

BOOMTOWN

Written by

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A journalism student investigates a faraway micro-state offering a
bizarre luxury tourism promotion: carte blanche to fight guerrilla
insurgents alongside the military.

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ACT ONE

INT. HANOI INT'L AIRPORT - PASSPORT CONTROL - EARLY MORNING

ERNESTO (34), a bookish, 21st century beatnik wearing a windbreaker and jeans, inches toward a passport inspection desk. He sports a massive backpack, in addition to a briefcase and camera bag slung across his chest. His passport dangles from a lanyard on his neck.

A Vietnamese customs officer waves him forward. Ernesto pulls the passport and a folded paper from the lanyard and presents them to the officer.

The officer inspects the documents. He knocks on the glass behind him to signal a co-worker, raising the passport for him to review. They speak in hushed tones for several seconds, casting doubtful glances back toward Ernesto.

INT. HANOI INTL'L AIRPORT - INTERVIEW ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Ernesto sits at a cold metal table, his luggage piled in the corner of a confined interrogation room. OFFICER LIU (35), dressed in a plaid suit with military epaulets, enters and pulls up a chair. He holds Ernesto's passport & visa paper.

OFFICER LIU

I apologize for the delay, Mister Ramirez. I'm sure you can understand, in light of recent speculation?

ERNESTO

Yeah, no, I figured.

OFFICER LIU

You told my subordinates that you are traveling for university. Is that correct?

ERNESTO

Yes, that's right. I received a grant-

OFFICER LIU

Forgive me, but- you are old for university studies, yes?

Ernesto forces a wry laugh, rubbing his temple.

ERNESTO

Well, yes, I'd say I'm above the average.

Liu purses his lips, studying the man across from him. His hands interlocked, he places his elbows on the table.

OFFICER LIU

You are aware of recent allegations? Americans entering our country as means of engaging in a certain...unsavory experience, across the border? This, in spite of sanctions compelled by your government and the United Nations.

ERNESTO

Officer...

OFFICER LIU

Liu.

ERNESTO

-Officer Liu, I can assure you I have not come to your country merely to smuggle my way into-

OFFICER LIU

What do you study?

ERNESTO

Sorry?

OFFICER LIU

Your studies. What is their focus?

Ernesto hesitates, scratching the back of his neck.

ERNESTO

Uh...journalism.

OFFICER LIU

Journalism...

ERNESTO

-but my bachelor's was in history. I've been following the progress your government's made in disposing of land mines left over from the '70s. That's what the grant is for, I came to interview former V.C. living here, in Hanoi.

Officer Liu picks up the passport and visa. He pauses a moment, giving Ernesto one last look-over. He taps the documents against the table and hands them back to Ernesto.

OFFICER LIU

You may stay one week. If you wish to extend you must report to the consulate Friday afternoon by 5pm.

ERNESTO

Thank you, officer. I'll make sure to do so.

OFFICER LIU

And Mr. Ramirez?

ERNESTO

Yes?

OFFICER LIU

Do not abuse our hospitality. Under no circumstances may you cross into Kharphet.

ERNESTO

Absolutely. Understood.

He gestures for Ernesto to gather his things and follow him.

OFFICER LIU

Please-

EXT. HANOI INT'L AIRPORT- ARRIVALS SIDEWALK - MORNING

Ernesto squints at his phone, attempting to zoom in on something. A posh black sedan pulls up to the curb beside him. A CHAUFFEUR in a black cap and blazer exits the car, striding around the hood.

CHAUFFEUR

Mister Ramirez?

Ernesto glances up, surprised.

ERNESTO

Yes?

CHAUFFEUR

I was sent to collect you. May I assist you with your bags?

ERNESTO

Oh, uh, yeah. Thanks.

He disentangles himself from his luggage, handing the bags to the chauffeur.

INT. BLACK SEDAN - BACKSEAT - MINUTES LATER

Ernesto takes out a pair of headphones and pops them in, before tuning in to a live video stream on his phone.

On screen, a White House press conference is underway, led by JENNA (35), the blonde, waspy spokesperson for the Department of State. She wears a coat of makeup that verges on tacky. Her skin pops against a scarlet red dress.

INT. WHITE HOUSE - PRESS CONFERENCE - CONTINUOUS

Jenna points to an unseen press member from the dais.

JENNA

Yes, third row.

REPORTER #1

Arabella DeStadt, Reuters. Is it true the State Department is turning a blind eye toward U.S. nationals traveling to Kharphet despite ongoing sanctions-

JENNA

(exasperated)

This again. As I've explained countless times, this administration does not recognize the deranged and radical Kharphese government. All commerce - including non-existent "shoot 'em up" safaris - remains shuttered indefinitely.

(pointing elsewhere)

Yes, Robert CBS -

REPORTER #2

But surely you've heard the stories? Rich folks gallivanting on some pay-to-prey war fetish, suiting up and playing soldier-

JENNA

You too, Robbie? The State Department does not concern itself with a gang of chronically online pearl-clutchers, scribing Rambo fan-fiction.

(MORE)

JENNA (CONT'D)

Reports of state-sponsored ride-alongs through an active war zone are both laughable and baseless-

EXT. PRIVATE AIRFIELD - ENTRYWAY - MORNING

The sedan pulls up to a security kiosk. Nearby, a long one-story building flanks the tarmac of a private airstrip.

The chauffeur rolls down the window. A SECURITY GUARD opens the door to the kiosk. They speak briefly in Vietnamese.

SECURITY GUARD

(in Vietnamese)

Tail Number?

The chauffeur hands the security guard a dense roll of bills. The security guard raises the gate and waves him through.

As the car enters, Ernesto looks up and makes eye contact with the guard. The man leers at him with icy contempt through the window until the vehicle passes out of sight.

Ernesto returns his attention to the press conference.

INT. WHITE HOUSE - PRESS CONFERENCE - CONTINUOUS

Jenna points to another reporter in the audience.

JENNA

Last question for today. Erica.

REPORTER #3

Does normalization of relations with the Kharphese government hinge on Fort Nguyen?

JENNA

The imperial regent has made clear that he views all concessions made by his predecessor as null and void. This includes construction of the strategic training facility at Kuhn Ha Lao. Should that situation change, you all will be the first to know. Thank you.

The reporters clamor as Jenna waves their questions away, gathering papers from the lectern.

INT. BLACK SEDAN - DRIVING - CONTINUOUS

The driver clears his throat, flagging Ernesto's attention.

CHAUFFEUR

Excuse me, sir? We have arrived.

ERNESTO

Oh, sorry.

Ernesto removes his headphones and unbuckles his seatbelt.

INT. PRIVATE AIRFIELD - LOUNGE BUILDING - MORNING

Ernesto takes the first seat in a long row of chairs. He begins to tackle a crossword on his phone.

QUINCY (39), a lanky, conspicuous man in a baseball cap and black v-neck, sleeps with his legs extended, chin tucked to his chest at the opposite end of the room.

TREVOR (34) approaches Ernie's seat. He's a douchey apparel exec circling a midlife crisis. He wears a puffy black vest, aviator sunglasses, and salmon-hued golf pants.

Flopping down two seats from Ernesto, he air drums on his knees while taking stock of the room. Ernesto bristles; he can sense that this guy's an insufferable chatterbox.

TREVOR

'Sup.

Trevor nods at Ernesto. Ernesto looks over and nods back, before looking back at his phone.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

(extending a hand)

Trevor Lamonte. Argus Sportswear.

Ernesto exhales, placing his phone in his pocket. He relents to a terse handshake.

ERNESTO

Ernesto. Most people call me Ernie.

TREVOR

Ernie, huh. Where's Bert?

Trevor chuckles at the stale joke. He leans forward, lowering his voice to a whisper.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
So, uh, figure we're here for the
same tour package?

He bounces his eyebrows, biting his lip.

ERNESTO
Probably, yeah.

TREVOR
Fuck yeah, dude! Right on!

Trevor leans back in his seat, drumming on his knees once more. Ernesto goes to pull his phone, but Trevor re-engages.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
So how'd you hear about it?

Ernesto gives up on regaining any peace and quiet.

ERNESTO
Uh, Reddit, mostly? 4chan, some Tik-Toks. But those all get taken down within a day or so.

TREVOR
And you're...down with the program?

ERNESTO
What do you mean?

TREVOR
I mean like, you ready to get your hands dirty over there? Show the sheriff how Americans handle a bunch of rebel punks?

ERNESTO
I'm just here to see it for myself. Wrap my head around the sort of...ethics of it, I guess? I think it's a complex story.

TREVOR
I totally get it. Not really my thing either.

ERNESTO
Why'd you make the trek, then?

TREVOR
Boar, brother. Gnarliest game this side of the world.
(MORE)

TREVOR (CONT'D)

This mad lad I work with, Bryce,
showed me a tusk the size of his
fuckin' forearm that he hauled back
from Jakarta last year. Figured you
hand me a bayonet, blow the
whistle...BOOM! This little piggy
goes all the way dome.

He ends by pointing a finger gun at his forehead.

ERNESTO

Cool, yeah-

The chatter of three arriving travelers brings a merciful end to the conversation. KEITH (45), GRETA SUE (40), and RYTTER (14) wheel their rolling bags up to a parallel row of seats.

Keith, a broad-shouldered, pot-bellied man in a gingham button-down, takes charge of stacking the luggage on a chair.

Greta Sue, a yacht club gossip clad head-to-toe in pink and yellow, applies sanitizer to her hands, rubbing them with frantic intensity.

Their son, Rytter, remains standing with a duffle bag slung on his shoulder. He's laser-focused on a handheld video-game.

GRETA SUE

Rytter baby, come sit down.

Rytter doesn't even glance up to reply.

RYTTER

SHHHHH.

Greta Sue and Keith share a glance before Greta Sue directs her attention to Trevor and Ernesto. She radiates the energy of a mom on vacation about to try something "bad."

GRETA SUE

You must be our comrades for the week, huh? I'm Greta Sue-

She shakes hands with Ernesto and Trevor. Keith finishes with the bags before joining in the handshakes and intros.

GRETA SUE (CONT'D)

But you can call me Mama Bear,
cause I always bring the hugs and
the snacks! Oh, and this is my
husband-

KEITH

Keith Pasternak, pleasure.

GRETA SUE

And this pouty button-masher is our son, Rytter. Rytter, come say hi.

Rytter, without removing his hands from the controller or looking up, flips the bird to all of them.

GRETA SUE (CONT'D)

He didn't sleep well on the flight. First Class is just not what it used to be!

KEITH

They say those seats go flat but I was hard stuck at a hundred sixty degrees. I mean, twist my balls while you're at it!

Ernesto watches as Rytter pops a small pimple on his chin.

ERNESTO

How old's your son?

KEITH

Just turned fourteen. He'll be startin' Junior R.O.T.C. in the fall and we figured this week could really set him apart from the other kids. You know, some real marksmanship application.

TREVOR

See, that's smart. When I was his age, it was *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, *G.T.A.*, every night. Kids already know all this stuff, right? But you guys are giving him real world context. Respect.

Trevor raises a fist in a show of support.

Ernesto, unsettled by the prospect of a literal child joining this expedition, tries to add a rational voice to the mix.

ERNESTO

Uh, by most accounts it's an actual war zone over there-

GRETA SUE

You know the real war zone? Our schools. We had two active shooters in our district last year.

KEITH

It's true. Those PTA ninnies will
be thanking their lucky stars that
some folks-

He gestures to himself and Greta Sue.

KEITH (CONT'D)

-aren't teaching their kids to just
duck behind a textbook.

GRETA SUE

We've been beggin' them to let
Rytter patrol the homecoming game.
What happens if one of those Denton
High thugs brings a gun and none of
our own boys can take him on?

Everyone watches as GABRIELLE (26) approaches. She lugs a
towering backpack twice her size, covered with dozens of sewn-
on flags. She chucks it down beside the seats, flashing the
group a weary smile.

GABRIELLE

Phew! Hey guys, I'm Gabrielle.

GRETA SUE

Well aren't you the cutest little
thing. You sure you're in the right
place sweetheart?

GABRIELLE

I think so. You all headed to
Kharphet?

Trevor, flirting, raises his chin in mock suspicion.

TREVOR

I dunno, who's asking?

Gabrielle plops into an empty seat beside Keith.

GABRIELLE

Well I hope so, 'cause that's where
I'm headed. Not much left to cross
off the list.

ERNESTO

What list?

GABRIELLE

Countries. I'm on pace to hit all
hundred ninety seven by November.

(MORE)

GABRIELLE (CONT'D)
Which, would make me the third
youngest woman to ever do it!

She beams with pride. Rytter glances up from his console for a split second, sizing her up.

RYTTER
What are you, like forty?

GRETA SUE
Rytter!

Gabrielle reels at the insult.

GABRIELLE
I'm twenty-six, actually.

TREVOR
Oh, so Daddy's got money.

GABRIELLE
Excuse me?

TREVOR
(raising his hands)
Or Mommy! It's 2025, mommys can be
rich too! But how else could you
afford it, right?

GABRIELLE
Well, not that it's any of your
business but I made a healthy
profit off my Etsy shop in college.

Rytter rolls his eyes. He tucks his console under his arm and pulls out his phone, typing with nefarious speed.

KEITH
That's arts and crafts stuff,
right? What's your specialty?

Gabrielle beams, feeding off his sincere interest.

GABRIELLE
So I make these crochet dinosaurs,
with big, kinda like, cartoon eyes-

RYTTER
Found it.

He thrusts his phone toward the group. On screen, Gabrielle poses topless in the profile photo for her OnlyFans. Ukrainian flags on toothpicks cover her nipples.

GRETA SUE

Rytter!

Greta Sue swipes the phone from Rytter's hands. Rytter pulls a second phone from his pocket and answers an incoming call.

RYTTER

(on the phone)

Yeah. No, I can talk-

He saunters off, leaving the group in uncomfortable silence. Trevor raises his hands and leans back, smirking.

TREVOR

I mean, I'd like and subscribe.

Gabrielle covers her face in her hands, mortified.

GABRIELLE

Oh my God-

An ESCORT in a tidy black suit approaches the group.

ESCORT

Ladies and gentlemen, the aircraft
is ready for you. This way, please.

Keith, Greta Sue, Trevor, Ernesto and Gabrielle rise and gather their luggage. Greta Sue waves to flag down Rytter.

GRETA SUE

Rytter, honey!

INT. PRIVATE PLANE - MAIN CABIN - MINUTES LATER

Ernesto enters a lavish plane compartment fitted with luxury amenities. He's awestruck by the sheer wealth on display.

Eight plush recliners, arranged into two circles along the left wall, sit flanked by shelves of stemware, ice-buckets, a humidor and gold-trimmed side tables.

Two smaller individual recliners sit against the opposite wall, for the more reclusive of passengers.

Already seated in the first cluster of seats, Keith clinks a bottle of PBR with Greta Sue, who holds a glass of champagne.

KEITH

(admiring the bottle)

They read my note. I'm impressed.

Ernesto claims a seat in the farther circle of loungers. Moments later, Trevor flops down in the seat beside him.

TREVOR
What up chief?

He takes an impossibly long hit off a vape, holding in the smoke. His face growing pink from the effort, he offers it to Ernesto.

ERNESTO
I'm good. Thanks.

Gabrielle cranes her neck to survey the seat options from the front of the plane.

Trevor coughs up a cloud of smoke. He waves her toward him.

TREVOR
Yo Miss Universe, why don't you
kick it back here!

Gabrielle flinches at the invite. Bending over to Greta Sue, she points to the chair opposite Keith.

GABRIELLE
Is that seat taken?

Rytter stomps toward his parents, nose deep in his game system again. He shoves past Gabrielle to reach his seat.

RYTTER
Thanks, we don't want AIDs.

GABRIELLE	KEITH
Alright, Columbine-	Chandler Rittenhouse
	Pasternak, that is enough!

Amid the fray, Ernesto watches Quincy duck into the cabin. He skirts past the chaos and settles into the solo seat along the cabin wall opposite Ernesto.

Trevor sizes him up, bristling at his wordless mystique.

TREVOR
Hey guy...you sure this is your
plane?

QUINCY
Pretty sure, yeah.

He pulls the baseball cap back down over his eyes, and stretches out his legs, resuming his nap.

Trevor scoffs. He pulls out some ear buds and pops them in.

TREVOR

Whatever.

Gabrielle claims the empty chair across from Ernesto, folding her arms and looking out the window.

Trevor closes his eyes and mouths the word "yes" as he does a silent fist pump for Ernesto.

Ernesto scans the available chairs, counting in his head.

ERNESTO

(to Gabrielle)

Hey, uh, Gabrielle? Sorry-

She looks over to him, wiping a tear from her eye.

GABRIELLE

You can call me Gabby.

ERNESTO

Ernie. Do you know, like, what's our headcount? Is this everyone or-

SU-Z (24) pushes into the cabin, filming herself with a massive handheld video-camera. Her sleeveless arms are covered in tattoos; the left side of her head is shaved, and she wears the rest of her blue streaked locks in a combover. Her eyes are obscured by Pit-Viper snowboarding shades.

SU-Z

I'm now entering our sky pad for the afternoon, and chat, this thing is dripped the fuck out, no cap-

Su-Z looks up and registers the other folks on the plane.

SU-Z (CONT'D)

Hold up, it's time to meet the homies! Stay tuned for first impressions!

She ends by flashing her tongue and wiggling her hand in the sign of a surfer shaka. She pulls her arm back and stops recording before addressing the room.

SU-Z (CONT'D)

What's up shitsnacks!

Rytter, for once, is in shock. He leaps from his seat.

RYTTER
You're Su-Z.

SU-Z
In the motherfuckin' flesh, kid.

RYTTER
Can you sign my DookieBot?

SU-Z
Anything for a member of Turd
Squad.

Rytter beams, totally starstruck. He fumbles with his backpack to locate something inside.

Quincy raises his baseball cap with the tip of his finger. Nodding toward her, he addresses Ernesto.

QUINCY
She famous?

Ernesto shrugs, perplexed at the stranger's sudden desire to speak with him, or anybody for that matter.

Rytter brandishes a figurine; it features an android body, wearing clown shoes. It has a dollop of poop for a head.

Su-Z pops opens up a sharpie with her teeth and spits the cap on the floor. She signs her initials under one of the shoes.

Keith slaps a hand to his forehead in sudden recognition.

KEITH
(to Su-Z)
Now wait a second, you're the- that
Youtube gal, right?
(to Greta Sue)
Honey this is the young lady Rytter
was talking about. Folks watch her
play the latest hit thing the kids
are into-

Greta Sue nods along, recollecting some vague prior detail.

GRETA SUE
Yeah, I think I remember.

She angles herself toward Su-Z, clasping her hands together.

GRETA SUE (CONT'D)
Didn't something happen to you in
Japan recently, sweetheart?

She lowers her voice and leans in, ready to gossip.

GRETA SUE (CONT'D)
Didn't they try to cancel you?

Su-Z scoffs, dropping her bag in the empty chair among the Pasternak family camp. She settles into the vacant single recliner on the opposite wall of the cabin.

SU-Z
Oh that was a bunch of BS,
honestly. The Japanese, man,
they've got so many fuckin' rules
about privacy, and filming people,
and taking up the street.
Impossible to make content there.

Trevor pops out his ear buds, pointing at Su-Z.

TREVOR
Yo, you're that chick! The one who
filmed the homeless dude OD-ing? Oh
my God that was brutal!

ERNESTO
What?

GRETA SUE
Oh my-

Su-Z grits her teeth, removing the sunglasses and rubbing her eyes with the heels of both her hands.

SU-Z
Alright, that's not exactly what
happened, ok? First off, didn't
know he was homeless.

She turns to Greta Sue to explain herself.

SU-Z (CONT'D)
I was doing a challenge on the
livestream and I told fans on the
street to jot something crazy down
that they didn't think they had the
balls to do and then I'd pull out
10k and offer it to 'em if they did
the thing they said-

Trevor leaps in to finish the story.

TREVOR

-Yeah but then this one guy, right,
he just wrote down heroin. Fucking.
Heroin!

Gabrielle is watching something on her phone, the faint sound audible to everyone in the cabin.

GABRIELLE

Oh my God-

Ernesto gets up and stands beside her chair. She's watching a recording of the controversial livestream in question.

EXT. DOWNTOWN TOKYO - STREET - EVENING

Su-Z escorts a disheveled man in tattered clothing down the street, flanked by a camera crew. In the lower right corner, fans react with comments in real time, hailing Su-Z as a "chaos legend" and "gooner queen."

SU-Z

Let's find Takumi some special K!

INT. PRIVATE PLANE - MAIN CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Su-Z raises a hand as if in vindication.

SU-Z

Yeah, see it wasn't heroin, it was
ketamine, and we found out after
that it must have been cut with
like, fent, or some shit!

The man onscreen seizes on the ground, coughing up red and white foam. Su-Z lays on the ground beside him, doing a stiff, sideways version of "the worm" in a tasteless attempt at turning his medical emergency into a viral dance.

SU-Z (CONT'D)

The TikTokification of stuff man,
that- that's the real lesson here!
Like, if creators weren't expected
to churn out the next viral dance
craze I could've maybe, like
recognized what was happening!

ERNESTO

Someone bleeding to death right
next to you?

SU-Z

Oh my God, why is everyone still
obsessed with this-

An announcement plays through the speakers in the cabin.

PILOT (V.O)

Good afternoon. We are now ready to
depart, approximate travel time one
hour, twenty seven minutes. Please
take your seats and secure your
safety belts until we have reached
the appropriate altitude.

The passengers drop the conversation and settle themselves
into their previous respective seats.

Ernesto stares out the window, then glances over at Quincy.
Feeling surveilled, Quincy looks up and meets Ernesto's eyes.

Ernesto goes red, not expecting to be caught. He contorts
himself in his seat and pretends to be asleep.

Quincy lingers on him for a moment, before resuming his nap.

INT. PRIVATE PLANE - MAIN CABIN - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto rewatches the press conference on his laptop. As it
wraps up, he hits pause; Jenna remains frozen on screen.

Trevor, peering over his shoulder, startles him by piping up.

TREVOR

I wouldn't have clocked you for a
red-ballot man.

ERNESTO

Excuse me?

TREVOR

Took you for a Dem from that first
handshake. Hey, that's on me. I can
see you like a party with some
proper ladies in it.

Trevor nods toward the screen. Ernesto rubs his brow with a
hand, shading his eyes.

ERNESTO

That's actually my ex, if you can
believe it.

TREVOR
Okay, big dawg! No Bert for this
Ernie, nuh huh.

Trevor bites his tongue between his teeth, shimmying back and forth. He claps Ernesto on the back and stands up.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
Gonna head to the john, gotta drop
the kids off at the pool.

He gives Ernesto a knowing glance. Ernesto gives him a half-hearted thumbs up. Trevor exits toward the cockpit.

Ernesto leans into the aisle and eyes a cracked door toward the back of the cabin.

INT. PRIVATE PLANE - READING LOUNGE - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto enters a small antechamber with a booth and a small table. He slides the door closed behind him and sits down, pulling out his phone to make a call.

INTERCUT - WHITE HOUSE HALLWAY - SIMULTANEOUS

Jenna, mid-stride, pulls out her phone to answer the call.

JENNA
Were you watching?

ERNESTO
From the car yeah. Just watched the
recap. Was it awkward?

JENNA
Playing the bimbo on C-SPAN? Wasn't
my favorite.

ERNESTO
I'm not here just to spite you, or,
like, compromise your professional
integrity, alright?

JENNA
Yeah, well that's what it feels
like. I'm up on national TV telling
millions of people some place is
dangerous and off-limits, and the
whole time I know you're prancing
over there in flagrant violation of
international diplomacy. So yeah,
it feels personal.

ERNESTO

We've been over this. I can't just half-ass this whole pivot-

JENNA

What pivot? You went from unemployed teacher to unemployed blogger, basically.

ERNESTO

Journalist, Jenna, I'm getting a masters in journalism. And if I want to reach people with stuff that matters, I have to go where it's happening-

JENNA

And as I told you, you're chasing a non-story. Bunch of rich assholes playing Duck Hunt in the jungle. Couple photos with soldiers doesn't mean Zuckerberg's out there busting bunkers behind enemy lines.

ERNESTO

Then why come all this way? Here, specifically? Everything I've read points to something more...I don't know...aggressive. And it boggles my mind that you can't, for a second, entertain that a scenario exists-

JENNA

Because I work for the only organization in the world that can prove otherwise, Ernesto!

ERNESTO

Well, I hope you're wrong. Not, like- I mean I think there's more to it. And if there is, it's important that someone bears witness-

JENNA

And there it is, the martyr complex. Can't say I miss waking up to it.

ERNESTO

Yeah well, I'm not exactly wanting for a backseat guidance counselor at my new place, so...ditto.

Jenna massages her brow, breathing out a deep sigh.

JENNA

Look, I gotta go. Text me when
you're settled, alright?

ERNESTO

Fine. Will do.

Ernesto hangs up. He chews on a thumbnail, rolling over the conversation in his head. He slides back out from the booth.

INT. PRIVATE JET - HOURS LATER

The plane lands and slows to a halt on the runway.

A flight attendant walks down the aisle, handing out flutes of mimosas. Trevor takes a glass and thanks her; when she passes him, he turns to take a peek at her ass.

He flashes Ernesto a smarmy grin, raising his glass.

TREVOR

The eagles have landed. I actually
bagged one in Yosemite last fall,
mounted the wings above the
fireplace-

Suddenly, black ops commandos storm the cabin, barking orders in a foreign language. Terror grips the cabin as the soldiers throw black bags over heads and zip tie everyone's wrists.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

Hey don't- yo, don't touch me bro!
Hey...I'm an American!

One-by-one, the captive passengers are led off the plane.

ACT TWO

INT. ROYAL PALACE - DINING ROOM - HOURS LATER

Ernesto shields his eyes as the black bag is ripped from his face. Each passenger adjusts to the sudden brightness as the commandos retreat toward the walls and stand at attention.

The group is seated in an opulent dining hall. At the head of the table stands SAO DEHT (68), a Southeast Asian man with trimmed grey hair and a deeply lined face, wearing a white linen suit. He smiles as the group takes in their environs.

SAO DEHT

Welcome, welcome my friends. Please accept my apologies for the unorthodox reception.

ERNESTO

Are- are we hostages?

SAO DEHT

(laughing)

Hostages? That wouldn't be very fitting of a host, I think.

He crosses over to Ernesto's seat.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sao Deht, Imperial Regent of Kharphet.

He bows to Ernesto.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

Due to the strained ties between our nations, it is important we are not seen giving special treatment to any Occidentals who might stumble across our borders. Hence the theatrics. But let us dispel with the cloak and dagger-

Sao Deht rings a small bell, and a phalanx of servants enters the room, placing heavy steel cloches in front of each guest. Steam erupts as the lids are raised to reveal mouth-watering steaks, exotic fruits, and elaborate herbal garnishes.

Greta Sue, weeping just moments before, dries her eyes. She giggles at the first sign of some familiar luxury.

GRETA SUE
Oh, well, apology accepted. Honey
look at that sear, my lord-

Keith nods in approval at the feast. He nudges Rytter.

KEITH
You see that son? That is how folks
greet you when you bring an open
mind.

Rytter accepts his game console from a servant. He
immediately begins playing, disregarding the meal.

RYTTER
I want pasta.

KEITH
No, hey, we're in Mr. Sao's home
and he cooked you a big juicy steak-

RYTTER
Fuck, fuck, shit, fuck, bitch,
asshole, bitch-

Keith rubs his brow and addresses the table.

KEITH
Sorry folks, our son has a
condition-

GRETA SUE
Tourette's, our poor baby. Always
flares up at meal time.

Ernesto barely masks his skepticism.

Keith turns to Sao Deht.

KEITH
Hey, uh, Mr. Sao, you got anything
like udon or ramen, something like
that?

SAO DEHT
I will have the kitchen prepare
something alternative for Master
Rytter.

Sao snaps twice at the staff, and they exit the room. The
commandos remain standing at attention.

Trevor leans forward, elbows on the table. He rubs his hands
together with anticipation.

TREVOR
So, when do we deploy?

ERNESTO
I thought you were hunting boar?

TREVOR
Changed my mind. Man is kind of
like the greatest game of all. They
can use tools, match wits- plus,
you see these guys?

He gestures to the commandos behind them.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
They look dope as hell.

ERNESTO
This isn't- there's like an actual
conflict going on here, I think?
It's not some turkey shoot.

TREVOR
Hardly! Have you seen some of these
freaks, screaming "ooh loo loo loo
loo," hucking molotovs? They're
animals.

GABRIELLE
(nodding)
It's really sad. I was at this
hostel in Dubai and someone showed
me footage of a rebel eating dirt
because they thought they saw a
carrot.

GRETA SUE
I saw that, mmmhmmmm. Keith's whole
family was just about havin' a
stroke about us comin' over here.
The number of TikToks they sent us
the last couple weeks, whew!

SU-Z
Did you see the one with the kid
sleeping inside the dead crocodile?

Trevor, Gabrielle, Greta Sue and Keith all nod.

ERNESTO
It kinda sounds to me like they're
desperate-

SAO DEHT

And we have tried many times to improve their condition. Even now, water flows to their pipes, electricity powers their huts. The pockets of discontent in our country are still surrounded by vocal, productive citizens who rely on our resources. If anything, the rebels benefit from the profound sense of restraint my generals have shown them.

QUINCY

Restraint. Hm.

Ernesto looks across the table at Quincy, who falls silent once again as he pushes his food around with a fork.

Trevor glowers at Quincy from his own seat.

TREVOR

Ok, what's your deal, pal? Only said three goddamn words this entire trip-

Quincy plunks his fork down, meeting Trevor's gaze with a raised eyebrow. Sao Deht jumps in to smooth things over.

SAO DEHT

Mr. Bruckner is only joining us temporarily. He will rendezvous with the FoodPeace outpost in forty-eight hours.

QUINCY

Mmm hmm.

Quincy smirks at Trevor, chewing cartoonishly on his meal as he stares his rival down.

SAO DEHT

His organization is responsible for feeding many of our displaced citizens, who fled East to escape the conflict. We are facilitating transfer to his assignment tomorrow evening, as a gesture of gratitude.

Quincy, still eyeing Trevor, dabs at his mouth before tossing his napkin on his plate.

Gabrielle pipes up from her seat beside Ernesto.

GABRIELLE

Not to be, like, a party pooper,
but...is it safe? The tour?

SAO DEHT

Why of course, my dear! I would not
allow patrons unversed in the art
of war to leap headlong into blood-
soaked trenches. The enemy is
stubborn, I admit, but they are
weary, and reluctant to challenge
large patrols. You will merely be
aiding my men in...trimming the
hedges. Many tours are in fact
quite mundane, you may not
encounter any rebels at all-

Keith clears his throat, raising a finger.

KEITH

Now my wife and I upgraded to the
three-day package, so if we don't
see any action tomorrow I imagine
we can check some other watering
holes on day two, yeah?

Su-Z wheels back and forth between Keith and Sao-Deht.

SU-Z

Wait I didn't see that option? What
if I don't get anything stream-
worthy-

Gabrielle raises a polite, stiff hand.

GABRIELLE

I was actually hoping I could stay
a fourth day if possible? If I
enter Pyongyang before the eighth,
I'd have to stay for the year-

Sao Deht spreads his arms wide, smiling ear to ear.

SAO DEHT

Breathe, my friends, relax! We are
willing to amend your itineraries
however you prefer... for a revised
fee, of course. For now, please
eat, drink, and explore the
premises at your leisure. The staff
will escort you to your rooms when
you are ready.

Sao Deht bows to the room and exits. Quincy rises and stalks off in his direction without missing a beat.

The rest of the group resumes dining and making idle conversation.

Ernesto goes to follow Quincy when Trevor puts an arm on his shoulder, shunting him back into his seat.

TREVOR

You and me? We're gonna have to watch each others' six out there.

ERNESTO

Sure, yeah. But I think we'll all be together, so-

TREVOR

They'll split us up at some point. Figure the hicks will stay together, and they'll pair up the G.I. Janes. But you get my back? I'll get yours.

ERNESTO

Sure. Hey, I'm gonna go find a bathroom.

He glances off again in the direction Quincy exited.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - HALLWAY - MINUTES LATER

Ernesto tiptoes down a long, opulent hallway, peering down various adjoining corridors.

He arrives at a dark, ominous antechamber, where soft light spills from beneath a heavy wooden door left ajar.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - LIBRARY - CONTINUOUS

Surrounded by towering shelves of ornate leather books, Quincy kneels beside a broad mahogany table, toying with something underneath.

Ernesto sidles into the room, aiming to be discreet. He trips on the rug, placing a hand on a shelf to catch himself.

Quincy swivels toward the intruder, standing rigidly upright. He relaxes once he realizes it's Ernesto.

QUINCY

Jesus, man-

ERNESTO

Sorry, were- were you looking for something?

QUINCY

No, just- I was-

Quincy, having started on the defensive, shifts to a more confident tone. His reply still sounds a bit rehearsed.

QUINCY (CONT'D)

-you're gonna laugh.

ERNESTO

What?

QUINCY

I'm something of a geocache buff - kind of like online treasure hunting. The clues are posted online but the prizes are real, hidden in plain sight all over the world.

ERNESTO

(skeptical)

And you thought you'd find one here? The net's been throttled here for a decade.

QUINCY

Just checking up on a tip, old Peace Corps forum. Don't know when I'll be passing through again, you know?

ERNESTO

Well don't you guys rotate in and out?

QUINCY

I'm sorry?

ERNESTO

For FoodPeace? It's a yearly stint, right, so I'm sure you'd pass through again at some point.

QUINCY

Right. Good point.

Quincy smiles at Ernesto. It isn't a friendly smile, per se.

QUINCY (CONT'D)
You seem less...simple, than the
rest of the group.

Ernesto scoffs at the back-handed compliment.

ERNESTO
Uh, thanks?

QUINCY
Quincy.

Quincy and Ernesto shake hands.

ERNESTO
Ernesto. Or Ernie.

QUINCY
I take it you're not some corn
syrup titan or TwitchTok princess
like the others. How'd you fund a
ticket to this shindig?

ERNESTO
A persuasive essay, and some...
light fraud.

Quincy raises his eyebrows, intrigued.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
I won a grant to interview landmine
techs on the fall of Saigon. This
year's the 50th anniversary. But,
once I had the visa and the plane
ticket, and I'd been reading all
these insane stories online...I
tweaked the itinerary, just a bit.

QUINCY
Bold stuff. Well, your secret's
safe with me.

Quincy glances around the room, pretending to look bored.

QUINCY (CONT'D)
I guess we'll head back, then.

He struts past Ernesto, en route to the entryway.

ERNESTO
Did you wanna look around some
more? Could be something here,
didn't mean to put you off it-

QUINCY

Nah, there's nothing here. And wouldn't want to miss out on whatever chestnuts of wisdom those dolts are trading out there.

Ernesto chuckles.

ERNESTO

Yeah, very true.

Quincy gestures for him to lead the way. Ernesto exits.

Quincy casts a passing glance backward. A tiny black capsule can be seen mounted below the table as he leaves.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - BRIEFING ROOM - THE NEXT MORNING

Ernesto, Trevor, Gabrielle, and Keith sit at a long table in a dark conference room with a projector at the center displaying the flag of Kharphe.

Sao Deht stands whispering with GENERAL HUHN, 72, a grizzled commander with a scar spanning from his left ear to his chin.

Su-Z slinks in, wearing an oversized hoodie. Greta Sue and Rytter follow. Greta Sue shoos Rytter toward a chair.

GRETA SUE

Sorry folks. This one was taking the longest damn shower. I thought I heard him watching a movie in there.

RYTTER

MOM! Fuck off!

GRETA SUE

(to Rytter)

We got to get some food in you mister!

(to the group)

We mentioned his condition last night? Would you believe he diagnosed himself? We're hoping he'll go into medicine!

Trevor swings in his chair toward Su-Z.

TREVOR

What about you cam-girl? Any me-time this morning?

SU-Z

Listen, my fans could delete your social security number if I asked 'em to. And I'm zooted from fucking with my hotspot all night.

ERNESTO

You managed to get service?

SU-Z

(shaking her head)

Whole jungle's a dead zone, and the palace network's a no-go. Kinda bummed about the stream, I'll have to upload everything back in the states.

TREVOR

I'm sure your pre-teen harem misses you.

SU-Z

And I'm sure the girl hand-cuffed to your radiator is starving-

They begin bickering. Ernesto turns to Gabrielle.

ERNESTO

(lowering his voice)

Hey, Gabby? Sorry for yesterday, everyone putting you in the hot seat. Feel like you kinda got fed to the wolves.

Gabrielle smiles, equal parts bashful and appreciative.

GABRIELLE

Thanks, but you get used to it. Not the first time I'm gotten teased about it.

ERNESTO

Well, it's no one else's business, and I'm sorry you got grilled for it.

GABRIELLE

You know I actually took that photo for charity. I was raising money for the troops in Crimea.

ERNESTO

Huh, well- that's really generous of you-

GABRIELLE

Yeah, this guy I was seeing,
Alexei, he told me how many guys
they'd lost over there and it
literally broke my heart. Like,
people hate these guys when they're
literally fighting Nazis.

ERNESTO

Well, sort of. The Russians kinda
hated the Nazis, so-

GABRIELLE

I know! I'm talking about the
Ukrainians. Have you heard about
the Azov Brigade? There's so much
anti-Russian propaganda out there-

Sao Deht clears his throat and claps his hands together. A
guard closes the door to the room and stands at attention.

Gabrielle whispers to Ernesto before angling herself forward.

GABRIELLE (CONT'D)

I'll send you some links!

Ernesto, eyes wide, pivots his attention to Sao Deht. He's
starting to see how Gabby fits with the rest of these folks.

SAO DEHT

Good morning, everyone. Did you
sleep well?

Folks around the table nod, glancing at one another.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

Excellent. May I now introduce you
to your esteemed military liaison.
General Huhn will be your battalion
leader as you journey into the
field today. General?

Sao Deht offers the General the floor. The General emits a
low, guttural snarl before falling silent again.

Sao Deht claps his hands together, re-taking the lead.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

A man of scant vocabulary. The
general has conducted surgical
military operations in Kharphet
since the first days of the
insurgency.

(MORE)

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

He is an expert tactician and an unparalleled soldier. I can think of no better man to lead your guided exercise.

Trevor shifts in his seat, his eyebrows knit with concern.

TREVOR

Hold on, exercise? I thought we were gonna be, like, in the shit?

GENERAL HUHN

You. Shit.

The room is silent. Trevor scoffs, mouth agape as he scans the faces of his companions, expecting someone to retort.

TREVOR

Excuse me?

SAO DEHT

I believe the general means to say that, as you are all civilians, it would be wise to approach today's activities with humility. No other government in the world provides the unparalleled access you will enjoy today, but it is important to remain vigilant. Isn't that right, General.

The general spits on the ground in reply, scowling at Trevor.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

Make no mistake, Master Jacobson, our troops will shepherd you through combat zones that remain attractive targets for rebel forces. We insist, however, that you remain with your escort, as there are still unforeseen challenges in the jungle. Monitor lizards. Fever nettles. IEDs.

Trevor settles back in his seat, chastened but satisfied.

Sao Deht raises a clicker and advances the projector slide. The screen changes to display a map with military specs.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

You will depart the convoy on the west bank of the Nhá Vahn. From there-

Rytter whispers something in Greta Sue's ear. She nods and breaks in on Sao Deht's summary.

GRETA SUE

We told Rytter there'd be a helicopter ride, is that still on the agenda?

SAO DEHT

Recently several anti-aircraft devices were lifted from an arms facility to the North. The General felt it best to travel by truck and on foot, for now.

KEITH

Do ya'll not have stuff that cancels those out. Anti-anti-aircraft weapons?

Gabrielle, regarding Rytter with mild contempt, interjects.

GABRIELLE

I'm sorry, but... is it safe for children to be coming on this trip? I mean, I was nineteen when I hitchhiked through Honduras but-

RYTTER

Can it MILF!

Gabrielle's eye twitches as she flashes a psychotic, gritted teeth smile at Rytter. She's on the verge of going nuclear.

GRETA SUE

Rytter! Hon, we gotta start carrying some Pop Tarts or something...

A commando whispers something to General Huhn, who grunts. Sao Deht checks his watch, as General Huhn moves to the door.

SAO DEHT

Ah, we will finish your briefing en route. We have been tracking a gang of insurgents that arrived at the bank ahead of projections. You are all in for an exciting day!

INT. HUMVEE - DRIVING - 1 HOUR LATER

The group bounces along on the benches of an armored military truck, interspersed among Kharphese commandos.

The troops wear bulletproof vests and armor plates. General Huhn sits among them.

The tourists wear faded powder blue helmets and vests, with the word "PRESS" emblazoned on them.

Keith nudges the nearest commando.

KEITH

Hey uh why are we dressed like reporters?

General Lee takes a drag off a lit cigar.

GENERAL HUHN

For protection.

ERNESTO

They won't shoot at journalists?

GENERAL HUHN

Yes.

TREVOR

Yes, they will? Or yes, they won't?

ERNESTO

(nodding at the soldiers)
And that goes for our guys too,
right?

General Huhn grunts, and spits on the truck floor.

Keith glances about the room, aiming to make conversation.

KEITH

Any of you folks done any media work?

(looking to Su-Z)
Sorry, aside from Miss Zee.

GABRIELLE

In a lot of ways I'm a journalist.
I show people far away places,
different cultures-

Su-Z snorts. She sneers at Gabrielle from the opposite bench.

SU-Z

If you're a journalist then I'm
Wendy-fuckin'-Cronkite.

Gabrielle flashes her a tight-lipped smile.

GABRIELLE

Well, actually my Instagram reaches two hundred thousand people in nineteen different time zones. So, a little more traffic than some dinky CNN podcast.

SU-Z

Please, I get that kind of engagement just showing my toes on the stream.

GABRIELLE

And that's why you and guys like Mr. Beast have your niche of content. Whereas I aspire to something a little more refined. Like Anthony Bourdain.

SU-Z

Oh why didn't you say so? I can find you some rope.

The tourists groan at the tasteless remark.

GABRIELLE

You're kind of a bitch-

GRETA SUE

(crossing herself)
Come on now, Suzie-

SU-Z

It's a joke?! I swear, comedy is fucking illegal these days.

Ernesto turns his focus to Quincy, seated across from him.

ERNESTO

This what you usually wear?

QUINCY

Hmmm?

ERNESTO

The vest. Or something similar, I guess. For volunteers, doctors, et cetera?

Quincy purses his lips, working on his answer.

QUINCY

Kind of. Pretty similar, yeah.

He falls quiet again, cutting off the conversation. Ernesto is rankled by his evasiveness: he's 100% hiding something.

EXT. KHARPET MILITARY OUTPOST - TRUCKS - TWO HOURS LATER

The motley crew clambers out from the the Humvee.

Trevor makes a grand gesture of stretching, really showing off his glutes and his calves.

Su-Z works on attaching a Go-Pro to her helmet.

Greta Sue distributes pistols from a massive fanny pack to Keith and Rytter.

Ernesto adjusts settings on his camera.

Gabrielle begins recording a video of herself.

GABRIELLE

Day two in country one eight seven!
Now I know y'all are gonna come for
me for not sharing that juicy
location tag, but this itinerary's
gonna stay top secret for now.
Shoutout to my newest sponsor,
Raytheon, for handling my logistics-

Quincy, meanwhile, walks up to a tree and makes a small "x" on the bark with a pocket knife behind his back. Ernesto looks up from adjusting his camera to observe him.

General Huhn points deeper into the trees, barking instructions.

GENERAL HUHN

From here we walk six kilometer. We
wait for signal before entering Ko
Bu Phem. Former village, now rebel
fortress.

He begins walking, followed by his commandos. The tourists trek behind them, trailed by three soldiers at their rear.

RYTTER

How far is a kilometer?

KEITH

It's about a football field, give
or take. Right, sweetie?

GRETA SUE

Yeah that sounds right.

EXT. JUNGLE - RESTING SPOT - HOURS LATER

After hours trekking through the oppressive jungle heat, the group could not be worse for wear. Everyone is drenched in sweat and gasping for breath.

Su-Z waterfalls an energy drink into, and onto, her face. She chucks the empty can into the forest.

Trevor trudges forward wearing his shirt as a head towel, his chest bare underneath the vest.

Ernesto and Quincy are the last in line of the ensemble, save two commandos at their rear. Quincy marks another x on a tree behind his back. Ernesto once again clocks it.

He sidles up closer to Quincy, lowering his voice.

ERNESTO

Alright man, what's up with you?

QUINCY

What do you mean?

ERNESTO

You've been messing with the trees like every five minutes.

QUINCY

Old habits. Eagle scout.

ERNESTO

Bullshit. You're doing something.

QUINCY

Maybe mind your own business, Tin Tin. Hardly worth your time-

There's a long, low whistle from somewhere in the trees. The group holds their breath. General Huhn continues on ahead.

GENERAL HUHN

This way.

EXT. JUNGLE - VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - CONTINUOUS

The group arrives at the tree line of a small, quiet village, arranged into two rows of shacks missing most of their roofs and walls. A muddy "street" runs between the structures.

Three children play soccer in the street. Nearby, an elderly bearded man cooks something on a makeshift stove.

General Huhn offers a pair of binoculars to Ernesto, who gazes out into the village.

ERNESTO

I don't see anything. Just kids.
And....an old man?

General Huhn scoffs.

GENERAL HUHN

Pretty picture, yes? Look-

He singles out a metal shed in the back, distinct from the other structures. It is flimsy and chaotic, and seems recently assembled. Ernesto eyes it through the binoculars.

GENERAL HUHN (CONT'D)

My men cleared this site, two
months. Already, new snakes.

General Huhn takes the binoculars back from Ernesto.

GENERAL HUHN (CONT'D)

But, their wounds still bleed. They
are weak. This will be fun for you.

Ernesto watches with unease as the general swaggers away, the flicker of a dark smirk forming at the corner of his lips.

EXT. JUNGLE - VILLAGE OUTSKIRTS - MINUTES LATER

The tourists stand in a circle facing the general at the side-door of the Humvee. The commandos stand behind them with their feet apart, assault rifles in hand, and visors lowered.

General Huhn turns from the Humvee holding two Kevlar vests, in the style of the other commandos' uniforms.

GENERAL HUHN

Who will fight? You wear this,
instead.

The tourists glance around at each other, waiting to see who will be the first to co-sign this insanity.

Rytter stomps forward, snatching a vest from Huhn's hand.

RYTTER

Pussies.

Keith and Greta Sue walk forward next, following their son's lead. Su-Z and Trevor approach soon afterward.

Huhn proceeds with distributing new vests as each guest comes forward. A commando beside him distributes semi-auto rifles to everyone who claims a vest.

Quincy takes a step toward the queue. Ernesto, fidgeting with his camera, looks up and calls out to the general.

ERNESTO

I think I'll stick with Quincy on observe and report.

Quincy clenches his fists and glares back at Ernesto. He retreats back to his spot at the edge of the circle.

QUINCY

Yeah, we'll keep an eye on things.

Gabrielle stands on her tip toes and raises a hand.

GABRIELLE

Me three! Really just came to check Kharpeth off the list, I'm fine with watching.

(to Ernesto)

Did the same thing in Syria.

General Huhn rolls his eyes, returning an unclaimed vest to the Humvee and unfolding a photograph from his pocket.

GENERAL HUHN

(pointing)

You will assist my men to destroy secret armory here. All remaining in village are rebel supporters.

SU-Z

Wait, uh...even the kids.

GRETA SUE

(to Keith)

I didn't see kids. Honey did you see kids?

KEITH

Folks are shorter over here hon, looked like forty-somethings to me. You can tell by the posture.

Rytter strikes poses beside them with his handgun, aiming at imaginary combatants with one eye closed.

RYTTER

Mom, you're so gullible sometimes, it's embarrassing.

GENERAL HUHN

No children here. Young soldiers,
heavily armed. Bombs, guns, rocks,
grenades. They do not know mercy.

General Huhn walks back to the tree line. The militants and tourists follow in tow.

A soldier steps up beside General Huhn and screws a projectile onto a rocket launcher. The soldier kneels down to fire, when Trevor jogs forward. He vibrates with excitement.

TREVOR

Wait, uh...can I give it a go?

The soldier looks to General Huhn, who shrugs. The commando hands the launcher to Trevor, who struggles to lift it.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

Holy shit, this is- it's a real
goddamn bazooka.

Grinning from ear to ear, he wheels the massive weapon towards the others to show it off.

The group, including the commandos, ducks and swears at him.

ERNESTO

WHOA WHOA WHOA-

KEITH

Careful son!

SU-Z

Chill dude, Jesus-

Trevor flinches with embarrassment, recognizing his screw-up.

TREVOR

Sorry, yeah, that's my bad.

Trevor faces the RPG downward and turns back toward the village. He kneels down to get a bead on the armory shack.

The commando helps Trevor balance the launcher on his shoulder and points from the sight to the armory.

General Huhn continues his address to the group.

GENERAL HUHN

Now, when Dye Hair releases the
trigger-

Removing his eye from the viewfinder, Trevor leers at Huhn.

TREVOR
I'm all natural bro-

He accidentally pulls the trigger and falls back onto his ass. The rocket whooshes across the village, striking a large tree, and bringing flaming boughs down on the shacks.

The General barks orders in his native language to the troops, who advance into the village, aiming down their sights. Several soldiers remain flanked behind the tourists, waiting for them to proceed.

GENERAL HUHN
(to the tourists)
Move! Move! Stay close!

The tourists stumble forward, whirling their weapons about in every direction as they follow the commandos into the street.

EXT. JUNGLE - VILLAGE CENTER - CONTINUOUS

Panicked villagers emerge from the ruined homes, stopping in the street to stare at the advancing soldiers.

A gaunt man, dressed in fabric scraps that once made up a shirt, picks up a rock. He raises his arm, facing the troops.

A soldier beside Ernesto raises his rifle and shoots the man point blank in the forehead.

General Huhn looks around at the tourists, eyebrows raised.

GENERAL HUHN
Shoot! Shoot now!

Keith, Greta Sue, Rytter, Su-Z and Trevor all begin firing their guns with chaotic aplomb. At first trepidatious and unfocused, they gain confidence with each shot, smiling at the raw power in their hands and aiming with new intention.

Ernesto, panting, throws himself behind a wall of a destroyed shack. He fumbles with his camera before raising it to his eyes and pointing at the action. His hands are shaking.

He captures men and women rushing forward with sharpened harvest tools and molotov cocktails. The photos capture fury, perhaps hate. But, far more strikingly: it's clear that every villager is consumed by fear.

Down the road, Ernesto watches as a tiny girl runs to the silver armory. She's three, maybe four years old, carrying a hand grenade. She heaves open the door and enters.

Ernesto strafes along behind the shacks. Crossing the far end of the street, he arrives at the armory.

Ernesto puts an ear to the door. He can't discern any sounds inside. Taking a deep breath, he hauls open the door.

EXT./INT. VILLAGE - ARMORY SHACK - CONTINUOUS

The little girl stands just inside the doorway, holding the grenade with both hands out in front of her. She doesn't seem to know how it works, she only knows it can hurt people.

Behind her, hospital cots cover every inch of available floor. Three emaciated villagers administer to IV bags and bandages on the bed-ridden patients.

Seeing Ernesto, the villagers raise their hands in surrender.

Ernesto steps inside the shack, the door banging shut behind him. He raises his hands up in a gesture of peace. The girl shuffles back, her hands still outstretched with the grenade.

Ernesto debates how to proceed, unsure of what actual danger the little girl poses. The door opens again: it's Quincy.

QUINCY

Of fucking course you're in here.

He removes his helmet and begins pacing the room, taking photographs of the patients and medical supplies with a long, cylindrical "spy" cam.

ERNESTO

Wait, are you like...CIA?

QUINCY

Really, Nancy Drew? You've been breathing down my taint since the minute we landed.

ERNESTO

So...yes? And the rebels-

QUINCY

Rebels, insurgents, refugees. Same difference. Just depends who you pick in November.

ERNESTO

And you guys are backing them, I presume? To overthrow the palace?

QUINCY

Wooooow, look who watches AOC's
TikToks. Newsflash, not every CIA
op is a goddamn coup. And I was
sent here to corroborate reports of
ethnic cleansing. Which-

Quincy gestures around the room. He shoves himself between a
cot and the little girl, who still holds the grenade. He's
completely unfazed by her.

ERNESTO

For an investigation?

Quincy pushes back past the little girl again.

QUINCY

Sure, why not.

(to the girl)

Can you fucking move, please?

ERNESTO

So, old dog, same tricks.

QUINCY

Oh give me a break-

Taking a final photo, he turns to Ernie. He points toward the
sounds of chaos outside with the camera

QUINCY (CONT'D)

Look, you want these people gunned
down by some cross-fit jack-off in
flip flops? Or could you stow your
savior complex for one second, and
play the goddamn board?

ERNESTO

Sure. Yeah-

Ernesto bouncing on his heels, lunges forward and snags the
spy camera from Quincy's hand. He dangles it between them.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

Just tell me what you guys plan to
do with these?

QUINCY

(mocking)

My mistake, Agent Ernie, let me
bring you up to speed!

Quincy snatches the spy camera back from Ernesto. He shoves
the device into his back pocket.

He wheels back toward Ernesto, eager to properly humble him.

QUINCY (CONT'D)

You know what, while we're at it-

He rips Ernesto's camera from the strap around his neck.
Ernesto reels in pain from the whiplash.

ERNESTO

Dude! Why?

QUINCY

Think they're actually gonna let
you, Twitchy and Clout Hound take
your little postcards home? They're
gonna screen all of these before
seeing you off.

He throws the camera on the ground and brings his heavy,
military-grade boot down on the lens.

QUINCY (CONT'D)

Time to grow up.

ERNESTO

What the fuck is wrong with you-

Ernesto bends down to dust off the equipment, sifting through
the dirt for plastic shards from the lens and camera frame.

Quincy relishes the sight of Ernesto pawing through the dirt.
Like a Bond villain, he's feeling ready to overshare.

QUINCY

You really wanna know what-

The shack explodes. Everything boils with fire, then fades to
total blackness.

INT. PENTAGON COMPLEX - HALLWAY - AFTERNOON

Jenna paces in the hall, phone pressed to her ear as she
waits on a dial tone. An answering machine picks up.

ERNESTO (V.O.)

You've reached Ernesto, leave a
message and I'll get back to ya.

Jenna bites her lip, tapping the phone to her cheek.

EXT. VILLAGE - ARMORY SHACK - MOMENTS LATER

Ernesto comes to, ears ringing as his vision swims. He sits up, blood oozing from a deep gash in his head. He places a hand to the wound, wincing.

Around him, shredded cots, sheet metal and charred corpses from the "armory" patients smolder around him.

One of the little girl's tattered pink shoes sits to his left. On his right, he glimpses Quincy's lifeless body.

Trevor jogs over, glowing with a mix of elation and awe. He's still carrying the RPG. Su-Z and Keith join them.

TREVOR

Dude, that was so fucking TIGHT!
How are you alive right now??

ERNESTO

I-I don't know...

SU-Z

I am gonna make you a certified
heavy back in the states. Got the
whole thing on the GoPro!

TREVOR

It's true, Suze was tryna tell us
she saw you run down here but I
swore you went back to the trucks
for a piss. Sorry bro-

Trevor raises the RPG for Ernesto to see.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

-but hey! Fourth time's the charm!

Trevor looks over and clocks Quincy's charred remains. He staggers back, holding a hand to his mouth.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

Jesus, is that...Quimby. Ugh-

He leans over, dropping the ammo-less RPG, and vomits.
Ernesto speaks to himself in a daze, just above a whisper.

ERNESTO

Quincy. He was...Quincy-

Rytter walks over and studies Quincy's spy cam, lodged in the dirt. He picks it up, intrigued, before tossing the device in a zipped pocket of his backpack.

Ernesto watches, but struggles to interject.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

Wait, Rit...you can't...fuck-

General Huhn marches over, fuming. He hauls Ernesto to his feet, dangling him on his toes.

GENERAL HUHN

Disrespectful!! Disrespect rules,
disrespect my officers! You stay
with patrol! You are not action
hero! You-

He bites his lip, trembling with fury. He drops Ernesto to the ground, barking instructions to the commandos. Several soldiers pick Ernesto up by his limbs and carry him away.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - LOUNGE - EVENING

Ernesto winces as he slouches into the room, a bandage around his head and another wrapped around his torso. A tinge of blood has stained both sets of gauze from within.

Keith, playing Uno on a couch with Greta Sue and Rytter, clocks his arrival. He rises to salute him.

KEITH

There he is, Mr. Schwarzenegger!

Gabrielle strides over and holds out her phone for Ernesto to inspect. On screen there's a black-and-white photo of Ernesto being carried off, with overlaid text.

Ernesto squints at the phone, reading the caption aloud.

ERNESTO

"One day we meet friends, the next
we bury them. R.I.P. Ernie."

GABRIELLE

I know you didn't actually die, but
is it ok if I post this when we get
back? I won't tag you. Unless you
want me to!

ERNESTO

Uh-

GABRIELLE

You know what, we can workshop on
the plane!

She places a hand on his shoulder.

GABRIELLE (CONT'D)
I'm so glad you're okay.

She skips away.

KEITH
Son, I've seen some gnarly stuff
happen on the factory floor but
watchin' you earlier...whew! Like
antifreeze up my catheter!

GRETA SUE
Shame about that Quint fella
though, how sad.

Greta Sue crosses herself. She slaps Rytter's wrist.

GRETA SUE (CONT'D)
Say a prayer son.

RYTTER
Praying is gay.

GRETA SUE
Hey, praying is not gay. It's
actually, the exact opposite of
gay. That's why Uncle Hank couldn't
come to Easter last year.

RYTTER
You're gay.

Greta checks her watch, noting the time.

GRETA SUE
Ugh-you know what, that's on me.
(whispering to Ernesto)
His affliction.

KEITH
Alright, let's get some grub in
him.
(to Ernesto)
We'll catch ya later, bud.

The family exits. Ernesto is startled by Trevor throwing two
hands on his shoulders and half massaging, half shaking him.

TREVOR
What up Burny! Eh? 'Cause you were
like, totally on fire earlier?

ERNESTO
Yeah, uh, I got it.

TREVOR
Well listen, I talked to S.D.-

ERNESTO
S.D.?

TREVOR
Sao Deht? Dude's a total homie. He has a pit out back with a bunch of hippos in it, watched two of 'em bone for like an hour. Anyways, he said that since we cut the day short, he'll let you tag along a second day, totally gratis. You're welcome.

ERNESTO
No way, I'm out. I barely survived out there today-

TREVOR
Ernesto brother, not gonna happen. Who's gonna have my six?

Growing secretive, Trevor scratches his temple with a finger.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
Besides, they said anyone hanging back has to stay in their rooms til the tour's over, security risk.

He lowers his voice further and leans in.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
Apparently they found some spy tech around here. They think one of us is a mole.

Ernesto leaves Trevor's side collapsing onto a sofa. He stares endlessly into the distance, reliving his near-death.

ERNESTO
The mole's dead. He got blown up this morning.

Trevor laughs, waiting for the punchline. He realizes Ernesto was completely serious, and begins to panic.

Trevor sidles up beside Ernesto on the couch, whispering.

TREVOR

Are you fucking serious? Why would you tell me that, dude? You're not- are you a spy? You have to tell me if you are, same rule as cops. Jesus, dude-

He puts his hands on his head. Getting up, he begins pacing in circles. Within seconds, he returns to Ernesto's side.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

Hold up, do you have a handler? Or a codename? What's your number like, double oh four? Double oh seven's gotta be like- jersey's up in the rafters, right?

ERNESTO

Trevor-

TREVOR

Yeah?

ERNESTO

Please shut the fuck up.

Ernesto rises and exits, leaving Trevor agape on the couch.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - ERNESTO'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Ernesto eases himself onto a palatial bed, wincing as he rests his weight on the mattress. He pulls his phone from his pocket and tries in vain to power it on. The shattered screen and sooty edges don't bode well for it's resuscitation.

Biting his lip, he ponders the day's events in silence.

Suddenly, his eyes dart around the room. He grabs a robe at the edge of the bed and makes for the door.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto pokes his head out into the corridor. Creeping from his room in the robe and a pair of white slippers, he slips the door closed before stealing away down the hall.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - HALLWAY #2 - CONTINUOUS

In a second palace corridor, Ernesto inches toward a cracked door. Peering through the entryway, he watches a servant place Quincy's windbreaker on a jewel-encrusted divan.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - QUINCY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto knocks on the door, startling the woman. Ernesto enters the room, his hands raised.

ERNESTO
I'm so sorry, uh- do you speak
English.

The servant shakes her head.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
Shit, uh-

He struggles to cobble together an excuse. He gestures around at the room, then points at himself, tugging at the robe and raising his slippers.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
This, uh- mistake. My- my room.

The servant tilts her head confused. She glances around at Quincy's belongings, struggling to reconcile her orders.

She bows and gathers Quincy's robe and a pile of used linens off the bed. She bows again before scurrying out the door.

Ernesto waits a moment, listening for her retreat. He darts toward Quincy's belongings on the divan, upending his suitcase and rifling through the windbreaker's pockets.

He examines several items of interest: several fake passports, surveillance mics, and a dense wad of U.S. cash.

Ernesto chews on his tongue, unsatisfied with the results. He runs his hand along the inside of the suitcase. He frowns upon detecting a small raise against the luggage frame.

Using a pen from Quincy's items, he tears at the sutures of the suitcase's inner lining to reveal a manila folder.

Ernesto pores over the folder's contents on the bed. He mumbles aloud to himself as he sorts through the documents.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
"-Audiovisual at priority access
points...target facilities
identified in satellite
reconnaissance...documentation Of
human rights infractions disclosed
in DYSKOM 419..."

Ernesto throws the paper down and continues sifting through the documents. He seizes on another, reading aloud again.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
"Previous intel shows leadership is responsive to credible threat of sanctions and/or disruption to interior development program."

Ernesto ponders the final words, which present a new mystery.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
"Interior develop--"

Ernesto trails off. He folds the paper up and jams it in the pocket of his robe.

Ready to leave, he spots one last item: a paper-clipped black-and-white photograph of a military fort obscured by bamboo.

The caption reads: Fort Nguyen, Kun Ha Lao ; October 2004.

Ernesto lingers on the photo for several seconds.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - HALLWAY #2 - MOMENTS LATER

Ernesto returns to the hallway, closing the door behind him.

SAO DEHT (O.C.)
Master Ramirez--

Ernesto braces at Sao Deht's surprise appearance, spinning to greet him. He knows he reeks of suspicious behavior.

Sao Deht wears the same crisp white suit as before. He clasps his hands at his waist, smirking. He's escorted by a soldier.

ERNESTO
Hey, hi- sorry, I- I thought this was my room.

SAO DEHT
Yes, no doubt today's events have had a severe impact on your mental faculties. Please, allow me to escort you to your quarters.

He gestures for Ernesto to proceed in front of him. Ernesto nods, observing the commando with concern as he joins Sao Deht in exiting down the hall.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - ATRIUM - MOMENTS LATER

Sao Deht speaks with Ernesto as they reach the end of the corridor and enter into a lavish, sprawling atrium. A fountain and exotic garden occupy the center of the room.

SAO DEHT

It is a shame what happened to Master Bruckner today. Or Master Walsh, Master Henreddy. Whichever surname he preferred.

ERNESTO

I, uh- I don't-

Sao Deht looks to his bodyguard. He gestures with a subtle wave for the commando to break off from their company.

The commando nods and veers left, disappearing from sight.

Sao Deht pauses, swiveling on his heel to face Ernesto.

SAO DEHT

At ease, Ernesto. I am well aware of your credentials. A snoop, perhaps. A foreign intelligence operative? I think not.

He extends a hand, inviting Ernesto to continue walking. They begin pacing a long circle around the garden.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

Many years ago, I attended an American university. It's quite common for members of the region's gentry to send their children West for their studies. I recall an excellent American novel assigned to our contingent. Slaughterhouse-Five. Do you know it?

ERNESTO

I think I know it, yeah.

Sao Deht places his arms behind him, raising his chin as he recites a passage.

SAO DEHT

"Like so many Americans, Ms. Pilgrim was trying to construct a life that made sense from things found in gift shops."

Sao Deht peeks at Ernesto from the corner of his eye, gauging his response. Ernesto swallows hard, nodding.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

I will not deny the wanton casualties resulting from our campaign against the rebels. General Huhn has shown little desire to discriminate between insurgents, and the civilians seeking refuge amongst them. But, politics - like war - are a fickle thing. Were I to tighten the general's leash, I believe I would find myself on the business end of a bayonet-

INT. ROYAL PALACE - HALLWAY #1 - MINUTES LATER

Sao Deht and Ernesto arrive at Ernesto's quarters. Ernesto hesitates outside the door, unsure what lies inside.

ERNESTO

So...what happens next?

SAO DEHT

I imagine you will attend tomorrow's excursion, return to another sumptuous feast, and promptly depart for Hanoi the next morning. We will, of course, review your memory cards and your electronic devices, and confiscate any deleterious materials, just as we will for your companions. Then, you may return to the mundane routine from which you enjoyed a brief, adventurous detour.

Sao Deht smiles, his hands clasped at his waist. His words carry the weight of both an assurance and a clear threat.

The commando returns, taking his place beside Sao Deht.

SAO DEHT (CONT'D)

Goodnight, Master Ramirez.

INT. ROYAL PALACE - DINING HALL - THE NEXT MORNING

The tourists - minus Quincy - enjoy a hearty breakfast feast.

Ernesto stares at the food in front of him, unable to muster an appetite. He gazes across the table at the chair Quincy occupied when the group first arrived.

At the end of the dining hall, Sao Deht stands in a doorway observing the guests. General Huhn appears at his side.

GENERAL HUHN
(in Kharphese)
You sent for me.

Sao Deht speaks to the general from the side of his mouth, attempting to seem nonchalant.

SAO DEHT
(in Kharphese)
They intend to force us back to the table. On unfavorable terms, no less.

GENERAL HUHN
(in Kharphese)
Your instructions?

GENERAL HUHN (CONT'D)
I want you to wrap things up. We'll make due with what's been secured. You have forty-eight hours.

Sao Deht directs the general's attention to Ernesto.

SAO DEHT
(in Kharphese)
And keep an eye on yesterday's patient. Keep him away from the action.

The general grunts, his eyes narrowing on his assignment.

INT. HUMVEE - REAR BENCHES - ONE HOUR LATER

The tourists make vapid chitchat en route to deployment. Ernesto, silent, sits crouched forward and staring at his hands, which tremble ever so slightly.

Ernesto looks up, and locks eyes with General Huhn who sits at the end of the opposite bench. Huhn's gaze bores into Ernesto. He spits on the floor without breaking eye contact.

EXT. JUNGLE - TRUCKS - AN HOUR LATER

Ernesto stomps out of earshot from the trucks while the rest of the unit readies themselves. Trevor hastens over to him, eager to continue their conversation from the lounge.

TREVOR
(whispering)
Psst! Ern-dog, hey! What's today's mission?

ERNESTO
Just drop it, man, I was doped up from the med bay-

TREVOR
Nuh-uh, no. You were being serious. So, Quinn was a spook. And you're what, his lieutenant?

ERNESTO
No, I'm- I have nothing to do with any of that, alright?

TREVOR
But you know something! What was he after? C'mon man, spill!

Trevor straightens up, folding his arms over his chest.

TREVOR (CONT'D)
What happened to having each other's six, huh? Who else can you trust out here?

Ernesto sighs, gazing up at the canopy. He looks over to the convoy, before removing the dossier photo from his pocket.

ERNESTO
I don't know, exactly, what Quincy was up to, ok? There were all these sick and disabled folks hiding in the-

Ernesto, watching Trevor, catches himself before "armory."

TREVOR
The what? The village?

ERNESTO
Yes, yeah, the village.

TREVOR

Shit, really? I didn't even see them. Where-

ERNESTO

Doesn't matter. But, look, he was taking all these photos that I think were supposed to be for blackmail, or leverage, or...something, maybe to get them out. I don't know.

(showing Trevor the photo)

You recognize this place?

Trevor looks at the photo. He shakes his head.

TREVOR

No clue. Some kind of prison?

ERNESTO

I think it's an army base. An American one. But, new-ish?

TREVOR

Fat chance. Everyone around here hates our fucking guts since 'Nam.

ERNESTO

I know, just- there's some sort of angle here-

GENERAL HUHN (O.C.)

Dye-Hair! Ghost Boy! We are waiting!

General Huhn waves impatiently for them to join the group. Ernesto smushes the photo back in his pocket.

EXT. JUNGLE - RADIO TOWER - MINUTES LATER

General Huhn stands at the head of the circled tourists, while his men prep gear and load ammo by the trucks. Each of the tourists wears the powder blue press uniform, save Su-Z.

Su-Z straps herself with a GoPro on a chest rig, mounted with an arm capable of rotating around her torso. She spools an endless cable from the rig over one shoulder and under the opposite arm to a battery holster. Ernesto watches her work.

SU-Z

(to Ernesto)

Carbon fiber CAT5.

(MORE)

SU-Z (CONT'D)

You'd need a fuckin' laser beam to
sever this puppy.

General Huhn points to the large comms structure behind him. Underneath the towering radio beacon stands a two story, vine-covered concrete building. It looks utterly deserted.

GENERAL HUHN

This is former rebel signal tower.
My men will clear now, send message
to central command.

The general shouts an order to his men, who begin marching toward the building.

Trevor takes a step forward, raising a hand to flag the general's attention. He tugs on his vest for emphasis.

TREVOR

Hey Huhnmeister, we swapping into
game day attire or what?

GENERAL HUHN

Stay with trucks. Everyone.

He locks eyes with Ernesto; the rest of the group takes note. The general turns and marches toward the structure.

Four soldiers remain behind with the group, swaying at attention with their eyes on the forest behind the convoy.

Rytter marches forward to follow General Huhn. Keith places a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back.

KEITH

Hold on there son, we gotta sit
tight for a second.

RYTTER

Why? That's dumb-

GRETA SUE

Mr. Huhn said they're gonna check
out the treehouse over there and we
can maybe take a peek in when
they're ready.

RYTTER

That's fucking stupid. I wanna see
it now-

Somewhere far off, a large branch snaps. Trevor cocks his head; he's the only one to register it.

TREVOR
That was kind of loud, right? You
guys hear that?

Ernesto massages his face. When he speaks up, he sounds fully disassociated.

ERNESTO
(to Rytter)
Honestly, it's better if they just
make sure things are safe before
any of us rush in there-

RYTTER
Shut up pussy. This is your fault.

Keith looks at his watch.

KEITH
Honey-

GRETA SUE
He just ate, I don't know why he'd
be flarin' up-

Ernesto wheels on Rytter, snapping from his traumatic fugue.

ERNESTO
My fault? I got blown to kingdom
come yesterday-

RYTTER
(singsongy)
Soy boy Beta cuck. Bitch baby beta
cuck-

Another crack echoes from the forest. This time, one of the soldiers turns his head toward the sound, and moves forward to investigate.

Greta Sue rummages through her rucksack for a pill bottle.

GRETA SUE
He's only supposed to take them in
an emergency-

SU-Z
Hey, G-Sue? Good news: your kid
doesn't have Tourettes.

Greta Sue rolls her eyes and flashes Su-Z a snarky look while continuing to dig through her bag.

GRETA SUE

Well, dear, you and several biased physicians are entitled to your diagnosis but we will treat our son in accordance with untainted medical expertise-

Nearby, Gabrielle flirts with one of the militia men. She adjusts his posture while extending her arm for a selfie.

GABRIELLE

No, here, let's get rid of that shadow-

Gabrielle angles the guard with his back to the jungle before posing for the photo. In the corner of the display, something creeps forward in the trees, perhaps thirty feet behind them.

Keith steps forward to back up his wife.

KEITH

You know mental health is a real crisis in our country. We need to open up a dialogue on what our kids are feeling. Epecially our young men-

Trevor, distracted by the rising tensions, looks back to where the guard nearest him stood, now gone.

Trevor whirls back to the group, staring across the circle. Gabrielle and the soldier scroll through the recent selfies, heads bent toward the screen. Neither is remotely on guard.

TREVOR

(pointing)
Guys!! Guys!!

A camouflaged rebel shrieks as he plunges a machete down into the soldier's neck, prompting the soldier to fire a hailstorm of bullets up toward the canopy.

Gabrielle screams at blood spurts from the guard's neck.

The rebel yanks the machete from his victim and wheels on Gabrielle, who trips backward onto her hands.

Keith, Greta Sue, Rytter, Su-Z, Ernesto and Trevor all scatter in search of cover.

One of the other commandos guns down the first rebel, only to be executed moments later by a second camouflaged rebel.

The last commando begins firing deeper into the trees, where a swarm of rebels now hastens toward the radio tower.

Ernesto and Trevor take shelter behind the Humvee. Trevor loads ammo into an assault rifle pulled from the vehicle and sets it beside him.

He loads a second rifle and shoves it into Ernesto's chest.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

If I die and one of these cannibals tries to skull fuck me, I need you to beat him to it.

ERNESTO

What?

TREVOR

If I get taken out, and you see one of these guys drop trow, you gotta promise me you'll either ice that fucker or pop my melon. Comprende?

ERNESTO

What are you talking about?!

They both turn at the sound of gunfire behind them. They watch as General Huhn and his men emerge from the tower and rush toward the trucks, picking off rebels in their descent.

TREVOR

Don't worry, I'll do the same for you.

Trevor slaps a firm hand on Ernesto's shoulder.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

Aim for my eyes, amigo.

Trevor rises and sprints forward, yelling and blasting away. Ernesto, hyper-ventilating, glances up and sees Su-Z, climbing into the gun turret of an armored truck.

Su-Z begins to flip switches and feed bandoliers of ammo into the roof-mounted machine gun. She grabs the beefy handles of the turret, unleashing a rain of bullets on the rebels below.

Su-Z raises a rocker hand and flashes her tongue for the gimbal camera rotating around her, recording her heroism.

Unbeknownst to Su-Z, the spool of extension cable powering her camera has come loose in the ascent, creeping ever closer to the machine gun's exposed churning gears.

The cover fire sends the rebels scrambling. Within seconds, General Huhn's forces outnumber the insurgents once again, some of whom begin to flee into the brush.

Ernesto exhales a heavy sigh of relief, wiping his brow.

Su-Z still mans the turret, targeting the rebel deserters.

SU-Z
What's up bitchesssss!!!

Her extension cable, flicking and bouncing against the machine gun housing is sucked into the gears with the ammo.

The gun jams, diverting Su-Z's attention. Within seconds, the ammo resumes feeding, yanking her toward the mechanism as it feeds both the ammo and the cord wrapped around her neck.

SU-Z (CONT'D)
Yo what- what the fuck is this-

Ernesto looks back to Su-Z, his relieved grin fading as he registers the panic on her face. He can't see the specifics, but it's clear something bad is unfolding, fast.

In the turret, Su-Z alternates between yanking on the extension cord, and attempting to unhook it from her neck.

The cord is now taut around her torso, and impossible to slide over her head. The tension forces her to kneel with the length of cord that's since passed through the machine.

SU-Z (CONT'D)
(practically croaking)
Motherf- HELP! YO, somebody HELP!

Ernesto sprints around the truck in search of a way up. He finds a set of rungs and hastens to the rooftop.

SU-Z (CONT'D)
(rasping)
Goddamn piece of shit, motherf-

Su-Z makes one last feeble pull on the remaining inches of wire. It's too late: the mechanism begins feeding on her neck, ear, and the side of her face.

She lets out a wet, gurgling scream as blood erupts from the gun console onto the metal roof.

Ernesto reaches the rooftop just in time to see the gun jam once more. It clicks over and over again, unable to advance the bandolier further. Su-Z, however, is very much dead.

ERNESTO

No, no, no no! Suzie! Suzie! C'mon-

Kneeling down, Ernesto tries in vain to extricate Suzie's corpse from the gun's exposed gears. He slumps back against the rounded turret wall in defeat.

Suddenly, the ammo resumes feeding, and the gun begins firing anew. The jolt of activity sends Su-Z's limp body slumping forward. The machine gun spins left to counterbalance.

One of General Huhn's men looks up and watches as every soldier to his right is ripped apart by machine gun fire. Seconds later, he too is riddled with high caliber rounds.

General Huhn hits the dirt, as do the remaining commandos.

The gun reaches the end of its turn radius and jams, this time for good. Ernesto peaks over the turret and makes eye contact with General Huhn, whose face contorts with rage.

Huhn points to the turret and inhales, ready to mark Ernesto as the soldiers' new target.

His orders are interrupted by a shrill whistle. A second wave of rebels pours forth from the trees, shrieking in unison.

Ernesto falls from the turret, scrambling to his feet on the jungle floor and sprinting into the brush.

General Huhn gathers the remaining men and tourists (Keith, Greta Sue, Rytter, Gabrielle, Trevor). They pile into the Humvee and peel off along the mud road from whence they came.

EXT. JUNGLE - DEEP TREES - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto wheezes as he frantically limps through the jungle.

He throws himself behind a tree, trying to catch his breath. As he reduces himself to a few shuddering exhales, he strains to listen for other signs of life.

The world quiet, Ernesto peeks around the tree.

He's greeted with the stock of a gun to his face.

Everything goes black.

ACT THREE

INT. BUNKER - PRISONERS ROOM - AFTERNOON

As the world swims back into focus, Ernesto spots KENYATTA (44) a tall, dark-skinned man seated cross-legged on the floor, playing solitaire. The room has been carved into mud and hewn from massive crags of rock. Muffled, distant sounds suggest they are underground, though not very deep.

An ARMED REBEL (23) stands guard with his back to the cell, swaying back and forth with his finger on his rifle trigger.

Kenyatta glances up at Ernesto, then looks back at his cards. He greets Ernesto with a deep, velvety voice.

KENYATTA

Good evening.

ERNESTO

What...where am I?

KENYATTA

Monaco. Don't you see the hot tub
and fine women in bikinis?

Ernesto whimpers as he sits upright, grasping at his leg.

Kenyatta sighs, taking pity on the ashen, bloodied American. He stands and approaches Ernesto, then squats to eye level.

Kenyatta places a hand under Ernesto's chin, lifting it up. He inspects the hair above the bandaged head wound, rubbing the dried blood between his fingers.

He pries Ernesto's left eyelids open with two fingers. This is the last straw for Ernesto, who swats him away.

ERNESTO

Alright, man, enough-

KENYATTA

Mild concussion, but I'd be more
concerned about your leg. It would
seem you sprained it in their
pursuit.

ERNESTO

You're a doctor?

KENYATTA

Triage medic.

Kenyatta crosses to his own cot and sits, dragging the cards over toward him with his foot. He collects them off the floor while he shares his story.

KENYATTA (CONT'D)

I was stationed with the Red Cross in Phu Laht, attending to refugees across the border. A fire broke out in one of our tents, and I ran to the river to fetch water. I awoke as a prisoner here.

ERNESTO

The insurgents, they attacked you at the river?

Kenyatta laughs, a deep hearty chuckle.

KENYATTA

The insurgents! That's good, I like that. Insurgents.

ERNESTO

Insurgents, rebels, whatever.

KENYATTA

Ha! There is no rebellion in Kharphet.

ERNESTO

Right, forgot. This must be my hostel.

KENYATTA

You are American, yes? Is that what they told you? Sao Deht, the generals and his sycophants?

ERNESTO

I didn't exactly take them at their word but...look around.

KENYATTA

Some rebellion. Three, four hundred men, contained to an area the size of a rugby pitch? Hardly a threat, even by guerrilla standards.

Kenyatta reaches under his bed and pulls out a book. He begins thumbing through it, in search of his last spot.

KENYATTA (CONT'D)

No, the rebels only loom as large as Sao Deht allows them to.

(MORE)

KENYATTA (CONT'D)

They are convenient to his purpose.
An ample pretext.

Ernesto rolls his eyes, growing tired of the cryptic speech.

ERNESTO

A pretext for what?

Kenyatta closes the book, placing it on the cot.

KENYATTA

You've traversed the jungle. I
imagine you've encountered some of
its inhabitants.

ERNESTO

(nodding)

We saw a village. Phem Ku Bo, or
something like that. It was in
ruins.

KENYATTA

The jungle is rife with such
places. When Sao Deht took the
throne, he consolidated his power
along the country's meager
coastline and forced minority sects
to the interior. It was only
afterward that he realized the
jungle's potential.

ERNESTO

Which was?

KENYATTA

Bananas, cassava, tin. Rubber,
coffee. And that's just the
surface. Far below, sprawling lodes
of rare elements, scarce metals you
nor I could begin to pronounce.

ERNESTO

And the rebels want to claim that
for themselves.

KENYATTA

The "rebels" have no interest in
raw materials. They have no
inclination toward industry.

ERNESTO

But then what do they want?

KENYATTA

Gold? Women? Blood? It doesn't much matter. They're prone to in-fighting, short on men and supplies. Their mere existence serves the palace, a rationale for indiscriminate thrusts of violence.

ERNESTO

Jesus Christ-

Ernesto remembers the photo of the military fort.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

(digging in his pocket)

Wait- uh, hold on-

His pockets are empty, likely pillaged by his rebel captors.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

Shit, there was a photo...there's an old army base somewhere out here. Saw it in the C.I.A.'s files.

Kenyatta raises his eyebrows at the mention of the C.I.A. Ernesto quickly works to dispel him of a connection.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

No I'm not- I stole it off some guy in our camp, he was undercover.

Kenyatta grunts, nodding.

KENYATTA

Many years ago, the Americans made a pact with Sao Deht's predecessor. In exchange for an American military base in Kharphet, the United States would end its embargo on Kharphese exports. Trade with the communist bloc brings the palace a sizable fortune, but this would pale in comparison to the Western market. The prior regent saw opportunity for boundless personal enrichment.

ERNESTO

So what happened to the base?

Kenyatta lies back on his cot, taking a rubber ball beside him and tossing it up in the air.

KENYATTA

It was never finished. Sao Deht capitalized on fears of an American return to the peninsula. His military confederates took the palace and installed him as premier. The base remains vacant to this day.

Ernesto collapses back onto his cot, staring at the ceiling.

ERNESTO

If he hates the U.S. so much, why cater to airhead tourists?

KENYATTA

Isn't it obvious, Yankee? Conquest is quite a costly hobby.

Ernesto sits upright, grasping the implication.

ERNESTO

The tour funds the war.

Kenyatta catches the ball, admiring it in his hand.

KENYATTA

Americans...you simply can't resist a scrap in someone else's yard.

INT. DEPT. OF DEFENSE - JENNA'S DESK - HOURS LATER

Jenna presses her cellphone to her ear as Ernesto's voicemail picks up once again.

ERNIE (V.O.)

You've reached Ernesto, leave a message and I'll get back to ya.

JENNA

Goddamn it.

Jenna hangs up the phone and chucks it on the desk. She chews on the end of a pen, lost in thought. She snatches the handset off a landline phone and dials an extension.

After several seconds, someone answers.

BOSWICK (V.O.)

Boswick.

JENNA

I need a favor. Do you guys have anyone stationed in Kharphet?

BOSWICK (V.O.)

Jenna, what an unwelcome surprise.

JENNA

Well?

BOSWICK (V.O.)

I obviously can't disclose that.

JENNA

So yes-

BOSWICK (V.O.)

No. And even if we did, that would be absolutely classified information-

JENNA

I'm calling in my favor. You owe me, remember?

BOSWICK (V.O.)

I should have never-

He sighs. The line goes silent for a moment.

BOSWICK (V.O.)

What do you need?

INT. BUNKER - PRISONERS ROOM - NIGHT

Ernesto and Kenyatta make small talk on their bunks.

The armed guard who staffs their cell enters from the tunnel. He points at Ernesto with the barrel of his gun.

ARMED GUARD

You come with me.

(to Kenyatta)

Alone.

Ernesto looks to Kenyatta in terror.

KENYATTA

(in Vietnamese)

He doesn't speak well, only English. Let me.

(in English)

Translator.

The guard glances between the two, weighing the pitch.

EXT. BUNKER - TUNNEL EXITS - NIGHT

Ernesto and Kenyatta follow the armed guard between raised piles of dirt and bamboo stalks. Antique metal lanterns on sticks illuminate small windows and ladders descending into the bunkers. Rebels idle along the walls, smoking cigarettes.

Ernesto glimpses the faces of children and their mothers peeking out from the occasional window opening. It's unclear if they're families of the guards, or refugees themselves.

Another rebel, cigar held in his teeth, crosses in front of the trio after spotting onlookers from a window. He hollers at them, raising his weapon as they all duck from within.

INT. BUNKER - REBEL HQ - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto and Kenyatta are escorted into a fresh underground chamber. Though of similar height to their cell, this room is much larger. It resembles an authentic war bunker, with finished concrete walls and flooring.

Guns, ammunition, and maps sprawl across several tables and lay stacked in piles along the perimeter. Several RPGs are piled in their own conspicuous section.

REBEL CHIEF (55) glowers at the arriving captives from under a central exposed lightbulb. He wears a black beret and a digital camouflage pattern uniform, akin to modern soldiers.

Lingering rebels consolidate around the Chief and his two captives as they come to a halt at his seat.

The armed guard who escorted them kicks out Ernesto's knees, forcing him to kneel. Kenyatta moves to the floor before suffering the same fate.

The rebel chief reclines in his seat, dangling a leg over the arm of his ramshackle wooden chair. He flashes a nefarious, playful smile at Ernesto as he addresses him in English.

REBEL CHIEF

Hello, American. Very nice to meet you.

Ernesto bows, aiming to show his utmost respect.

ERNESTO

Thank-thank you king. It is very nice, very nice to meet you.

REBEL CHIEF

"King?"

He mumbles something to one of the rebels nearest him.

KENYATTA

(in Vietnamese)

Vua.

The rebel chief raises his eyebrows, repeating the word.

REBEL CHIEF

(in Vietnamese)

Vua?

He cracks up at this, bellowing at the notion.

REBEL CHIEF (CONT'D)

(in English)

"King." Very good.

Recognizing Kenyatta's presence as Ernesto's translator, the chief pivots to address him.

REBEL CHIEF (CONT'D)

(in Vietnamese)

Tell the Texan he will follow my instructions.

Kenyatta turns to Ernesto.

KENYATTA

He said tell the Texan to do what he says.

ERNESTO

Texan? Am- am I the Texan?

KENYATTA

Guess.

ERNESTO

I don't even sound Southern. I'm from Philly!

The armed guard who escorted Ernesto and Kenyatta comes forward. He chucks down a boxy phone with a long antennae.

REBEL CHIEF

(in Vietnamese)

You will relay news of your capture to American law enforcement. Once they've heard of your imprisonment, we will negotiate terms.

KENYATTA

(in English)

They want you to call the police in America. They believe if word spreads of your capture, they can make some sort of deal.

Ernesto stares at the headset. He begins babbling excuses.

ERNESTO

I- I- I can't just dial 9-1-1, it doesn't work outside the states.

KENYATTA

Call any number, it doesn't matter. Your parents! Call their home.

ERNESTO

I don't know their number.

The rebel chief bristles at their side conversation. He consults with one of the commandos.

REBEL CHIEF

(in Vietnamese)

What is he saying?

Kenyatta continues grilling Ernesto.

KENYATTA

(in English)

What do you mean-

ERNESTO

They moved when I left for college, I don't know their new number.

KENYATTA

Call their mobile phones-

ERNESTO

I don't have those memorized! They're saved in my contacts.

The Rebel Chief leaps up, furious at the language barrier.

REBEL CHIEF

(in English, to Kenyatta)

YOU! What is he saying!

KENYATTA

(in Vietnamese)

He's saying he doesn't know any numbers to America.

The rebel chief swing his leg off the chair arm, sitting up.

REBEL CHIEF
(in Vietnamese)
Lies!

KENYATTA
(to Ernesto)
Do you not speak to her? Your mother?

ERNESTO
Of course I do, I'm just bad at memorizing stuff. I've always had some sort of contacts list-

REBEL CHIEF
(in English)
Enough!
(in Vietnamese)
You will make a call to the United States and announce your capture. Refusal will merit execution.

KENYATTA
(in English)
You must make a call, any call. Or they will shoot you.

For emphasis, the rebel chief arms his weapon. The men around him follow suit, the air filled with intimidating "clicks".

ERNESTO
Jesus, okay, alright, just- just gimme a minute. Uh-

Ernesto clenches his fists rocking on his knees. Eyes closed, he mumbles under his breath for several seconds.

He freezes, his eyes shooting open. He turns to Kenyatta.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
Wait! Wait- I- okay-

His voice trembles as he sings a jingle under his breath.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
Eight hundred five eight eight, two three hundred. Empireeee-

KENYATTA
What are-

Ernesto starts punching the numbers into the satellite phone. He presses the handset against his forehead as it rings.

On the fourth tone, someone picks up.

EMPIRE CARPET REP
Empire Carpet, this is Arvin.

ERNESTO
Hello! Hi, thank god. Listen, my name is Ernesto Ramirez-

EMPIRE CARPET REP
Good morning Ernie. Sorry- can I call you Ernie?

ERNESTO
Yes, yeah, listen-

EMPIRE CARPET REP
Guess that makes me wonder if Bert's on the line too, hehe-

ERNESTO
Arvin just- shut up for one second. I'm currently being held hostage by Kharpheese terrorists on the border of Vietnam. I need you-

EMPIRE CARPET REP
Haha, yeah I get it. You and your punk-ass friends stayed up watching Family Guy and saw the ad and you thought it'd be soooo funny to-

ERNESTO
Arvin, I- my name is Ernesto Ramirez, and I'm begging you to call the cops, the fire department - the fucking D.M.V. - and tell them an American citizen is being held for ransom by the Kharpheese insurgency-

EMPIRE CARPET REP
Sure, alright pal-

ERNESTO
Sir, please, just tell someone-

The line goes dead.

Ernesto, ghost white, stares at the receiver.

The rebel chief flicks his cigar away. He may not speak the language, but he gathered the gist of the conversation.

Admiring his gun, lost in thought, he tosses it to the ground. He whips a machete out from a holster at his side .

The chief lines the blade up with the center of Ernesto's head. Ernesto bends over, hands up, spit bubbling from his mouth with a stammering plea.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

Wait, wait, wait! My ex! She- she
works for the government! S-State
Department! If I can-
(to Kenyatta)
Ask if they have a computer!

Kenyatta relays the message. The rebel chief pauses, then barks an order. A rebel brings forth a heavy, ancient laptop.

Ernesto opens a browser window and opens up Facebook.

INT. JENNA'S APARTMENT - MIDNIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Jenna's phone buzzes on her nightstand, stirring her awake. She props herself up on an elbow, squinting at the notification: "Friend Request: Donald Sayavong"

She opens the friend request. The screen displays a Facebook Profile for the armed guard staffed outside Ernesto's cell. He wears a Snoopy T-Shirt and brandishes an AK-47.

She notices an unread Messenger alert in the corner of the screen. Clicking to open the message, she scans the text. Her eyes grow wide as she processes the details.

INT. BUNKER - REBEL HQ - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto's eye twitches as he stares at the "Read" confirmation beneath his desperate plea.

KENYATTA

Has she responded?

ERNESTO

She read it, ok, she's definitely
seen it. I just- wait, wait, she's
typing-

Dots appear below the message thread.

Before a new message arrives, the Rebel Chief kicks the laptop away with his boot.

He raises Ernesto's chin with the edge of the machete.

REBEL CHIEF

Thank you Texan, we will take things from here.

REBEL CHIEF (CONT'D)

(in Vietnamese)

Back to their cell!

INT. BUNKER - AFTERNOON - AN HOUR LATER

Ernesto sits on the edge of his bed, his knees knocking against one another. He bites his lip, wracked with obvious discomfort.

Kenyatta lays on his back, reading a Vietnamese book.

KENYATTA

What is it, Yankee?

ERNESTO

I haven't been able to go since we've been here. There's nowhere to- you know-

Kenyatta stops reading and juts his chin toward the farthest corner of the room.

KENYATTA

That corner is best. Anywhere else will return to your cot.

He resumes reading.

KENYATTA (CONT'D)

Dig before you go, cover when you have finished.

Ernesto looks toward the ceiling as if some alternative might descend from heaven. Admitting defeat, he shuffles toward where Kenyatta instructed him to do his business.

Kneeling to dig, Ernesto glances back at Kenyatta's book.

ERNESTO

What are you reading anyway?

KENYATTA

A satire. It's by an American,
actually, a former soldier. He
fought in the second world war.

ERNESTO

Any good?

Kenyatta flips back several pages, using a finger to search
for a passage he has in mind.

KENYATTA

"Mr. Trout dreamed of a money tree
with twenty-dollar bills for
leaves. Its flowers were government
bonds. Its fruit was diamonds. It
attracted human beings who killed
each other around the roots and
made very good fertilizer."

Ernesto chuckles.

ERNESTO

I like that. It sounds familiar.
Or, I don't know...maybe not.

He sighs, gazing down at the shallow divot he's prepared.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

You're not gonna watch, right?

KENYATTA

Would you like me to, Yankee?

ERNESTO

No!

KENYATTA

Good. Proceed.

INT. BUNKER - AFTERNOON - SOME TIME LATER

Ernesto and Kenyatta both sit cross-legged on the floor of
the bunker room, playing a game of cards. The usual armed
guard stands watch at the entrance.

Suddenly, the ceiling quakes above them. Faint explosions can
be heard in the distance.

A second rebel arrives at the entrance. He argues with his
associate before sprinting off. The first armed guard trains
his gun on Ernesto and Kenyatta.

ARMED GUARD

Don't move!

He sprints into the tunnel. Kenyatta scrambles to his feet.

KENYATTA

I've never been left unsupervised.
Something is coming.

Ernesto tilts an ear to the ceiling. There's a faint rumbling of machinery, interspersed with frantic shouting.

Kenyatta douses his palms in water from a pail. He scrapes at each hand with a tattered rag in an attempt to sanitize them through brute force.

He dashes over to Ernesto, where he begins to unspool the bandage around his waist. The wound is still gnarly, with dark red blood rising to the surface.

Kenyatta dips his fingers into the wound, eliciting a shriek of pain from Ernesto.

ERNESTO

Fucking Jesus man, what the hell-

Kenyatta ignores him. He paints the blood across Ernesto's face, clothes, and exposed skin.

KENYATTA

You must stay out of sight. If you
hear voices, lay down and play
dead.

Kenyatta leaves his side. He begins to thrust various items from around the room into a dingy, cloth bag.

ERNESTO

If they were gonna kill us, they
would have done it already.

DOCTOR KENYATTA

They are desperate. You are still a
bargaining chip. And it's not the
rebels you should fear.

ERNESTO

What?

KENYATTA

You have seen behind the curtain.
No one controls what you know of
this place. They will not let you
leave here alive.

ERNESTO
Shit- ok, uh- they-

Ernesto begins to wheeze, losing control of his breathing.

Kenyatta, donning a nearby water pail as a helmet, returns to Ernesto's side. He slaps the cloth bag on Ernesto's lap.

He grabs Ernesto's hands and folds them around a compass.

KENYATTA
You must find the river. There is a
camp across the border, two miles
from the opposite bank, due East.
Should you reach the clearing, my
colleagues can secure you safe
passage.

An earth-shattering explosion rocks the ceiling overhead,
sending fragments of dirt raining down on the two men.

The doctor bolts to the tunnel exit, scanning both ways.

ERNESTO
Wait, where are you going?

KENYATTA
There will be wounded here. I will
do what I can for them. If God is
kind, I will meet you at the
crossing. Good luck.

Kenyatta nods to Ernesto, and disappears into the tunnel.

Ernesto attempts to gather his breath, psyching himself up.

He begins to move around the room in search of weapons or
tools. Shrieks and gunfire echo from the hallway.

Two guards emerge from the tunnel, screaming at Ernesto and
gesturing with their weapons to kneel on the floor.

As one guard puts the barrel of their gun against the back of
his head, the sounds of two booming shots ring out. Ernesto
recoils at the shots, expecting each to be an execution blow.

The guards slump to the ground. Someone enters: it's Trevor.

Trevor rushes forward to help Ernesto to his feet. He wraps
Ernesto in a vice-like hug, taking the latter by surprise.

TREVOR
Dude!! Holy shit, I mean- you're
like un-killable, man!

ERNESTO

Trevor, how-

TREVOR

Bro, they are absolutely torching these fuckers outside, it's like a goddamn barbecue out there! Took a page out of your book and just leapt in one of these foxholes-

He shows off some cartoonish karate chops.

TREVOR (CONT'D)

Been slicin' and dicin' these chodes, maverick style. But I knew you were in here, dude, I fuckin' knew it. Here, follow me-

He slides a new ammo clip into place and hustles down the tunnel. Looking back, Ernesto grabs the cloth bag off his cot and stumbles after Trevor.

EXT. BUNKER - AFTERNOON - MOMENTS LATER

Trevor and Ernesto emerge from the bunker to sheer chaos.

Flaming rebel fighters stagger past before collapsing. They continue to smolder, lying motionless in the dirt.

An RPG whistles past Ernesto and Trevor, detonating inside the tunnel from which they just fled. Flames erupt outward.

A blood-soaked rebel leaps on a commando, wrapping his legs around his waist as he stabs at the gaps in the kevlar vest.

Both are swiftly decimated by an exploding mortar shell.

EXT. BUNKER - TREE LINE - CONTINUOUS

Some hundred feet away, General Huhn leans back on his heels, smirking through a lit cigar.

Staring across the field, his face twitches as he recognizes Ernesto and Trevor conversing outside the bunker.

The general hurls the cigar into the dirt, snarling with primal rage. He stalks off with a clear objective.

EXT. BUNKER - TUNNEL EXITS - CONTINUOUS

Ernesto turns his head and clocks Kenyatta's lifeless body twenty feet away. Keith & Greta Sue stand over his corpse.

KEITH

Now, I didn't shoot him because he's...you know. We're both in agreement here-

GRETA SUE

No, he was runnin' straight at ya darling! And, uh, you don't wear a helmet if you're planning on bein' peaceful. Nuh uh-

Ernesto, watching the unfolding massacre around him, looks back toward the tunnels, perhaps to head back for cover.

Seeing the complex in daylight for the first time, he registers a structure atop the network of tunnels: it's Fort Nguyen, just as it appeared in the dossier photo.

Ernesto grabs Trevor by the arms.

ERNESTO

Trevor, listen to me. We have to get out of here, alright? If Sao Deht finds me - us, together - we're not going back alive-

TREVOR

Hey, hey, calm down bud! Think your days on a squatty potty messed you up pretty good. Let's just head back to camp-

ERNESTO

Trevor! We need to leave right now. You just have to trust me, ok, I...you said you had my six, right?

Trevor puffs out a huge sigh, lolls his head back.

TREVOR

Bro, that's not fair...

ERNESTO

Right?!

TREVOR

-yes, yeah dude. I have your six-

ERNESTO

-ok, then you need to trust me. You saved my life. Now, just- let me pay you back.

Trevor sticks a tongue in his cheek. He glances around at the unfolding disaster, taking an aimless kick at the dirt.

TREVOR

Fuck, fine, ok. But you gotta recommend me for, like, a Nobel Peace Prize or MI6 after this.

ERNESTO

Fine, yeah, whatever. But...you're with me?

Trevor places a comforting hand on Ernie's shoulder, smiling.

TREVOR

I'm with you big dawg. Let's-

Mid-sentence, Trevor's head explodes from a sniper round, showering Ernesto in blood.

ERNESTO

(gasping)

WHAT THE FUCK-

Ernesto claws the blood from his eyes and scans the horizon for the source of the attack.

Some distance away, he watches as General Huhn heaves on the bolt of a massive sniper rifle before aiming down the scope.

Ernesto dives to the side. A massive round buries itself in the dirt inches from where he'd stood mere seconds before.

Trevor's body slumps forward and collapses on the ground as Ernesto sprints away, into the flora.

INT. JUNGLE - AFTERNOON - FIVE MINUTES LATER

Ernesto collapses on the ground, wheezing, after a relentless sprint from the war zone.

He stares at the compass clutched in his palm. As he squints at the needle, the snap of a twig paralyzes him with fear.

Ernesto splays on the dirt, attempting to cover himself with loose leaves and branches. He closes his eyes, laying still.

RYTTER (O.C.)
What the fuck are you doing?

Rytter stands with a rifle at his waist trained on Ernesto, his backpack slung over one shoulder.

Ernesto clambers to his knees, trembling from adrenaline.

ERNESTO
Thank God, Rytter. Listen-

RYTTER
Shut up, commie.

Ernesto cocks his head, squinting his eyes. He staggers to his feet, but remains hunched over. He winces as he places a hand on his injured ribs.

ERNESTO
Huh?

Rytter pops a bullet in the chamber and pulls back the bolt, adjusting his stance for stronger balance.

Ernesto raises his hands, cowering, while taking small steps backward.

RYTTER
Stop moving!

ERNESTO
Okay, okay-

RYTTER
Bet they didn't even try that hard.
Probably flipped you to their side
in just a couple of hours.

ERNESTO
What? No, they didn't- I'm not,
like, reprogrammed, alright? You
and me, we're- we're Americans,
right?!

Rytter eases his stance ever so slightly. He raises his chin.

RYTTER
Prove it!

ERNESTO
Huh?

RYTTER
Say what you love about it.
America.

Ernesto grimaces, fumbling for a reply.

ERNESTO
Sure, yeah. Uh, uh...freedom,
right? Freedom to say whatever you
want, even- even sometimes if it
isn't even true! And, uh, football,
real football, not the one with the
kicking-well there's some kicking-

Rytter raises the gun to his shoulder. Ernesto speeds up his
pleas, holding his hands higher.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)
FUCK- and- and you can put the Ten
Commandments wherever you want, and
you can make more money than has
ever been possible in the history
of mankind and you don't need
experience, any experience, to be
in charge of the whole free world,
you just gotta be charming and
flexible-

RYTTER
I think that's enough.

Rytter puts the gunsight to his eye once more.

Ernesto squeezes his hands together and rocks back and forth
on his heels, crumbling inward at his impending demise.

ERNESTO
Please, Rytter, I'm begging you
man, I just wanna go home.

Rytter takes a step forward, sneering.

RYTTER
Don't worry, I'll send you home.
Home to your Bolsheviks -

Rytter continues pacing forward.

Ernesto falls to his knees, his raised arms quaking.

RYTTER (CONT'D)
And your food stamps-

Rytter's closing the distance. He's about ten feet away.

Ernesto closes his eyes, whimpering as he starts to cry.

RYTTER (CONT'D)
And your Siberian yak-fucker
friends. You're nothing more than
brainwashed rebel terrorist scum.
And I'm gonna-

Rytter takes another step forward.

A crisp "click" sounds. Rytter looks down, confused.

RYTTER (CONT'D)
Huh-

In an instant, Rytter disappears with a deafening boom,
replaced by a fine red mist.

Ernesto, trembling, cracks open an eye.

A large piece of metal lands at his knees with a metallic
thud: it's a shard from an old land mine.

Ernesto releases a tortured half-chuckle. He devolves into
insane, disbelieving laughter as he comes to terms with his
impossible survival.

He crawls to the smoldering, tattered remains of Rytter's
backpack. Pawing through the debris, his eyes narrow as he
touches something recognizable.

Ernesto pulls out Quincy's spy cam. The exterior is sooty and
cracked but intact. The hard drive just *might* be salvageable.

Staring ahead into the jungle, Ernesto tightens his grip on
the device. He forges ahead with newfound conviction.

EXT. JUNGLE - RIVERBED - HOURS LATER

Ernesto arrives at the riverbed. He rests his hands on his
knees, taking a moment to recuperate.

Hiking up his pant legs, he carries Rytter's backpack
overhead as he wades across through the chest-deep water.

EXT. JUNGLE - REFUGEE CAMP - HOURS LATER

Ernesto emerges into a clearing. In the distance, he espies
several white tents emblazoned with red crosses.

Volunteers and doctors in white coats bustle between the tents, tending to victims interspersed on makeshift cots inside the awnings and along the exteriors of the tents.

Ernesto, seizing on a final wind, limps toward them.

INT. REFUGEE CAMP - MEDICAL TENT - DAYS LATER

Ernesto dials an unknown number from a satellite phone. On the other line, Jenna answers.

INTERCUT - DEPT. OF DEFENSE - JENNA'S DESK - CONTINUOUS

Jenna struggles to grasp the phone, forgetting how to hold the device in her desperation to answer.

JENNA

Hello?

ERNESTO

Jenna-

JENNA

Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead. I specifically said not to go radio silent on me-

ERNESTO

I know, ok, just- it's been a fucking nightmare, Jenna, alright? There's crazy evil shit happening here-

Jenna places the phone on speaker and lays it on her desk.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

-we're talking genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes type stuff. I'm still-

Ernesto glances around the tent. He cradles the phone against his shoulder as he shrinks inward, lowering his voice.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

I don't think we should talk over the phone about it but- I have stuff people need to see. Proof.

JENNA

What do you mean?

ERNESTO

It's complicated. But we- we need to get everyone over here, alright? I'm talking U.N., the Hague, UNESCO-

JENNA

Slow down, just- first off, are you safe?

ERNESTO

Yes, yeah, I'm at a camp across the border, Vietnam. I think I'm in the clear.

JENNA

Ok, alright, listen. Someone at Langley owes me a favor, he's got an exfil on standby for you-

ERNESTO

No I'm fine, these guys are gonna give me a ride first thing tomorrow morning.

JENNA

Are you sure you can trust them?

ERNESTO

Yeah. Yeah I think so.

JENNA

Ok, just be careful, alright?

ERNESTO

I will.

An extended silence ensues before Jenna replies.

JENNA

I'm really glad you're ok. I thought...I'm just glad you're ok.

Ernesto smiles. He knows what she wants to say.

ERNESTO

Yeah. Me too. I'll be back soon. I'll tell you all about it.

JENNA

I'd like that.

She smiles, too. For the first time in a while, Ernesto isn't anxious for what awaits him in his future. He hangs up.

INT. DEPT. OF STATE - JENNA'S DESK

Jenna hangs up the phone.

JENNA
Thank God.

BOSWICK (O.C.)
So we're all square then?

Across from her sits BOSWICK (39), a broad-shouldered, intense man with five o'clock shadow.

Boswick lights a cigarette, leaning back in his chair.

JENNA
Yeah, we can call off the cavalry.
Thanks, John.

BOSWICK
Mmmhmm.

Boswick rises to his feet, his immense stature filling the space. He begins to make his way toward the door.

He pauses just inside the entryway.

BOSWICK (CONT'D)
Did he give anything to you,
previously? Coordinates, photos...

JENNA
No, this is the first time he's
called since the Facebook stuff.

BOSWICK
Good, good. Well if anything else
comes up, you give me a call. Yeah?

JENNA
Absolutely. Thanks for your help,
Cal. Seriously.

Boswick moves to the door. A shadow hangs over his face as he grips the entryway with a massive, muscled hand.

BOSWICK
Don't mention it.

He exits.

EXT. JUNGLE - REFUGEE CAMP - DAWN

Ernesto, bare-chested, sits on his medical cot rubbing sleep from his eyes. A TRIAGE NURSE approaches.

TRIAGE NURSE

The helicopter is arriving shortly,
if you can gather your things.

ERNESTO

Thanks, will do.

Looking down, Ernesto spots the cloth bag bequeathed to him by Kenyatta peeking out from under the bed.

Ernesto reaches for the bag and rummages inside. He seems surprised as he pulls something out: Kenyatta's book.

Inspecting the cover, he tries to divine some translation of the characters. He swears he's seen this cover art before.

Opening the book, he flips to a page that's been dog-eared, with a passage underscored in pen.

The Triage Nurse comes back through the tent. Ernesto raises an arm to flag him down.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

Hey man, sorry, can I ask you
something? Uh...do you speak
Vietnamese?

The triage nurse nods. Ernesto holds the passage up for him.

ERNESTO (CONT'D)

Can you tell me what this says?

Walking over, the triage nurse takes the book from Ernesto.

TRIAGE NURSE

"That's the nice thing about war.
Everybody gets a little something."

The triage nurse flips back to the cover, admiring it.

TRIAGE NURSE (CONT'D)

That's a good book. I'd recommend
getting a copy in English, though.

ERNESTO

What's the title?

TRIAGE NURSE

Slaughterhouse Five.

Ernesto smirks at the coincidence, nodding his head.

ERNESTO

Thanks.

He slides the book back into the bag and rises from the cot.

EXT. JUNGLE - HELICOPTER LANDING - AN HOUR LATER

Ernesto limps out to meet a medivac chopper idling past the tents, accompanied by two other bandaged patients.

A pilot in a weathered bomber jacket helps them aboard.

As the chopper rises into the air, Ernesto gazes out at the jungle. In the distance, a hot orange sun rises on a new day.

Ernesto smiles and closes his eyes, a picture of pure relief.

EXT. JUNGLE - DISTANT VIEW OF TREE CANOPY - CONTINUOUS

The helicopter explodes. Flames and broken metal rain down on the canopy below. A black cloud lingers where the helicopter flew just moments before.

EPILOGUE

INT. WHITE HOUSE PRESS CONFERENCE - HOURS LATER

Jenna delivers a tailored report from the press secretary podium. Minor faults in her makeup suggest she's been crying. She clears her throat.

JENNA

We have reason to believe Kharphese rebels are responsible for the destruction of a medivac chopper carrying refugees three miles north of Phu Laht. Secretary Fuller would like to thank the Kharphese government for repatriating the remains of several American citizens believed to have been kidnapped and executed by rebel forces while volunteering with the Red Cross. Their remains were discovered near the crash site-

CUT TO:

EXT. ROYAL PALACE - ENTRANCE FACADE - HOURS LATER

Sao Deht stands at a podium, surrounded by flashing cameras and reporters as he delivers his own press conference.

The imperial regent forces a toothy smile for the cameras, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides as he reads from a pre-written statement.

General Huhn, scowling, stands at attention beside him.

SAO DEHT

Today marks the dawn of an unprecedented era of collaboration with our American allies. In the coming months, American troops will commence training exercises at Fort Nguyen. And in the spirit of cooperation, President Danforth has agreed to lift certain sanctions on goods procured from our freshly liberated interior-

Behind the mob, a mute, shadowy figure can be seen: Boswick.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY STREET - AFTERNOON - IPHONE FOOTAGE

A young INFLUENCER (25), holds the microphone piece of their headphones as they walk down a city street, recording themselves via iPhone with an extended shaky arm.

INFLUENCER

I've spoken with doctors on site in
Phu Laht, right, and the math just
isn't math-ing. Like, check it-

The screen changes to show shaky cellphone footage taken from outside the medical tents at the refugee camp.

The video shows the moment the RPG flies through the trees and collides with the medivac chopper. It plays forward and backward several times.

INFLUENCER (V.O.)

This is footage captured by a
volunteer at the camp on the day of
the attack.

The feed returns to focus on the manic influencer.

INFLUENCER

The missile wasn't fired from
anywhere near the Kharphese border!
If you follow the smoke trail-

CUT TO:

INT. PASTERNAK HOME - LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Keith and Greta Sue sit in director's chairs amidst an interview set staged within their home.

KEITH

Unexploded ordinances account for
five thousand deaths globally each
year.

GRETA SUE

At Rytter's Rangers, we educate
parents on the dangers often hiding
in plain sight-

CUT TO:

MONTAGE - B/W PHOTOS OF SU-Z, TREVOR & ERNESTO

Candid photos of Su-Z, Trevor and Ernesto taken from around Sao Deht's compound, inside the Humvee and amid the jungle trees fade in and out while "In the Arms of An Angel" plays.

EXT. BOUTIQUE HOTEL - BALCONY - MORNING

The images fade into Gabrielle holding her hands in a heart shape over her chest, recording herself from a laptop. The remnants of a charcuterie board lie on the table beside her.

GABRIELLE

Gone, but not forgotten. Our crew
was only together for a few days,
but we were ride-or-die. And some
of us? They did.

Gabrielle shuts her eyes and clutches her chest, breathing a dramatic sigh. She smiles, her tone suddenly upbeat.

GABRIELLE (CONT'D)

To Trevor, Su-Z, and the rest, I'd
like to dedicate Monaco, my one
hundred and ninety third country.
Check my story tomorrow, when I'll
be headed to 2025's hottest spot on
the rise: South Sudan! Byeeeeeeeeee!

BLACKOUT

THE END.