention fixed on the displays. The tension in the room is palpable. No one speaks. Every pair of eyes remains locked on the screens as the Renascence Lance climbs higher into the atmosphere. Elsewhere, in Southern Demmin, Dr. Sloane sets her phone down as a strange sensation suddenly washes over her. Frowning slightly, she turns toward a nearby window and slowly walks toward it. Sunlight filters through the glass as she gazes out at the distant horizon. Her expression gradually grows uneasy, as though sensing that something far beyond her sight has changed. The scene then cuts back to the makeshift laboratory deep underground. The alarm continues blaring overhead while the room slowly settles from the lingering aftershocks of the launch. Dew and the others stare upward for one final moment before breaking the silence.

Rena: Was that the..?
Elvir: It's the bloody rocket... it's been launched.
Vilmer: It certainly seems like it.
Dew: Dammit.
Krista: You gotta be freaking kiddin' me!
Lorenzo: We ain't come this far for nothin'... Man... after all this? There's gotta be a way to stop that thing...
Krista: Yeah... no way we're letting Thornton and these *Bush of Life* clowns get the last laugh.
Cooper: Hmm... There may be.
Lorenzo: How so..?
Cooper: If there's a launch sequence, there's almost certainly an abort protocol tied to it. We'll need to reach the control console to initiate the override.
Narrator: Dew quickly pulls out the satellite phone and brings up the underground silo schematics as Krista questions Cooper.
Krista: Wait... Are you sure? Why would a doomsday cult even have a fail-safe built in?

Cooper: Because even fanatics still want control. No group launches something this massive without some kind of command override. If the wrong person triggered it too early, the entire operation could be compromised...

Narrator: Dew finally locates the Launch Control Center on the satellite phone map, positioned directly above the makeshift laboratory.

Dew: The Launch Control Center should be right above us...

Lorenzo: Then what we waitin' for?! Let's move before that rocket gets too damn high!

Vilmer: Then to the Launch Control Center...

Rena: Right. Let's go...

Narrator: Dew nods once and slips the satellite phone back into his vest pocket. Without another word, he and the party break into a sprint out of the makeshift laboratory and into a winding stairwell leading upward as the emergency alarm continues blaring throughout the underground missile silo. Far above them, the Renaissance Lance continues ascending into the atmosphere. Dew leads the ascent without slowing as the others follow close behind him. Several more flights pass before they finally reach the top landing. They exit the stairwell into a narrow corridor where a reinforced metallic door stands before them, partially illuminated beneath the flashing emergency lights. Above it, faded white lettering reads: "LAUNCH CONTROL CENTER." Dew immediately rushes forward, pulls the keycard from his vest, swipes it across the nearby access panel, and the door splits open down the middle with a deep hydraulic hiss. He and the party quickly spill into the Launch Control Center. Once inside, they are met by the dim glow of blinking consoles lining the walls and darkened surveillance monitors flickering with live feeds from various levels of the facility. Along the right side of the room, the massive main console remains active, its large display streaming telemetry data connected to the Renaissance Lance launch systems. To the left, a reinforced

observation window overlooks the now-empty launch silo where the rocket had once stood. Standing silently before the observation window is a lone figure—the masked female *Bush of Life* cultist scientist. She remains perfectly still with her back turned toward them, one hand hanging loosely at her side as she stares into the vacant silo beyond the glass. The room immediately grows tense as Dew and the others instinctively raise their weapons, unsure of what to make of the lone figure before them.

Lorenzo:

...Who the hell..?

Vilmer:

Just one of them?

Narrator:

The masked female *Bush of Life* cultist scientist doesn't respond to the party's presence. She simply continues staring outward through the massive reinforced glass. Then, a small glass vial suddenly slips from her fingers and strikes the floor, shattering beside her. A few faint droplets of shimmering residue spread outward from the broken vial. The party's eyes immediately narrow toward it. Suddenly, she stiffens as a low groan escapes her throat. Her body begins to spasm violently. Caught off guard, Dew and the party instinctively take a step back with their weapons still raised.

Krista:

Whoa..!

Narrator:

The masked female *Bush of Life* cultist scientist stumbles forward slightly as sharp cracks echo from beneath her robes. Her breathing grows uneven—distorted. One hand slams hard against the viewing glass for support while the other claws tightly at her chest. Beneath the dark fabric, violent shifts ripple through her body as sickening internal pops begin echoing through the chamber. The robes twitch and tighten around her frame in uneven pulses, as though something beneath them is forcibly restructuring itself. The room remains frozen in horrified silence as the party looks on. Then, faint strands of dim luminous energy briefly flicker upward along the exposed skin near the base of her mask before disappearing again.

Her body suddenly jerks once more before the spasms abruptly stop entirely. Slowly, the masked female *Bush of Life* cultist scientist straightens.

???: *(soft, almost relieved)* Ha-ha-ha...

Narrator: Her laughter sends an immediate chill through the room, causing the party's grips to tighten around their weapons. The masked female *Bush of Life* cultist scientist slowly turns around, her movements calm and deliberate. She reaches upward with slight trembling fingers and grips the edges of her mask before pulling it away and letting it fall to the floor as her hood slips down to her shoulders. Beneath it is a woman with soft olive-toned skin, delicate yet striking features, and high cheekbones sharpened by an eerie stillness. Loose waves of dark brown hair frame her face and fall around her shoulders, partially swept back behind her head. Her amber-brown eyes remain fixed upon the party with an unnatural calm, carrying both quiet intelligence and something deeply unsettling beneath the surface. Faint ethereal blue light pulses intermittently beneath the skin along her neck and temples, briefly illuminating the veins beneath before fading once more into darkness. A faint smile slowly forms across her lips—gentle in appearance, yet hollow in warmth. Dew tilts his head sideways as Rena's eyes widen instantly with recognition, her breath catching in her throat before she finally comments.

Rena: ...Elizabeth..?!

Narrator: Elizabeth says nothing at first. Her amber-brown eyes remain fixed upon the party as a whole before finally settling on Rena. The faint smile lingering across her face deepens ever so slightly before she finally responds.

Elizabeth: *(softly, warmly)* ...Hello again, Mother. And I see you've escaped from your cell. I assumed you would have remained there until the transition to the new world.

Narrator: Rena tightens her grip on her scythe.



- Rena: (sarcasm) I wasn't planning on staying in that stuffy thing. Just out getting my steps in, you know, before the end.
- Elizabeth: Oh, Mother... Ha-ha... you are quite funny... Why do you mock the little mercy I have left for you..?
- Rena: Okay, Elizabeth. This has gone on for far too long. Stop this now, young lady.
- Elizabeth: Hm? Such a tone, Mother. Are you here to ground me? Ha-ha-ha...
- Rena: If you want to call it that, sure.
- Elizabeth: Since you and your friends have made it this far... then that means Thornton... *(then a frown forms on her face upon a sudden realization)* is dead... Oh, Thornton... *(sigh)* My love, you were ever so faithful to the very end... *(then somberly looks off into the distance)* Thank you... for everything... *(then, almost unnervingly, her sorrow softens into cheer)* But... your death is only temporary. *(then turns her attention back to Rena)* ...When this world comes to an end, he

will be restored, along with so many others of my choosing.

Rena: Elizabeth. I know this isn't you. It still doesn't have to be this way...

Narrator: Momentarily ignoring Rena, Elizabeth looks down, staring at her hands, and slowly flexes her fingers. She then looks back up at Rena and speaks aloud to herself.

Elizabeth: How strange... To feel warmth again. Weight. Breath. I almost forgot what it was like to have a body... *(then she places a hand against her chest and closes her eyes)* When I died in New Havenport... when Zircon shot through me while I shielded my love, Thornton... *(then her expression darkens)* I remember the pain... my fleeting last breaths... Then nothing. My soul drifted into a darkness so vast that I thought I would simply cease to exist... *(then she slowly opens her eyes)* But before oblivion could claim me, something found me. Ancient. Patient. Older than memory itself... It showed me a world drowning in its own corruption. Endless suffering. Endless cycles of violence. It said the essences of the Priscus within me gave me the power and the worthiness to fulfill its purpose. It asked whether I would become the instrument that would finally end it all. *(then she smiles faintly)* ...And I accepted. The moment I embraced that purpose, I was no longer Elizabeth Voight. Not entirely... I became something more. I became the Söl Congruum—the cosmic rectifier! So, you see, Mother, it does have to be this way... and it will be.

Rena: Elizabeth... No. It doesn't.

Elizabeth: Well, it is... What you see before you IS NOT your little girl crying out for help... *(then the faint blue glow beneath Elizabeth's skin pulses softly)* What you see is inevitability.

Rena: No. I still see my Elizabeth.

Narrator: Elizabeth slowly shakes her head.

Elizabeth: You still refuse to let that go. Even now, after everything, you look at me with those grieving mother's eyes... as if love can just fix everything.

Rena: Because I am your mother. And whether you mock it, hate it, or bury it under the cosmic role you've accepted, some part of you still knows that.

Elizabeth: Ugh. Motherly devotion. How noble. How useless. Give it a rest...

Narrator: Elizabeth's gaze lingers briefly on Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer, who have their weapons drawn and are in their fighting stances, before she mutters to herself.

Elizabeth: ...Insignificant. *(then shifts her gaze toward Dew, cracking an amused smirk)* And there he is... *(then briefly studies him)* My mother's "shining lighthouse."

Narrator: Dew raises an intrigued eyebrow at Elizabeth's comment before responding.

Dew: What's wrong? You jealous..?

Narrator: For the briefest moment, Elizabeth's lip tightens, and the corner of her eye twitches almost imperceptibly. Dew catches it and lets a faint, knowing smirk linger, while Rena remains silent, her eyes shifting between them. She says nothing, but the sudden crack in Elizabeth's composure tells her enough. Elizabeth then slowly circles a few steps before coming to a stop again to continue speaking to Dew.

Elizabeth: Hm. The brave freedom fighter and former SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier. The dutiful student. The selfless hero. Tell me, Dew... knowing this will all come to an end soon, does it bother you that every time you threw yourself into danger to save those in need, it was all a waste?

Dew: Not at all.

Elizabeth: Why's that..?

Dew: Firstly, whether I succeeded or not, it was worth the effort every time. And secondly, don't get ahead of yourself. This isn't over yet.

Elizabeth: Tch. Such pitiful defiance, even when facing the end of this existence... I can even sense it now. Your love

for my mother is strong... (*then her smile sharpens as she gazes upon Rena*) Her love for you... Her guilt and need for forgiveness. Your mercy and loyalty. This stubborn little hope you both keep mistaking for strength. This little stand you're making together. You think it matters? It's meaningless!

Narrator: Elvir then rolls her eyes, becoming annoyed, and decides to interject.

Elvir: ...Okay, okay, enough. Geez. For someone who's just been dragged back from the bloody beyond, you've got a mouth on you, don't ya, Sōl Congruum?

Narrator: Upon hearing this, Elizabeth's smile leaves her face entirely as her gaze shifts once more, this time toward Elvir.

Elizabeth: Finally, someone who addresses me for what I really am... And I see you, little *Hozho* girl... I was about to get to you...

Elvir: (*sarcasm*) And here I thought you'd nearly forgotten about me...

Narrator: The two tensely stare at one another briefly until Elizabeth continues.

Elizabeth: Look at you... one of Chosha's chosen... and the last of your kind, so it seems... proudly and eagerly waiting to take me down to fulfill your role and sacred vow for Chosha... The cycle repeats itself every time... The world falls into decay, the Sōl Congruum returns and tries to wipe the slate clean... and yet you *Hozho* get in the way. Generation after generation, you build yourselves up, waiting for my return... blindly following "The Great Author's" script to destroy, ironically, what it created. You were born a slave to Chosha... You're a tool!

Elvir: Oh, piss off, you cosmic fiend. I wasn't born to be anyone's bloody tool. I was born to stop monsters like you.

Elizabeth: ...Born to die against a "monster" like me, like the few of your kind who fell to my past iteration.

Elvir: Yeah, but that's the risk that comes with fulfillin' our holy duties, ain't it? Speaking of cycles repeating, last

time you fought my *Hozho* ancestors, they handed you your ass. *(then immediately points one of the dual daggers toward Elizabeth)* This time won't be any different... *(then lowers the raised dual dagger)*

Narrator: The ethereal blue light flickers on and off through Elizabeth's veins once more as she slowly tilts her head before responding.

Elizabeth: Ha-ha-ha... How amusing. We'll see about that, *Hozho*... but speaking of time...

Narrator: Elizabeth gestures toward one of the nearby monitors. Dew and the party follow her gaze, their eyes then widening as a countdown timer ticks down on the screen, showing only 56 minutes remaining before the rocket reaches the upper atmosphere and detonates.

Krista: Fifty-six minutes left?!

Lorenzo: You've gotta be kiddin' me.

Vilmer: Uh-oh. That's definitely not good.

Cooper: That means...

Elizabeth: That's right... When that countdown reaches zero... it's Game Over!

Narrator: The room briefly falls silent as the timer continues its relentless countdown. Elizabeth's devious smile widens as she senses the growing despair and anxiety within Dew, Rena, and the rest of the party. However, the feeling is short-lived. A moment later, they steel their resolve, regain their focus, and step forward one by one, defiantly challenging Elizabeth.

Lorenzo: After everything we've been through... after putting your boyfriend and the rest of your cult in the ground... you really think we're just gonna tuck our tails and run? Nah. Ain't fuckin' happening. I've lost too many people to let this end any other way. All my fallen *Aurora Blade* comrades... Paca... Lynch... even "Mamie"... I'm carryin' all of 'em with me. For truth, justice, equality, liberty, love, and hope. If anything, you're the one runnin' outta time.

Cooper: I spent years thinking I failed the people I loved. My father died asking me to become better than the pain

that broke him. My mother died, becoming just another unneeded statistic of a fraudulent war, like so many others. So no, Elizabeth... I'm not standing here because I have nothing left to lose. I'm standing here because I know what I have to protect... this world and its future.

Krista: I know what it's like to come from a broken family... I know what it's like to hurt people and pretend that survival somehow made it right. But I walked away from that life, and I'll be damned if I let you drag the whole world into the same darkness under your lie of "salvation" that I fought my way out of.

Vilmer: I once climbed through death, snow, and grief to reach the top of the world, only to learn that glory means nothing if you lose yourself along the way. You are not order. You are not salvation. You are just another storm pretending to be fate—and storms pass. Mountains remain.

Elvir: You can smile all you want, but just so you know, I'll be wiping that off your face in a moment, eh. The *Hozho* do not run from darkness. We cut through it. For my ancestors. For Chosha. For the future. It's time for you to be vanquished again, Söl Congruum.

Rena: Dammit... I don't want to do this, daughter... But if this is how it has to end, then I will not hesitate to stop you... even if it breaks my heart. The sins of my past are standing right in front of me. It's time I correct them once and for all. "It is what it is," right, Elizabeth..?

Narrator: Elizabeth's smile fades slightly as Rena's words—and the very phrase Elizabeth uses herself—linger in the air. For a brief moment, silence fills the room. Then Dew steps forward and speaks with unwavering resolve.

Dew: ...What you said earlier about all of this being "meaningless"... none of it is meaningless. Fighting to save this world as it is, while striving for a better tomorrow, is the only future worth having. I won't... (*then looks at Rena*) your mother won't... (*then looks at all*

the other party members before turning his attention back to Elizabeth) We won't let you succeed.

Narrator: Dew and the party tighten their grips on their weapons and once again assume their fighting stances.

Elizabeth: Very well, then... Let's begin.

Narrator: Elizabeth's smile returns and slowly widens as suddenly a surge of ethereal energy erupts from her body, rippling throughout the Launch Control Center. The air itself seems to bend beneath its presence. Dew and the party hold their ground, weapons drawn and ready, their eyes locked firmly on Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: ...When I am finished with all of you, and this world has been remade, rest assured... none of you will be restored..! *(then her gaze settles upon Rena)* Not even you, Mother. You had your chance...

Narrator: Elizabeth slowly raises one hand. Instantly, the space around her begins to warp and distort. The walls twist, the lights flicker unnaturally, and the very fabric of reality seems to tremble beneath her will. Despite the overwhelming pressure, Dew and the party remain steadfast in their fighting stances.

Elizabeth: *"Ring a ring o' roses,
A pocket full of posies.
A-tishoo, A-tishoo,
Chaos, Order, and Bliss
shall now rain down!!!"*

Narrator: Elizabeth's feet then slowly rise from the floor as she begins to levitate into the air. The ethereal blue energy pulsing beneath her skin rapidly intensifies, while veins of luminous light spread across her body like cracks racing through glass. The glow grows brighter and brighter until her entire form is engulfed in a blinding azure radiance. The Launch Control Center gradually becomes saturated with the overwhelming pressure emanating from her floating body as the distortions surrounding her intensify, causing reality itself to buckle and unravel around her, Dew, and the party. Moments later, the scene fades to black.

CHAPTER 32 – CHAOS, ORDER, & BLISS

Narrator: The darkness lingers for only a moment before everything slowly fades back into view. Dew and the party, still in their fighting stances and gripping their weapons, realize they are no longer inside the Launch Control Center. Instead, their surroundings are an endless, fiery wasteland stretching toward a distant horizon shrouded beneath swirling crimson clouds as ash drifts endlessly through the suffocating air. Rivers of molten earth carve through the broken landscape, while countless thorn-covered branches rise from the ground. Suspended in midair several feet above the ground, a radiant cocoon sways slowly from side to side. Then, a sharp crack suddenly rings out, echoing throughout the wasteland. The sounds of snapping bone, tearing flesh, and violently shifting muscle reverberate through the air as whatever lies within begins to transform. A shadowy silhouette becomes visible through the glowing shell as its body elongates and its proportions twist into unnatural shapes. Jagged protrusions force their way outward, stretching and distorting the cocoon's surface as it swells larger and larger with each passing second. The blinding radiance pulses erratically, as though struggling to contain the being emerging from within. At last, the radiant cocoon suddenly contracts inward, followed by an eerie moment of silence. A pair of glowing golden slitted eyes slowly opens within the fading light. Then, the cocoon shatters as fragments of azure energy explode outward before dissolving into countless particles. A massive serpentine tail slowly unfurls through the air, uncoiling from around a towering figure suspended above the wasteland. Scale-covered flesh is revealed as the last remnants of azure energy drift away into the darkness. Clawed hands emerge from within the tangled coils while thorn-covered appendages spread outward behind her back like the twisted branches of a dead tree. A scaled mask conceals much of her face, and faint traces of ethereal blue energy pulse beneath

her transformed flesh. As the final coils unravel, the monstrous Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos slithers downward through the air, her immense tail coiling and uncoiling beneath her before settling upon the scorched earth before Dew and the party.



Her massive serpentine body rises nearly seven feet above the wasteland floor, looming over the group with an unnatural, predatory presence as her cold, golden, unwavering eyes sweep across them one by one. Then, without warning, her immense serpentine tail whips upward before slamming violently against the scorched earth. The wasteland erupts with a deafening boom. A massive shockwave tears across the landscape as the ground trembles beneath everyone's feet.

Rivers of molten earth surge violently from the impact while countless thorn-covered branches shudder and crack throughout the wasteland. Dew and the party brace themselves against the violent tremor as ash and embers swirl around them. As the tremor finally subsides, Dew immediately surges forward, and the rest of the party follows close behind with their weapons at the ready, charging toward Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos and marking the beginning of Phase I. Dew reaches Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos first, attacking the left side of her massive serpentine body. His bo staff swings directly into one of the enormous coils supporting her weight. The strike lands with a heavy crack as scales scatter across the scorched earth. Almost simultaneously, Elvir leaps forward beside him and slashes across the same section with both daggers before springing back out of reach. On the opposite flank, Rena follows with her scythe carving through another section of Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos's serpentine tail, opening a glowing wound through the scaled flesh. Vilmer immediately supports her assault, swinging his grappling hook with tremendous force. The metal head crashes into the damaged area before he quickly pulls it back. The combined assault forces the towering creature to recoil—not in pain, but in irritation—as glowing blue energy leaks from the accumulating wounds. Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos suddenly lashes out with her immense tail toward the party, causing Dew and Elvir to duck beneath the strike while Rena and Vilmer narrowly avoid being swept off their feet. The attack tears through several thorn-covered branches behind them instead, sending ash and splintered thorns exploding into the air. As the massive tail passes between the two groups, Lorenzo, Cooper, and Krista seize the opening and join the fight. Lorenzo rapidly drives both brass-knuckled fists into an exposed section of scaled flesh along the center of Elizabeth's serpentine body. The impact sends a visible shockwave rippling through her towering form. Before the towering monstrosity can retaliate, Lorenzo quickly retreats out of range. Cooper immediately capitalizes on the opening, using his mop like a spear as he thrusts into the same area and forces the scales apart. At the same time,

Krista's boomerang repeatedly strikes the newly exposed section from a distance, preventing Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos from recovering and drawing a furious hiss from the towering monstrosity. Now further enraged, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos retaliates. Arching her towering body forward, she suddenly begins swiping wildly with her elongated arms toward the party. One clawed hand tears through the air toward Dew and Elvir. Dew raises his bo staff just in time, the impact forcing him backward several feet across the scorched earth, while Elvir narrowly ducks beneath the strike and rolls clear. A second swipe crashes toward Rena and Vilmer. Rena intercepts the blow with the shaft of her scythe, gritting her teeth as the force drives her backward. Beside her, Vilmer attempts to evade, but the elongated arm catches him squarely across the chest and sends him hurtling several yards through the ash-covered wasteland before crashing heavily onto one knee. The third strike comes without warning. Lorenzo quickly retreats out of range after his assault, while Cooper dives aside moments before the claws tear through the space they had occupied. Krista is not as fortunate. The backhand of another claw catches her across the side and sends her tumbling across the scorched earth before coming to a stop near a cluster of thorn-covered branches. Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos releases a furious hiss as glowing blue energy continues leaking from the wounds scattered across her serpentine body. Vilmer slowly rises back to his feet, clutching his chest, while Krista grimaces and pushes herself upright. Bruised and shaken, but still ready to fight, both quickly rejoin the others as the battle continues. Dew and the party spread out, relentlessly attacking Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos from her left, right, and center flanks. Again and again, they strike. Again and again, she retaliates with sweeping claw attacks from her elongated arms, devastating tail strikes that send shockwaves rippling across the wasteland, and volleys of thorn-covered appendages launched from her back. Blow after blow is exchanged across the burning battlefield as neither side shows any willingness to yield. Gradually, however, Dew and the party begin to gain ground, preventing the towering monstrosity from regaining

control of the battle. More scales shatter, and more glowing wounds appear across Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos's body. The ethereal blue energy pulsing beneath her flesh begins to flicker erratically. Her attacks remain powerful, but the accumulating damage steadily slows her movements. The once-fluid motions of her massive serpentine body become increasingly uneven as glowing blue energy leaks from wound after wound. Attempting to rear upward once more, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos suddenly falters. Her upper body sways before slumping forward slightly over her damaged coils. Sensing an opening, the party converges and unleashes a coordinated assault. Blow after blow lands in rapid succession, driving Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos backward and leaving her reeling from the combined assault before ultimately forcing the towering monstrosity downward toward the scorched earth. The golden glow within her eyes flickers violently as an insidious, agonized hiss escapes her throat, echoing throughout the wasteland like a chorus of tormented voices. Dew and the party instinctively retreat a few steps, weapons still raised and ready as they watch the creature's body convulse. Slowly, she recoils inward and coils tightly upon herself. The ethereal blue energy coursing beneath her scales begins pulsing with increasing intensity, no longer flowing in a steady rhythm but surging wildly and uncontrollably through every inch of her transformed body. Cracks of luminous energy spread across her scales as the very form of Chaos begins to destabilize. The wasteland trembles as rivers of molten earth churn violently across the broken landscape. Thorn-covered branches sway and creak as though caught within an unseen storm. Then the pulsing reaches a crescendo. A blinding eruption of ethereal blue energy explodes outward from Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Chaos, engulfing the battlefield in an ocean of radiant light. Dew and the party shield themselves as the overwhelming brilliance consumes everything around them. The burning wasteland, the crimson sky, and even Elizabeth's monstrous form is swallowed by the radiance, bringing Phase I of the battle to an end. Then, suddenly, there is only darkness. It persists for several moments before a faint light slowly begins to spread overhead. Dew

and the party look upward as a brilliant radiance gradually pierces the void. The darkness recedes, revealing a vast marble courtyard stretching endlessly in every direction. Towering ivory columns rise toward the heavens, while magnificent arches span the horizon beneath a sky of brilliant blue and drifting clouds. Dew and the party realize they are no longer standing within the infernal wasteland, but instead within a realm of impossible symmetry and unnatural perfection. Instinctively, they survey their surroundings. Though all seven remain within sight of one another, they find themselves divided across different sections of the immense courtyard. Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper stand relatively close together on one side of the gleaming marble expanse, while Rena, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir find themselves grouped on the opposite side. A short distance of polished marble separates the two groups. Even so, they immediately begin moving toward one another. Then, a distant sound echoes across the heavens—the soft, rhythmic fluttering of enormous wings. With each passing moment, the sound grows louder. High above the courtyard, a brilliant star of ethereal blue light appears among the clouds. Dew and the party, still armed and poised in their fighting stances, momentarily halt their advance as the radiance slowly descends from the heavens through the parting clouds. With each rhythmic flutter, the light grows nearer, and the silhouette of a descending figure gradually takes shape within the brilliance. Four enormous ethereal butterfly-like wings spread outward, shimmering beneath the celestial light. Flowing violet robes drift gracefully around polished silver armor. A pale mask conceals her face as a gleaming sword—resembling Thornton's bastard sword—materializes within her hand. Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Order continues her slow descent from the heavens until her sandaled feet gently touch the marble floor. The moment she lands, an eerie silence washes across the realm. Her immense butterfly-like wings gradually cease their rhythmic fluttering, remaining spread wide behind her. For several long moments, she stands motionless, her gaze fixed upon Dew and the party as they remain poised for battle. Then, without uttering a single word, she raises her sword and slowly points it

directly at them. Then, lines of ethereal blue light suddenly race across the marble floor.



Before either group can reach one another, towering walls of radiant energy erupt upward between them. The barriers stretch toward the heavens, dividing the courtyard in two. Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper instinctively turn toward the sudden eruption of light. Across the divide, Rena, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir skid to a halt before the glowing wall as it hums with immense power. Elvir narrows her eyes, studying the barrier's surface for a moment before Rena steps forward and strikes it with her scythe, testing its strength. The energy ripples slightly, but holds. Vilmer and Krista quickly follow up with their own attacks. Vilmer swings his grappling hook

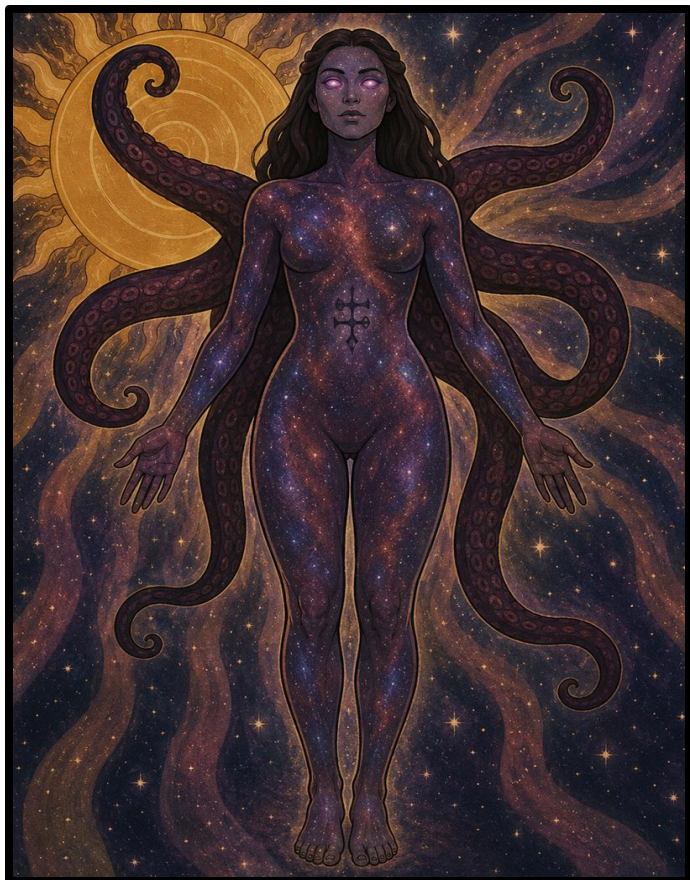
before hurling it into the barrier. It crashes against the radiant wall but fails to penetrate it. Krista's boomerang strikes next, only to ricochet harmlessly away. Before Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper can move any closer to the barrier, a sudden movement catches their attention. They quickly snap their focus back toward the battlefield. Their eyes widen as Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order is already upon them, her radiant butterfly wings flaring outward as she streaks through the air with terrifying speed. Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper quickly evade her incoming rush, each rolling out of the way as Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order closes the distance and comes to an abrupt stop. Rising back to their feet, the three immediately ready their weapons and fall into their fighting stances once more. Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order slowly turns to face them, remaining suspended in midair as her radiant butterfly wings flutter behind her. With sword in hand and her back to the barrier, she hovers between Dew's group and the others while Rena, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir continue their attempts to break through. Phase II of the battle begins as Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order's sword suddenly flashes. She immediately unleashes her first attack, *Judgment Arc*, channeling radiant energy throughout the entire blade before releasing it from the tip in a devastating beam of light that tears across the marble courtyard toward Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper. Dew ducks beneath the wave of ethereal energy as it slices through a nearby column. Lorenzo sprints through the opening left in its wake, narrowly avoiding the attack, while Cooper dives aside moments before a second arc tears across the battlefield. Meanwhile, Rena's group desperately and continuously strikes the barrier with their weapons. With every impact, faint cracks of light spread across its surface, showing gradual signs of weakening. As Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper regain their composure, and before they can launch a counterattack, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order descends once more toward Dew. Her sword crashes against his staff as he quickly raises it to block. The marble floor beneath him cracks slightly from the impact as the two exchange a rapid series of strikes until Lorenzo rushes in from the side. Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order suddenly pushes Dew back

several feet with a powerful gust of wind generated by her butterfly wings and immediately raises her sword to intercept Lorenzo's incoming brass-knuckled fist. The two briefly clash as she blocks the attack. Cooper presses the attack, driving his mop forward and connecting with her chest, forcing her backward through the air. While Dew, Lorenzo, and Cooper continue their battle against Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Order, Rena and the others refuse to relent. With each successive strike, the fractures spreading across the barrier widen, though it still holds them at bay. Finally, a large crack forms. Rena and Elvir strike it simultaneously with their weapons, followed by Vilmer's grappling hook hurtling into the weakened section. An instant later, Krista's boomerang slams into the same point, causing the barrier to shatter as radiant fragments explode outward across the courtyard. As this happens, Dew, Lorenzo, Cooper, and Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Order immediately ceases fighting and turn their attention toward the collapsing barrier. Realizing that Rena and her group are now free and rapidly approaching, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Order immediately attempts to regain control of the battle. Taking flight once more, she rises into the air and hovers high above the courtyard. Raising her sword overhead for a brief moment, she then brings it down in a powerful cutting motion, unleashing another attack called Decree of Separation. Instantly, five pillars standing throughout the courtyard become encased in radiant light before violently tearing free from their positions. The glowing structures surge across the battlefield toward Dew and the scattered members of the party, tearing through marble and sending debris flying in every direction. Dew narrowly avoids one as it crashes into the courtyard, while the others scramble to evade the incoming barrage. One after another, the five radiant pillars carve through the battlefield, shattering stone, cracking nearby columns, and leaving thick clouds of dust and radiant energy in their wake. Despite the devastation, the party survives the assault and quickly regroups into formation for the first time since the battle began. Seeing this, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Order descends from the air with her sword still in hand and lands before them once

more. A tense silence falls over the courtyard as Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order and the party stare each other down. Dew stands at the forefront with his bo staff at the ready while the others tighten their grips on their weapons, refusing to yield despite showing signs of minor exhaustion. Refusing to give her another opportunity to divide them, Dew and the party surge forward together. The battle erupts once more as Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order meets them head-on. The party relentlessly presses the attack from all sides, forcing her onto the defensive at first. However, she soon shifts into the familiar swordsmanship of Thornton himself, striking back with precise and powerful attacks of her own. For a time, she trades blows with Dew and the party, but their refusal to yield causes a growing irritation to become increasingly visible with each passing exchange. Finally, feeling the toll of the damage inflicted upon her and seeking a moment to recover, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order breaks away from the assault, dashing several feet backward across the courtyard. Her butterfly wings flare outward, initiating her next attack, *Scales of Judgment*, as gigantic spectral scales materialize high above the battlefield. The immense scales then slowly tip, and a crushing force descends upon several members of the party, driving them toward the marble floor and slowing their advance. Yet the effect proves only temporary. As the attack dissipates, the others quickly move to assist their allies and help them back to their feet. As the battle rages on, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order retaliates again and again, only for Dew and the party to adapt and counter her every move. In another attempt to regain control, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order launches herself into the heavens at supersonic speed. In the next instant, she reappears, plummeting downward and unleashing another attack called *Celestial Descent*. With her sword engulfed in flames and her body shielded by radiant energy, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order releases the weapon once she reaches midrange. The blazing sword hurtles downward and crashes into the courtyard with tremendous force, shattering a section of the marble floor and sending Dew and the party diving clear of the impact zone. Cracks spiderweb outward

across the pristine courtyard as clouds of dust erupt into the air. Landing gracefully upon the fractured marble, Elizabeth retrieves her sword and immediately reengages Dew and the party. As the battle intensifies and nears its conclusion, Dew and the party's relentless teamwork continues to overwhelm Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order. One coordinated assault after another steadily drives her back across the fractured courtyard until, at last, the cumulative toll of her injuries forces her to stumble and drop to one knee. The sword then slips from her grasp and dissolves into particles of shimmering blue light as her butterfly wings suddenly flare outward. A single blinding pulse of blue light then erupts from her body before abruptly fading. Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order remains suspended in place, visibly panting as the marble beneath her feet violently cracks and the heavenly realm begins trembling around her. Dew and the party remain armed and in their fighting stances, watching as hairline fractures gradually spread across her mask. More radiant energy surges uncontrollably from within her form before suddenly subsiding once again. Then the structures throughout the realm begin collapsing all around Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order, Dew, and the party. The sky itself starts to tear apart as her butterfly wings begin shedding countless luminous fragments that drift upward into the heavens. At the same time, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Order slowly rises into the air, as though being pulled upward by an unseen force. Then another eruption of blue radiance bursts from her body. The radiance grows brighter and brighter until everything is consumed by the overwhelming brilliance, bringing Phase II of the battle to an end. Then there is only light and the deafening silence that follows. For several minutes, Dew and the party are engulfed by an endless radiance, unable to see anything beyond its boundless glow. The brilliance stretches infinitely in every direction, erasing all sense of distance, shape, and form. Gradually, however, the light begins to soften and recede. A handful of stars slowly emerge from the fading glow before suddenly multiplying. Countless points of light flicker into existence across the boundless expanse as distant galaxies drift silently through the void and nebulae swirl beyond

comprehension. A vast cosmic void unfolds before them. Dew and the party, still armed and poised in their fighting stances, find themselves standing upon an invisible floor, drifting together through the boundless expanse, suspended weightlessly amid the stars. Then, far beyond the stars, a brilliant glow begins to form. It neither approaches nor descends. It simply becomes visible. The radiance gradually intensifies as a silhouette slowly materializes within the cosmic void. A feminine figure emerges from the starlight itself, her body woven from countless galaxies, nebulae, and celestial light. Dark cosmic tendrils drift behind her like living extensions of the universe itself. Beyond her back burns a radiant, sun-like halo whose gentle brilliance illuminates the surrounding stars. At the center of it all, her eyes slowly open. Two luminous violet lights shine from within the darkness of her cosmic form. In a sudden flash, Dew and the party—along with the invisible floor beneath their feet—are instantly pulled through the cosmic void toward her. Stars and galaxies streak past in every direction as the vast expanse blurs around them. Seconds later, the motion abruptly ceases, leaving the seven standing upon the same invisible floor only a few feet away from Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss. Suspended amid the endless cosmic void, they now stand face-to-face with the celestial entity. For a brief moment, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss remains motionless and silent, simply gazing upon Dew and the party. The stars surrounding her begin to slowly revolve in vast celestial rings. The tendrils behind her unfurl and drift through the void like cosmic currents. Entire galaxies seem to bend around her presence, as though drawn into her orbit. Dew and the party remain silent as they gaze upon the figure before them. Chaos had faded. Order had fallen away. What now stood before them transcended both. Something vast, beautiful, and terrifying beyond comprehension. Yet despite the overwhelming cosmic presence radiating from Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss, the party's resolve had only hardened through every trial, loss, and battle that had brought them to this moment. Each of them knew this was the point of no return. The fate of everything now rested upon what happened next.



Together, they prepared to finish the fight once and for all. Dew and the party steel themselves, their weapons poised and their eyes fixed upon Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss. Her radiant gaze never leaves them as her cosmic tendrils unfurl behind her like living extensions of the universe itself. Without warning, the entire cosmic void momentarily shudders. As the tremor subsides, her tendrils curl slightly inward, and a faint smile forms across her face. Then, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss takes a single step forward, and Phase III of the battle begins. Phase III quickly proves unlike anything Dew and the party have faced before. Striking from every angle in an effort to overwhelm Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss, they find each assault effortlessly countered by her devastating cosmic power. The dark tendrils drifting behind her suddenly

lash outward across the cosmic void, striking with impossible reach and forcing Dew and the others to constantly evade them or driving them back whenever they attempt to close the distance. At times, Dew and the party manage to land successful strikes against the advancing tendrils, damaging them whenever an opening presents itself while pressing forward. As the battle intensifies, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss unleashes an attack called *Event Horizon*. Tiny stars suddenly materialize throughout the battlefield before collapsing inward. The resulting gravitational pull drags Dew and the party across the invisible floor, disrupting their formations and nearly hurling several of them into one another. Before the party can recover, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss follows with another attack called *Cosmic Mirage*. The stars surrounding the battlefield suddenly distort and refract. In an instant, dozens of identical images of Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss appear throughout the cosmic void. Each one attacks simultaneously, forcing Dew and the party to defend themselves against threats coming from every direction. Only one is real, but identifying the genuine target amid the deception initially proves nearly impossible. Several times, Dew and the party believe they have found the true Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss, only for another illusion to shatter beneath their attacks. Valuable seconds slip away with each failed attempt as the real Elizabeth continues maneuvering unseen throughout the battlefield. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Dew, the talisman concealed beneath his shirt emits a faint green flicker. The light pulses only briefly, as though reacting to something yet to occur, before fading away once more. Finally, one of the party members strikes the true Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss. Instantly, the remaining illusions shatter into countless fragments of starlight as the cosmic entity is driven backward. As the battle rages on, Dew and the party relentlessly assault Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss from every direction, inflicting significant damage upon her celestial form. In response, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss unleashes an attack called *Stellar Flare*. The radiant halo behind her suddenly erupts with blinding energy, releasing a massive wave of celestial light that surges across the cosmic

void. Dew and the others raise their defenses as the blast tears through the battlefield, forcing several of them backward. Around her, the stars begin revolving faster and faster until they become streaks of light. She then fires countless streams of cosmic energy throughout the void, compelling the party to scatter to avoid being overwhelmed. Despite managing to land occasional counterattacks, none prove decisive. The party soon realizes that every wound inflicted upon Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss gradually repairs itself as the galaxies woven throughout her body shift and flow around the damage. Time and again, Dew and the others launch coordinated assaults in response, only for Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss to answer with even more overwhelming celestial power. As Dew and the party's struggle against Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss grows increasingly desperate, a faint distortion suddenly ripples through reality. Several feet from the battlefield, the monitor displaying the Renaissance Lance countdown briefly flickers into existence, its timer reading **00:00:23**, before fading away once more. Moments later, it reappears: **00:00:18**. The display crackles with static before dissolving back into the cosmic void. Neither side notices the phenomenon, nor do they relent as the battle continues to rage. Again, the monitor flickers into existence: **00:00:07**. This time, its image distorts violently, as though reality itself can no longer maintain its form. The numbers warp and flicker amid waves of static as the countdown continues its inexorable march toward zero: **00:00:03**, **00:00:02**, **00:00:01**, and then **00:00:00**. The instant the timer reaches zero, the monitor vanishes entirely. Then the scene cuts to far above the planet as the Renaissance Lance continues its ascent through the heavens. Flames roar from its engines as the rocket tears through layers of cloud and atmosphere, leaving a blazing trail stretching across the sky. Higher and higher it climbs until it finally reaches Earth's upper atmosphere. Then, for a single split second, everything stands still. The rocket hangs motionless against the darkness of space, frozen in time as though reality itself is holding its breath. Then it detonates. A blinding sphere of light erupts outward. The explosion expands with terrifying speed,

swallowing the surrounding darkness as an artificial sun is born above the world. The scene then cuts back to Dew, the party, and Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss within the cosmic void of the altered Launch Control Center buried deep beneath the missile silo. Without warning, both sides abruptly cease fighting. An unnatural silence settles across the battlefield as though the cosmic void itself has suddenly fallen still. Then, in the next instant, every one of them feels it. A distant vibration courses through the void. A strange pressure follows immediately afterward, accompanied by a sensation unlike anything any of them have ever experienced. Though none can identify its source, they instinctively recognize that something monumental has just occurred. The entire cosmic expanse suddenly shudders. The stars scattered throughout the void tremble violently while the galaxies surrounding the battlefield ripple in unnatural waves. Even the invisible floor beneath their feet vibrates as though reality itself has been struck by an unimaginable force. For the first time since Phase III began, uncertainty briefly crosses the faces of Dew and the party. The sensation is overwhelming, yet impossible to understand. Across from them, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss remains motionless. However, her luminous violet eyes widen ever so slightly as genuine curiosity flickers across her face. Even she can feel that something has changed. The scene then cuts back outside as the upper atmosphere ignites beneath the unimaginable force unleashed by the Renascence Lance's detonation. The expanding sphere of destruction races across the planet with impossible speed, swallowing everything in its path. The scene then cuts back to the cosmic void within the altered Launch Control Center. The realization of horror and failure strikes Dew and the party almost immediately as they realize they were too late to prevent the detonation of the Renascence Lance. Across from them, Söl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss's face brightens with a euphoric smile. As they struggle to comprehend this, the talisman concealed beneath Dew's shirt suddenly emits another faint green flicker. This time, the light lingers for a fraction of a second longer before fading completely, as though reacting to the catastrophe that is about to unfold.

Seconds later, Dew suddenly hears something. At first, the sound is faint, barely audible beneath the trembling of reality itself. A strange phantasmagoria of muffled voices echoes throughout the approaching collapse of existence. Laughter intertwines with crying. Whispers overlap with distant screams. Countless voices blend together into a single incomprehensible chorus, as though the memories, hopes, fears, and final moments of an entire world are being carried away at once. The sound grows louder with every passing second until it seems to come from everywhere at once. Then the shockwave arrives. With no time to react, no time to speak, and no time to run, the advancing wave of annihilation tears through the cosmic void with unstoppable force. Dew, the party, and even Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss are engulfed instantly. Their bodies, weapons, and the battlefield itself vanish. The scene cuts again as the shockwave tears across the planet's surface. Entire continents disappear beneath oceans of fire. Cities are erased within moments as billions of people are caught where they stand—in homes, offices, schools, hospitals, factories, vehicles, and crowded streets—with no warning and no chance to escape. Entire families cease to exist in an instant. Conversations end mid-sentence. Dreams, ambitions, and lives that had taken decades to build are extinguished in less than a heartbeat. Some witness the approaching wall of destruction for only the briefest moment before it reaches them. Others never see it at all. As the shockwave continues its relentless advance, forests erupt into towering infernos stretching beyond the horizon while mountain ranges fracture and collapse beneath the unimaginable force. Oceans begin to boil as colossal pillars of steam rise into the burning atmosphere. Rivers evaporate, coastlines vanish, and clouds are swept from the sky. Within seconds, the heavens themselves burn crimson. The scene cuts once more to the darkness of space. Far below, the planet is seen burning, having become a glowing sphere of fire, ash, and ruin suspended within the vast emptiness of the cosmos. Then Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss's soft, distant, and endless, yet unmistakably triumphant, ethereal laughter reverberates across the darkness of space like a celebration of

absolute victory as the last remnants of the world continue to burn below.

CHAPTER 33 – A SECOND LIFE

Narrator:

Far beyond the planet's destruction and the endless darkness of space, a faint green glimmer then appears. Barely perceptible at first, the fragile light flickers weakly before steadily growing brighter. Then, as though guided by the will of Chosha itself, the emerald radiance erupts across existence, surging outward with overwhelming force. In its wake, the flow of time itself begins to reverse. Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss's triumphant laughter abruptly reverses, the ethereal sound pulling inward through the darkness of space. Far below, the apocalypse begins running in reverse. Oceans of fire collapse. Ash returns to the heavens. Boiling seas cool, rivers reappear, mountains reassemble, and the scars carved across the world vanish one by one. Across the globe, entire cities reconstruct themselves as buildings, vehicles, and streets return to their former states. Billions of lives reappear exactly where they had stood moments before as conversations resume, dreams return, and futures once erased are restored. Even the shockwave itself collapses, racing backward across the planet toward its point of origin as the consequences of destruction are steadily undone and time itself hurtles toward an earlier moment. Elsewhere, high above the world as the artificial sun created by the Renaissance Lance's detonation rapidly contracts until the explosion vanishes entirely. The rocket reforms and retraces its ascent through the heavens as time continues flowing backward. Meanwhile, as Pomodoro Cay is gradually rewound to its previous state, the reversal accelerates within the Launch Control Center, returning Dew, the party, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss, and the cosmic void itself to an earlier moment as the shockwave withdraws and the countdown rewinds. The reversal accelerates even

further as the emerald radiance continues driving reality backward. In an instant, Dew, the party, and Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss are returned to the exact moment following the conclusion of Event Horizon and immediately before she unleashes Cosmic Mirage. Then the reversal ends. The emerald radiance dissipates, and everything resumes from that point as though none of it had ever happened. As Dew and the party struggle to recover from the attack, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss begins preparing her next move. The stars surrounding the battlefield shimmer as she slowly raises her hand. Then, without warning, she freezes in place as a sudden sense of déjà vu washes over her. For the briefest moment, confusion crosses her face, and uncertainty flickers within her luminous violet eyes. Across the battlefield, Elizabeth's unexpected hesitation grants Dew and the party enough time to regain their footing and ready their weapons. Then they feel it as well—the same impossible sensation. A faint yet unsettling sense of déjà vu washes over them simultaneously, as though reality itself has momentarily slipped out of place. The scene cuts back to Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss as she struggles to comprehend the strange feeling. For an instant, she experiences the fleeting impression of a memory that never happened—or perhaps one that did. The sensation is gone almost as quickly as it appears, yet the lingering unease remains. Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss shakes herself free of the trance, and her expression hardens once more. Without another word, she unleashes Cosmic Mirage. The stars surrounding the battlefield suddenly distort and refract. In an instant, dozens of identical images of Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss appear throughout the cosmic void. Each one attacks simultaneously, forcing Dew and the party to defend themselves against threats coming from every direction. Yet this time, something is different. Although the illusions move exactly as they had before and the attacks unfold

exactly as they had before, something deep within Dew and the party recognizes the pattern. None of them can explain why, yet their instincts guide them toward a single figure moving among the countless duplicates. The real one. As one, the party surges toward the genuine Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss. Surprise flashes across her face as she realizes that Dew and the party have immediately locked onto her position and are no longer being deceived by the illusions. Realizing that Cosmic Mirage has been compromised, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss retreats through the cosmic void. The surrounding illusions converge to intercept the party while the real Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss attempts to conceal herself among the countless duplicates and reposition elsewhere across the battlefield. Yet no matter where she moves, their eyes find her. One by one, the illusions are cut down as Dew and the party relentlessly pursue their true target. In the next exchange, their coordinated assault catches Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss before she can reposition again. Forced onto the defensive, she attempts to repel their advance, but several strikes break through her guard and land cleanly. Instantly, the remaining illusions shatter into countless fragments of starlight as the cosmic entity is driven backward once more. For the first time since Phase III began, the momentum of the battle shifts. Refusing to yield, Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss unleashes Stellar Flare just as she had before the rewind. The radiant halo behind her erupts with blinding energy, releasing a massive wave of celestial light across the cosmic void. This time, however, Dew and the party instinctively anticipate the attack and evade the blast. Clearly unsettled by their ability to predict her movements, she follows up by unleashing countless streaks of cosmic energy throughout the battlefield. Yet even this fails to catch them off guard, as they evade the barrage and continue pressing their attack. Seizing the opportunity,

Dew and the party press their advantage, maintaining relentless pressure as they drive toward their celestial adversary. Although Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss continues regenerating from the damage inflicted upon her and responds to every assault with overwhelming force, the relentless pressure gradually begins to take its toll. The galaxies woven throughout her celestial form flicker with increasing frequency. Her movements grow less precise, and for the first time, cracks begin to appear in her defenses. With only several minutes remaining before the Renaissance Lance reaches Earth's upper atmosphere and detonates, both sides unleash everything they have left. The cosmic void erupts into bedlam as celestial energy, *Elementome* attacks, and impossible forces collide throughout the battlefield. Blow after blow is exchanged as neither side relents. Yet with approximately three minutes remaining on the countdown, Dew and the party finally gain the advantage. Seizing a fleeting opening, they launch one final assault that breaks through Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss's defenses and delivers the decisive blow. The impact hurls Sōl Congruum Elizabeth—Bliss backward through the cosmic void as genuine shock flashes across her face and her eyes widen in disbelief. Yet before she can react further, she crashes violently into the location where the launch console would normally stand as a blinding flash erupts throughout the altered Launch Control Center. The cosmic radiance surrounding her body begins to unravel while the galaxies woven throughout her celestial form collapse inward. Soon afterward, the cosmic void itself begins to recede, restoring the Launch Control Center to its original form. Elizabeth's celestial body disappears entirely, reverting her back to her human form. Her cloak is torn and tattered from the battle as she collapses face-first onto the floor, unconscious and defeated, bringing Phase III to an end. Dew and the party stand victorious yet exhausted within the

damaged Launch Control Center. Their weapons remain drawn as they stare down at Elizabeth lying amid the wreckage of the ruined launch console. For several moments, nobody speaks until Lorenzo breaks the silence.

- Lorenzo: ...That was some insane shit. Yo, for real... *(huff)*
(puff) is it actually over this time?
- Krista: *(looking around nervously)* So, guys... *(huff)* *(puff)* did we do it?
- Elvir: Against all odds, yeah... *(huff)* *(puff)* looks like we did... *(huff)* *(puff)* My Hozho ancestors... *(huff)* *(puff)* would be proud...
- Cooper: I sincerely hope that's that... *(huff)* *(puff)* Imagine if she had a fourth form... Actually, never mind.
- Vilmer: *(glancing at Cooper)* Please don't say things like that.
- Dew: *(without taking his eyes off Elizabeth)* Yeah. *(huff)*
(puff) Let's not... Ha-ha... tempt fate. *(huff)* *(puff)*
- Narrator: As the others struggle to catch their breath, Rena lowers her scythe and suddenly rushes toward the unconscious, face-down Elizabeth with motherly concern. The rest of the party watches in silence, though none of them lower their guard completely. Reaching her side, Rena drops to one knee beside her daughter. She carefully turns Elizabeth over onto her back before placing two fingers against her neck and waiting. Several tense seconds pass before she finally exhales in relief. Dew and the others watch as Rena looks up at them and speaks.
- Rena: She's... still alive...
- Narrator: The room remains quiet following Rena's announcement. While none of them are particularly relieved to learn that Elizabeth is still alive, they all understand what the news means to Rena from the look on her face. For the moment, Dew and the others choose to remain silent, allowing her this small comfort. Dew keeps his eyes fixed on Elizabeth, his expression unreadable. Krista and Lorenzo exchange uncertain glances. Vilmer remains alert, while Elvir continues watching the unconscious woman cautiously. Despite

her condition, none of them are willing to completely lower their guard around the person who nearly destroyed the world. Meanwhile, far above the planet, the Renaissance Lance continues its ascent through Earth's upper atmosphere when, without warning, the rocket begins to falter. Its engines sputter and lose power, causing the exhaust trail to flicker erratically. The massive vehicle slowly veers off course before entering an uncontrolled descent back toward the planet. Back inside the Launch Control Center, Cooper turns toward the ruined main console where Elizabeth had crashed moments earlier. His expression suddenly changes as he remembers the threat still soaring somewhere above them.



Cooper:

Dew:

Lorenzo:

Krista:

Elvir:

The Lance...

Oh shit...

That damn rocket!

Don't tell me it's still on course to detonate..!

Nyaaaaaahhhhhhh!

Narrator: Cooper immediately rushes toward the damaged main console. Dew and the others quickly follow as Rena rises to her feet beside the unconscious Elizabeth. Cooper leans over the shattered controls, scanning the flickering displays until his attention is suddenly drawn to telemetry still appearing on one of the surviving monitors.

Cooper: Hold on... everybody, look at this...

Narrator: The others gather around him. Cooper studies the telemetry data for several tense seconds before his eyes widen with realization.

Cooper: ...I think when we sent Elizabeth crashing into the launch console, the impact knocked out the launch systems. The Lance can't maintain guidance or power anymore...

Narrator: Cooper then points toward the flight path displayed on the monitor, where the rocket's trajectory is rapidly changing.

Cooper: It's falling..!

Narrator: The scene cuts once more to the Renaissance Lance as the crippled rocket hurtles back toward Earth. Thick clouds rip past its battered hull while its descent becomes faster and more violent with each passing second. Then, with nowhere left to fall, the massive vehicle plunges into the ocean below, slamming into the water with tremendous force and sending a towering column of spray erupting high into the afternoon sky. What follows is nothing. No blinding flash. No earth-shattering explosion. No apocalypse. Only the endless expanse of the open sea stretching quietly beneath the afternoon sun as the waters gradually settle once more. Elsewhere, atop Pomo-doro Cay, the remaining SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers watch the distant impact. Moments later, cheers erupt across the cay as several soldiers raise their weapons overhead in celebration while others embrace one another in relief. Nearby, the captured *Bush of Life* cultists lower their heads in silence, and a few openly weep as the reality of their defeat finally

sinks in. Meanwhile, near the missile silo entrance, another SWAT TROOPER ELITE unit continues working desperately to breach the sealed blast doors. Engineers operate cutting torches while soldiers' strain against heavy equipment, making little progress against the reinforced entrance. Suddenly, one of the soldiers notices a towering plume of water rising on the distant horizon where the Renaissance Lance had disappeared moments earlier.



STE Engineer:

It's down..! The rocket's down!

Narrator:

A wave of cheers erupts throughout the breach team. Several soldiers clap one another on the shoulders while others raise their fists in triumph, relieved that the catastrophe has been averted. The celebration lasts only a few moments before the team's commanding officer regains everyone's attention.

STE Commander:

All right! Celebrate later! We've still got friendlies down there! They may need our help. Get those doors open!

Narrator: The engineers immediately return to their equipment as the relentless effort to breach the missile silo resumes. The scene then cuts to the Aether's Keep Underground Command Center. Still standing before the massive radar screen, Interim Premier Killbin Janerio stares at the updated readings in disbelief. The two *ISPYA* agents flanking him exchange brief glances before letting out sighs of relief, while several SWAT TROOPER ELITE officers erupt into excited cheers as confirmation after confirmation flashes across the monitors. At last, Killbin releases a long breath and speaks aloud to himself.

Killbin: Thank Chosha...

Narrator: A smile finally spreads across his face. The scene cuts once more to the limestone hollow on Pomodoro Cay, where Johnny Torrio and Dr. Brundle stand near the entrance. The two men gaze toward the distant horizon before breaking into relieved celebration. Johnny pumps his fist triumphantly into the air, while Dr. Brundle shakes his head with a satisfied smile. The scene cuts once more to Southern Demmin, inside Dr. Sloane's workshop. For several moments, she stands silently beside the window as sunlight filters through the glass. Gazing toward the distant sky, she lets out a quiet sigh of relief. Finally, the scene cuts to Steelwind-Three, piloting the helicopter as it continues cutting through the sky. Still several miles from the cay, the aircraft speeds steadily toward its destination, its rotors thundering through the open air. The scene cuts back to the Launch Control Center when a loud pop suddenly echoes throughout the room. A shower of sparks erupts from the ruined main console where Elizabeth had crashed moments earlier. The massive wall-mounted display above it flickers violently before several sections of the screen briefly cut to black.

Krista: Uh... guys?

Narrator: Warning indicators begin flashing across the damaged console as harsh electronic fault tones chirp

from its surviving systems. Moments later, the failures begin spreading to the secondary consoles lining the walls. Several monitors flicker with static while others abruptly lose power. The overhead lights dim briefly before stabilizing.

Vilmer: I have a bad feeling about this...

Narrator: A violent electrical discharge suddenly erupts from the ruined main console. Everyone instinctively recoils as sparks scatter across the tiled floor. The acrid smell of burning insulation quickly fills the air.

Elvir: Right. That's our cue to leave.

Narrator: The damage continues cascading through the Launch Control Center. Warning indicators illuminate across the surviving panels while several secondary monitors go dark one after another. Thin streams of smoke begin rising from the shattered main console as electrical faults spread through the interconnected equipment.

Dew: Everybody, move..!

Narrator: The party immediately prepares to evacuate—all except one. Rena remains standing beside the unconscious Elizabeth. Dew notices immediately.

Dew: Rena.

Narrator: Rena doesn't move. Instead, she kneels beside her daughter once more and gently brushes several strands of hair away from Elizabeth's face before finally responding.

Rena: ...I'm not leaving her here.

Narrator: The declaration causes several members of the party to exchange uneasy glances. Cooper's eyes widen in disbelief while Krista looks between Rena and the unconscious Elizabeth in stunned silence. Vilmer lets out a slow sigh. Lorenzo's eyebrows shoot upward as he stares at Rena in disbelief. Dew remains silent, though the concern on his face is unmistakable. Elvir's expression hardens instantly as she steps forward.

Elvir: What?!

Narrator: Rena rises to her feet and faces Dew, Elvir, and the rest of the party.

Rena: I abandoned her once. I will not be making that mistake ever again... She's coming with us.

Elvir: Oh, no. Absolutely not. Have you completely lost the plot?

Narrator: Behind them, another section of the damaged main console erupts in a shower of sparks. Neither woman breaks eye contact.

Elvir: Rena, that isn't your daughter anymore.

Rena: No. She's my DAUGHTER!

Elvir: Pfft. No, Rena. She's also the Sōl Congruum who almost wiped out the entire bloody world.

Narrator: One of the secondary workstations along the wall abruptly loses power, its displays fading to black as smoke continues rising from the ruined main console. Rena remains unmoved, her expression unwavering as she responds defiantly.

Rena: She's still coming...

Narrator: Cooper nervously shifts his weight while Krista lowers her gaze toward the unconscious Elizabeth. Vilmer folds his arms but says nothing. Lorenzo shakes his head and lets out a disbelieving laugh.

Lorenzo: Rena, seriously? We're bringin' her with us? After all that..?

Narrator: Rena doesn't even spare Lorenzo a glance. Another sharp electrical crack erupts from the damaged main console as the massive wall display flickers again, its telemetry feed breaking apart beneath waves of static.

Elvir: ...And just how d'you plan on explaining that to the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers waiting topside? Because I'm fairly certain they're not going to be thrilled when they find out who she is.

Narrator: For a brief moment, only the sounds of failing equipment fill the chamber before Rena responds coldly.

Rena: That'll be my problem when we get there.

Narrator: Elvir stares at her in disbelief. Another burst of sparks erupts from the main console as additional equipment begins to fail. Slowly, she closes her eyes and lets out a long breath before speaking candidly.

Elvir: Bloody fucking unreal...

Narrator: Dew lets out a weary sigh before lowering his bo staff. He then walks over to Rena and crouches beside the unconscious Elizabeth. The others watch in stunned silence as he reaches down toward her. Rena looks at him in surprise. Dew briefly meets her gaze before speaking.

Dew: She's coming with us... Let's get her up.

Narrator: Rena nods. Together, they carefully lift Elizabeth from the floor. Her limp body sags between them before Dew hoists her up and drapes her over one shoulder. For the first time since the argument began, a hint of relief crosses Rena's face. Elvir watches the scene unfold for a moment before rolling her eyes in resignation. She glances toward the others, but no one voices an objection. Realizing the rest of the party has already accepted the decision, Elvir reluctantly relents.

Elvir: Fine... *(then points one of her daggers directly at the unconscious Elizabeth draped over Dew's shoulder)* But if she wakes up and tries anything funny— *(tightening her grip around the dagger)* ...then my duty as a Hozho comes first. I'll put her down.

Narrator: Rena's expression tightens slightly before she looks away. Beside her, Dew meets Elvir's gaze for a brief moment before turning toward the exit. Elvir then lowers her dagger. Behind them, another bank of controls on the damaged main console suddenly shorts out, sending sparks cascading across the floor as the massive display finally goes dark.

Dew: All right. It's time to go...

Narrator: With the Launch Control Center becoming increasingly compromised, Dew, carrying the unconscious Elizabeth over his shoulder, quickly evacuates alongside Rena and the rest of the party. As they depart, thin streams of smoke continue rising from the ruined main console while small electrical fires begin spreading through its shattered control panels and into nearby equipment. No sooner do they clear the

doorway than an automated warning tone sounds. A moment later, the reinforced blast door begins sliding shut behind them. The heavy barrier seals the Launch Control Center with a resounding metallic thud, isolating the growing fires and failing equipment within. After navigating the passageway, they emerge onto the vast maintenance catwalk overlooking the missile silo below. The enormous cylindrical chamber stretches deep into the darkness beneath their feet. Far below, the launch platform stands empty where the Renaissance Lance had once rested. Behind them, the distant crackle of failing electronics and the faint glow of electrical fires continue to emanate from beyond the sealed control room. Elsewhere within the underground complex, deep inside one of the dimly lit service corridors branching off from the missile silo, a lone figure moves silently through the aftermath of the battle. Several slain *Bush of Life* cultist scientists lie scattered across the floor. The figure pauses above the last surviving cultist scientist, who desperately attempts to crawl away. Then a suppressed handgun fires, the shot striking the cultist scientist in the back of the head and killing him instantly. The figure places the handgun into their left-side pocket, then kneels beside the deceased cultist scientist's body, turns it over, and begins searching through the pockets of the cloak. After several moments, the figure discovers a small USB flash drive tucked away inside. The figure turns the device over in their hand, then briefly studies it as though recognizing its potential importance. The figure slips the flash drive into their right-side pocket, rises, and hurriedly disappears down the dimly lit corridor.

CHAPTER 34 – THE MAN BEHIND

THE CURTAIN

- Narrator: The scene cuts back to Dew, with the unconscious Elizabeth draped over his shoulder, as he leads the rest of the party at a hurried pace across the massive catwalk suspended beneath the sealed Launch Control Center. Having already crossed nearly half of the immense structure, they continue toward the distant exit while flames and smoke intensify within the damaged Launch Control Center far above. Suddenly, a violent explosion erupts overhead, echoing throughout the underground complex like thunder. A powerful shockwave tears through the metal framework of the Launch Control Center, causing the entire catwalk to shudder violently beneath their feet. The sudden jolt throws everyone off balance. Dew stumbles forward and crashes hard onto the platform as Elizabeth slips from his shoulder and tumbles from his grasp. The impact snaps the talisman's clasp, tearing it free from around his neck and sending it skidding several yards across the catwalk before it disappears into the darkness ahead, unnoticed amid the commotion. Around them, the rest of the party is knocked to the ground while the catwalk continues rattling beneath the force of the blast. For several seconds, the entire group remains sprawled across the platform until the shaking finally subsides. Lorenzo groans as he pushes himself onto one knee and calls out to the nearby party members.
- Lorenzo: ...Is everybody... good?
- Narrator: Cooper gets back to his feet and replies as he helps Elvir up.
- Cooper: We're fine...
- Narrator: Once upright, Elvir winces, brushes dust from her armor, and dryly comments.
- Elvir: Right, then... who put the catwalk in a cocktail shaker? Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk...

Narrator: Vilmer steadies himself against the railing while Krista pushes herself up from the catwalk.

Krista: ...Could've done without that. Yep...

Narrator: As Rena quickly pushes herself back to her feet, she looks around in a panic. Relief briefly washes over her when she spots Dew and Elizabeth still on the catwalk, but it vanishes just as quickly when she sees Dew lying motionless on the grated platform and Elizabeth crumpled near the railing. Fearing that the blast may have seriously injured them, she rushes toward the pair and calls out in alarm.

Rena: Dew! Elizabeth!

Narrator: As Rena rushes toward them, Dew lets out a low groan and slowly begins to stir. He rolls onto one side and plants a hand against the grated platform before pushing himself upright. Rena quickly reaches his side; her expression filled with concern as she steadies him while he rises unsteadily to his feet.

Rena: Dew, are you hurt?

Dew: I'm okay...

Rena: Are you sure?

Dew: Ugh... *(then briefly presses a hand against the left side of his chest before waving off the discomfort)* Yeah. I feel like a million Wertes. Ha-ha...

Narrator: Relieved, Rena quickly walks over and kneels beside Elizabeth. After a brief examination, she finds no visible injuries and confirms that her daughter is still breathing normally.

Rena: She's fine... Okay... *(then turns to Dew)* Can you help me move her over a bit?

Narrator: Dew nods before walking over and crouching beside Rena. Together, they carefully lift Elizabeth and move her farther from the railing, laying her in a safer spot near the center of the catwalk. Just as they finish moving Elizabeth, Dew suddenly freezes. Noticing the change in his demeanor, Rena looks at him questioningly. Without saying a word, he quickly reaches inside his shirt and feels around beneath the fabric. A sinking feeling settles in his stomach as he realizes the talisman is no longer there. Before Dew can begin searching for the missing talisman, a calm voice echoes throughout the chamber.

???: ...Oooh. What do we have here?

Narrator: Dew and the rest of the party immediately turn toward the source of the voice. At the far end of the catwalk, a lone figure draped in a dark cloak slowly emerges from the shadows, Dew's missing talisman resting in his hand. Noticing it, Dew gestures to the others. With the unconscious Elizabeth safely out of harm's way, Dew and the party leave her behind and cautiously approach the cloaked figure. Once they are within speaking distance, they stop several feet away, and Dew addresses the mysterious stranger.

Dew: Hey. That belongs to me. Mind handing it back?

Narrator: The cloaked figure pauses at Dew's request before letting out a quiet chuckle. He then takes several calm steps forward, casually holding the talisman between two fingers as he studies it for a moment. Afterward, his gaze shifts back to Dew before he finally responds.

???: It certainly looks important... quite valuable, in fact. I think I'll be holding on to it.

Narrator: Dew responds with an irritated growl. Elvir narrows her eyes at the mysterious stranger before speaking.

Elvir: ...Who the fook is this knob?

???: (*looking toward Dew and Lorenzo*) It's been quite some time, hasn't it, Dew Wilder and *Aurora Blade* friend? (*then looks over at Rena*) Ah... and the illustrious Dr. Irene Ettiep. We meet again.

Narrator: The cloaked man slowly lowers his hood, revealing his face. Dew stares at him for a moment, struggling to place the familiar features before recognition finally begins to dawn. Lorenzo's expression immediately hardens. Beside him, Rena freezes where she stands, instantly recognizing the man before her. Cooper, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir exchange puzzled glances, unsure why the three suddenly look so unsettled.

Dew: Wait a minute... you're...

Lorenzo: ...That punk-ass Secretary-Treasurer we ran into a year ago at the Mesovilla National Tax Depository...

Rena: ...Sherwin Cromwell.

Narrator: Sherwin inclines his head ever so slightly before offering them a faint, almost nostalgic smile.

Sherwin: Correct... although former Secretary-Treasurer would be more accurate. Hmm... I was expecting several associates to

rendezvous with me. Curious... they never made it. And then I run into all of you... Hmph. So, where do you all think you're going? Bingo? Ha-ha-ha... *(then his eyes fall upon Dew, Lorenzo, and Rena)* I imagine the three of you never expected to see me again... did you? *(then his gaze shifts to the rest of the party)* And I see you've got yourselves a whole new host of "merry little men," too... *(then his eyes settle upon Elvir, taking notice of her Hozho armor and attire)* ...So, you're the other *Hozho* I've heard so much about.

Narrator: Elvir's eyes narrow at Sherwin's remark before she fires back.

Elvir: Other? There's another? And yeah, I am. What's that got to do with you, then?

Narrator: A faint smirk spreads across Sherwin's face before Dew speaks up.

Dew: What are you doing here?

Sherwin: ...Isn't it obvious? I'm with the *Bush of Life*... No... no... Ha-ha... That's not entirely true. They were merely pawns in a far grander scheme... just like my two nephews, Zircon and Thornton... Elizabeth... and all of you.

Dew: What?

Cooper: You're their uncle?!

Sherwin: Indeed. It would seem the plot has thickened... and we've scarcely begun. But don't worry... there will be ample time to tell the whole story.

Narrator: Dew and the rest of the party stare at Sherwin in stunned confusion as he continues.

Sherwin: You've all come so far... and what a pity it would be if you never learned the whole truth. I suppose you've earned at least that much.

Lorenzo: Man, what—you gonna monologue us to death or what?

Sherwin: Monologue? Certainly. Death? That will come soon enough for all of you. But trust me... you're going to want to hear what I have to say.

Narrator: Keeping Dew's talisman in hand, Sherwin reaches beneath his cloak with his free hand and presses a button on the device fastened to his belt. Instantly, the massive blast doors at both ends of the catwalk begin to descend. Dew and the others watch as the entrance behind them seals shut, followed moments later by the exit ahead. Heavy locking mechanisms

engage with a series of thunderous metallic clanks before silence returns to the chamber. Their attention then shifts back to Sherwin.

Sherwin: There... that's better. It would seem the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers above won't be getting in here anytime soon, anyway. That gives me all the time I need to explain everything...

Narrator: A heavy silence settles over the catwalk. High above, the distant roar of the fire still raging within the sealed Launch Control Center echoes throughout the underground chamber as thin wisps of smoke slowly seep downward through the damaged structure overhead. Sherwin calmly folds one hand behind his back while idly turning Dew's talisman between the fingers of the other.

Sherwin: Now, then... Where shall I begin? Hm... Ah... yes. Let us begin where all of this truly started. Long before the establishment of Mesovilla, the *Hozho*, or humanity itself. *(then slowly raises the talisman, studying it as though admiring an ancient relic)* ...But with the Priscus. They were the first beings created by Chosha—the First Nascency. Their civilization was unlike anything humanity has achieved since. Their understanding of medicine, engineering, nature, and even the heavens surpassed anything your modern minds could comprehend. Yet the foundation of their greatness came from something that did not originate within their world. A great meteorite fell from the heavens and shattered upon impact, scattering countless mystical stones across the land. The *Elementomes*. *(then he slowly turns the talisman between his fingers)* ...Each fragment embodies a different aspect of nature, and as you all know, grants its bearer command over it. Through them, the Priscus transformed their civilization, ushering in an age of unprecedented advancement—one whose legacy still shapes the modern world. But... what history failed to preserve was that those countless *Elementomes* were merely fragments. At the core of the meteorite was something far greater... *(then raises a single finger)* The *Prime Elementome*.

Krista: ...*Prime Elementome*?

Sherwin: *(then nods)* Correct...

Narrator: Dew, Rena, Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer exchange uncertain glances. Elvir, however, remains motionless. Unlike the others, this revelation is not entirely new to her.

Sherwin: ...Unfortunately, knowledge has always demanded a price. The Priscus High Council—the wisest and most revered among their people—became consumed by a singular obsession. Perfection. Immortality. Divinity. *(then his grip tightens slightly around the talisman)* They believed the *Prime Elementome* could elevate them beyond mortality itself. They believed it could make them equal to Chosha. Ha-ha... Such magnificent intellect, undone by the oldest flaw of all. Arrogance. *(then begins pacing leisurely across the catwalk)* ...In their arrogance, they tampered with forces they could neither understand nor control. Their manipulation of the *Prime Elementome* disrupted the natural balance and nearly tore the fabric of existence apart. And in response to that imbalance... The universe answered with the Sōl Congruum.

Narrator: Another heavy silence settles over the catwalk before Sherwin continues speaking.

Sherwin: ...Under its influence, an unnamed member of the High Council became its vessel and hastened the destruction of the Priscus civilization. Their civilization fell. Nearly their entire people were annihilated. Yet... two remained. Adan and Leva. Unlike the High Council, they had opposed the misuse of the *Prime Elementome* from the beginning. They understood that the Priscus civilization could no longer be saved. Only life itself could be preserved. And so, as their final act, they created—

Elvir: ...the *Genesis Aeternum*.

Narrator: Sherwin slowly turns toward her. A pleased smile crosses his face.

Sherwin: Very good...

Dew: Genesis... what?

Narrator: Elvir keeps her eyes fixed upon Sherwin before responding.

Elvir: That's sacred *Hozho* knowledge. Or at least... it should be. *(to Sherwin)* How the bloody hell do you know about *Genesis Aeternum*?

Sherwin: Ha-ha... Patience, young *Hozho*. We shall arrive there soon enough. *(then resumes pacing)* The *Genesis Aeternum* was a

device designed to preserve the essence of life itself. Before the final remnants of their civilization disappeared, Adan and Leva used it to seed the world with their genetic legacy. From that legacy, humanity was born. Not by chance. Not through some meaningless accident of nature. Humanity was created as the successor to the Priscus. That is the truth of the Second Nascency. *(then lightly rubs the talisman with his thumb)* ...As for the *Prime Elementome*, Adan and Leva understood that no civilization should ever wield such power again. So, they cast it into the deepest reaches of the ocean, beyond the grasp of kings, empires, and history itself. *(then a faint smile slowly returns to his face)* But, of course... The story did not end there. Humanity endured. Kingdoms rose and fell. Civilization rebuilt itself upon the graves of the Priscus. The lesser *Elementomes* continued shaping history while the *Prime Elementome* faded into history. Then came Gerent Yersinia Mor Kataktitis. *(then stops pacing)* ...The self-proclaimed descendant of the Priscus. The tyrant who sought to reclaim their legacy. You already know the stories. His conquests across the ancient Mesovillian kingdoms. His atrocities. His obsession with genetic purity. The belief that he was the Sōl Congruum itself. Blah. Blah. Blah. *(then waves one hand dismissively)* What mattered was that Yersinia somehow recovered the *Prime Elementome*. With it, he nearly brought the world to ruin. Yet despite its power, he was ultimately defeated by the *Hozho* Warrior Saints. As the final blow was struck, the earth opened beneath him, swallowing both Yersinia and the *Prime Elementome* into the abyss. Neither was ever seen again. ...The *Hozho* subsequently dedicated themselves to preventing such a catastrophe from ever happening again. For generations, the order upheld a sacred tradition. With each passing generation, every *Hozho* lineage entrusted its divine mission to one chosen successor deemed worthy of helping safeguard the world against the return of the Sōl Congruum. *(then his gaze settles upon Elvir)* A tradition with which you are quite familiar, I imagine.

Elvir:

...

Narrator:

Sherwin brushes a speck of dust from his cloak before continuing.

Sherwin: The *Hozho* gradually erased themselves from known history. Their lineages scattered. Their records were buried. Their symbols were forgotten. They survived by concealing their identities, living ordinary lives, and revealing themselves only when the Sōl Congruum returned. (*then his expression becomes almost nostalgic*) I... was born into a prosperous family and raised by two loving parents alongside my younger sister, who later became the mother of my nephews, Zircon and Thornton. A perfectly ordinary childhood... Or so it appeared. But in reality...

Narrator: Sherwin quickly unfastens the clasp securing his cloak. The heavy garment slips from his shoulders and falls silently onto the catwalk. Beneath it, he wears the unmistakable the ancestral armor of a *Hozho* Warrior Saint. Though aged, the chest plate remains immaculate. Only one detail mars its appearance. The sacred *Hozho* crest upon the breastplate is fractured, with jagged cracks spreading outward across its surface as though something within had long since broken. A stunned silence falls over the party. Dew, Lorenzo, Rena, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer stare in disbelief. Elvir instinctively takes a step backward before finally finding her voice.

Elvir: ...You're also a...

Sherwin: Indeed. I, too... am a *Hozho*.

Narrator: Elvir's eyes remain fixed upon the fractured crest. For a long moment, she says nothing, her mind racing as she struggles to comprehend the revelation before her. Sherwin then continues.

Sherwin: ...My mother was a *Hozho*. And when the time came to select her successor... She chose me. From that moment onward, she filled my head with every sacred truth our order had preserved and taught me of the responsibility carried by every *Hozho* who came before me. (*then a smile forms*) ...I embraced it wholeheartedly. How could I not..? To be one of the few entrusted with the fate of the world... What greater honor could there be? (*then his smile fades*) But knowledge has an unfortunate habit. The more one learns... The more one begins asking questions. Questions my mother could never answer.

Questions I placed before Chosha in prayer, only to be met with silence. *(then his voice hardens)* ...If I, along with the few chosen, were expected to stand between existence and cosmic annihilation, then why was I expected to remain nothing more than a servant? Why should the responsibility of preserving creation be expected of me while the authority to shape it belonged only to Chosha? Why was I expected to preserve a world so visibly corrupt, unequal, violent, and imperfect? So, I eventually reached the only logical conclusion. A perfect world cannot be entrusted to imperfect beings. And if Chosha would not correct such a flawed design... Then I would.



- Narrator: Elvir's expression twists with revulsion. To her, Sherwin's words were nothing less than blasphemy.
- Sherwin: ...But before I could reshape the world, I had to ensure that no one remained capable of standing in my way. So, I spent decades tracing the hidden *Hozho* lineages through historical records, genealogical archives, historical anomalies, and fractured family histories. It was a painstaking process. Painfully

slow. *(then his voice becomes eerily composed)* And then... I would wipe them out, one by one. *(then a cold smile slowly creeps across his face)* At long last, I believed I had succeeded. The *Hozho* Order was extinct. No one remained who could threaten my plans.

Narrator: Elvir instinctively tightens her grip on the hilts of her daggers before interjecting.

Elvir: You're telling me... their disappearance was all because of you..?

Sherwin: Guilty as charged.

Elvir: Bloody fucking...

Sherwin: Tch... But apparently, I didn't get rid of all of them. *(then briefly frowns)* When Thornton spoke of a young woman claiming to be the last of the *Hozho*, I initially dismissed it as nonsense... but I couldn't risk ignoring it, either. *(then studies Elvir with almost clinical fascination)* Somehow... one *Hozho* lineage escaped my notice. *(then his eyes narrow)* One final survivor? Perhaps you and a remaining parent? Or perhaps not. Hm... My one mistake. But it is a mistake I fully intend to correct shortly.

Elvir: You make me sick. Everything our ancestors fought for... Everything they sacrificed... You took all of it and twisted it into this! *(then steps forward, her voice echoing throughout the chamber)* The *Hozho* were chosen to protect life! To stand against the Söl Congruum! To serve Chosha and preserve the balance! Not to murder entire lineages and use the end of the world as some bloody stepping stone to your self-appointed throne!

Narrator: Sherwin watches her with mild boredom.

Elvir: ...You betrayed our ancestors—every one of them who carried that sacred duty before us. *(then points one of her daggers directly at Sherwin before lowering it)* You betrayed Chosha... And all this talk about perfection... About rebuilding the world in your image... It's the same arrogance that destroyed the Priscus High Council! The same madness that consumed Gerent Yersinia Mor Katakittis! You're no different from either of them.

Sherwin: Hah-ha! Oh, but I am. *(then calmly takes one step toward her direction and stops)* ...The Priscus High Council acted without

understanding the power they sought to command. Yersinia was driven by vanity, hatred, and delusions of inherited divinity. They were blinded by obsession. (*then taps the side of his head with one finger*) ...I possess clarity!

Elvir: Clarity?! That's what you call this?! (*then exhales in utter disgust*)

Sherwin: ...Then again, I apparently lacked enough of that to realize I had failed to eliminate every *Hozho*. Nonetheless, believing that matter had been dealt with, I turned my attention to another plan already in motion: acquiring the knowledge and resources necessary to fulfill the remaining parts of my objective.

Narrator: Rena's expression then hardens before speaking.

Rena: ...The *Priscus Initiative*.

Sherwin: Precisely, Dr. Ettiep. ...I had the privilege of chairing the Aethnaeum Foundation for nearly two decades before assuming my role in Zircon's administration. To the outside world, it was a philanthropic institution dedicated to advancing medicine and scientific discovery. To the Mesovillian government—and to you and your colleagues—it was simply the financial backbone of the *Priscus Initiative*. (*then raises the talisman once again*) But contrary to what any of you believed, I did not fund the *Priscus Initiative* to develop biological weapons. Nor was I interested in creating enhanced soldiers for the military. Those objectives merely served as convenient pretenses. The *Priscus Initiative* was, from its very inception... a long-term investment.

Dew: Long-term investment?

Sherwin: Indeed. (*then his gaze briefly shifts to the unconscious Elizabeth before returning to Rena*) ...Dr. Ettiep, the research conducted by you, Dr. Voight, and Dr. Eudora fascinated me—not because of the discoveries you intended to make... But because I knew where that research could eventually lead.

Rena: ...

Sherwin: In time, your work with your late husband resulted in the creation of two genetically altered children infused with *Priscus* DNA from birth. An extraordinary achievement. And one that was greatly welcomed... (*then his eyes drift toward Elizabeth*

again) Yet even that was merely one piece of a far greater design. Because despite all of your brilliance, none of you truly understood the Priscus. You did not understand their capabilities. Or the forces their blood could attract. Elizabeth's Priscus blood proved what I had long suspected. A sufficiently compatible descendant of the Priscus could become a conduit for the Söl Congruum. But at the time, she was still only a hypothesis. A possibility requiring the correct conditions. *(then lowers the talisman and looks toward Dew)* Meanwhile, as all of this was unfolding, I was also searching for the *Prime Elementome*. Centuries after Yersinia's defeat, the artifact unexpectedly resurfaced within the nation of Nordavia's underground antiquities market. By the time I discovered its location, it had already fallen into the hands of one of the country's most powerful criminal syndicates. So, through an intermediary, I quietly commissioned an expedition of mercenaries to retrieve it. None of them knew who had financed the mission. Nor did they understand what they had been sent to recover.

Narrator: Dew stares at Sherwin with growing unease.

Sherwin: ...The expedition ended in catastrophe. By the time it was over, the criminal syndicate and nearly every one of my hired guns had been annihilated. Only one mercenary emerged from the carnage. Hah. Your grandfather... Othmar Wilder.

Narrator: Upon hearing this, Dew and Rena exchange a stunned glance before Dew turns back toward Sherwin.

Dew: My grandfather was a mercenary? No... that's nonsense. *(then turns to Rena)* D-did... you know about this..?

Rena: ...No. I didn't know this, either. *(then talking aloud to herself)* Hmm... But that does explain why he was gone so often...

Narrator: Dew continues looking toward Rena, quietly processing her realization before turning his attention back to Sherwin, who nods slightly.

Sherwin: Yes. And a fine mercenary he was, from what I eventually learned. Being a retired SWAT TROOPER ELITE officer must have become rather dull after a while. But he certainly put his skills to good use. Your grandfather was the type of man who always completed whatever job he had been sent to do.

(*then briefly looks down at the talisman*) ...Officially, the mission was deemed a failure. Your grandfather supposedly returned empty-handed. Or so everyone believed. In reality, he had successfully recovered the *Prime Elementome*. But sometime during the expedition, he discovered the truth about the talisman and what it was capable of. So, he disappeared with it. He concealed it. Later, he reforged it. Disguised it as nothing more than an ordinary family keepsake.

Narrator: Dew's eyes widen with realization before Sherwin continues. He then raises the talisman between two fingers, displaying it to Dew.

Sherwin: This... was never merely a family heirloom. It is the long-lost *Prime Elementome*.

Rena: It is?!

Dew: ...You're lying. (*then he instinctively takes a step forward*) My grandfather would've told me something like that.

Sherwin: Would he?

Narrator: Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer stand frozen in stunned disbelief. Elvir stares at the talisman as though seeing it for the first time.

Elvir: You mean to tell me... The *Prime Elementome* was with us the entire bloody time?

Sherwin: Ha-ha. Yep. Hidden in plain sight. The safest place to conceal something is often where no one would ever think to look.

Elvir: But... But how could I not have known?

Sherwin: Perhaps, my dear, because... you're a rather terrible *Hozho*.

Elvir: Nyaaah... says you!

Sherwin: Heh. (*then turns his attention back to Dew*) ...And your grandfather almost got away with it, too. But as the years passed, I became increasingly convinced that the *Prime Elementome* had not been lost. Eventually, I discovered that the expedition's lone survivor was living quietly in Twin Pines with his teenage grandson.

Narrator: Dew's expression hardens, his eyes never leaving Sherwin.

Sherwin: ...I placed him under constant surveillance. And one day, my suspicions were confirmed. Photograph after photograph showed the talisman hanging from his neck. So, when the time came, I dispatched several agents to recover what rightfully belonged to me. They never returned.



Dew: You... You sent them? (*then his fists slowly clench*) Are you... telling me you were responsible for my grandfather's death?!

Sherwin: Responsible? Hardly. Your grandfather made his own decision. He chose to stand between me and the *Prime Elementome*. Whatever happened afterward was the consequence of that choice... not my doing. (*then briefly studies the talisman*) ...During the struggle, somehow the *Prime Elementome* activated without warning. The resulting surge killed your grandfather... my agents... and consumed the entire house in a fiery blaze.

Narrator: Dew's breathing grows heavier as he struggles to contain his anger.

Sherwin: Naturally, after all that... an incident of that magnitude would attract far too much attention... and far too many questions. So, it had to be covered up.

Narrator: Dew stares at Sherwin, his voice trembling as he struggles to restrain his anger.

Dew: All this time... I believed it was nothing more than a house fire. And now you're telling me... all of it happened because of you?!

Sherwin: *(then rolls his eyes)* Ugh. Again, your grandfather sealed his own fate, Mr. Wilder. I merely sought to obtain the *Prime Elementome*.

Narrator: Dew's eyes burn with barely restrained fury, yet he remains silent as Sherwin continues.

Sherwin: ...When the fire died and the ashes settled, the *Prime Elementome* was nowhere to be found. Once again, it had eluded my grasp. With the talisman lost, I turned my attention back to the *Priscus Initiative* and the four SKT virus samples it had produced. Each contained a different component of Elizabeth's and her late brother's genetic makeup. But protecting those investments became considerably more complicated when my elder nephew rose to power. *(then his expression shifts to one of faint disappointment)* Zircon... He possessed remarkable intelligence, discipline, and political instinct. Unfortunately, his ambition was so voracious that even the slightest taste of power left him desperate for more. That was precisely why I never revealed my *Hozho* lineage to him. He could never have been trusted with such knowledge.

Lorenzo: Damn... Backstabbing, deception, and manipulation run in your family, huh?

Narrator: Sherwin gives Lorenzo a brief glance, then smirks before continuing.

Sherwin: ...At the beginning of Zircon's first term, the Province of New Havenport repeatedly defied his premiership. The humiliation wounded his pride more deeply than any military defeat could have. Eventually, he learned of the existence of an SKT virus sample. The C

sample. But he believed it was the only one in existence. *(then lightly taps his temple)* That misconception was no accident. Long before the *Great Civil War* began, I had devised an elaborate campaign of misinformation in the event that one of my investments was exposed. I planted false documents. Altered records. Paid informants. Eliminated witnesses who might have contradicted the official narrative. Every trail, every document, and every rumor was arranged to ensure that Zircon never suspected the existence of the remaining three samples. *(then resumes pacing)* ...So long as Zircon believed only one SKT virus existed, he remained fixated upon the C sample. Zircon sought greater power. He sought revenge. He sought to break New Havenport so completely that no province would ever challenge him again. The virus merely gave him the means. *(then his eyes pass over the party, still pacing)* ...And as the Great Civil War raged, every atrocity and every death pushed the world closer to the imbalance required for the Söl Congruum's return. Zircon's hubris played directly into my grand design.

Narrator: Vilmer slowly shakes his head in disgust before speaking.

Vilmer: You speak of those people as though they were nothing... That was once my home. Those who died had families. They had dreams. Your actions are absolutely abhorrent.

Sherwin: *(then stops pacing)* Abhorrent? Me? But I am not the one who ordered the province destroyed with a nuclear weapon, am I?

Narrator: Again, silence falls over the catwalk. Vilmer's weathered face hardens with quiet indignation. None of the party can deny the narrow truth of Sherwin's words, yet each understands that he deliberately helped create the very conditions that made the tragedy possible.

Sherwin: Ah... I thought not. Where was I..? Oh, yes. ...Before New Havenport's final collapse, I entrusted the SKT

virus A vial to Seneschal Ligo and instructed him to safeguard it. Once it became clear that New Havenport would lose the war, he disappeared without a trace. Dr. Eudora had already fled years earlier with the SKT virus G vial while escaping the authorities. As for the SKT virus T vial, it remained hidden within the secret laboratory beneath that video store in Northern Demmin. Early in the war, I hired mercenaries to retrieve it. They never returned. I could only assume they had either died during the journey or while infiltrating the facility. Sending another team would have attracted unnecessary attention, so I left it there. For the time being, the vial remained secure. *(then he looks down and turns the talisman over in his palm)* ...After the *Great Civil War*, however, I believed the SKT virus C sample had been lost forever. With it, I feared that decades of planning had gone down the toilet. *(then his eyes settle upon Dew again)* ...Then, one year ago, I encountered the *Aurora Blade* gang and a young man among them named Dew Wilder at the Mesovilla National Tax Depository. The moment I heard your surname... I had a sickening feeling wash over me. Against every law of probability, there was no possibility that you could be related to Othmar. No possibility that you could be the teenage grandson I had once dismissed as insignificant. And yet... you piqued my curiosity. Following our encounter, I suffered what the government generously described as a nervous breakdown and took leave from my administrative duties. I began scouring every government record I could access. *(then a delighted smile spreads across his face)* ...To my astonishment, you truly were Othmar's surviving grandson—a SWAT TROOPER ELITE corporal, and one who, according to every official record, had died in New Havenport. And here you stand before me now... *(then raises the talisman)* Fate has truly smiled upon me. Because through no intention of your own, you happened to carry the *Prime Elementome* with you all these years

and delivered it directly into my hands. And for that... I have you to thank, Mr. Wilder.

Narrator: Dew continues glaring at Sherwin, slowly shaking his head in furious disbelief.

Sherwin: ...Not long after our encounter at the Depository—and shortly after I began my leave—I was contacted in secret by members of the *Bush of Life*. For years, I had believed my younger nephew, Thornton, had died in the line of duty in New Havenport. That was merely another lie fabricated by Zircon to conceal his acquisition of the SKT virus C sample. Thornton had survived. When I was finally reunited with him, he revealed what had truly happened. Elizabeth had become the vessel of the Söl Congruum. And Thornton intended to bring about her Renascence. *(then slowly spreads his arms outward)* In that moment, every scattered piece began falling into place. Thornton possessed the conviction. Elizabeth possessed the connection. The *Bush of Life* possessed the manpower. And I possessed the knowledge required to guide them without revealing their true destination. *(then lowers his arms to his side)* ...So, naturally... I joined them. Ha-ha... Thornton believed our ambitions were aligned. And in a sense, they were. Thornton wished to fulfill the Söl Congruum's will. Elizabeth wished to destroy everything and recreate the world in her own image. I required the world to reach the brink of destruction before it could be remade. They were both extraordinarily useful tools... Thornton, through Elizabeth, knew of the *Prime Elementome's* existence because of the inherited memories carried by the Söl Congruum. Yet neither of them knew where it had gone after Yersinia's defeat. Such a powerful force of entropy... And yet so limited in scope. Heh. *(then with quiet amusement)* Because the *Prime Elementome* remained lost at the time, they pursued a far less elegant alternative. The Renascence Lance. *(then, again briefly glances toward Elizabeth's unconscious body)* Had the Lance reached

the upper atmosphere and successfully detonated, Elizabeth would eventually have reset the world. Although the process would have taken considerably longer to materialize... Yet as we can all see... That plan failed. *(then starts pacing again)* What Thornton and Elizabeth never understood was that I revealed only what I needed them to know. Neither of them learned of the *Genesis Aeternum*. That knowledge, along with so many other sacred truths, belonged exclusively to the *Hozho*. I had no intention of allowing either of them to comprehend the full scope of what they were helping me accomplish. *(then stops in place and closes his fingers around the Prime Elementome)* ...Also, neither understood what true power required. That is why they both failed. *(then his gaze settles upon Rena again)* Dr. Ettiep, I told you that your daughter's creation was an extraordinary achievement. But you must understand... She was never anything more than a long-term investment.

Narrator: Rena's eyes flash with anger as every protective instinct within her surges to the surface in response to Sherwin's remark.

Rena: She is not an "investment" and never was. She is my daughter!

Sherwin: A mother's sentiment. Bah. To you, perhaps. To me... *(then he gestures toward Elizabeth with the hand holding the Prime Elementome)* she was the culmination of a hypothesis decades in the making. Her Priscus blood allowed her to become the perfect conduit. The perfect vessel. For the Söl Congruum.

Narrator: Sherwin's gaze remains fixed upon Elizabeth, utterly devoid of sympathy.

Sherwin: ...The hypothesis has now been proven beyond doubt. She has fulfilled her purpose... and outlived her usefulness.

Narrator: Rena clenches her teeth in anger at Sherwin's words. Before she can respond, Elvir interjects.

Elvir: So, what now, then? The Söl Congruum's been defeated. You did all this for nothing. You lost.

Sherwin: Have I? Ha-ha-ha... The *Hozho* teachings provide many insights into a great many things. Perhaps you simply haven't reached that level of understanding yet... but momentarily, the Sōl Congruum's power will be at my disposal.

Elvir: You believe that? You're not Priscus. You've lost your bloody mind if you think so.

Sherwin: Oh, I assure you, my mental faculties are perfectly sound. And you are correct—I am not Priscus... but watch and see.

Narrator: Elvir raises an eyebrow, puzzled by his statement, as Sherwin studies the talisman resting in his palm. For the first time since revealing himself, the smug certainty in his expression gives way to something resembling disappointment.

Sherwin: Strange, though... *(then slowly turns the Prime Elementome over, examining its surface with quiet fascination)* According to the *Hozho* teachings, the *Prime Elementome* grants its wielder visions of possible futures. Glimpses of what may come to pass. Warnings. Opportunities. Paths not yet taken.

Narrator: Sherwin waits in silence with a forced smile, his eyes fixed upon the ancient stone as though expecting it to respond. Nothing happens. His smile gradually fades before commenting aloud to himself.

Sherwin: Yet here it rests in my hand... And I see nothing. No revelation. No prophecy. No grand vision of what awaits me. *(then closes his fingers around the talisman, his expression briefly tightening with irritation)* Perhaps even the sacred teachings of the *Hozho* can be wrong about certain things... Ha-ha-ha... *(then lifts his gaze toward Dew and the party as cold conviction settles across his face)* Then again... Who needs to see the future... *(then his grip tightens around the Prime Elementome)* ...when you can make your own?

Narrator: Another heavy silence follows. Sherwin turns toward the unconscious Elizabeth once again. Whatever reverence had lingered in his voice disappears entirely, replaced by detached calculation.

Sherwin: And now we arrive at the final return on my investment...

Narrator: Rena then shifts protectively toward Elizabeth.

Sherwin: The Sōl Congruum has already been drawn into a compatible vessel... And after all the cosmic carrot-dangling, the *Prime Elementome* is finally in my possession. *(then raises the Prime Elementome before him, the fractured crest upon his armor catching the fading light filtering through the lingering smoke above)* ...The Priscus High Council attempted to become gods without understanding the power they wielded. Yersinia attempted to rule through inherited power he merely believed was his birthright. Thornton surrendered himself to worship. Elizabeth surrendered herself to a cosmic destructive role... *(then his voice grows quieter and colder)* I will make no such mistake. I shall take the power of the Sōl Congruum for myself and finally undo Chosha's imperfections... Starting by... doing this...

Narrator: Sherwin then whispers an ancient incantation beneath his breath as Dew and the party watch curiously.

Sherwin: *(whispering to himself)* Ultima... Giggity giggity giggity... Megidolaon... Woolay... Alakazam... Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo... *Prime Elementome... yield unto me the essence of the Sōl Congruum! Zip-a-dee-zoo!*

Narrator: The *Prime Elementome* suddenly erupts with light as a stream of blue ethereal energy surges from Elizabeth's unconscious body and races across the catwalk toward the talisman. The unexpected spectacle catches Dew and the rest of the party completely off guard. Acting on instinct, Rena immediately places herself between Sherwin and her unconscious daughter. However, the flowing energy bends around her and continues surging into the *Prime Elementome*. Moments later, the stream of energy ceases. Sherwin lowers the *Prime Elementome*. Alarmed, Rena rushes to Elizabeth's side, kneels beside her, and quickly

checks that she is still breathing before turning toward Sherwin.

Rena: (*concerned and angry*) What did you do?

Sherwin: I merely collected what was needed to get this party started... With long-overdue interest. (*then he opens his hand, revealing blue energy swirling beneath the surface of the Prime Elementome*) Even three-fourths of the Sōl Congruum's essence will be more than sufficient to eliminate all of you. Yes... And afterward... I shall drain the remainder from your dearest daughter.

Narrator: Rena then rises, fury burning across her face. Sherwin's eyes pass over Dew, Rena, Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir one by one as he chatters on.

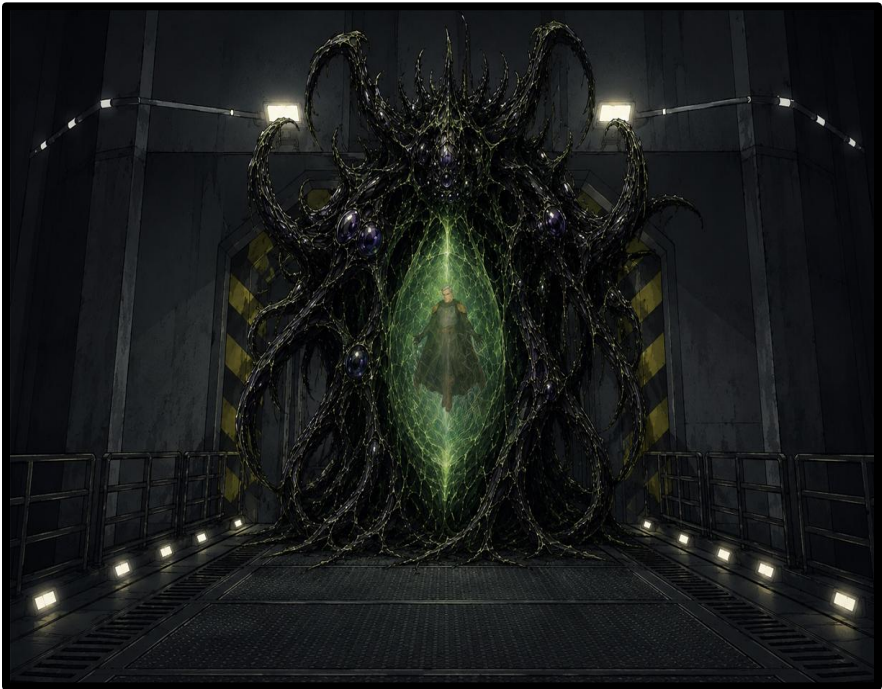
Sherwin: ...Once I have finished dealing with all of you, I will eliminate the SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers waiting topside. And after that... (*then a slow, chilling smile spreads across his face*) The world!

Narrator: Rena rejoins Dew and the rest of the party as they draw their weapons and assume their fighting stances. Without taking his eyes off them, Sherwin swiftly backs away toward the sealed exit before coming to a stop. Dew and the party quickly advance toward Sherwin as he calmly places the *Prime Elementome* around his neck. They come to a halt several feet away. Seconds later, the *Prime Elementome* begins to flicker before erupting with an emerald radiance that slowly spreads across Sherwin's body. The brilliant light intensifies, forcing Dew and the others to raise their weapons to shield their eyes as the chamber is momentarily consumed by its glow. As the light finally fades, a colossal, 10-foot-tall emerald crystalline construct materializes around Sherwin—a towering, ethereal, stationary shell formed from the power of the *Prime Elementome* itself. Its jagged crystalline frame twists outward into countless obsidian-black and emerald spires, while glowing veins of emerald light pulse relentlessly beneath its fractured surface. Suspended upright within its radiant,

protective core, Sherwin Ascendant hovers silently in place. Dew and the party cautiously lower their weapons, their eyes fixed upon the overwhelming spectacle before them. Before the final battle begins, Sherwin Ascendant addresses the party, his voice reverberating throughout the chamber as though amplified by an unseen PA system from deep within the construct's crystalline core.

Sherwin Ascendant: Ah... So, this is what it feels like to be God. Now this is TRUE POWER...! Ha-ha-ha... Story time is all but over. I'm your final boss fight. But you're my first... And last... Random battle. Time to... DIE!

Narrator: Dew and the party silently tighten their grips on their weapons. Without another word or a moment's hesitation, they charge toward Sherwin Ascendant, beginning their final battle upon the catwalk.



CHAPTER 35 – ABSOLUTE VALOR

Narrator: As the distance closes, Dew leads the assault, driving his bo staff into the towering emerald crystalline construct with a thunderous strike. Lorenzo follows with a relentless barrage from his brass knuckles, Rena cleaves through its jagged emerald and obsidian-black crystalline spires with her scythe, Cooper hammers its fractured shell with his reinforced mop, Krista's boomerang ricochets violently across its crystalline frame, Vilmer attempts to wrench it apart with his grappling hook, and Elvir slips through every opening, carving rapidly with her twin daggers. Deep fractures race across the construct's shell as crystal shards scatter across the catwalk, yet the emerald veins pulsing beneath its fractured surface immediately restore every wound. Suspended within its radiant crystalline core, Sherwin Ascendant silently watches the onslaught, an unwavering smile fixed upon his face. Without moving from its position, the construct retaliates. Several colossal crystalline arms lash outward simultaneously. One crashes into Dew's raised bo staff, launching him backward into Rena and Krista and sending all three skidding violently across the catwalk, while the remaining appendages sweep across the battlefield, forcing the others to scatter. The construct's emerald veins suddenly blaze with blinding intensity before countless razor-sharp crystal spikes erupt in every direction. Rena suffers a scrape across her shoulder, Krista narrowly avoids the deadly barrage, Elvir barely escapes a wall of erupting crystal, and Vilmer is forced to release his grappling hook as the crystalline spire anchoring it explodes, showering the party with razor-sharp fragments. Refusing to yield, Dew rallies the group into another coordinated assault. Together they surround the construct, striking relentlessly from every angle. The combined barrage sends violent tremors coursing throughout its towering shell as deeper fractures spread across its crystalline frame and massive emerald and obsidian-black spires splinter onto the catwalk below. Hope briefly flickers among the party, but the damage proves short-lived. The construct's emerald veins pulse once more,

sealing every fracture and restoring its shattered shell within seconds. Throughout it all, Sherwin Ascendant remains suspended within the radiant crystalline core, his smile only widening. Suddenly, the emerald veins beneath the construct's fractured surface blaze with overwhelming intensity. A devastating pulse of energy erupts from the construct, unleashing a colossal shockwave that tears across the chamber and hurls the entire party backward. Parts of the guardrails are ripped from the catwalk as reinforced concrete walls shatter and support columns splinter under the force of the blast. Twisted steel, chunks of concrete, and crystalline debris cascade into the abyss below. The entire silo convulses under the strain as buckling steel, widening fractures, and collapsing infrastructure herald the facility's impending destruction. Yet amid the devastation, Sherwin Ascendant remains completely untouched, suspended silently within the construct's radiant crystalline core. His smile never fades, as though the battle has only just begun. Several yards away, Elizabeth's fingers twitch. Another tremor ripples beneath her body. Slowly, her eyes open. At first, everything is nothing more than blurred light and distorted shapes. The deafening clash of metal against crystal reverberates throughout the chamber as her vision gradually comes into focus. She blinks and realizes she is no longer inside the Launch Control Center, but lying upon the massive catwalk. She then freezes, her eyes widening at the sight before her. Far ahead, a colossal, emerald crystalline construct towers over the battlefield. Jagged emerald and obsidian-black spires twist outward from its towering shell while glowing emerald veins pulse relentlessly beneath its fractured surface. Suspended within its radiant crystalline core hovers Sherwin Ascendant, the talisman necklace—the very one her mother once wore—hanging around his neck.

Elizabeth: ...Sherwin?

Narrator: She slowly pushes herself upright, one hand braced against the catwalk as another violent shockwave ripples through the chamber. Her breathing becomes uneven as fragments of memory come flooding back—the launch of the Renaissance Lance, her battle against Dew, her mother and the party, and

ultimately, her defeat. As she stares once more at Sherwin Ascendant suspended within the construct's radiant crystalline core, she senses that most of the Söl Congruum's essence has been stripped away from her.

Elizabeth: My power... did he..? But how..?

Narrator: Her gaze then slowly falls upon the talisman hanging around Sherwin Ascendant's neck, the same one she had seen her mother wear in the past. Then realization slowly overtakes her. At last, she understands what it truly is—and what has happened.

Elizabeth: ...That talisman... could it have been..? Was that... it this... entire time..? So... he finally found... it... The *Prime Elementome*... No...

Narrator: Several colossal crystalline arms suddenly lash outward from the construct's towering shell. Rena raises her scythe just in time to intercept one of them, but the overwhelming force sends her skidding backward across the steel catwalk before she crashes hard into a support column. Elizabeth instinctively lurches forward.

Elizabeth: Mother..!

Narrator: Her voice is swallowed by the roar of battle and the destruction raging throughout the chamber. She watches Dew rush to Rena's side, helping her back to her feet before the two immediately rejoin the fight without hesitation. Again and again, the construct's sprawling crystalline appendages batter the party aside. Jagged emerald and obsidian-black spires erupt from its shell while waves of crystal burst across the battlefield, forcing the heroes onto the defensive. Yet throughout the relentless assault, the delighted smile never leaves Sherwin Ascendant's face as he silently observes the battle from within the construct's radiant crystalline core. Elizabeth lowers her gaze. Her hands begin to tremble as shame and disgust consume her.

Elizabeth: ...This ...This wasn't supposed to happen...

Narrator: Silence suddenly surrounds her. The sounds of battle fade into the distance. The drifting smoke becomes motionless. A familiar pair of boots comes to a stop several feet to her right. Elizabeth slowly lifts her head. Standing several feet away is Thornton—not the zealous, long-haired, trench coat-

wearing servant who perished earlier, but once again the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Sergeant she remembered from before the fall of New Havenport. His uniform is immaculate. His posture is firm. Peace rests upon his face. Elizabeth stares at him in silence.



Elizabeth: ...Thornton..?
Thornton: Hey, Elizabeth. How's it going, beautiful?
Elizabeth: Thornton... How... how are you..?
Thornton: Shh... Don't worry about that. I'm here for you.
Elizabeth: My love... I... I failed. I failed you... All of the *Bush of Life*... You... everyone's sacrifices... All those deaths... For what? Your uncle... it looks like he played us... and got exactly what he wanted. We caused this... No... I caused this... I'm... I'm sorry...

Narrator: Thornton slowly shakes his head.
Thornton: Yeah... He sure did pull a fast one on us. And things do look a little bleak, huh? But... You can fix this.
Elizabeth: A little bleak?! I can fix this? After everything that's happened?

Thornton: It is what it is... Or is it?

Elizabeth: What..?

Thornton: Yes, Elizabeth... even after all this. You played your part as the Sôl Congruum. But maybe that was never truly your fate... It looks like there's another path for you now...

Elizabeth: Pfft... Thornton, you can't be serious.

Narrator: Elizabeth then gestures toward the distant battle, where Dew and the others continue fighting against the towering emerald crystalline construct.

Elizabeth: Look at them... They're suffering because of me... My mother spared me... I didn't deserve it... She should have left me to die...

Narrator: Thornton turns toward the ongoing battle. For several long moments, he simply watches. Far in the distance, the construct's colossal crystalline appendages continue sweeping across the catwalk as emerald veins pulse beneath its fractured shell. Suspended within the radiant crystalline core, Sherwin Ascendant watches the battle unfold with quiet amusement. Then Thornton continues to speak.

Thornton: Well... that didn't happen. And here you are.

Elizabeth: Ugh...

Thornton: And... they're fighting because they chose to. For a better future. Just as you can choose now.

Narrator: Elizabeth then looks on with Thornton at the ongoing battle as Dew is thrown backward once again by one of the construct's massive crystalline arms. Lorenzo staggers to one knee. Elvir narrowly escapes another eruption of crystal. Cooper drags Krista clear of falling debris. Vilmer struggles to keep the catwalk from collapsing, his grappling hook anchored around a warped support beam, while Rena remains standing firm and fighting despite everything.

Elizabeth: *(thinking aloud to herself)* ...Choose to...

Narrator: Thornton turns back toward Elizabeth.

Thornton: ...Your story isn't over. Not by a long shot.

Narrator: Elizabeth's eyes begin to glisten.

Elizabeth: ...Can I still stop him?

Thornton: Well... I've always believed in you. *(then winks, offering the faintest smile)*

Elizabeth: You certainly have done a lot of that... You're my "number one" fan. Ha-ha...

Thornton: Hah. Besides... I think you already know the answer to whether you can handle my uncle...

Narrator: Thornton's form then gradually begins to dissolve into countless tiny motes of light. Elizabeth instinctively reaches toward him.

Elizabeth: My love... wait!

Thornton: Elizabeth... Whatever happens from here... Remember... I love you. We'll always be one. And most importantly... This is your second chance. It won't be easy... But you have to live. Make it count...

Narrator: The last traces of his figure drift away into the light. Elizabeth remains motionless for a brief moment. Then she closes her eyes, and a long, trembling breath escapes her. When she opens them again, her self-doubt, self-pity, and confusion are gone. Only resolve remains. She slowly rises to her feet and tries to steady herself. Her weakened body trembles with exhaustion, yet a faint blue radiance begins gathering around her fingertips. Beneath her skin, delicate blue veins pulse softly with each heartbeat, their glow noticeably dimmer than before as the last lingering fragments of the Söl Congruum's essence answer her call. Far across the catwalk, Sherwin Ascendant continues watching the battle unfold from within the construct's radiant crystalline core. Around him, its colossal crystalline appendages relentlessly batter Dew and the others while emerald veins pulse beneath the construct's fractured shell, restoring every wound almost as quickly as it appears. He never notices Elizabeth back on her feet as she slowly raises both hands. Then a brilliant azure radiance erupts from her palms, surging through her fingertips as a massive, concentrated beam of light tears across the underground chamber with blinding speed. The blast cuts through the chaos and slams directly into the construct's radiant crystalline core. Upon impact, Sherwin Ascendant's eyes widen as his delighted smile instantly

vanishes. Violent tremors course throughout the construct's towering shell. Cracks explode outward across its emerald crystalline surface as jagged emerald and obsidian-black spires splinter apart. The glowing emerald veins flicker violently, their steady pulse becoming erratic for the first time. The construct shudders ever so slightly. A deafening chorus of cracking crystal reverberates throughout the silo as fractures race across its immense shell. Sherwin Ascendant stares in stunned disbelief from within the damaged radiant crystalline core. For the first time since his ascension, the construct shielding him had been weakened. Across the catwalk, Dew lowers his bo staff just enough to glance over his shoulder. His eyes then widen, and Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, Vilmer, Elvir, and Rena all follow his gaze. Standing several yards behind them, Elizabeth remains frozen with both arms still extended toward the construct. Wisps of pale blue light continue drifting from her fingertips before dissolving into the surrounding air. For a brief moment, no one moves. Rena's eyes lock onto her daughter.

Rena:

...Elizabeth.

Narrator:

The last remnants of the blue radiance surrounding Elizabeth begin to fade. The faint glow within her eyes slowly disappears, while the subtle, pulsating blue veins beneath her skin gradually lose their color until they vanish completely. The invisible pressure that had quietly lingered around her ever since becoming the vessel of the Sōl Congruum finally expels itself from her body, leaving her fully human once again. Elizabeth slowly lowers her trembling arms and exhales weakly. A faint, exhausted smile touches her lips before her knees finally give way, causing her to collapse onto the catwalk. Silence settles over the catwalk once more. Rena instinctively takes a step forward as her hand tightens around the shaft of her scythe. Every instinct within her screams to run to her daughter. Instead, she forces herself to

stop. She knows she cannot do that yet. Keeping her gaze fixed on Elizabeth, she mutters,

Rena: Hang on, sweetheart... Just a little longer...

Narrator: Dew quietly glances toward Rena before tightening his grip on his bo staff once again. He gives the slightest nod, then they both turn back toward Sherwin Ascendant. Within the fractured radiant crystalline core, disbelief rapidly gives way to fury. Sherwin Ascendant's eyes burn with rage as he glares toward Elizabeth. His voice reverberates throughout the chamber with thunderous force.

Sherwin Ascendant: You..! You insignificant little wench! You dare squander such power?! You have no right... no right to interfere with my rightful ascendancy!

Narrator: As Sherwin Ascendant's furious gaze remains fixed on Elizabeth, the construct begins to falter. Several glowing emerald veins sputter before dimming altogether, while tiny crystalline fragments break away from its immense shell and tumble into the abyss below. Elvir's eyes widen in realization as she shouts to the others.

Elvir: Oi! She's weakened its core! Now's our chance..!

Narrator: Without another word, the party understands. Dew tightens his grip on his bo staff. Lorenzo raises his brass knuckles. Rena lowers into a fighting stance with her scythe. Krista catches her returning boomerang. Cooper steadies his mop beside Elvir, who gestures with her dual daggers. Vilmer plants his feet, readying his grappling hook. Sherwin Ascendant finally tears his gaze away from Elizabeth and turns his attention back to Dew and the others. His expression twists into one of growing concern as he realizes the seven warriors standing before him now pose a genuine threat. Without hesitation, Dew leads another charge. The seven of them launch a relentless, coordinated assault against the weakened construct. Dew's bo staff, Lorenzo's brass knuckles, Rena's scythe, Cooper's reinforced mop, Krista's returning boomerang, Vilmer's grappling hook, and Elvir's twin

daggers crash into the fractured crystalline shell again and again. Each strike widens the damage surrounding the radiant crystalline core as emerald and obsidian-black crystal splinters apart, sending glowing fragments cascading into the shaft below. The construct desperately retaliates. Its colossal crystalline appendages lash out in every direction while jagged crystal erupts violently from its fractured shell in a final attempt to drive the party back. Yet its movements have grown sluggish, its emerald veins flicker erratically, and each counterattack lacks the overwhelming force it once possessed. They press forward without relenting, battering the construct faster than it can repair itself. Unable to withstand the relentless onslaught, the construct begins to fail. Deep fractures race across its immense shell as its emerald veins sputter, no longer capable of restoring the catastrophic damage. Sensing the decisive moment, the party strikes as one. Seven weapons descend simultaneously, converging upon the weakened radiant crystalline core. An earth-shattering crack reverberates throughout the underground chamber. The radiant crystalline core caves inward. Its brilliant emerald light implodes violently. Within the collapsing core, Sherwin Ascendant's expression twists into panic.

Sherwin Ascendant: ...WHAT?!?

Narrator: As the construct crumbles around him and the reality of his defeat becomes undeniable, Sherwin Ascendant resolves to bury everyone alongside him. With trembling hands, he fumbles for a small device fastened to his belt before slamming his thumb against its concealed button, activating his final contingency. The scene cuts to multiple explosives hidden throughout the underground complex. Several faint electronic chirps echo throughout the silo as the thin red indicators on the devices begin blinking for several seconds before unexpectedly stopping. The scene cuts back to Sherwin Ascendant, whose eyes widen as he realizes the explosives are not going off.

Violent tremors course throughout the construct as fresh fractures race across its towering crystalline shell. The radiant crystalline core splinters apart, its emerald light flickering uncontrollably before beginning to fade as Sherwin Ascendant's body begins to unravel. It peels away from his fingertips, then his hands, and finally his arms. Countless glowing emerald particles drift from him like burning embers carried upon an unseen wind. Sherwin Ascendant watches in mounting horror as more and more of himself disintegrates.

Sherwin Ascendant: No! No! No!!! It wasn't supposed to end like—
Aaaagh!

Narrator: His scream reverberates throughout the silo as his form continues to dissolve. His shoulders dissolve into shimmering particles. Then his torso. Then his neck. Before Sherwin Ascendant's face and head fragment into countless specks of emerald light that scatter into the air, he utters one final, fleeting word.

Sherwin Ascendant: ...Bummer.

Narrator: Within moments, nothing remains of Sherwin Cromwell. The *Prime Elementome* then slips free, dropping from midair onto the core's fleshy surface. Only drifting emerald particles linger where he had once stood suspended. Moments later, the towering construct emits one final blinding pulse before rupturing into thousands of crystalline fragments as a shockwave erupts throughout the underground chamber. Unnoticed by anyone amid the violent explosion, the *Prime Elementome* is violently ejected from the core, tumbling silently through the air before falling over the edge of the catwalk and disappearing into the seemingly bottomless darkness far below. At the same time, the expanding shockwave partially blasts open the sealed blast door ahead before slamming into Dew and the party, hurling them backward and scattering them across the catwalk while their weapons remain firmly in hand. Above them, more reinforced concrete fractures as the steel support beams

surrounding the launch chamber continue to twist and buckle. Dust, shattered crystal, and debris rain throughout the vast chamber, some of it disappearing below the massive catwalk. One by one, Dew and the others struggle back to their feet. Dew forces himself upright, planting his bo staff against the catwalk for support. Several feet away, Rena steadies herself against a warped support beam before immediately searching for the others. Cooper coughs through the settling dust while Krista retrieves her boomerang from beneath a pile of fractured crystal. Elvir slides to a stop near the damaged railing, quickly regaining her footing. Farther down the catwalk, Vilmer pushes himself up with a strained groan. Another violent tremor tears through the chamber. Without warning, an entire section of the catwalk beneath Lorenzo, who is lying face down and trying to push himself back to his feet, suddenly shears away. Whoa—!

Lorenzo:

Narrator:

The section of the platform gives way beneath him. Lorenzo instinctively throws himself forward, barely catching the jagged edge of the remaining catwalk with both hands as tons of twisted debris plunge into the abyss below. His brass knuckles scrape violently against the edge, and his body swings helplessly over the darkness.

Lorenzo:

Ghh..!

Narrator:

He desperately tries to pull himself upward, but the fractured edge bends beneath his weight. Tiny fragments crumble away beneath his fingers. Another tremor rocks the chamber. His grip begins to slip. A few feet away, Vilmer turns and notices Lorenzo hanging over the abyss. The moment his eyes meet Lorenzo's desperate expression, time seems to stop. The collapsing silo disappears around him, replaced by a snow-covered mountainside, the towering cliffs of Mount Illini, the freezing wind, and Aldous hanging from the edge.

Aldous:

...Vilmer! Please! Don't let me—

Narrator: Aldous's fingers slip, and he plummets to his death.

Vilmer: ALDOUS!!!

Narrator: Then the memory quickly vanishes, and Vilmer's eyes widen as he finds himself back in the present. His hand clenches into a fist.

Vilmer: ...No.

Narrator: Without another thought, he sprints toward Lorenzo, who is hanging on for dear life. Each section of the platform buckles beneath his strides as fresh cracks race across them. Then another violent tremor strikes, causing one of Lorenzo's hands to lose its grip. Now hanging by a single arm, he grimaces in pain.

Lorenzo: Sh-shit..!

Narrator: The instant Vilmer reaches him, he dives, his outstretched hand seizing Lorenzo's wrist just as his remaining grip gives way. For one terrifying instant, both men slide toward the fractured edge. Vilmer slams his free hand onto the catwalk, his muscles straining beneath the weight. His boots grind against the platform. He refuses to let go.

Vilmer: *(then aloud to himself)* No... Not again... Never... NEVER AGAIN!!!

Narrator: With one tremendous pull, Vilmer hauls Lorenzo back onto the catwalk. The two crash heavily onto the platform, breathing hard as another section collapses into the darkness behind them. By then, Dew and the others **have regrouped** and, from a distance, **turn** toward the commotion, only to find Vilmer and Lorenzo collapsed on the catwalk. For a brief moment, neither man speaks. Lorenzo finally pushes himself to his feet before offering Vilmer a hand as he continues catching his breath.

Lorenzo: *(huff) (puff)* ...Fuck... *(huff) (puff)* that was way too damn close. Heh... Appreciate you, man.

Narrator: Vilmer remains silent as his breathing gradually steadies. The tortured expression that has haunted him for so long finally begins to soften. For the first time since Aldous's death, the crushing weight of self-

hatred and grief within him begins to lift. A faint, peaceful smile crosses his weathered face before he finally responds.

Vilmer:

Right... Yeah. Don't mention it...



Narrator:

Lorenzo quietly places a hand on Vilmer's shoulder without exchanging any other words. Then, a moment later, the two hurry over together to rejoin Dew and the others, who had regrouped only moments earlier. As Lorenzo and Vilmer approach Dew and the others, Rena's eyes immediately scan the catwalk before falling upon the motionless Elizabeth. Without another thought, she breaks away from the group and runs toward her. Dew and the others silently watch, allowing mother and daughter their moment. Reaching Elizabeth, Rena drops to her knees beside her. Elizabeth lies motionless upon the catwalk, her breathing shallow but steady. Dust clings to her face. Slowly her eyes flutter open. For a brief moment, mother and daughter simply look at one another in

silence. Then, with a trembling hand, Rena gently brushes the dust from Elizabeth's face.

Rena: ...Hey, sweetheart.

Elizabeth: *(her voice little more than a whisper)* Mother.

Rena: *(then smiles with glistening eyes)* You had me scared there for a moment...

Elizabeth: *(regretful)* ...I'm sorry. For... everything...

Rena: Shh... Don't. *(then gently shakes her head)* Not now. We'll have plenty of time for that later. Right now... I'm just grateful you're still here.

Narrator: Elizabeth's weary eyes begin to water.

Elizabeth: ...After everything I've done... You still... came back for me...

Rena: Of course I did. You're my daughter. Nothing will ever change that. I love you, Elizabeth...

Narrator: Elizabeth's lips tremble as she struggles to get the words out.

Elizabeth: I... I... *(cough)* *(cough)* love you too... Wow. That's definitely going... to take some getting... used to... saying... Ha-ha... *(cough)*

Rena: ...Listen to me. I'm never abandoning you again. Ever. No matter what comes next... we'll face it together. As a family. You hear me?

Narrator: A faint smile then spreads across Elizabeth's face before she quietly responds.

Elizabeth: ...I'd... like that... very much... Mother...

Narrator: Then Elizabeth's eyelids begin growing heavy once more from exhaustion. Rena gently rests her forehead against Elizabeth's before speaking again.

Rena: Thank you, Elizabeth, for saving our tails back there...

Elizabeth: Well... What kind of daughter would I be if I didn't..? Not a very good one. Ha-ha...

Rena: Hah. Hey... Now get some rest. You've earned it.

Narrator: Elizabeth gives the slightest nod before drifting back into unconsciousness, the peaceful smile never leaving her face. Rena quietly exhales as she looks upon her daughter with grateful relief. Moments later, another tremendous explosion shakes the chamber, causing the massive catwalk to lurch even more

violently than before. A support column buckles before crashing into the shaft below. As Dew approaches Rena and the resting Elizabeth, he urgently calls out.

Dew: Rena! We have to move! Now!

Narrator: Rena turns back toward the others. Their eyes meet in silent acknowledgment, understanding that it is time to leave. Dew quickly kneels beside Elizabeth and, with practiced care, lifts her into his arms. She barely stirs.

Dew: I've got her...

Narrator: Rena nods gratefully before rising to her feet beside him. Another section of the catwalk collapses only yards away. Elvir hurriedly glances toward the group.

Elvir: Woo-woo-woo-woo! Unless everyone fancies being buried alive... I'd recommend running!

Lorenzo: Best idea I've heard all day!

Narrator: Without another word, the seven, with Elizabeth safely cradled in Dew's arms, turn toward the partially opened blast door. Dew leads the way while Rena remains close beside him. Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir follow close behind. Without looking back, the party disappears into the next area beyond the damaged blast door. Behind them, the immense silo chamber continues tearing itself apart for several minutes. Steel support beams snap like brittle branches as entire sections of the massive catwalk peel away and plunge into the darkness below. The towering launch chamber, where the Renaissance Lance once stood, vanishes beneath an unstoppable cascade of collapsing concrete, twisted steel, emerald crystal, smoke, and fire. Meanwhile, elsewhere deep within the silo, far from the fleeing party, now ascending a winding emergency stairwell beyond the second blast door, a small, unremarkable device quietly powers on. A faint indicator light begins blinking. Seconds later, the device emits a strange, translucent wave of microscopic spores. The harmless cloud drifts silently through the ventilation system before

escaping the underground complex through an exterior ventilation shaft and dispersing unnoticed into the open air. Just as suddenly as it activated, the device powers down. Silence returns briefly. Then a series of faint electronic chirps' echoes throughout the collapsing underground facility. A moment later, the hidden explosives activate, detonating one after another. A massive chain reaction rips violently through the underground complex as fire races through every room and corridor, then bursts through the sealed Launch Control Center and catwalk platform area. Within moments, the entire silo is consumed in a catastrophic inferno. The scene then cuts to the missile silo entrance above ground, where members of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE engineering unit continue working frantically to breach the sealed blast doors. Suddenly, the ground beneath them begins to tremble violently. One of the SWAT TROOPER ELITE engineers looks down in alarm. Before anyone can react, the shaking intensifies.

STE Engineer:

Everybody back! Move! Move!

Narrator:

The personnel immediately abandon their equipment and sprint away from the entrance, retreating to a safe distance. Seconds later, the earth erupts as a colossal pillar of fire and debris explodes skyward from the silo entrance with deafening force, hurling smoke, shattered concrete, and twisted steel high into the air. The surrounding ground convulses as the entire underground facility collapses in on itself, subterranean chambers and passageways giving way beneath the surface. Within moments, the missile silo complex is reduced to a vast, irregular field of collapsed and sunken earth, shattered concrete, twisted wreckage, and deep depressions, with flames surging from fractured openings as thick black smoke billows into the sky.

CHAPTER 36 – INTO THE SUNSET

- Narrator: After traversing the winding emergency stairwell for what feels like an eternity, Dew and the others finally reach a narrow service corridor buried deep within the hillside. Dust drifts from the ceiling with every distant tremor as the collapsing underground complex continues groaning behind them. Still carrying the unconscious Elizabeth securely in his arms, Dew follows Elvir, who is now leading the way through the cramped passage, while Rena remains close beside him. Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer trail only a few steps behind, each breathing heavily from exhaustion. At the end of the corridor, Elvir discovers a concealed steel panel partially hidden beneath layers of dirt, exposed roots, and overgrown vegetation.
- Elvir: Looks like this may be our way out... Or at least, I bloody well hope so.
- Narrator: She presses both hands against the panel and strains to push it open. For several seconds, it refuses to budge. Lorenzo steps forward and places one hand against the metal.
- Lorenzo: Move over. Let me put some muscle into it.
- Elvir: Oh, piss off.
- Narrator: Lorenzo braces himself beside her, and together they shove against the concealed panel. The rusted steel shifts only slightly before grinding to a halt. Noticing the two struggling, Vilmer then steps forward to offer his assistance.
- Vilmer: ...I think you two could use a hand.
- Narrator: Vilmer gestures toward the panel before planting both hands firmly against it and pushing alongside Lorenzo and Elvir. With one final heave, the rusted hinges groan loudly before finally giving way, allowing warm late afternoon light and fresh air to pour into the passage. One by one, the party climbs through the opening and safely emerges onto a grassy hilltop overlooking the surrounding landscape, where reddish earth and dense vegetation descend toward the rocky coastline below. Dew emerges last, carefully shielding Elizabeth's head as he carries her through the narrow opening. Behind them, the concealed passage lies hidden beneath thick brush

and the exposed roots of a massive tree growing along the hillside. For several moments, no one speaks. The party simply stands beneath the open sky, breathing deeply as the warm breeze washes over them. Eventually, they turn their attention toward the landscape they had just escaped. In the distance, thick black smoke billows from the devastated section of the cay where the underground missile silo complex once stood, rising above a vast, irregular expanse of collapsed and sunken earth, shattered concrete, and twisted wreckage. Farther across the landscape, SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldiers continue securing the red-sand beachfront and surrounding area as the operation draws to a close. Still holding Elizabeth securely in his arms, Dew slowly lowers himself onto one knee. Rena kneels beside him and gently checks her daughter's breathing once again.

Rena: She's still doing fine...

Narrator: Dew nods before carefully lowering Elizabeth onto the ground, gently positioning her against a slightly elevated patch of earth so she can rest more comfortably. He then rises to his feet while Rena remains kneeling beside her. Nearby, Lorenzo bends forward with both hands resting on his knees as he catches his breath. Cooper lowers himself onto the grass beside Elvir, who sits with her legs crossed while brushing dirt and dust from her armor. Vilmer quietly settles near the edge of the hill, staring toward the thick smoke billowing from the devastated section of the cay in the distance. Krista remains standing with her hands on her hips, taking a deep breath before slowly exhaling and speaking.

Krista: We actually made it...

Cooper: Yeah... Somehow.

Lorenzo: Man... Zero outta ten. Wouldn't tell nobody to come here.

Krista: ...Definitely not a stop I'd ever put on one of my tours.

Lorenzo: Good. 'Cause ain't no way I'm comin' back.

Elvir: You gonna leave 'em a review, then?

Lorenzo: Damn right I am. One star. Needs fewer explosions and death cultists.

Narrator: A faint chuckle passes through the exhausted group. Before anyone can say more, a sharp electronic ringing suddenly

breaks the silence. Dew freezes for a moment before reaching into the inner pocket of his vest and retrieving the satellite phone. The device continues ringing. Dew glances briefly toward Rena, who remains kneeling beside Elizabeth, tending to her, then looks at the others before answering the incoming call from Interim Premier Killbin Janerio. He switches the satellite phone to speaker so everyone can hear.

Dew: Hello..?

Killbin: ...Dew Wilder, it's good to hear your voice. Thank Chosha... I was finally able to reach you.

Dew: Killbin, it's good to hear from you too. I've got you on speaker, by the way.

Killbin: That's perfectly fine. I take it your friends are all right as well?

Dew: Yeah. We all made it out in one piece.

Narrator: On the other end, Killbin releases a long breath of relief.

Killbin: ...I'm relieved to hear that. After I was informed the silo had been destroyed, I feared you all had perished down there. Then your phone's tracking signal suddenly became active again.

Dew: Yeah... Things got pretty hectic down there.

Killbin: What happened?

Narrator: Dew looks toward the devastated section of the cay in the distance before answering.

Dew: ...It's over. Thornton is dead. All four SKT virus vials were destroyed.

Killbin: I see...

Dew: ...And the Renaissance Lance, as you've probably noticed, has been brought down.

Killbin: Yes. A salvage team is already on site, as we speak, recovering the rocket and the two *oddments*. And... thank you for seeing that through. I'm certain it wasn't easy bringing it down. But you did...

Dew: ...We also had a run-in with someone you probably knew very well from your former boss's administration...

Killbin: Former Secretary-Treasurer Cromwell?

Dew: Yeah. Turns out he was the one running the *Bush of Life*. He'd been the mastermind behind everything. We took him down too.

Killbin: Hm. That confirms my suspicions, considering how easily the *Bush of Life* managed to acquire *Effluvium* and *Fetor*, as well as the circumstances surrounding his escape from custody, his subsequent disappearance, and their raid on Aether's Keep... You eliminated a major threat that will no longer endanger this nation going forward. For that, you have my sincere gratitude. Hmm... But... there is something I have to ask you.

Dew: What's that..?

Killbin: What about all that talk concerning the return of the Sōl Congruum?

Narrator: A long silence follows on Dew's end of the call. His eyes slowly lower toward Elizabeth, still resting peacefully against the elevated patch of earth. Rena, still kneeling close beside her, watches Dew closely, as do the others. For several more seconds, Dew carefully weighs his response. He finally looks away from Elizabeth and toward the horizon before answering into the satellite phone.

Dew: ...That... that was... all nonsense. Just... uh, babble. Something used to manipulate a bunch of desperate people searching for meaning. There was never any real cosmic threat...

Narrator: Killbin remains silent for a brief moment. When he finally speaks again, his voice is quieter.

Killbin: Oh... Understood. No further explanation is necessary.

Narrator: Dew's gaze briefly meets Rena's. She gives him the faintest, most grateful nod.

Killbin: ...What happened beneath and, on that day, today will remain classified and will never be disclosed to the public. As far as this government is concerned, the *Bush of Life* attempted to launch a biological weapon, and you and your party prevented it.

Dew: A convenient lie. Heh... But for once, I'll go along with it. That's probably for the best.

Killbin: Agreed... Oh, by the way, I have some good news. Ground teams have located your two friends, Johnny Torrio and Dr. Brundle. Both are alive and safe.

Narrator: The party immediately reacts upon hearing this. Rena looks up in joyful relief, while the rest of the group smiles or

exchanges satisfied nods. Dew allows himself a faint smile before turning his attention back to the call.

Dew: Ah... That's good to hear.

Killbin: They were found wandering away from a limestone hollow while ground forces were scouring the area for any remaining *Bush of Life* holdouts. Your friends were exhausted and suffered a few minor injuries, but they're receiving proper medical attention. They'll both be fine.

Narrator: Then Dew suddenly remembers Gaz and urgently realizes he needs to tell Killbin about him.

Dew: Killbin... I take back what I said earlier when I told you all of us made it out in one piece. That's not quite true. There was another friend of ours... Gaz.

Killbin: Oh..?

Dew: Yeah... He didn't make it. He sacrificed himself to ensure our mission was a success... If it wasn't for him... none of us would've made it out alive. Please... if someone could let Johnny know... he deserves to know.

Narrator: A heavy silence settles over the party as each of them solemnly reflects on Gaz for a brief moment. Moments later, Killbin interjects.

Killbin: ...Understood. You have my deepest condolences. Mr. Torrio will be informed personally. Your friend gave his life so that others could live. His courage and selflessness will not be forgotten, and Mesovilla will forever remain in his debt. May he rest in peace.

Narrator: Dew gives a small appreciative nod before glancing again toward Elizabeth, who remains unconscious as Rena gently watches over her.

Dew: ...There's one more thing. We found another person being held captive inside the underground complex. An unconscious woman. She's alive, but she'll need medical attention too...

Narrator: Rena slowly looks up at Dew. Their eyes meet for only a moment. She immediately understands what he's doing and doesn't interrupt. Instead, a quiet look of appreciation crosses her face before she returns her attention to Elizabeth.

Killbin: ...Understood. I'll notify the medical team so they'll send a medic your way once your helicopter arrives. ...Now, tell me where you are.

Narrator: Dew then pauses and silently surveys the area around them before responding.

Dew: ...We came out through a hidden passage on a hilltop northwest of the silo. There's a large tree near the entrance and a rocky ridgeline running along the eastern side. From up here, we can see the whole stretch of devastation left by the underground missile silo explosion.

Narrator: Several second's pass. A quiet pause follows on Killbin's end as the low murmur of voices can be heard relaying Dew and the party's description of their location to someone nearby. Moments later, Killbin responds.

Killbin: All right... We have your location. It's being relayed to your assigned pilot now. I'll also notify the ground teams that you and the others survived, and I'll have them inform your two friends as well.

Dew: Appreciate it. Thanks.

Killbin: No, Dew. We appreciate you. All of you... *(then his voice grows more solemn)* What you all accomplished today saved countless lives—not just in this nation, but throughout the world, although none will ever know this. You have my word, though, that your actions will not be forgotten by me. Nor will they go unrewarded.

Dew: We didn't do it for a reward.

Killbin: I know. That's precisely why you've all earned one.

Narrator: Dew then gives a faint, weary smile.

Killbin: ...Thank you all again for your service to Mesovilla.

Narrator: Dew then briefly glances toward Rena, Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, Vilmer, and Elvir before responding.

Dew: ...It was our pleasure.

Killbin: All right. Sit tight. We'll have you out of there soon.

Dew: We will...

Narrator: Then the call ends. Dew lowers the satellite phone and quietly returns it to his inner vest pocket. For several moments, the party remains gathered atop the hill, silently watching the last traces of smoke drift into the late afternoon sky as the fires within the devastated section of the cay gradually

die down. Cooper then turns and glances toward Elizabeth, who remains resting on the gently elevated patch of earth beside Rena. He then looks back at Dew and the others, breaking the silence.

Cooper: ...Guess we're all on the same page now. If anyone asks... we found an unconscious prisoner, like you said, Dew. That's it.

Narrator: Krista folds her arms and nods once.

Krista: Works for me. After everything she's done since waking up... I'm not about to throw her to the wolves.

Narrator: Vilmer stands in thoughtful silence for a moment before speaking.

Vilmer: ...People deserve to be judged for the choices they make. Not only for the worst thing they've ever done. *(then his gaze slowly shifts toward Elizabeth)* ...She chose to help us. For me, that's what matters in the end.

Narrator: Lorenzo scratches the back of his head before commenting.

Lorenzo: ...Yeah. I'll stick with the whole "rescued an unconscious hostage" story too. Sounds a whole lot less crazy than tryin' to explain everything we've been through.

Narrator: A few tired smiles appear around the group. Elvir, who had remained unusually quiet, lets out a long sigh before looking toward Rena.

Elvir: ...Well. Hmph. *(then folds her arms as she glances at the resting Elizabeth. Dew, Rena, and the others watch Elvir's hesitant, contemplative body language until she finally speaks)* Meh. What's happened has happened. The Söl Congruum has been defeated and banished once more... My holy duty as a *Hozho* has been fulfilled... She's just... *(looking over at Rena)* Elizabeth now... your daughter. Who "we found as an unconscious captive the *Bush of Life* was holdin'." End of the bloody story.

Narrator: Rena looks at Elvir in mild surprise. Elvir simply shrugs in silent response. Rena's eyes begin to glisten as she slowly looks around at each member of the party before finally settling on Dew. Overcome with gratitude, she lowers her head.

Rena: ...Thank you. All of you. *(then her voice trembles)* I know... this wasn't a small thing for any of you to do... You're protecting more than a secret. You're protecting... my daughter. *(then she brushes a loose strand of hair away from*

Elizabeth's face before looking back up at the party) I don't think I'll ever be able to repay any of you for that.

Dew: You don't have to. *(then steps closer, offering Rena a reassuring smile)* We're family... That's what family does.

Lorenzo: *(then nods)* Damn straight.

Krista: Couldn't have said it better myself.

Vilmer: Family is not defined by blood... It is defined by those who choose to stand together.

Cooper: ...Yeah. I like that.

Narrator: Elvir rolls her eyes with exaggerated annoyance.

Elvir: Ugh... Yeah. Yeah. You lot are gonna make me sick... *(then she pauses for a few seconds as the corner of her mouth curls upward)* ...Still. If she's family to one of us... then she's family to all of us. After all... you're my squad.

Narrator: The hilltop fills with quiet smiles, silent acknowledgment, and a shared warmth. For the first time since arriving on Pomo-doro Cay, the crushing weight hanging over the party begins to lift, replaced by a fragile yet genuine sense of peace. Beside Rena, Elizabeth—still only half-conscious—hears every word. A single tear quietly slips down her cheek. She closes her eyes once more, holding those words close as the breeze gently stirs the grass around them. For a while, again, no one says anything. Then Krista casts a glance toward the devastated section of the cay in the distance.

Krista: ...Hey, guys. What do you think happened to the *Prime Elementome*..?

Narrator: The question hangs in the air. Dew slowly turns his gaze toward the devastated section of the cay in the distance, and Rena does the same. Lorenzo, Cooper, Krista, and Vilmer exchange uncertain glances. None of them answers immediately. Finally, Cooper breaks the silence.

Cooper: Maybe... it was destroyed when Sherwin's crystal construct blew up. Could've gone with it.

Narrator: Elvir quietly shakes her head before interjecting.

Elvir: ...I rather doubt that.

Narrator: The others turn toward her.

Elvir: The *Prime Elementome* survived the fall of the Priscus... Then thousands of years beneath the sea. It survived Gerent Yersinia Mor Kataktitis' defeat before being swallowed into the

very earth. And somehow... it endured all the way to the present day. A wee bit of an explosion isn't likely to finish off something like that. *(then she looks back toward the devastated section of the cay, her expression thoughtful)* If I had to wager... it's still down there somewhere. Buried beneath all that rubble. Or deeper. Much deeper. *(then she softly exhales)* Still... the immediate threat's over. No one's laying hands on it today. Or tomorrow. Perhaps not for a very long while. *(then a faint smile crosses her face)* And perhaps... that's exactly where it ought to stay... *(then she slowly turns toward the rest of the party. For the first time since they met her, there is no sarcasm or playful jab in her voice—only sincerity)* ...I wanted to properly thank all of you... for everything you did to stop Sherwin, the Söl Congruum, Thornton, and the *Bush of Life*. Though each of us had our own reasons for fighting... the mission was always the same. In the name of my *Hozho* ancestors... and in the name of Chosha... every one of you chose to do what was right. For that... you have my deepest thanks. *(then her eyes briefly drift toward the sky)* You may not be *Hozho*... but after today... I daresay my ancestors would've been proud to fight alongside every one of you.

Narrator: A quiet silence follows. Krista smiles warmly. Cooper gives an enthusiastic thumb-up. Lorenzo rubs the back of his neck and nods in agreement. Vilmer smiles faintly in quiet appreciation. Rena offers Elvir a grateful nod. Dew also smiles at Elvir before responding.

Dew: ...Thanks, Elvir. That means a lot.

Narrator: Lorenzo suddenly glances toward Elvir's weathered *Hozho* chest plate. He scratches his chin thoughtfully.

Lorenzo: You know, Elvir... I gotta admit somethin'.

Elvir: *(then raises an eyebrow)* Oh? This ought to be good.

Lorenzo: Back when I first saw you in that get-up, I know I teased you about it... *(then shrugs with a sheepish grin)* ...But after everything we've been through... I ain't gonna lie. It would've been pretty damn cool if I'd had one of those too. Ha-ha...

Narrator: Elvir looks down at the *Hozho* crest upon her breastplate. Her fingers briefly brush across its worn surface. Then she looks back at Lorenzo. Rather than teasing him in return over

his admission, she simply gives him a quiet nod and a knowing smile—one of forgiveness and respect. To Elvir, though neither he nor the others could ever truly become *Hozho*, they had earned something just as meaningful. In her eyes, they would always be honorary *Hozho*. Nothing more needed to be said. For Lorenzo, that quiet smile was answer enough. The party eventually turns back toward the ocean as the warmth of the late afternoon gradually gives way to the golden hues of early evening and the sun slowly descends toward the Mesovillian Ocean. Dew and the party remain peacefully silent, taking in the tranquil moment. Still weak and recovering from everything that has transpired, Elizabeth keeps her eyes only half open as she rests her head against the shoulder of the now-seated Rena. Rena smiles softly as she tenderly runs her fingers through Elizabeth's hair. Only the distant cries of seabirds, the whisper of the ocean breeze, and the rhythmic crash of waves against the shoreline disturb the quiet. Far out across the shimmering waters of the Mesovillian Ocean, unnoticed by Dew and the party, a tiny figure suddenly races across the surface atop what appears to be a sea scooter. The lone rider speeds steadily away from Pomodoro Cay without slowing, growing smaller and smaller until both rider and craft finally disappear beyond the distant horizon. Several more minutes pass before the faint chopping sound of helicopter rotors begins echoing across the landscape. Lorenzo cups his left ear, listening intently before drawing Dew and the party's attention to it.

Lorenzo: Hear that..?

Narrator: Dew and the others each turn from their respective spots to face Lorenzo, acknowledging the sound. They then turn toward the direction from which it is coming, off to their side, as the rhythmic thumping steadily grows louder. Moments later, the helicopter piloted by Steel-Wind Three comes into view, approaching from across the landscape before gradually closing in on their location. Dew then comments to the others.

Dew: Well... looks like our ride's about to get here.

Narrator: Cooper, Vilmer, and Elvir then get back to their feet as Dew walks past them and offers Rena a hand. Once she's back on

her feet, Rena nods to him. Dew then kneels and gently scoops Elizabeth into his arms. As the helicopter closes the remaining distance, Krista lets out a tired sigh and places a hand against her stomach.



- Krista: Man... I'm starving. Right about now, Old Country Buffet sounds absolutely perfect.
- Cooper: Heh... I'd destroy that buffet. Start me off with the fried chicken, cranberry sauce, macaroni and cheese, and those breadsticks.
- Vilmer: After everything we've been through... I'd go back for seconds... and thirds. And don't forget the vanilla and chocolate pudding.

Lorenzo: Ha! Now you're talkin'. Throw me some pizza, roast beef, and a big ol' plate of mashed potatoes, and I'm straight.

Narrator: Before anyone else can agree, Elvir wrinkles her nose and interrupts.

Elvir: Pfft... Old Country Buffet? After savin' the bloody world?! (*then folds her arms matter-of-factly*) Nah. We're goin' to Buca di Beppo instead. Fresh pasta. Proper garlic bread. Real pizza—though it's a shame they don't have any banana curry pizza. And cannoli. Now that's a meal worth celebratin'.

Lorenzo: Heh. Now that's what I'm talkin' about. I can definitely get behind that.

Krista: Honestly... As long as I get food soon, I don't even care anymore.

Cooper: Yeah... But those breadsticks... ...and that vanilla and chocolate pudding, though. Mmm... Oh well. That would've been nice...

Narrator: As the four continue chatting, the helicopter draws closer. Rena raises one arm high overhead and begins waving while Dew continues holding Elizabeth in his arms. The others quickly follow suit, signaling their position to the pilot. Once within range, Steel-Wind Three acknowledges them with a gesture from the cockpit before beginning its descent toward the hill, its powerful rotors stirring the tall grass all around them. Meanwhile, a SWAT TROOPER ELITE medic hurries toward Dew and the rest of the party from farther downhill. The scene then cuts to several minutes later as the helicopter steadily lifts away from Pomo-doro Cay with Dew and the others onboard. As it flies off, the devastated section of the cay above the collapsed underground missile silo complex gradually shrinks into the distance, leaving behind a vast stretch of sunken earth, shattered concrete, and blackened terrain beneath the late afternoon sky. Beyond it, the crimson shoreline of the cay gives way to the endless blue waters of the Mesovillian Ocean as the aircraft banks toward the horizon. Inside, the

steady thrum of the rotors fills the cabin. The scene then cuts to the helicopter's cabin, where Dew sits quietly, zoning out everything going on around him. His gaze briefly drifts toward the fading cay below through one of the cabin windows before slowly lowering. Quietly exhaling, he falls into thought as the memories come one after another. He remembers his younger self after New Havenport—a disillusioned former SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier who had lost faith in the Mesovillian government—setting out alongside Lorenzo, determined to free Mesovilla from a regime that had stolen its people's liberty. At the time, he believed the struggle would end with Helix. He had been wrong. The faces of the *Aurora Blade* members who never lived to see that day of liberation drift through his thoughts. Friends who had laughed beside him, fought beside him, and ultimately gave their lives believing a better tomorrow was worth dying for. Their sacrifices had never left him. Then came the journey beyond the Helix Capital. The long voyage across the Eastern and Southwest Regions. The countless battles. The impossible odds they had overcome. One by one, strangers became trusted companions. He quietly reflects on each member of the party and how much every one of them has changed since they first set out together.

Dew:

(thinking to himself) Krista... the quirky, always-positive tour guide... she had finally found, through all of us, the family she never knew she needed even after reconciling her broken relationship with her brother... Elvir... I didn't trust her at first, and she's kinda annoying at times. Ha-ha... but she grew on me... she embraced and lived up to her Hozho legacy, made peace with her father, and finally released the burden of blaming him for her mother's death... Vilmer... so strong and knowledgeable, yet he carried so much pain... he had finally laid to rest the guilt he had carried since his late lover's death and allowed himself to heal and truly live... Cooper... my brother-in-arms and

wielder of that stupid mop—and sometimes a broom... this guy had some nerve mocking me for my awesome bo staff... hater. Hah. Well... he had finally confronted the ghosts of his past, accepting that his mother's death wasn't his fault and refusing to let his father's shadow define the man he had become... Lorenzo... one badass motherfucker and a true fighter for the people... he had slowly learned that life could be about more than anger, revenge, and simply surviving another day... And Rena... yeah... that's who you'll always be to me... my Sifu... my "shining lighthouse"... the woman who had spent years believing she deserved nothing but punishment had finally found the strength to forgive herself. Against every expectation, the secrets that could have torn us apart had instead brought us closer together...

Narrator:

Dew's thoughts then drift to Emily, remembering the vow he made to her as she lay dying: to raise and protect Aspen in her place, and to give the little boy the future his mother could no longer provide. Whatever lay ahead, he intended to fulfill that promise. He nods his head with quiet resolve. Dew then returns from his deep thoughts and slowly lifts his eyes, looking around the cabin. Across from him, Vilmer sits upright against the bulkhead, fast asleep despite the roaring engines. His arms remain folded across his chest while his head gently bobs with the helicopter's subtle vibrations. Nearby, Lorenzo, Krista, Elvir, and Cooper sit facing one another on the bench seats. Lorenzo and Elvir are playing yet another game of rock-paper-scissors while the other two watch. They throw their hands simultaneously, and Krista bursts into laughter as Lorenzo once again comes up on the short end of the exchange. Beside Elvir, Cooper pumps a fist into the air, celebrating her victory.

Cooper:

Ha! That's my girl, Elvir.

Lorenzo:

(dramatically) ...Aw, come on! How do I keep losin'?! Fuck!

Elvir: (taunting) Winner, winner, chicken dinner. Nyuk-nyuk-nyuk.

Lorenzo: Ugh...

Cooper: (to Elvir) You're doing great. Keep beatin' him!

Lorenzo: (to Cooper) Man... Whose side are you on?!

Cooper: (dryly) The winner...

Narrator: Then, after a second's pause to take in Lorenzo's dismay, Elvir, Cooper, and Krista break into laughter before he finally joins them himself. Their laughter fills the cabin as the game of rock-paper-scissors continues. Dew's eyes finally settle on Rena, who sits a few seats away beside a secured medical gurney, where Elizabeth lies peacefully upon it, still semi-awake. Rena quietly removes her glasses. She lingers for a brief moment, gazing at them silently as if reflecting on the life that had brought her here. With a quiet sense of peace, she then clips them to the front of her dress and turns her attention back to her daughter. An intravenous line is connected to Elizabeth's right arm as the SWAT TROOPER ELITE medic carefully checks her pulse before adjusting the blanket covering her. Rena then gently takes Elizabeth's hand. Though still semi-awake, Elizabeth weakly squeezes her mother's hand in return. Mother and daughter gaze at one another with quiet affection as Rena's thumb softly brushes across Elizabeth's fingers. Watching them together, Dew drifts into deeper thought, reflecting on how they had finally been given a second chance to rebuild the family that had once been torn apart—a family he never believed could ever be mended. Yet here they were. One final thought crosses his mind as he remembers the words Rena once shared with him—words that had remained with him through every trial life had placed before him.

Dew: (thinking to himself) "...As is a tale, so is a life: Not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters."

Narrator: A warm, satisfied smile slowly crosses Dew's face. The scene then cuts to the shimmering waters of the

Mesovillian Ocean far below as the helicopter flies steadily toward the glowing orange horizon, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. It continues onward, growing smaller and smaller until it finally disappears into the sunset. The scene fades to black.



Their story, however... was far from over.

EPILOGUES

Krista Naples: The Road Onward

Narrator: The mid-morning sun shines across the turquoise waters surrounding Llivisaca's Northern Zone. Gentle waves lap against the white sand as seabirds circle overhead, while palm trees sway beneath a warm tropical breeze. A familiar RV cruises steadily along the coastal highway. Having departed from Llivisaca's Southern Zone earlier that day, after dropping Lorenzo off to continue his journey back to Helix, Krista now drives The *Tor* alone with quiet confidence, though traces of anticipation linger in her expression. The scene then cuts to 45 minutes later. An abandoned carnival rests beneath the morning sun. A towering Ferris wheel stands frozen in place, its rusted frame silhouetted against the brightening sky. Weathered ticket booths, faded game stalls, and overgrown walkways bear silent witness to a place once filled with laughter and music. Nature has slowly begun to reclaim what people left behind. The RV rolls into the empty lot and comes to a stop beneath a row of towering palms. Lani waits beneath a weathered kiosk. Krista switches off the engine, steps out, and quietly closes the door behind her. She walks toward Lani. Seeing Krista approach, Lani steps away from the kiosk and walks toward her, both women slowing as the distance between them closes. Just a few feet apart, they stop. For a long moment, neither woman speaks. They simply look at one another, taking in the time that has passed and the people they have become. A faint smile gradually forms on Lani's face. Krista returns it. Without another word, they step forward and embrace—not because the past has been forgotten, but because they have both decided it deserves another chance. Time apart had changed them. The long journey across Mesovilla had changed Krista even more.

Some wounds could never truly disappear. Others simply needed time. Together, they choose to begin again.



The scene cuts ahead several days. Krista returns to her position as a tour guide with Earhart Tours & Travel, once again leading visitors through Llivisaca’s historic districts. With her usual infectious enthusiasm, she welcomes travelers from around the world, guiding them through the province’s vibrant streets, colorful architecture, and celebrated landmarks. Every tour reflects her deep appreciation for her home as she shares its history and traditions with the warmth and authenticity that had long made her one of the company’s most respected guides. Recognizing the dedication, professionalism, and passion she had consistently demonstrated over the years, Mr. Rainer finally promotes Krista and awards her another well-deserved raise, this time reflecting her advancement within the company. At last, her career—and her life—continues moving forward.



The scene then cuts to the Llivisaca Southern Zone Correctional Facility. Heavy steel doors close behind Krista as she is escorted into the visitation area—a modest dining hall furnished with several small round tables and chairs. Correctional officers stand watch around the perimeter as other inmates quietly meet with their visitors. Krista takes a seat across from her brother, Ketcy. Their conversation remains unheard. Instead, their expressions tell the story—regret for the past, forgiveness long overdue, and a quiet hope for the future of their family. Time passes as the siblings continue talking. The weight they had carried for so long gradually begins to lift. At last, they exchange a warm, genuine smile before a correctional officer signals that visitation has ended.

Krista rises from her chair, and after sharing a hug with her brother, she quietly walks away, leaving with the hope that this would not be their last conversation, but the beginning of a new chapter for them both.



The scene then cuts once more. The *Tor* now sits permanently parked beneath a grove of towering palms overlooking the coast. Its awning is extended, providing shade from the afternoon sun, while colorful flowers bloom in small pots arranged neatly outside. Lani tends to them with a watering can, pausing occasionally to admire the blossoms she has carefully nurtured. Inside the RV, Krista prepares dinner as the comforting aroma of a home-cooked meal drifts through the open windows. The scene cuts one final time. Krista and Lani now sit together in the booth dinette inside The *Tor*, sharing a quiet meal. Resting on a nearby shelf in the background is the pink plush elephant that Lani won for Krista at the carnival so many years ago. Their conversation remains

unheard, but the sound of gentle laughter, accompanied by bluegrass music playing softly on the radio, fills the warm evening air. With her journey now behind her, Krista had not only found peace and embraced a life of normalcy once again, but she was finally able to share it with the one she loved—something that, at one time, had seemed impossible. The scene slowly pans away from The *Tor* as its lights glow softly beneath the swaying palms, while the sounds of laughter and bluegrass music drift into the warm tropical night.

Lorenzo Arana: Esperanza

Narrator: The Helix Province awakens beneath a brilliant sunrise as rush hour fills the streets, businesses reopen, and life moves forward. Among the thousands walking those sidewalks is a casually dressed Lorenzo, carrying the same determined stride and unreadable expression. Yet the man himself has been changed forever by the journey he endured. The scene then cuts to the Eastern Zone, where construction workers secure the final sign above a newly renovated building: AU-RORA HORIZONS. Children gather outside as families begin arriving. Young volunteers unpack books, computers, food, and medical supplies.



With the reward granted by Interim Premier Killbin Janerio, Lorenzo had been given an opportunity far greater than personal wealth. Rather than keeping it for himself, he chose to invest in people and their future, establishing Aurora Horizons in honor of his late brother, Estevan, his beloved mentor, Aquagonla, and the fallen members of the *Aurora Blade*.

On its opening day, “Aurora Horizons” opens its doors, providing educational opportunities, mentoring programs, vocational training, and humanitarian assistance throughout the province's underdeveloped zones. A montage follows as Lorenzo teaches a classroom of teenagers, helps repair homes long neglected, listens to struggling families, shakes hands with volunteers, and celebrates small victories alongside children whose futures suddenly seem much brighter. Not every problem disappears. But with every life touched and every community uplifted, hope spreads farther than any one person ever could. The scene then cuts to Lorenzo's apartment several weeks later. It is quiet as the gentle rhythm of a weekend afternoon rain taps softly against the windows. Lorenzo gazes outside for a brief moment before walking over to a wooden kitchen drawer and opening it. Inside rests a brand-new stamp collection album, lying face down. Carefully, almost reverently, he opens it. One by one, colorful stamps fill its pages, each representing different countries, cultures, and histories. Every stamp symbolizes another corner of a world still worth exploring. He continues flipping through the album until he reaches several empty pages still waiting to be filled. He gently closes the album and looks at the small label across the front cover that reads ESPERANZA, meaning Hope. It is the name he has chosen for the collection, and somehow, it feels right. Lorenzo turns back to the window as the rain continues to fall, quietly reflecting before leaving the album resting on the counter. The world remains imperfect. There is still suffering. Still injustice. Still more work to be done. But despite those reminders—and despite all the unimaginable hardship he has endured—he now believes the future can be made better, not only with his fists. He glances down at his hands for a moment before looking back at his reflection in the rain-streaked window. It can also be shaped with all his heart. He gives a quiet nod and allows himself a small smile before continuing to stare out across the rain-soaked zone. Time passes. The rain gradually comes to an end, and for a while, nothing happens. Then, little by little, sunlight begins to break through the clouds. A

brilliant rainbow stretches across the sky as the scene slowly fades to black.



Cooper Tyler & Elvir Harjo: Roots of Tomorrow

Narrator: The scene fades in as warm sunlight pours across Woodworm Orphanage in Anahit's Northern Zone. Children race through the backyard, their laughter echoing through the air while freshly washed laundry sways gently on the clotheslines. Nearby, Cooper kneels beside several children, helping them plant rows of daisies and other colorful flowers. His familiar mop and broom rest casually against a nearby fence as the children excitedly chatter among themselves, watching the garden slowly come to life. Weeks earlier, after saying their goodbyes to Dew and the rest of the party, Cooper and Elvir had returned to Anahit to begin the next chapter of their lives. Life after the abrupt end to his military service had carried Cooper from one place to another until he eventually settled in Helix. Former SWAT TROOPER ELITE soldier. Custodian. Wanderer. But for the first time in many years—and especially after everything he had endured on this journey—he finally felt he had found a place worth calling home.



The scene then cuts to the streets of Flea Bottom Heights, where Elvir walks alongside her father, Elzon, through the fully renovated neighborhood. Grateful residents greet them with warm smiles and friendly waves as children play freely along the sidewalks. Families once again fill the streets with life, secure in the knowledge that this place will always be their home—a promise Elzon had vowed to keep, and did. Father and daughter exchange proud smiles before continuing toward the newly constructed Harjo Memorial Park.



At its center stands an elegant fountain, where a memorial statue has been erected in honor of Elvir's late mother. They pause before it in respectful silence, reflecting on how far they had come and how, as a family, they had been united once again. In that quiet moment, they also understand that another journey still lies ahead. As the last surviving *Hozho*, restoring their nearly extinct order would require years of dedication, sacrifice, and patience. But that responsibility

could wait for another day. Today, they simply allowed themselves to laugh, to live, and to be a family once again. The scene cuts to later that afternoon inside the recreation room at Woodworm Orphanage. A television glows softly in the corner as the sounds of a video game fill the room. Cooper and Elvir sit side by side with controllers in hand, completely absorbed in an intensely competitive match. Neither is willing to admit defeat. Betsy watches nearby with an amused smile while the orphanage children erupt into cheers after every close round. Even Ms. Penway cannot help but laugh as the friendly rivalry unfolds before her. The room overflows with warmth—not because anything extraordinary is happening, but because ordinary moments like these had become extraordinary to the people sharing them.

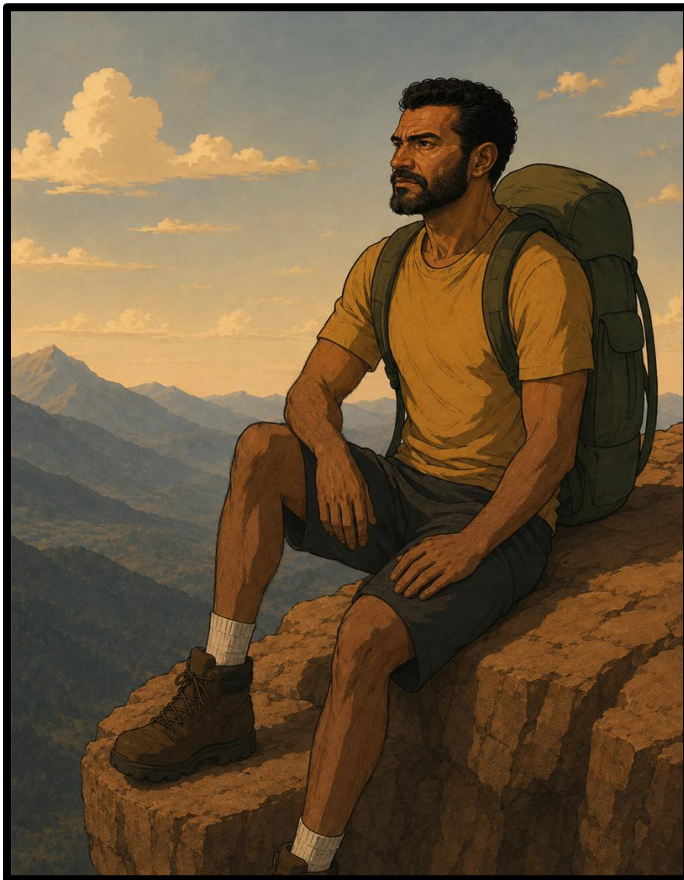


As the day's laughter gradually gives way to evening, the children wave goodnight before heading inside for bed. Cooper and Elvir, now seated together in the backyard, remain there with their hands gently intertwined. They watch the sun slowly disappear beyond the skyline of Anahit's Northern Zone, bathing Woodworm Orphanage in the warm colors of dusk. Neither knows exactly what tomorrow will bring. But whatever adventures life has in store for them, they know one thing for certain: together, as a blossoming couple, they will face every challenge side by side, supporting one another through whatever the future may bring. The scene slowly rises above Woodworm Orphanage, revealing the lights of Anahit stretching toward the horizon. As the evening sky gradually darkens, the cityscape begins to glow beneath the fading sunlight.

Vilmer Parsad: Moving Beyond the Ascent

Narrator:

A cool mountain breeze sweeps across Mount Illini as sunlight filters through drifting clouds. Only a few hours after saying his goodbyes to Dew and the rest of the party, Vilmer, a backpack slung over his shoulders, ascends the mountain alone. Boots crunch steadily against the rocky trail as his pace remains unhurried, deliberate, and peaceful. Several hours later, the trail opens onto a narrow overlook. Vilmer walks to the edge of the cliff before quietly taking a seat.



The wind gently stirs his hair. For several long moments, he simply gazes across the endless horizon. His thoughts drift to Aldous—his beloved companion, whose loss had remained with him for so many years. Though the sorrow of losing him still lingers from time to time, it no longer defines him. After everything he had endured throughout his journey, the burden he had carried for so long had finally given way to acceptance. Rather than dwelling on what was lost, Vilmer chooses, as he always has, to cherish the life they shared together and the memories that will forever remain in his heart. He closes his eyes. A faint, peaceful smile crosses his face. The mountain breeze continues to drift softly around him, almost as though, at long last, it carries a final farewell to Aldous—and with it, the peace that comes from finally letting go. A montage follows as Vilmer begins his descent from Mount Illini. Traveling on foot, he leaves the Twin Pines Province behind. Over the course of several days, he journeys along familiar roads. Dense forests gradually give way to open fields, stone paths become dirt trails, and with every passing mile, the landscape grows increasingly familiar. The scene then cuts to Vilmer finally arriving in Masaya Village—his home. The peaceful village basks beneath the warm glow of the setting sun. Children laugh and play between the small cottages while villagers pause to wave as Vilmer makes his way down the familiar road. Suddenly, a familiar voice calls out. Konrad comes running toward him. Unable to contain his excitement, the young boy throws his arms around Vilmer in a joyful embrace. Nearby, Konrad's mother, Ms. Oilla, watches with a warm smile. Vilmer returns the embrace before smiling down at Konrad as they gently pull away from one another. Taking Konrad by the hand, Vilmer joins him and his mother as they stroll through the village, catching up on everything that had happened during his journey. The scene

slowly fades as the sun slips below the horizon, casting Masaya Village in the soft light of evening.



Dr. Brundle & Dr. Sloane: A Better Purpose

Narrator:

The scene fades in inside an interview room at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy. A recorder quietly clicks as stacks of documents rest upon a metal table. Two government officials continue questioning Dr. Brundle, who remains calm and cooperative throughout the interview. He answers everything he reasonably can, recounting what he witnessed, clarifying the events surrounding Pomodoro Cay, and explaining how the *Bush of Life* abducted him and forced him to help construct the Renaissance Lance. Despite the officials' persistent questioning, Dr. Brundle never discloses the existence of his portable teleportation devices, knowing the technology is far too dangerous to fall into the wrong hands ever again. Eventually, the investigation comes to an end, and with no further questions remaining, Dr. Brundle is cleared to leave. The following morning, in the Southern Zone of Demmin, Dr. Brundle arrives by ferry carrying nothing more than a small travel bag. The vessel eases gently against the shoreline before lowering its boarding ramp. As Dr. Brundle steps ashore, he is greeted by a familiar face—Dr. Sloane. The two are overjoyed to finally be reunited and warmly embrace one another. For a brief moment, the years between them seem to disappear. A brief montage unfolds over the next two days. Dr. Sloane shows Dr. Brundle around Southern Demmin and her workshop. Though the Southern Zone still bears the scars left by the *Great Civil War*, reconstruction efforts have slowly begun under the new government, offering the province its first real chance to heal. As they walk through the streets together, the two enjoy each other's company, sharing meals and reminiscing about the many years they spent working side by side, as well as the lives they

have built since then. Inside Dr. Sloane's workshop, they revisit old theories and discuss Dr. Sloane's Sky Warp machine. Dr. Sloane marvels at how Dr. Brundle ultimately refined her original Sky Warp design into his portable teleportation devices. Together, they imagine how such discoveries might one day serve only peaceful and humanitarian purposes, grateful to have found one another again.



The scene then cuts to the morning of the third day. Before boarding the ferry to begin the next leg of his journey home, Dr. Brundle and Dr. Sloane share one final friendly embrace. Dr. Brundle then makes his way up the boarding ramp. Moments later, the ramp is raised, and the vessel slowly pulls away from the shoreline. Dr. Sloane remains standing at the water's edge, quietly watching until the ferry disappears into the distance. With a gentle smile, she turns and

begins walking back toward her workshop, while Dr. Brundle continues the long journey that will eventually lead him back to the family waiting for him.

Johnny Torrio: Fabulous Until the End

Narrator:

After receiving medical care for the minor injuries he sustained during the mission, Johnny was also questioned by government officials at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy regarding his role in the events that unfolded on Pomodoro Cay. Once the investigation concluded, he was cleared to leave. Before returning home to Ganas Commune, Johnny reunited with Rena one final time in Twin Pines. Dew stood beside her as Krista and Lorenzo prepared to begin their own journeys home. Together, they reflected briefly on everything that had happened before saying their goodbyes once again. Before departing, Johnny looked to Dew and reminded him to take good care of Rena. On her journey back to Llivisaca, Krista dropped Johnny off in Ganas Commune. There, his daughter, Analia, warmly welcomed him home. Once settled in, he shared with her the story of the journey he had undertaken and everything that had happened along the way. Life gradually returned to normal. Although Johnny had known Gaz for only a short time—and their first meeting had been anything but friendly—the bond they forged was undeniable. Over the course of their journey, Gaz had earned Johnny's respect. Even after his death, Johnny found himself unable to forget the man who had fought alongside him until the very end. The scene then cuts to Ganas Commune's communal garden several weeks later. It is late afternoon. A gentle breeze rustles through the communal garden as Johnny stands alongside his daughter, Analia, and her boyfriend, Taizo, before a small machete-shaped memorial he had erected in Gaz's honor. Its inscription reads: "*In Memory of Gaz: A Fabulous Guy Who Never Stopped Fighting.*" For a long moment, Johnny stands in silence, quietly

reflecting on the friend he had lost. He gently brushes his fingers across Gaz's engraved name before lowering his hand. Sensing her father's grief, Analia quietly places her hand on his. Together, the three share one final moment of remembrance before turning and walking away.



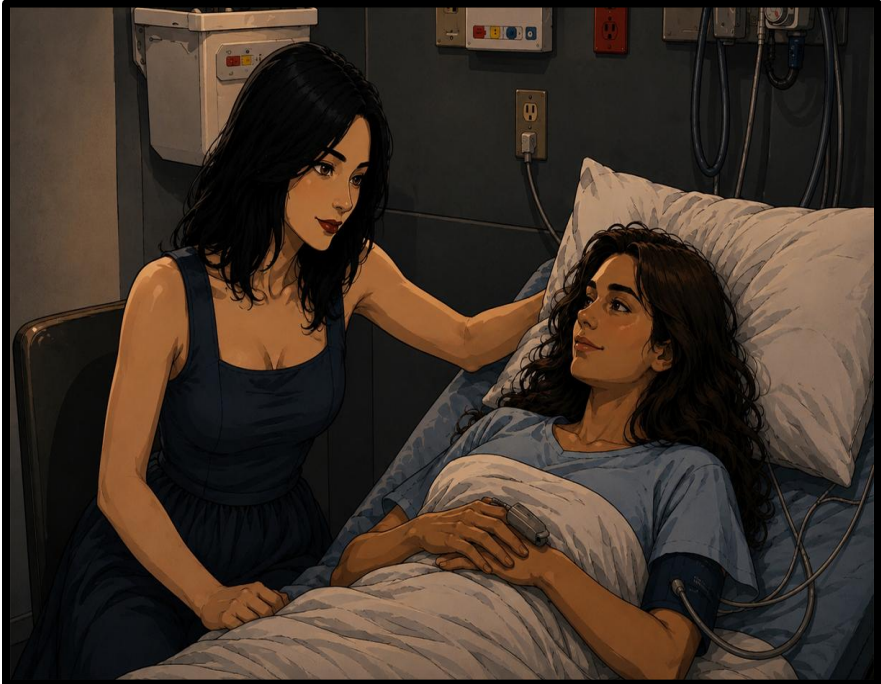
Dew Wilder & Rena Cullen: Family Ties

Narrator:

As Dew returns to Twin Pines to assume guardianship of Aspen, Rena remains behind at the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic, staying by Elizabeth's side. Before they part ways, Dew and Rena share one final kiss, knowing they will soon be together again. Upon arriving in Twin Pines to finalize Aspen's guardianship with the Howards, Dew is met by Greg, who presents him with one final letter from Emily. He explains that, before Dew's first visit, Emily had entrusted the letter to both him and Arvella, instructing them to keep it until the day Dew officially became Aspen's guardian. Believing that day had finally arrived, Greg places the letter into Dew's hands.



Curious, Dew opens the envelope and begins to read. Following their brief reunion—the night Dew had come to see her—Emily had accepted a painful truth. Despite the *Bush of Life*'s unwavering belief that victory was certain, she knew she might not survive the conflict ahead. Wanting to ensure Aspen would always have someone to love and care for him, she quietly revised her will, naming Dew as the beneficiary of her home as well. In her final words, she thanks him once again for taking care of her son and expresses her hope that he will give Aspen the life she never could. She signs the letter with one final, heartfelt farewell. The scene then cuts to the SWAT TROOPER ELITE Academy Medical Clinic several days later. Throughout Elizabeth's recovery, Rena remains by her daughter's bedside, never leaving her once, as the two slowly rebuild their relationship and make up for the years they lost together.



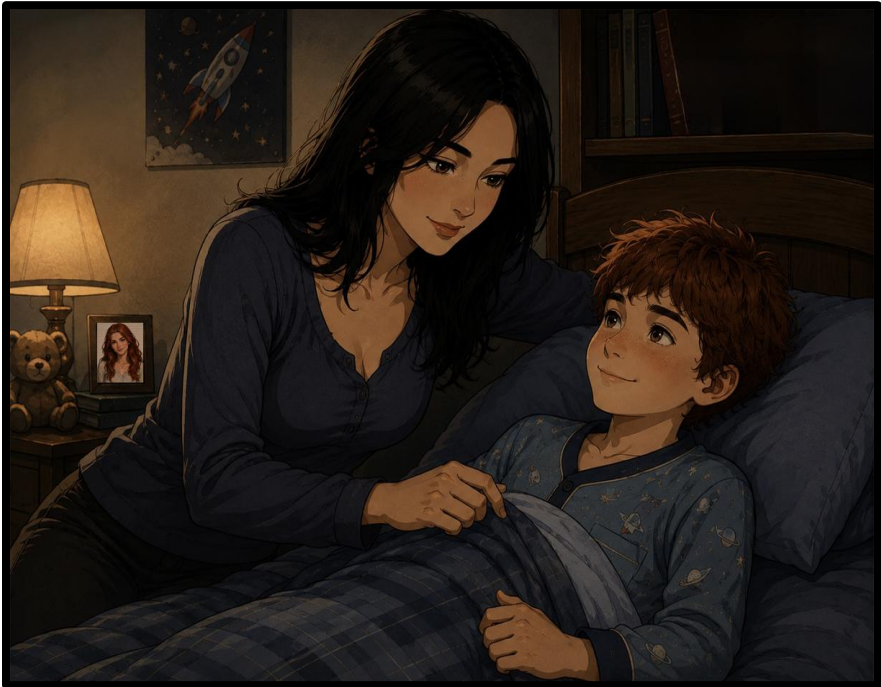
On Elizabeth's final day at the clinic, the quiet hum of medical equipment fills the room as doctors complete one last examination. The results reveal something that quietly leaves both Rena and Elizabeth speechless. According to the doctors, Elizabeth is a healthy eighteen-year-old. To the medical staff, it is simply another entry in her chart. But to Rena and Elizabeth, those words carry a far deeper meaning. Elizabeth's reconstructed body is now completely human, with no trace of Priscus DNA remaining. Although twenty-four years had passed since her birth, her rebirth had not restored the years she had lost. Instead, it had allowed her life to continue from the very moment it had once been stolen away. Neither mother nor daughter says a word. A single glance between them conveys everything words cannot. It is a second chance for them both, but especially for Elizabeth. For the first time in six years, her future truly belongs to her once again. Neither had ever expected to receive such a gift. With Elizabeth fully recovered, she and Rena are cleared to leave. Before departing, they are questioned by government officials regarding the events that took place on Pomodoro Cay. Just as the others had done before them, they recount the agreed-upon version of events, carefully concealing Elizabeth's true identity. The scene then cuts forward once more. The morning sun rises over the Southeast Zone of Twin Pines. A gentle breeze rustles through the trees as birds sing from the branches overhead. Following the settlement of Emily Arlington's estate, her final wish is honored. Rather than searching for somewhere new to begin again, Dew and Rena, now reunited, choose to remain in Twin Pines, making Emily's house their new home. Over the following days, the cardboard boxes gradually disappear as each room slowly begins to take shape.

Furniture is rearranged, fresh photographs find their place throughout the house, and the once-familiar surroundings gradually begin reflecting the family now living within them. Elizabeth quietly unpacks the new clothes and personal belongings that had recently been purchased for her, each item serving as another quiet reminder that she had been given the chance to begin life anew. Nearby, Aspen follows closely behind Dew, eagerly carrying small boxes and handing him whatever he needs, determined to help in any way he can. Although still adjusting to their new lives, Dew and Rena gradually begin settling into roles that remain unfamiliar to them both. Though much remains new and unfamiliar, each passing day makes the house feel a little less like the home Emily left behind and a little more like the home they are building together. Elizabeth quietly begins adjusting to life as an ordinary young woman, though she remains somewhat reserved around Dew and Aspen. At times, she awakens from vivid dreams—fragmented memories belonging to the woman whose body had once become her vessel. Faces she never truly knew. Places she had never lived. Emotions that felt both familiar and foreign. The guilt of the choices she made while under the influence of the Sōl Congruum lingers as well, serving as a constant reminder of a past she wishes she could forget. Yet, in her quietest moments, she often hears a gentle, reassuring reminder that she has been given a second chance. Whether the voice comes from her own conscience or from some lingering remnant of the young *Bush of Life* cultist scientist whose body she now inhabits—a woman who willingly sacrificed herself for Elizabeth's rebirth—she never truly knows. Perhaps she never needs to. The message remains the same: "*You are worthy. Be better... and live.*" With each passing day,

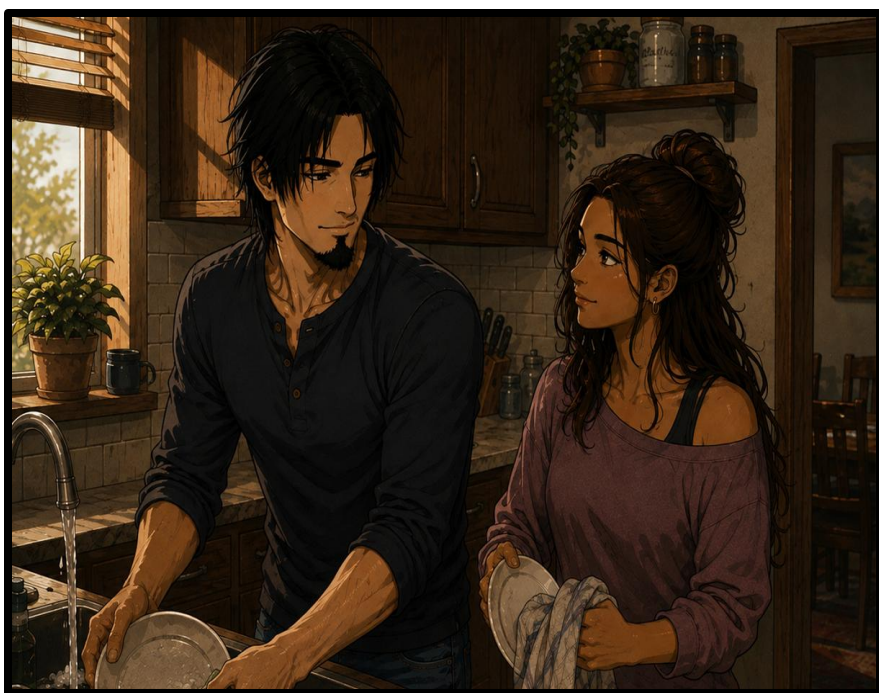
life becomes a little easier. Her guarded demeanor gradually begins to soften. A faint smile appears more often than before and the occasional laugh escapes her. Slowly but surely, she begins allowing herself to embrace the life she has been given. One sunny afternoon, Aspen plays alone in the backyard, tossing a baseball into the air as Elizabeth quietly sits nearby, enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun. Still somewhat reserved, she gazes up at the clear blue sky, lost in thought. Without meaning to, Aspen throws the ball a little too far. It sails toward Elizabeth, who instinctively reaches out and catches it with an awkward fumble. Startled, the two look at one another for a brief moment. After a brief hesitation, Elizabeth gently tosses the ball back. Aspen catches it with a grin and throws it again—this time a little straighter.



Before long, the ball passes back and forth between them with growing confidence. Their quiet exchange gradually gives way to smiles, and soon the backyard is filled with laughter. At one point, Aspen glances toward an empty patch of grass and proudly announces that Slambert, his imaginary green dragon friend, thinks Elizabeth has a pretty good throwing arm. Elizabeth looks toward the empty spot before turning back to Aspen with an amused smile. The game continues as the afternoon passes. Though they are not brother and sister by blood, a growing bond begins to form between two people who have both lost so much. Dew and Aspen spend an early morning fishing from the same pier where Dew had once fished with Emily and Hoplyn during their younger years. As Dew patiently teaches Aspen how to cast his line, Aspen beams with pride, eagerly showing off each catch.



Rena and Elizabeth browse local shops together, sharing quiet conversations as Elizabeth becomes more comfortable simply enjoying her mother's company. One evening, Rena gently tucks Aspen into bed, wishing him goodnight before quietly turning off the light. What begins as a simple act of kindness soon becomes part of their nightly routine, and before long, Aspen naturally begins looking to her with the comfort and trust only a mother can provide. Elizabeth and Dew spend their days working side by side around the house. At first, their conversations are few, but with each passing day, the awkward silence gradually gives way to quiet smiles, casual conversation, and a growing sense of trust.



As Elizabeth slowly rediscovers the carefree spirit she had been denied for so many years, she and Aspen begin sharing playful antics around the house. Whether teasing one another, racing through the backyard, or laughing over harmless mischief, the two gradually grow into the roles of an older sister and younger brother. More than once, their antics leave Dew and Rena exchanging weary glances, amused smiles, and the occasional exasperated sigh. Even so, neither would have it any other way.



The family attends local festivals and community events, enjoying the simple pleasures of life. Board games cover the dining room table during rainy evenings, with friendly competition often giving way to laughter. Meals are cooked side by side, each person gradually finding their place in the kitchen. Family dinners fill the house with easy conversation, the

occasional joke, and laughter that grows more frequent with each passing week. Movies play late into the evening before everyone eventually falls asleep in the living room. Little by little, new memories begin replacing old pain, and the house once again fills with love, hope, and the promise of tomorrow. Time passes once more. The scene then cuts to a modest courthouse courtroom as warm sunlight streams through the tall windows. Before the officiant, Dew and Rena stand side by side, exchanging their wedding vows and rings. Nearby, Elizabeth and Aspen watch with unmistakable joy. Once the ceremony concludes, Dew signs the marriage certificate, followed by Rena. After the officiant signs the document as well, he smiles warmly before officially pronouncing them husband and wife. Dew and Rena share a loving embrace as Elizabeth and Aspen applaud, their smiles reflecting the happiness of the moment. The scene cuts one final time to a community park in the Southeast Zone of Twin Pines late one afternoon. Warm sunlight filters through the branches of a large oak tree as a gentle breeze rustles the leaves overhead. Gathered beneath its shade, Dew, Rena, Elizabeth, and Aspen stand before a camera resting atop a tripod. After setting the timer, Dew hurries back just as the countdown begins. He stands close beside Rena, slipping an arm around her waist, while Elizabeth stands beside her mother, leaning affectionately toward Aspen and resting a hand on his shoulder as he stands happily between her and Rena. For one brief moment, no one moves. Then the camera flashes. A single photograph captures the Wilder family exactly as they are—not perfect, but together. The photograph slowly fills the screen, preserving far more than smiles and familiar faces. It captures hope. It captures healing. It captures the promise of a

future that, after everything they had endured, finally belongs to them. As the image slowly fades to black, the joyful laughter of the Wilder family continues to echo in the background.



An Unveiling Masquerade

- Narrator: Three months later, the scene cuts to a modest hotel room somewhere in the country of Tianheiwajyoti. The room is quiet. A single lamp on the nightstand casts a warm glow across the otherwise dim interior. A clean-shaven man, whose face remains obscured, sits comfortably on the right-side edge of the bed, casually dressed. A flip phone rests against his ear while a half-filled glass of liquor sits on the nightstand beside him. His posture is relaxed, his expression composed, as he answers the call.
- ???: Mr. Director... it's been a while.
- Narrator: The voice on the opposite end of the line remains unheard for a few moments before finally responding.
- Mr. Director: *Yes... It has. Enjoying your vacation?*
- ???: *(then a faint smile crosses his face)* ...Very much so. Although... I have to admit, I'm already looking forward to my next assignment.
- Mr. Director: *...You won't be waiting much longer.*
- ???: *(then nods to himself)* I suspected as much.
- Narrator: Another comfortable silence passes before Mr. Director continues.
- Mr. Director: *It's hard to believe it's already been three months since Pomodoro Cay.*
- Narrator: The mysterious man leans back slightly, his eyes drifting toward the ceiling as he prepares to respond.
- ???: Hm... Time has a habit of slipping away. Looking back... I never imagined my assignment in Llivisaca would end the way it did. Ha-ha... I spent years building my cover inside the *Mantid Oscuro*. The objective was simple: remain embedded for as long as the operation required and help the organization sow further social unrest to weaken the Mesovillian government. Instead... I crossed paths with a group of rather extraordinary adventurers. *(then his smile lingers for a moment before fading into a more professional expression)* I'm sure you've already read every report I submitted.
- Mr. Director: Yes. Several times.
- ???: Ah. Yes... As I was saying, neither of us could have anticipated what happened afterward. The *Mantid Oscuro* quickly

became the least remarkable part of the mission. The emergence of the *Bush of Life* changed everything. *(then his expression grows more reflective)* ...Sometimes I still replay the sequence of events in my mind. Watching the *Mantid Oscuro* collapse... Traveling into the Buckass Badlands alongside what remained of the organization... Crossing paths with those adventurers again... Being defeated, imprisoned briefly, and then released not long afterward... Traveling with one of the adventurers and her companion—the man with the shades... Discovering the true scope of the *Bush of Life's* operations... Learning just how far the Mesovillian government had gone to conceal its continued research into gene-enhancing viral technologies... Then regrouping with everyone at Pomodoro Cay. And those mutations... *(then slowly shakes his head with an amused smile)* Without question... one of the most unusual assignments of my career.

Narrator: Another brief silence settles over the conversation before Mr. Director speaks again.

Mr. Director: *Years of preparation... only for the entire operation to change course within a matter of weeks. But that's the nature of intelligence work. No plan survives first contact with reality.*

???: So true, sir. Fortunately, my cover was never compromised. Not one of them ever realized who I truly was. The flamboyant, perverted fool they believed "Gaz Lalaki" to be... *(then glances toward the ceiling)* Every mannerism... every joke... every exaggerated gesture... all of it was carefully rehearsed. People rarely question someone they've already dismissed. Hmph. Even faking "Gaz's" death... I'd say the performance deserved an encore.

Narrator: Mr. Director gives a quiet hum of approval before speaking again.

Mr. Director: *About that USB drive you recovered... approximately twenty percent of its encrypted data has been decrypted so far.*

Narrator: The mysterious man listens attentively as Mr. Director continues.

Mr. Director: *...The remaining files—particularly those containing data on the gene-enhancement virus—will require considerably more time to recover. Even so, the intelligence we've obtained has already proven exceptionally valuable. Recovering that drive*

may well prove to be one of the most significant successes of the entire operation.

???: I'm glad to hear that, sir. Then retrieving it was worth every risk. At least that part of my mission wasn't in vain, especially now that Mesovilla has finally been reunified.

Mr. Director: *Indeed, it wasn't...*

???: Though, with their special election approaching, it appears the Interim Premier is likely to win, especially after re-establishing the Plenum and introducing a new charter. I doubt our government will be particularly pleased with that development.

Mr. Director: *Not really. But all that is out of our hands... I do, however, have one question, Agent...*

Narrator: Another brief silence follows before the mysterious man responds.

???: Sir?

Mr. Director: *Regarding those adventurers... I noticed the seven names listed throughout your report— Handsome Badonkadonk, Miss Scythe Mommy, Soldier Mop, Wayfinder Boomerang, Summit Hook Line, Saintly Pocket Knives, and Purple Knuckles. ...Those are code names.*

???: That's... correct, sir.

Mr. Director: *And during your time with them, you never once learned their real identities?*

???: No, sir. Those were the only names they ever gave me.

Mr. Director: *Not even the man with the shades..?*

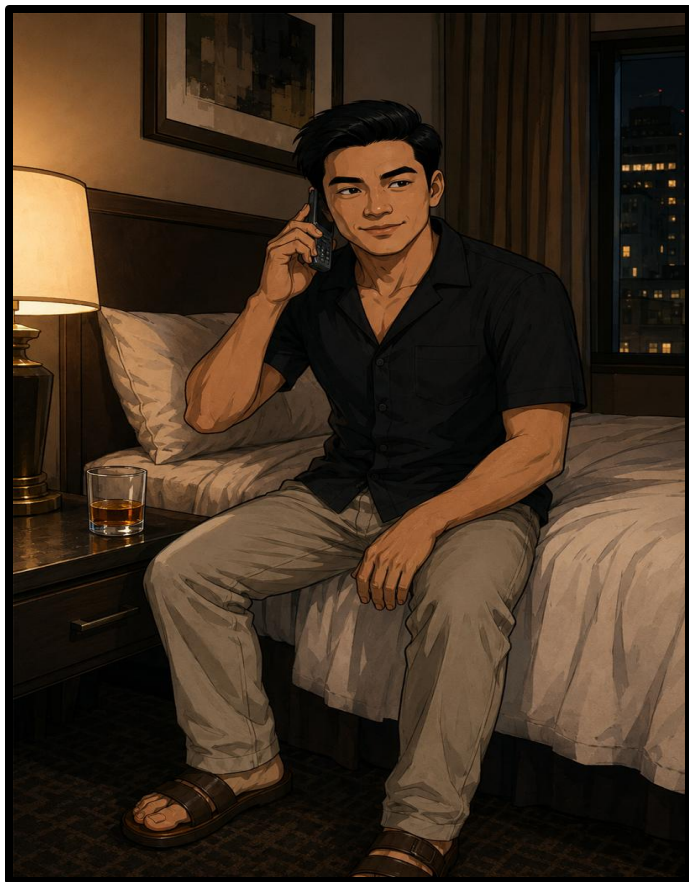
???: Correct, sir. Nothing more.

Narrator: Silence settles over the conversation once more. Several seconds pass as Mr. Director quietly gathers his thoughts before continuing.

Mr. Director: *Hmm... For all we know, they could have been nothing more than mercenaries doing wetwork for the Mesovillian government. Very well. Once again, outstanding work. The nation of Voroh—and the VIS (Voroh Intelligence Service)—remains grateful for your service... Agent Orlando Babae.*

Narrator: The mysterious man's expression barely changes. Only the faintest smirk appears as his true identity is finally revealed. He responds without hesitation.

Agent Babae: Thank you, sir.



Mr. Director: *Enjoy the remainder of your vacation. We'll remain in contact.*

Narrator: Agent Babae straightens slightly before responding once more.

Agent Babae: It is always an honor to serve our nation. I'll remain available whenever duty calls. Until then... goodbye, Mr. Director.

Mr. Director: *Take care, Agent.*

Narrator: The call disconnects. Silence settles over the room once more as Agent Babae slowly lowers the phone. For several moments, he remains seated, his expression unreadable. His eyes slowly scan the room before he rises from the bed and turns toward the nightstand beside it. Near the far edge rests a thin file folder, while a half-filled glass of liquor sits closest to him. He opens the folder. Inside are surveillance

photographs of Dew, Rena, Elizabeth, and Aspen. Separate photographs show Lorenzo, Krista, Vilmer, Johnny Torrio, Dr. Brundle, Cooper, and Elvir living ordinary, peaceful lives. Agent Babae quietly studies each photograph. There is no performance now. No flamboyant persona. No deception. Only silent reflection. After a long moment, he removes the photographs one by one before closing the now-empty folder. Without hesitation, he tears each photograph into small, unrecognizable pieces before dropping the fragments into the waste bin on the other side of the nightstand. He watches them settle as a faint smile of genuine contentment crosses his face. Almost beneath his breath, he quietly speaks.

Agent Babae: ...Enjoy your lives, darlings.

Narrator: He picks up the half-filled glass of liquor and finishes it in a single drink. A quiet sigh escapes him before Agent Babae switches off the bedside lamp, walks to the door, and exits the room.

The First Words



Narrator: Night falls over Nyandari, the capital of the country of Imvusha. In a quiet alleyway tucked between rows of aging brick buildings, a lone, medium-sized mixed-breed stray dog with a weathered tan coat slowly pads across the cracked pavement. The surrounding cityscape has long since settled into silence, leaving only the distant hum of traffic and the occasional rustle of loose paper carried by the wind. Unseen to the animal, faint, translucent spores continue drifting through the air, remnants of an event the world has yet to understand. As the dog breathes normally, the microscopic particles are quietly drawn into its lungs. The dog continues forward before stopping in front of a dark storefront

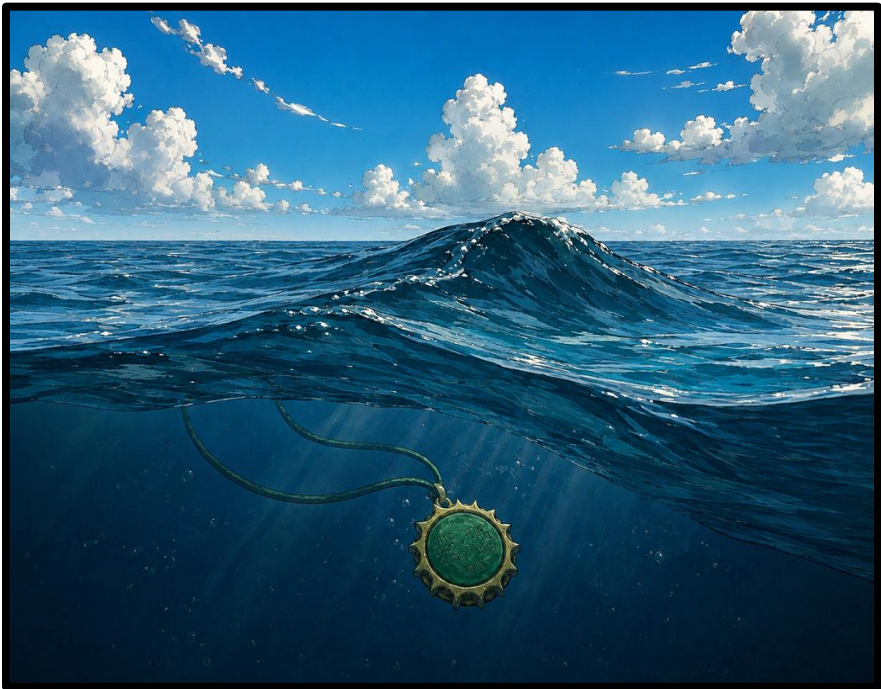
window. It stares silently at its own reflection, tilting its head as though something unfamiliar has begun stirring within its mind. After several long moments, the animal strains to move its mouth. Its lips twitch awkwardly, its jaw trembling as it fights against instincts that were never meant to form words. A strained, raspy sound finally escapes.

Dog: ...P...pr...eh...dee...

Narrator: The dog blinks once, as if startled by the sound it just made. It gives its reflection one final glance, then quietly turns and disappears into the darkness of the alley.

A Prime Elementome Drift

Narrator: Far out at sea, an endless ocean stretches toward the horizon. Beneath a quiet sky, gentle waves roll endlessly across the surface, their rhythmic motion undisturbed by the world beyond. Far below, hidden within the cold darkness of the abyss, the *Prime Elementome* slowly lifts from the ocean floor. Over time, the ancient talisman ascends through the ocean's endless depths until it finally reaches the top. There, carried only by the current, it drifts upon and beneath the rolling waves, untouched and unseen. Then, a single emerald flicker pulses from within the *Prime Elementome* before fading once more into the darkness.



THE END?

***THE THEME OF VALOR TALE:
"VALOR'S LIGHT"***

Lyrics by David Earl Williams III

Verse 1

Shadows fall, the night remembers,
Every tear we left behind.
Silent scars, eternal embers,
Guide the weary back to light.

Pre-Chorus

Through the fire, through the broken skies,
We still stand; we still rise.

Chorus

If tomorrow fades away,
Our voices will remain.
Bound by love, by hope, by pain,
We'll never be forgotten.
Carry the flame, through endless night,
Together, we are Valor's light.

Verse 2

Echoes call, the past still lingers,
Ghosts of battles never won.
Yet our hands, our hearts, our spirits,
Hold the dawn for those to come.

Bridge (soft, almost whispered)

Even when I fall...
I'll hear you calling me home.
Even when the dark consumes...
Your light will lead me on.

Final Chorus (soaring, layered vocals)

If tomorrow fades away,
Our voices will remain.
Bound by love, by hope, by pain,
We'll never be forgotten.
Carry the flame, through endless night,
Forever—we are Valor's light.