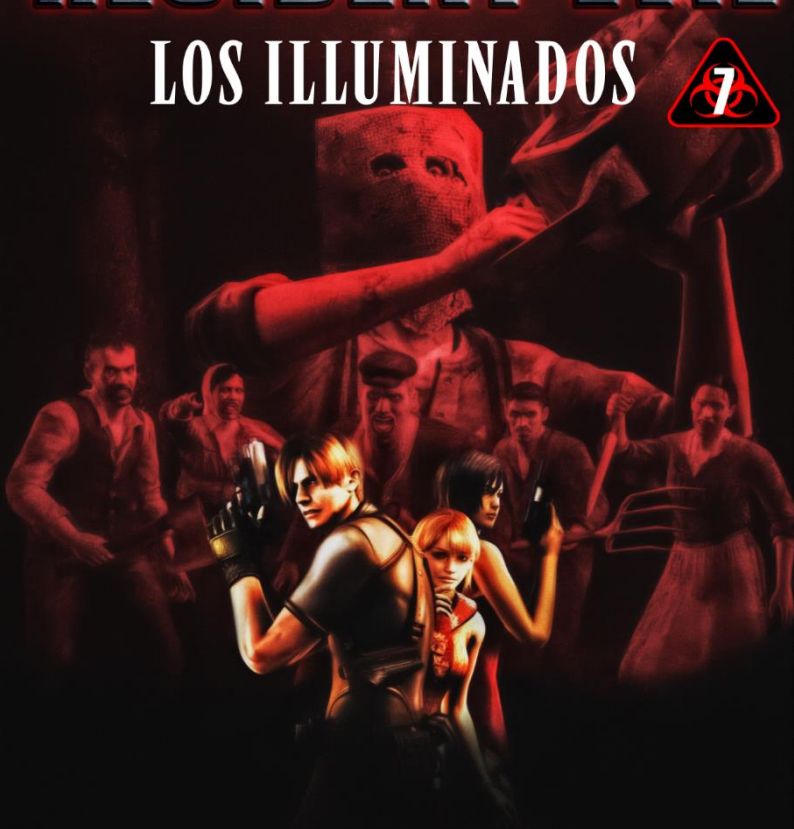


The sacrilegious novelization of *Resident Evil 4*

# RESIDENT EVIL™

## LOS ILLUMINADOS



N.E. STRIDE

As the villagers pounded on the door, their Spanish chants blending into a harrowing cacophony, Leon clambered up the stairs, immediately greeted with a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun mounted on the wall.

He craned towards the bottom floor, trying to listen for any signs of the villagers breaking in. Their incessant screaming had stopped, leaving an eerie silence.

Then, there was a loud buzz.

Leon went down the stairs, approaching the window he covered with the bookcase. There was a crack just small enough for him to peer through.

The villagers had decided to stop their attack and just stand there, smiles on their pallid faces as that whirring buzz got louder and more aggressive. *Right. Whatever's going on, you need to get out!*

Leon turned away from the window, his back to the wall. *Up the stairs and to the roof, just like we planned-*

*WHAM!* The wall burst open right next to Leon's chest, and a chainsaw blade rammed through, sending splinters in all directions.

RESIDENT EVIL™ NOVELS BY S.D. PERRY

The Umbrella Conspiracy

Caliban Cove

City of the Dead

Underworld

Nemesis

Code: Veronica

Zero Hour

# RESIDENT EVIL

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

N.E. STRIDE

**LRE**

PROJECT LRE BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Raccoon City

This is fanfiction that has been made available for free. If you enjoy it, it is strongly recommended that you support the developers of the source material by purchasing their games.

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

*An original publication* of PROJECT LRE BOOKS

© 2023 Capcom Co., Ltd. ©2023 Capcom U.S.A., Inc.  
All Rights reserved.

This is a fan project that is not affiliated with any of the entities responsible for the Resident Evil series, the author of the previous official novels, nor the people and organizations responsible for their publication. No infringement is intended.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

As you no doubt already know, this is not going to be a 1:1 adaptation of the source material. This is for multiple reasons, from me wanting to write something in continuity with S.D. Perry's previous Resident Evil novels, to me also wanting to create a new experience that still stays true to the game. Regardless, I hope you enjoy reading it, as I certainly had fun writing it. Also, this was written long before the remake came out. Any similarities to it are a complete coincidence, I promise.

*For S.D. Perry, who did it first and best.*

When one with honeyed words but evil mind  
persuades the mob, great woes befall the state.

– *Euripides*

# PROLOGUE

*News Comet*, October 2, 2003

## UMBRELLA: THE FINAL CASUALTY OF RACCOON CITY

*RACCOON CITY* — It appears that we have lost the Umbrella Corporation to the new millennium with the announcement of the closure of its remaining subsidiaries earlier this morning. This announcement comes on the fifth anniversary of the bombing of Raccoon City — an incident linked to the major

## II. E. STRIDE

pharmaceutical conglomerate via a series of internal data leaks confirming the company's responsibility for a chemical spill that caused a wave of unprecedented violence in the city's streets.

While the families of the deceased face an uphill battle to claim financial reparations, Umbrella faces the downhill slide toward its inevitable demise. What was once one of the most powerful corporate entities on the planet has financially flatlined, liquidated its assets, and is now reduced to begging its competitors to buy it out. At the time of writing, there has been no indication that an acquisition of Umbrella is in the cards.

But what of Oswald Spencer, Umbrella's elusive CEO? Since the destruction of Spencer's estate in 1998, the man has seemingly disappeared from the face of the Earth. There is speculation that Spencer's self-imposed exile stems from the revelation that his home was one of Umbrella's testing facilities, housing some of the biological weapons spotted in Raccoon City on the night of the incident.

Regardless of the reason, President Graham recently announced the beginning of an international manhunt to recover the disgraced CEO and ensure that he answers for his company's dark legacy...

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*The Global Times*, November 16, 2003

### US/SPAIN BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH INITIATIVES PROMISE TO PAY DIVIDENDS

*CAMBRIDGE* — If you asked your average man on the street to tell you what they knew about Valdelobos, you'd likely get stunned silence.

However, the otherwise isolationist Spanish village could cement its place in world history, thanks to an initiative from the U.S. Government to provide scholarships to outstanding individuals worldwide.

Today, one such individual (whose identity will remain anonymous, per their request) graduated from one of the most prestigious educational institutions in America with a Bachelor of Science, majoring in Biology.

While the graduating class of 2003's plans now include a well-deserved rest, this individual doesn't plan to hit the brakes. They have outlined their plans to immediately return to their hometown and continue their work in biological research, citing agriculture and medicine among the many fields they hope to innovate.

Watch this space because you'll hear more about Valdelobos sooner than you think...

*News F3*, January 8, 2004

## MEET THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER

WASHINGTON D.C. — Ashley Graham is the daughter of the most powerful man in the entire free world. However, I forgot that fact almost immediately when our interview started, and I found myself wholly disarmed by her effortless charm.

Graham is an incredible, bright young woman whose elegance and poise never betray her down-to-Earth demeanor. While her father grapples with the upcoming election, promising to be tough on the growing threat of bioterrorism that emerged with the Umbrella leaks, Ashley has just finished her third year of college — and she is already moving towards a career in humanitarianism.

Graham quickly dismissed the discussion about her father's bid for re-election. "Regardless of my father's position, I am lucky to have been granted a platform with influence. My priority is using that platform to help those in need."

And Graham has undoubtedly used her influence on various projects, from volunteering to clothe, feed, and house the homeless, donating to many different charitable organizations, and vocally advocating for the rights of minority groups worldwide.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

When I asked Graham if she had presidential plans of her own, she responded with a light-hearted chuckle. “I want to focus on what I can do now,” she said with an infectious smile, “because, who knows what the future holds?”...

# ΟΠΕ

Operation: Javier was not Leon S. Kennedy's first anti-B.O.W. mission. However, it was his first mission sanctioned by the United States Government. After years of hiding in the shadows with the few members of Special Tactics and Rescue Squad (S.T.A.R.S.) that weren't dead, something was refreshing about getting to fight evil out in the open, especially now that the Umbrella Corporation was no more.

When the President's men first approached Leon, he had just finished moving into an apartment with

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

partner Claire Redfield. They had gone from relying on each other throughout their time in Raccoon City to having feelings for each other that they couldn't ignore, even as they were battling whatever was left of Umbrella's dwindling forces – mutant and humankind. Their shared nightmares only brought them closer together.

Now that the evil corporation was finally gone, nothing was left to stop the two from finally making things official. From a first date to an impromptu trip around Europe to a decision to settle down, their relationship had gone from a hint below the surface to a beautiful all-consuming blur.

And yet, neither Claire nor Leon was surprised when they were approached by stone-faced G-Men in dark, perfectly tailored suits, each stepping over cardboard boxes full of bric-a-brac to extend a hand towards them.

By the end of the day, Leon was stepping into the Oval Office, fighting jet lag and nerves as the President greeted him with a look of harrowing concern. The Umbrella Corporation may have been a footnote in history, but their footprint remained, as several bio-organic weapons had apparently made their way onto the black market.

Several hours later, Leon was in combat fatigues, wiping a thick layer of sweat off his brow as he peered through a pair of high-tech binoculars into Mixcóatl. A suspected shady deal had been made in this deserted South American town — someone had gotten their hands on the T-Virus.

*TWANG!* Leon was snapped out of his surveillance by thick metal piercing the dirt behind him. He whipped his body around to find Jack Krauser, his partner — a stern, heavy-set jarhead with slicked-back blond hair underneath a green beret.

"You need to watch your back, Leon."

Leon's eyes drifted to Krauser's hands, wrapped around the hilt of a combat knife, its thick blade the length of Krauser's muscular forearm. Impaled to the dirt was a small snake, twitching as the life ebbed from its reptilian body.

"Right. Thanks." Leon muttered as he awkwardly returned to surveying the nearby houses for any signs of life.

Something about Krauser unnerved Leon, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Perhaps it was because he insisted on carrying a knife that could slice a man in half or because he was twice Leon's size with three times the muscle.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*Don't kid yourself*, Leon thought. *You know precisely why he gives you a bad feeling*. Did Leon shudder at the thought of being on the receiving end of Krauser's knife? A little. But, it was Krauser's stoicism that really got to him.

As the two touched down in South America, Leon was met with Krauser's attempts to probe him on the gory details of what occurred in Raccoon City in '98.

So, he told Krauser the truth — about how he spent his first night as a Raccoon City police officer fighting hordes of the undead, uncovering a conspiracy involving the Umbrella Corporation, and encountering a terrifying bioweapon that resulted in years of sleepless nights and therapy.

At first, Krauser's reaction was the same as any other; a healthy dose of skepticism. For Leon, that was understandable. After all, his story sounded like the plot of a 70s horror movie, not the recollections of a fellow soldier you relied on to have your back.

But that skepticism slowly gave way to a curiosity Leon had never experienced. Krauser wanted to know more about how the Umbrella Corporation circumvented death, how the company's work was ostensibly the next generation of soldier, how the late William Birkin must have

felt as he mutated into the torso of a bloodthirsty monster that tore through the Raccoon City sewers in search of meat to devour, including his own 12-year-old daughter.

Leon wondered if he was witnessing the mentality that led people to Umbrella in the first place. It ends in complete destruction, but it probably starts with these kinds of lateral questions – where the T-virus is more than just an uncontrollable engine of destruction.

Yet, as he and Krauser made their way into the town and fought through hordes of the zombified populace, Krauser had Leon's six. Despite nagging intrusive thoughts, Leon felt safe.

When they finally reached their target, once-charismatic drug smuggler Javier Hidalgo, Leon was surprised to hear that the anguished criminal had purchased a T-Veronica plant, not to further his own agenda and cause irreparable damage to the world around him, but to harness its restorative powers to save his wife and child from a terminal genetic illness.

The outbreak, the zombies, the mutants – it wasn't the attempt of another rich sociopath to seize power; it was all a terrible mistake that Hidalgo was clearly remorseful for.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon struggled to reconcile that as he kept his standard issue Heckler & Koch VP70 trained on Hidalgo. *If you got involved with the T-virus, you were a selfish monster who wanted power, no matter the cost. That was Umbrella. That's how it works!*

And yet, Javier was in tears when the T-Veronica plant consumed him. When the plant morphed into a bulbous nightmare surrounded by insectoid limbs and rows of spiky, bony protrusions, ready to kill everything in its path, he didn't emerge from the monster's body, cackling and delivering an evil monologue.

*Because Javier wasn't a monster. And, despite his questions, neither was Krauser.*

Forget the nightmare creatures; guilt caught Leon off guard as he watched his partner, whom he'd spent countless hours judging, dive in front of him, right in the path of an imminent attack.

Guilt coursed through Leon as Krauser wailed in pain, his arm tearing open to expose taut meat, torrents of blood, and shards of bone.

Guilt weighed Leon down as he raised his pistol and took the carefully aimed shots that killed the T-Veronica plant and the man inside it.

Guilt was all that Leon felt when he got the call a few days later that Krauser had died of his injuries while in Government custody.

# Two

Leon tried to focus on the music being blurted out from the radio; smooth cante flamenco, plucky toque, and lively castanets amidst a sea of gurgling static.

It wasn't enough to clear his muddled head, which was brimming with memories of past missions. His brain wasn't content focusing on Operation: Javier or Raccoon City alone. Leon also recalled when he and former S.T.A.R.S. Exeter branch member John Andrews had to race through simulated environments teeming with mutant

animal hybrids in an underground Umbrella facility called “The Planet” or when he had to call an old friend to investigate an island off the coast of Europe where more B.O.Ws were being bred by another crazy wealthy Umbrella executive. Of course, who could forget when he and Barry Burton encountered a shape-shifting monster aboard a passenger liner crawling with zombies?

At least, in the aftermath of Operation: Javier, the President was more than happy to keep Leon on the payroll for some perfectly average missions – well, average for your typical USSTRATCOM agent.

Leon was equally pleased to undertake intelligence operations that focused more on espionage and subterfuge than shooting the weak spots on moving nightmares lined with teeth and claws. If the zombie movies had to be real after all, why couldn’t the spy movies?

*Look on the bright side. This is just another regular mission, Leon thought. Sure, the President’s daughter’s missing. But, all things considered, that’s nothing you can’t handle. A search and rescue? Piece of cake. No zombies, no puzzles, no monsters, no Umbrella-*

“You’re a long way from home, cowboy.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

With that, Leon was pulled back into the real world – specifically, a rust-bucket squad car driving through a seemingly never-ending forest in rural Spain.

As Leon stared out the window at a conveyor belt of trees, he could feel the curiosity radiating off the two police officers sitting in front of him.

“Guess that’s a local’s way of breaking the ice,” Leon retorted, not in the mood to palaver.

Leon’s escort responded with amused scoffs. Clearly, they drew the short straw back at the station in Madrid, and they were going to make it his problem.

“It’s a shame you couldn’t wait for the Spring, Americano. This place is a real tourist haven.”

Leon was about to fire back when he spotted a sign of hope through the windshield. The endless chorus line of trees gave way to a log bridge. His destination couldn’t be too far away. Leon only had to sit tight and hope that this junker didn’t cause the clearly aged wood to snap, plunging them into the raging waters below.

As soon as the car crawled off the bridge and onto a nearby dirt road, it pulled to a stop, and the driver turned off the ignition, engaging the handbrake with a satisfied smile.

Leon turned to him, “Hey-”

“What? The village is just up ahead.”

*Right, so this was how it was going to be.*

“I’ll go check it out,” uttered Leon as he clambered out of the car, limbering up as the officer next to the driver rolled down his window.

“Good thinking. We’ll stay with the car – make sure we don’t get any parking tickets.”

Okay, that was a little funny. Besides, those cops could make all the jokes they wanted. As long as they were there when Leon was ready to leave, he didn’t care.

Leon turned toward the village, sighing as he was greeted with a dirt path lined with more trees. He made a mental note to thank Claire for the jacket she gifted him for their first Valentine’s Day together – a classic B-3 Sheepskin Leather Bomber Jacket that was working overtime in helping him fight off the harsh chill.

At least the sarcastic barbs and sputtering engine were replaced with the serene sound of waterfalls and the cawing of crows.

*BZZT*, Leon jumped as the walkie clipped to his belt stirred to life. He plucked it and raised it to his ear, following the dirt road.

“Leon, I hope you can hear me.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“Loud and clear.”

“I’m Ingrid Hunnigan. I’ll be your support on this mission.”

Leon surmised from her voice that she was in her early twenties – possibly even fresh out of college. Good thing she was starting on a relatively simple mission, then. This’ll be a great way to learn the ropes.

“Right. I look forward to working with you, Ingrid.”

“Have you entered the village yet?”

“Close. I’m on the outskirts. I’ll call you when I’m there. Leon out.”

And with that, Leon clipped his walkie and surveyed his surroundings, hoping for more than dirt and trees.

*Ask, and you shall receive*, he thought as a diversion in the road beckoned him towards a modestly sized house.

*It might be too inviting*. The door was left wide open, revealing the soft, rustic interior. Leon scanned the area, unable to shake the feeling that he was being watched.

Now wasn’t the time to be paranoid. Ashley was counting on him.

Leon walked up the wooden steps, noting how they creaked beneath his feet. So much for stealth. He took careful steps forward, not wanting to startle whoever was inside.

He turned a corner, ending up in a small dining room with sparse decor. A wooden chair sat at a square table with a stained and faded tablecloth, punctuated by a severely rusted cooking pot Leon hoped didn't contain dinner.

On the other side of the room was the home's sole occupant – a middle-aged villager crouched by a brick fireplace, jutting a poker back and forth as he stoked the bright orange flame inside.

Leon cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Sir?"

No response. Leon approached the man, reaching into his jacket and plucking out a small photo. It was the last picture of Ashley Graham – a headshot taken for an interview, where she was seated against a blank backdrop, a beaming smile on her delicate face.

The villager got to his feet and turned to Leon, his features becoming more visible in the radiant fire light – his sunken face, bleary eyes, ragged facial hair, rotting teeth, dirt-stained clothes, and hands wracked with scars.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon continued, “I was wondering if you’d recognize this woman. I heard she was last seen somewhere around this area.”

The villager’s eyes darted toward the photo. Immediately, his brow furrowed with rage as he snarled a rapid series of Spanish words, too quick for Leon to catch.

Leon didn’t know how to read Spanish, but he knew how to read a room. “Sorry to bother you,” he muttered as he pocketed the photo and turned to leave.

There was a sudden movement in his periphery. Instinct was kicking in. Leon dived out of the way as an axe swung downward, embedding itself in the floorboards amidst a burst of dust.

Leon scrambled to his feet, swiping his 9mm handgun from his thigh holster and aiming it at the villager lifting the axe from the floor.

“Freeze!”

The villager raised the axe above his head, eyes wide and unblinking as he seethed at Leon.

“I said freeze!”

With a roar, the villager charged at Leon. It was over instantly as Leon pulled the trigger and sent a bullet directly between the man’s eyes.

As the villager lay motionless at his feet, Leon realized his hands were shaking, and his heart was racing. He wasn't expecting hostiles this early, especially not ones ready to use lethal force so quickly. Something was wrong.

*Maybe the cops were right to stay by the car.*

As if the universe was answering him, a crash echoed through the house, distant yet loud enough for Leon to tell where it was coming from — the squad car!

More yelling erupted from outside before Leon could figure out his next move. Were these more hostiles? Did they hear the gunshot?

Footsteps. They made it through the entrance.

Leon didn't plan on sticking around. He darted towards a nearby window, gritting his teeth and bracing for impact as he dived through it, rolling on the soft grass outside amidst a hail of tiny shards.

It was only a matter of time before the others found their dead comrade. As he sprinted along the dirt path, Leon hoped they were too occupied to see where he went.

The sights at the rendezvous point made Leon's heart dive into his stomach.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

The bridge was obliterated, timber and rope haphazardly draped over the sides of adjacent cliffs, drifting in the wind.

There were no signs of the cops, nor their car, as jet-black tire tracks left in their place led to the cliff's edge. Leon was greeted with a thick plume of dark smoke as he got closer.

He peered over the cliff, and all he could muster was, "Oh no."

At the foot of the ridge was the twisted and mangled fractal of steel that used to be the car, smoke billowing from the jagged debris.

Leon noted the lack of any bodies. Perhaps the cops escaped.

Or, maybe they were kidnapped too.

Leon wrenched his walkie from his belt and called Hunnigan.

"Leon, are you at the village?"

"Not yet. There was a hostile local. I, unfortunately, had to neutralize him."

"That's concerning"

"They got to the cops as well. I don't know where those officers are or if they're still alive, but I'll need new extraction."

"I'll take care of that. In the meantime, get to Ashley using whatever means necessary."

“Understood”

As Leon hung up the call, he returned to the dirt road. This mission was going to hell very quickly. It was time to get moving before it got worse.

# THREE

If the road to hell was paved with good intentions, the road to the village was paved with warnings.

The first was a crow perched atop a signpost that was a crude collection of sticks tied together with rope, threaded through the empty eye sockets of two degraded human skulls, their jaws hanging limply — a demonstration of what happened last time someone turned up uninvited.

Leon's attention was taken from the signpost by a high-pitched whine. A dog was just a few feet

away, shaking and crying as its leg was caught in a bear trap.

Leon's first response was to immediately go about setting it free. Then rationality appeared in his head – this could be a trap.

So, he paused for a moment. Sure enough, a tripwire was expertly hidden amongst the grass at his very feet. Leon followed it with his eyes, not surprised to see it connected to a smattering of plastic explosives haphazardly grafted to a nearby tree.

Disgusted, Leon stepped over the tripwire, crouching beside the trembling canine. He ran a hand across its fur, trying to soothe it so it wouldn't move.

“Good dog,” Leon cooed as he placed a hand on either side of the beartrap's steel jaws, making sure not to cut himself against its teeth.

*Okay. One... Two... Three-*

His muscles tensed as he yanked the bear trap open.

“C'mon,” Leon grunted as the dog took a second to remove its blood-matted leg from the trap. The second it was clear, Leon let the device go, jumping as the jaws slammed against each other.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

As Leon composed himself, the dog walked as fast as its leg could handle, barking excitedly. Looks like its injuries weren't so bad, Leon thought. That's one rescue out of the way.

So, Leon continued down the path, wondering how these people could sleep at night, knowing they would harm an innocent animal like that.

The answer came in the form of a small wooden cabin. The closer Leon got, the more an unassailable stench of death wafted toward him.

Leon stepped inside to find very little. A wooden table housed an old typewriter. Shelves nearby stocked dead plants.

It wasn't until Leon turned to the left that he spotted... someone. It was difficult to tell who they were as a rusty pitchfork mounted their body to the planks behind them. It also didn't help that there was a fleshy void where their head used to be or that their skin had been removed, leaving the spoiled meat of their insides exposed to the elements.

Leon rushed out of the cabin, fighting the urge to throw up. These people were nuts, to put it lightly. Ashley was in more danger than he thought.

Finally, Leon reached the gate to the village. It was a large, reinforced iron structure with an insignia emblazoned on its surface – a sharp and

angular piece of iconography that sent a potent chill up Leon's spine.

He opened the gate, revealing the village. His first order of business was to leap behind a nearby tree, unhooking a pair of binoculars from his belt and peering through them.

The village appeared so vibrant, bustling with activity as its population ventured back and forth, performing their various daily activities accompanied by their livestock.

A series of cottages lay adjacent, flanked by a barn and a bell tower. At the center of the village square was a collection of logs and vegetation – a pyre from which a colossal flame stretched out towards the overcast sky.

More theatrics, Leon thought. But then he took another look and spotted one of the police officers that brought him here. It was the driver, his charcoal arms outstretched and upheld by the pyre's branches, the charred-black flesh that hung from his skull contorted in a hellish scream.

*If the whole village is in on this, I'd better make sure I don't get caught-*

“¡Un forastero!”

*Oh shit.*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon clipped his binoculars to his belt as a wiry, pale woman in a bloodstained gray dress pointed towards him, brandishing a kitchen knife.

She was quickly joined by the other villagers, men and women, with all kinds of improvised weapons – knives, axes, pitchforks, and sickles all ready to carve him to pieces.

Leon pulled out his 9mm, hoping it'd be enough to keep them at bay.

“¡Cógelo!”

Suddenly, Leon was pointing his pistol at the mob as they slowly made their way toward him, reveling in the fact that they had him cornered.

They didn't realize that Leon was using this time to strategize. *Where can I shoot the minimum amount of bullets and get an opening?*

The closer they got, the more Leon could see they looked... just... off. They weren't the shambling, decayed corpses of Raccoon City, but they were clearly not well. Their pallid skin, foaming mouths, and bloodshot eyes gave that away.

Leon took two shots, kneecapping a villager on his right. As the man sunk to the ground, wailing in pain, Leon lunged towards him, kicking at his head. Leon kept the momentum, narrowly dodging a sickle as it sliced through the air, and he ran towards

the pyre, creating some distance between himself and the villagers. A nearby cow let out a deep and boisterous moo, startling him. At least the cow was enjoying the show.

This wasn't enough. Leon needed a proper plan. Luckily, the distance allowed him a few more seconds to figure out his next move. Running wasn't an option. He didn't know the area and was likely to hit a dead end or, worse, a trap.

His attention turned to the houses. One of them was a double-story, with a window overlooking the roof. That was an idea – *get to high ground and pick off as many as you can!*

Leon ran as the mob inched closer, holding their weapons aloft and forming their own phalanx. He reached the door to the two-story house and slammed it shut, locking it behind him.

That wasn't going to hold them off. Leon scanned the room for something to bar the door. The furniture was almost non-existent as it was in the last house. Under any other circumstance, he'd have found their modest living endearing, even a bit relatable, but not now.

He settled on a chest of drawers, surprised at how much effort it took to push them in front of the door. Maybe they'd hold for long enough. He also made

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

sure to shove a sturdy-looking bookcase against a nearby window. Not gonna make it easy for them.

As the villagers pounded on the door, their Spanish chants blending into a harrowing cacophony, Leon clambered up the stairs, immediately greeted with a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun mounted on the wall.

Leon's heart skipped a beat as he plucked it from the mount and examined it up close. It was loaded – no spare ammo, though, so he would have to be conservative with his shots.

He craned towards the bottom floor, trying to listen for any signs of the villagers breaking in. Their incessant screaming had stopped, leaving an eerie silence.

Then, there was a loud buzz.

Leon went down the stairs, approaching the window he covered with the bookcase. There was a crack just small enough for him to peer through.

The villagers had decided to stop their attack and just stand there, smiles on their pallid faces as that whirring buzz got louder and more aggressive. *Right. Whatever's going on, you need to get out!*

Leon turned away from the window, his back to the wall. *Up the stairs and to the roof, just like we planned-*

*WHAM!* The wall burst open right next to Leon's chest, and a chainsaw blade rammed through, sending splinters in all directions.

Leon turned and doubled back as the chainsaw blade was pulled outside. Through the newly made recess in the wall, he could see a portly man wearing suspenders and a burlap sack on his head, with blank, rage-filled eyes staring through the peepholes. Above his head, he held the chainsaw aloft – it looked brand new, howling as the man carrying it brought it back against the wall.

*Right. Window. Now!*

Leon bolted upstairs, marching towards the window that led to the roof, only for it to explode as soon as he reached it.

He recoiled from the shattered glass as villagers entered through the broken window, eyeing Leon with bloodthirst.

With a deep breath, Leon raised the shotgun, only for one of the villagers to swipe it aside with their pitchfork. *I'm too close. I need to get some distance.*

Leon hurried back downstairs, hoping that Chainsaw Man was still occupied outside. His stomach backflipped when he saw that this was not the case, and Chainsaw Man was standing right in front of him, weapon raised.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*No room to hesitate.* Leon aimed the shotgun point blank at Chainsaw Man and fired. The blast pushed his power tool-wielding assailant back, chunks of gore flying from his torso as he tensed up.

But then Chainsaw Man readied his weapon to gut the meddlesome intruder. If that shotgun round phased him, he sure was good at hiding it, even as Leon could see the oozing muscle underneath his now-tattered flesh.

*Well, I had a good run. My luck had to run out sometime.*

Just as Leon was about to be carved into a charcuterie platter, everybody froze as the heavy toll of the bell reverberated throughout the entire village.

Leon, who was so sure that he was mere seconds from death, could only watch in awe with his mouth agape as the villagers immediately dropped their weapons. They broke into a series of incoherent mumbling as they walked past Leon and exited the house as though nothing had happened. The only words Leon could catch were “Lord... Saddler...”

Dumbfounded, Leon stepped back outside to find the village completely deserted.

“Where’s everyone going, Bingo?”

As Leon wondered how much closer he could get to death today, his walkie trilled. He snatched it and answered the call.

“Leon-”

“Hunnigan, this is bad. I’ve confirmed the body of one of the officers. Barely escaped, myself.”

“What happened?”

“These people don’t take kindly to strangers. If you’ve got any intel on them, now’s the time.”

“Not yet, unfortunately. Our archives on Valdelobos are scarce. Its population is really reclusive.”

Leon sighed. *Just my luck.*

“I’ve got a lead, though. There was a college student from the village that studied in the US. If I can talk to him or one of his peers, I can probably find something you can use.”

“Good thinking, Hunnigan.”

“Thank me later. Right now, you have to find Ashley.”

“Of course. Leon out.”

As Leon hung up the call, that pervasive gut feeling returned – he was being watched.

From the top of the bell tower, a woman peered at Leon through the scope of her high-powered sniper rifle, a smirk on her face.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*Looks like I just saved your ass again, Leon...*

# FOUR

The church was the oldest building in Valdelobos, constructed in medieval times. It survived the Crusades, a testament to the resilience and longevity of the ideas that it housed.

For Chief Bitores Méndez, becoming the figurehead for these ideas was the highest possible honor. He felt an incomparable swell of pride as he prayed to the congregation. Lord Saddler had spoken nothing but the truth to him, and he wanted nothing more than to spread that truth as far as possible.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Of course, the outside world would not receive their message with open arms. Like the Castellans before them, their response would be blind aggression – the base urge to protect their precious status quo. All Mendez had to do was remember the eye they gouged from his skull.

So, let the enemy come. Let their American friend get himself killed. It mattered not. They had the girl, and soon there would be nothing anybody could do about it.

Leon swept the village, finding only two things of note. The first was that the bell tower was empty. Whoever rang the bell, whether they were a friend or foe, had disappeared without a trace. The second was a building that overlooked the village square. Leon would have paid it no mind had it not bore the logo on the gates. It had to be significant.

Unfortunately, it was also locked. Leon cursed himself for not learning lockpicking from Jill when he had the chance.

So, Leon wondered where that door could lead as he followed a completely different trail, flanked on either side by cliffs. It led downwards, planks covering the dirt and acting as stairs.

His train of thought came to a screeching halt as he heard grunting in the distance, followed by a rumble that got closer with each passing second. A quick glance over his shoulder and Leon broke into a sprint.

Feeling the muscles in his legs tighten as pain exploded through his chest, Leon willed his body to keep running as a boulder ten times his size raced towards him, guided by the cliffs.

There was nowhere to hide. Leon could only keep running forward. *Great, you survived Raccoon City to die by a rock!*

Finally, Leon desperately dived into a slight recess in the cliffs, hoping it would be enough. As he pressed himself against the jagged cliff wall, he felt the barreling stone slightly graze him as it roared past, creating a tear in his jacket.

*Sorry, Claire.* He doubled over, trying desperately to catch his breath. *On the bright side, it may be a sign I'm heading in the right direction.*

As Ada Wong watched Leon leave the village, having just rung the bell that saved his life, she couldn't help but sigh.

In Raccoon City, she had come so close to many firsts, like compromising a mission because she

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

couldn't emotionally detach, facing her own death, and witnessing the sheer destruction caused by the kinds of evil corporate suits she'd previously worked for. The second she gave the G-Virus sample to her employer, her next plan was an early retirement. Maybe she could settle down with a new identity and find a job that didn't involve professional murder.

Six years later, and here she was; same employer, same mission, same blood-red cocktail dress – *same distractions*, she thought, her mind drifting back to the virtuous rookie she'd met in Raccoon City. Leon might have had Government training, but seeing that the suits couldn't take away his compassion reassured Ada. Anyone else would have left that poor dog to bleed out, herself included, but not Leon.

Her cell phone let out a high-pitched trill. She answered it to see the pale, angular, sunglasses-adorned face of Albert Wesker, a man who also knew a fair bit about what it was like to be thought dead by the outside world.

*Shame he's such a prick. He's even still wearing those damn shades.*

"We have an irregularity. The researcher has been discovered by the Illuminados."

"Where is he?"

"I'll send the coordinates to your phone."

"Right."

Ada could see Wesker's scowl. *What, were you expecting a thank you for doing your job?*

"Remember, Ada, until he recovers the sample, we can't let him die."

"Of course. Ada out."

It felt good to hang up on Wesker. Had Ada known that an ex-Umbrella stooge was involved in this mission, she'd have declined immediately. Her employer was probably aware of that, as he withheld that information until it was too late to back out.

Not that she could have backed out anyway. Wesker and Ada were connected by this employer. He'd technically saved their lives — Wesker from the Spencer Mansion, Ada from Raccoon City. They practically owed him one last favor.

But, only one last favor.

*It's settled. After this mission, I'm retiring — for real this time!*

Leon emerged from a tunnel to find another house, this one bigger yet more dilapidated than anything in the village. Despite the rotting wood, the door

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

was polished iron with a padlock the size of a fist. It was clearly hiding something important.

Leon took the shotgun from his back, where it had been slung, and pointed it at the lock.

*BAM!* He blasted the lock with the shotgun. The metal crunched and warped, but it didn't give. His next move was to grab his knife from the sheath on his chest. With a slash, the lock buckled, falling to the floor where it left a dent.

Leon paused. He could hear an arhythmic thumping muffled by the damp walls. *Sounds like someone's trapped. It could be Ashley.*

*Could be a trap.*

He slung the shotgun on his back and pulled out his handgun, slowly opening the door and stepping inside.

The inside of the house was more or less what Leon expected. The decay that had set in outside had undoubtedly left its mark inside.

All that really mattered was the thumping. Leon weaved through broken and scattered furniture as the thumping got louder.

Finally, Leon's journey ended at a cabinet shifting back and forth with each thump. Whatever was inside really wanted out.

With only a moment's hesitation, Leon wrenched the door open, pointing the gun at whatever fell out.

It was a Spanish man, only slightly older than Leon. He writhed on the floor, his arms and legs bound with rope, peering up at Leon through wavy strands of black hair. He was trying to speak, but they had duct taped his mouth shut. No sign of Ashley, but this was a start.

Leon bent down and tore the duct tape from the Spaniard's mouth. In a thick accent, the man winced and then uttered, "A little rough, don't you think?"

He responded with a grunt as Leon rolled him over, untying the rope from his hands and legs.

"You're not like the others?" Leon asked.

"No. I do have one very important question, though. You got a smoke?"

Leon shrugged, "I got gum."

Suddenly, the color drained from the Spaniard's face. Leon turned to find a seven-foot-tall man, bald with a dark trenchcoat and a priest collar poking behind a thick bushy beard and withered skin housing a glass eye. He reminded Leon of Mr. X, whom Claire had told him about from Raccoon City. Maybe he had a Spanish cousin.

Leon didn't get long to think about that, though. He launched a kick at the tall man, only for his foot

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

to be caught effortlessly. The man barely moved. And yet, the next thing Leon knew, he had been tossed across the room – flung directly into the cabinet that previously held the Spaniard.

It shattered on impact. Leon hit the ground. In an instant, everything went black.

## FIVE

Amidst the pooling blackness, there were a series of sensations – a hooded figure with a jackal-like face... murmurs, the language unintelligible... a sharp sting in his neck... the smell of decay... a taste of copper...

Leon awoke with a gasp inside a featureless room with stone walls and wooden supports. His first instinct was to leap to his feet, only to discover that his wrists were shackled behind his back.

He felt a stir behind him.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

"Ay ay ay, crawl out of one hole and into another." It was the Spaniard.

Leon cleared his throat, "You wanna tell me what's going on here?"

"Americano, si? You first."

Leon sighed. "Name is Leon. I'm looking for a woman that was last seen here."

"What is she, the President's daughter or something?"

That caused Leon to tense up.

"That was too good for a guess."

"What can I say? I'm a psychic."

Leon rolled his eyes, thinking about how long it might take to dislocate his thumbs and escape. It couldn't be more painful than this conversation.

The Spaniard stirred, "Alright, you got me. I overheard one of the villagers talking about the President's daughter in the church. If you can return to the village, a passageway will take you there."

"Thanks. So, who are you? Why'd they stuff you in a cabinet?"

Now it was the Spaniard's turn to sigh. "Mi llamo Luis Sera. I used to be a cop in Madrid."

*Obvious lie.*

"Right. Used to be a cop myself. Only for a day, though."

"And I thought I was bad."

"So, what about the big guy who put us here? Do you know him?"

"Ahh, the big cheese."

"What?"

Before Leon could interpret that answer, the sound of metal dragging against stone crawled into the room. It was the herald for another villager, groaning, head slumped as he pulled an axe behind him. This one was medieval, with dual blades and a long handle.

"Do something, cop!"

The villager raised the axe upward.

Leon blurted, "Now!" as the two men launched in opposite directions.

The axe swung between them, cleaving their shackles apart and freeing them. Leon rolled over, massaging his sore wrists as the villager went for another strike. As the axe swung down again, Leon caught the villager's torso with his feet, lifting the villager off the floor and into a nearby wall. Luis gagged as the villager fell headfirst, the impact against the floor emphasized by the sickening snap of his neck, the broken bone punching through flesh and muscle.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

That was enough for Luis, who scampered from the room, leaving Leon to stand up, confused yet again. At least he now knew where Ashley was. All he had to do was find the church.

He was stopped in his tracks by a sudden realization. Not only had the bastards taken his weapons. They'd taken his jacket.

Hands balled into fists, Leon marched out of the room, ready for a fight.

He turned a corner and spotted a hunched-over figure wearing a hooded coat and fingerless gloves, his face obscured by a bandana. On his back was a large camping backpack.

Leon bounded towards the man, only to be met with a thick cockney accent that exclaimed a hearty "Welcome!" that made him skid to a halt.

"Excuse me?"

"Got a good selection of things on sale, Stranger!"

It took Leon a second to collect his thoughts.

"Sure. Why the hell not?"

The Merchant opened his coat, revealing several guns.

"What're you buyin'?"

Leon's hand went to one of his pockets, pulling out a full money clip.

"A handgun for starters, plus some ammo"

"Is that all, Stranger?"

After briefly browsing the Merchant's wares, Leon declared, "I'll take the rifle, with ammo too."

"Anything else?"

This guy's a typical salesman, thought Leon, before he quickly remembered;

"I'll take a knife."

After a surprisingly warm chuckle, the Merchant responded with a "thank you."

In a matter of minutes, Leon slotted a new 9mm handgun into his thigh holster, filled the pouches on his belt with rifle cartridges and pistol mags, sheathed a newly sharpened combat knife, and was cradling a .223 caliber bolt action rifle. It was a shame to lose the shotgun, but this still had some serious stopping power.

Suddenly, the Merchant procured a small pouch from his coat.

"Your change, Stranger."

Leon took the pouch and opened it, revealing several coins. *Pesetas? Didn't Spain stop using these like two years ago?*

Before Leon could ask, the Merchant closed his coat.

"Come back any time."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon would have walked away with an arsenal had questions been a currency. Still, he left with some solid firepower. It was time to figure out where he was and return to the village.

Luis was crouched behind a fence, watching as several villagers were scouting the area, no doubt looking for him. It sickened Luis to his stomach to see people he knew — his very neighbors, now the playthings of that absolute madman, Saddler.

He procured a small two-way radio from his sock, still a little shocked but eternally grateful that nobody had checked for it, even as they tied up his legs before stuffing him in that damn cabinet.

"This is Sera. Ada, you hear me?"

Nothing but static. The senorita was playing hard to get.

"Ada, come in. You want me to help you or not?"

Radio silence. *Forget this.* Luis stuffed the radio back in his sock. *Guess she doesn't want the sample that bad after all.*

*In fact, with Mr. Leon the One-Day Cop in play, maybe I don't need to deal with Ada anymore. She was my point of contact with the outside world. But she hasn't done anything to earn my trust.*

*Then again, neither has Leon. This sample isn't just something I can hand off to anyone. This decision determines the fate of the free world.*

It was then that Luis decided to hold off. Think of it like an audition — give it time, and everyone will show their true colors. Whomever he deemed more trustworthy would get the sample.

Of course, he had to recover the damn thing first.

Leon approached a large estate, noting how different it looked from the houses he'd seen. The brick walls were chipped and covered in a thick layer of dirt, but they surrounded an ornate door draped with elaborate gold trim and that weird symbol again.

At the center of this door was a glass orb with a piercing sky-blue hue and a razor-thin plus sign on its surface.

*What a weird little centerpiece,* Leon surmised. His first instinct was to reach out and touch it, feeling the cool, smooth glass underneath his fingertips.

The orb shifted under his touch. It wasn't a plus sign, after all. Leon pressed his palm against the sphere, rolling it until it presented the same symbol as the door. *I see a pattern here.*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

The door opened with a click and a long creak, beckoning Leon inside a surprisingly warm and inviting living space. Gone was the faded, dying decor of the village — this place was a study of sorts, complete with artisan furniture.

But then Leon's eyes set upon a portrait that hung from the wall. It was a painting of that jackal-faced man, his withered face curved into a sinister smile. Leon's hand involuntarily shot up to his neck, and he was overcome by pervasive nausea.

Below the portrait was a cabinet, where a decorative box with velvet lining displayed a thick iron key adorning the insignia that appeared on every door.

Leon snatched it from the box and slipped it into one of his pouches. *Maybe that'll help me get to the church.*

He opened a nearby door, stepping into a long hallway, the burgundy carpet hiding the sound of his footsteps. *Who the hell lives here?*

Movement. *Damn it, not again!* Leon's mind flashed as he turned to see the big cheese, who apparently had a knack for sneaking up on people despite being built like a walking tank.

Before Leon could even fathom reacting, a giant hand wrapped around his throat and lifted him off the ground.

"Make no mistake. You may carry our blood. But, continue to be unpleasant, and you will face consequences."

Struggling for breath, trying not to black out, Leon snatched the knife from his sheath and slammed it into his attacker's hand, embedding it in the thick muscle.

As Leon hit the floor with a thud, El Gran Queso towered over him, dragging the knife from his bleeding hand and brandishing it with a white-hot fury.

There wasn't much room in the corridor to maneuver. Leon had been shot before but never stabbed. *Something tells me I'm about to become very intimate with that feeling.*

A blinding white flash engulfed the room as a nearby window burst into a hail of jagged glass, accompanied by a symphony of automatic gunfire.

Bullets slammed into the big cheese, not that it mattered — even the one that punched through the side of his face, tearing his flesh and shattering his teeth, seemed little more than an annoyance.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon got to his feet as his opponent turned to the entry point of the bullet swarm. With an inhuman leap, he launched himself through the newly opened wall cavity, disappearing in a flurry of gunfire.

Leaning against a nearby wall, trying to silence the racing thoughts doing laps around his throbbing head, Leon gasped for air. *Same blood? The pain in my neck. What does it mean?*

But Leon knew that he was avoiding the elephant in the room. There was a flash of red outside that window. A red dress? It couldn't be. She was dead. He watched her die.

Except, he didn't, did he? He watched her fall. Not the same thing. It wouldn't exactly be out of her wheelhouse to fake her death. But, after what happened back in 1998...

*No, it couldn't be. It was just stress, all because this was supposed to be an easy mission, damn it! Keep your cool!*

Leon trudged out of the room, hoping today reached its weirdness threshold, knowing completely that would not be the case.

## SIX

Hunnigan had just finished compiling her research when she got the call. With a keypress, Leon's voice made its way through her headset.

"Hunnigan, it's Leon."

"Leon! You went quiet for a bit. Anything to report?"

"I know where Ashley is. I'm heading there now."

"Perfect—"

"There's something else, though. I think I might be infected with something."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

Perturbed, Hunnigan opened a manila envelope on her desk, combing the stack of documents inside.

“I managed to contact a college professor who taught a student from Valdelobos.”

“What could he tell you?”

“Apparently, the village has played host to a pagan religious cult known as Los Illuminados since the 15th Century.”

“A cult? That... that makes a lot of sense, actually.”

“According to him, they worship an entity known as Las Plagas that was driven underground by the Catholics during some kind of massacre. He couldn’t tell me much more, though.”

“Keep digging, Hunnigan. If you find anything, keep me posted. Leon out.”

With that, Hunnigan was left with silence. With a scowl, she got up from her swivel chair. If she was going to uncover more about this ancient cult, she needed another cup of coffee.

Leon found the exit door to the estate, relieved to see that it didn't include any puzzles. Hopefully, it's just a trail to the village from here.

Pistol in hand, Leon opened the door...

... and his heart sank.

Sure, he saw a path that could lead to the village.

That didn't discount all the villagers that had spotted him and were now bounding towards him, practically foaming at the mouth.

Oh, and Chainsaw Man was leading the pack. Why not? How could this get any worse?

Leon holstered his pistol and pulled out the rifle, snapping the bolt back and peering through the scope. He had two options: focus on Chainsaw Man or take out some of the villagers to try and clear a path while risking a chainsaw to the kisser.

With a deep breath, Leon fired the rifle. A chunk of flesh tore from Chainsaw Man's leg, leaving meat and fabric flapping in the wind. The maniac hesitated briefly before continuing his advancement, slowed only by a slight limp.

*Wrong move, Leon.* He flicked the bolt back and peered into the scope, hoping against all odds that he didn't just screw himself.

*Shit, not enough time!* Leon lowered the rifle, impulsively rushing towards the far end of the mob,

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

where a particularly zealous villager lunged towards him with a snarl.

Gripping the barrel of his weapon with both hands, Leon clubbed the villager in the face, seeing the split second in which their nose crunched inwards, shards of teeth spraying outward amidst flecks of dark blood. Leon didn't break his stride, slinging the rifle on his back as he continued to run from his pursuers, narrowly dodging their outstretched arms as they reached for him.

It wasn't long before Leon made it to the end of the path, where a gate, precisely like the one that led him to the village in the first place, hung open. He was going to make it!

As soon as Leon reached the gate, he clambered through and pulled its thick steel doors shut. The second they were closed, he spotted a sizeable medieval bolt lock facing him and wrenched it shut too.

With that, he leaped back as the villagers slammed their weight against the gate to no avail, showering Leon with what he presumed were Spanish obscenities. Eventually, the yelling died out, giving way to the sound of a chainsaw's teeth wailing against the gate's metal surface.

*It has to hold*, Leon thought. But he also didn't want to be there to find out. So, he turned around to find himself back in the village. The remnants of the pyre still remained — a pile of twigs and branches reduced to charcoal, fused with the ashen, brittle strands of flesh that clung to the police officer's skeletal remains, still adorned with tatters from his uniform.

*So, this was a cult ritual.*

Leon wondered if that was what they planned to do with Ashley. Why do that to the President's daughter? Make an example? It's a bit much, to say the least, and there's no way the US would take that lightly.

Now wasn't the time to speculate. Leon had to find out if the insignia key worked.

Albert Wesker wasn't used to the ennui of managing from afar. As he hacked into the village's camera feed, watching Ada slink from building to building, he felt a hint of jealousy. He yearned for the days of the Spencer Mansion or Rockfort Island, where he got to control everything with boots on the ground. All this sitting around, staring at monitors bullshit was for the birds.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

And yet, that's how Trent wanted it, and what Trent says goes. If it had not been for Trent, Wesker would've been a pile of ash scattered around the Arklay Forest in Raccoon City. So, if Trent ordered Wesker to run reconnaissance while he hired Ada to do the work, that's how it would be done.

Still, her lack of progress was frustrating. Was it that hard to find a single sample? With the T-virus coursing through his veins, Wesker would've stormed that village and found the target in seconds — no need for all this meandering.

Maybe that's what Trent's afraid of, although it seemed unlikely to him that Trent was fearful of anything. He probably just wanted Ms. Wong because they had worked together before, and she'd already succeeded in collecting the G-virus sample for him.

*I'll give Ada some more time,* Wesker thought. Maybe he just liked how she looked in that red dress. Whatever it was, he'd wait a little longer before contacting his asset. One way or another, everything would work out in the end.

Leon scoured the caverns underneath the village, eyes squinting to adjust to the dim light as he felt the

smooth stone against his hands and the damp mud between his shoes.

He was on edge. Then again, why wouldn't he be? It was like finding an oasis in a desert when he rounded the cavernous walls to find the Merchant standing next to a work table illuminated by a lamp with a royal blue flame. The closer Leon got, the more serene, ambient music filled his ears.

“Welcome! Got a selection of good things on sale, Stranger.”

Leon placed the rifle on the table with the remaining cartridges he'd had on him.

“Oh-Hoh! What're you selling?”

Leon indicated towards the rifle and the ammo, “Just these.”

“Were my wares not up to scratch?”

“No! They were fine! It's just that the shotgun sounds like a better idea.”

“Well, in that case...”

The Merchant crouched behind the table, only to emerge with a matte black tactical shotgun and a box of shells.

“... how about this — for the rifle, its ammo, and the rest of your pesetas, of course.”

Leon took out the small pouch and emptied its contents onto the table before snatching the shotgun

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

and shells, noting how much lighter this shotgun felt in his grasp.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Stranger!”

The church stood at the end of a hill overlooking a cemetery. The path was drenched in fog, which Leon shivered his way through, his exposed arms tensed against the raging cold.

*Just a little further, and you'll be in the church. Hopefully, it'll be warm there.*

Leon approached the door and reached for the handle...

*... of course, it was locked. Damn it!*

“Sorry, Ashley, just a little longer,” Leon uttered as he turned to examine the still cemetery and determine his next move. Facing the headstones was a wagon with wooden barrels atop it. *Probably nothing useful.*

He turned to see a deviation stretched out to his left, leading to a series of wooden bridges lined against the adjacent cliff wall, suspended by ropes. *My other options are doing nothing or returning to the village, where I'll probably get my head chopped off.*

So, he set off towards the cliff.

## SEVEN

The bridges could have been more sturdy. Leon gripped the support ropes tightly and ensured his steps were slow as he crossed, trying not to look down at the massive drop toward the lake below. This was difficult, considering the alternative was looking up and getting a face full of that icy breeze.

There was a gap in the bridges. *That's a bit of an oversight.*

However, there was also a wooden shed to Leon's immediate left, suspended over the water on another platform. Even if it had nothing inside, it would at

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

least be the right spot to take a deep breath and collect his thoughts before risking a jump that could send him to a cold, watery grave.

The inside of the shed was as bare as Leon assumed it would be. However, there was a note pinned to one of the walls. He plucked the paper, eyeing its printed contents. It was written in Spanish.

*Not sure what I was expecting*, Leon thought, cursing himself for not taking up the language in high school when he had the chance.

Leon called Hunnigan, who responded with an attentive, "What do you need?"

"You wouldn't happen to speak Spanish, would you?"

"It's one of the reasons I got the gig."

So, Leon read the note's contents to Hunnigan — at least, he did it to the best of his ability. It took some time and multiple corrections. But, Hunnigan eventually cleared her throat.

"So, where do you want me to start?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's a lot to unpack here, Leon."

"Okay. Is there anything that'll help me get inside the church?"

"It says that the key is just beyond the lake, but it's being guarded by something called Del Lago."

"Does that mean anything?"

"Literally 'from the lake'"

"Oh," said Leon, "that's... redundant".

After a pause, Hunnigan continued, "Also, congratulations. You're not enemy number one. Apparently, that honor goes to Luis Sera-"

"Luis?"

"Yeah, apparently, he stole something from them."

"That explains a lot."

"Do you know him?"

"It's complicated."

"Apparently, the priority is getting whatever he stole back, then the next step is stopping you from getting to Ashley until... "

Another pause. Ingrid's concern was palpable.

"Until what, Hunnigan?"

"Shit. Leon, remember what you said earlier about how there's a chance you could be infected with something?"

Leon felt his stomach turn to stone. "Yeah?"

"You were right. It says here that they injected you with something... something that, in enough time, will turn you into one of them."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

For what felt like an eternity, Leon's brain went numb. He knew that he ended the call, made that perilous jump from one bridge to the other, and survived to continue the journey.

He knew this because the next time he felt conscious, he stood in the middle of an expansive space, surrounded by cliff walls and peppered with wooden huts.

*So, is that what's going on? These people have been injected with something that turned them into crazy murderers. This really is Raccoon City all over again.*

*Except, in Raccoon City, you were never bitten. You never got infected. You didn't see the zombies and think, 'That's gonna be me.'*

A deep, beastly roar sailed toward the sky, snapping Leon back to reality. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and centering himself.

*No more of this self-pity. Ashley is probably feeling scared and hopeless right now, and you can't help her if you're too busy wallowing in what's just another setback. You are Leon-Scott-Goddamn-Kennedy. You thought you'd die in Raccoon City, you thought you'd die in the Planet — well, guess what; you're still here. Now get the key, get to the*

*church, save Ashley, and figure this shit out like you always do.*

So, Leon continued onward.

Eventually, he reached a fork in the road. In front of him was the lake, as murky and uninviting as a body of water could be. To his right was what appeared to be a boathouse next to a pier. To the left was a sizable cliff that overlooked the lake.

Leon made his way to the top of the cliff, scanning the water with his binoculars for any signs of what a "Del Lago" could be.

There was a small boat in the distance. *Could that be Del Lago? It's technically from the lake.* On it were two villagers decked out in fishing gear. A large mass sat at their feet, covered in a thick blanket.

One of the villagers tore the blanket off to reveal the other police officer from Madrid, bound and gagged and surprisingly still alive.

*Shit,* Leon thought, regretting that he didn't keep the rifle.

The villagers picked up the police officer, tossing him over the side of the boat, his body hitting the water with a splash.

As the villagers started their boat's engine and sped towards the other side of the lake, Leon

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

lowered his binoculars and took off down the cliff. Despite all odds, he hoped he could get to the pier, find a boat and reach the officer before he drowned.

Leon froze as an enormous fleshy mass exploded from the lake's surface, sending water in all directions as it completely engulfed the officer before plunging itself back under.

*Okay, that's Del Lago. That is definitely Del Lago. There are monsters here, after all.*

There was no way around it. Leon had to cross that lake. As he went down the path toward the boathouse, his mind raced. *So, whatever this cult has its hands on, it creates monsters, too. Are we sure Umbrella's not behind this?*

The thought made him shudder. Umbrella was dead. It had to be. After everything they went through, there was no way Umbrella could still be somehow clinging to life.

*What if this was just how the world worked, though? Even though the Umbrella Corporation was six feet under, there would always be some way to bring the monsters lurking in the dark to the surface. As long as that evil that was intrinsic to humanity was left unchecked, B.O.Ws would always exist in one way or another.*

*This is your life now. Forever.*

Before Leon could muster some kind of emotional response to that fact, he reached the pier, stepping across its wooden surface to find a small anchored motorboat. A pile of four-flue-type harpoons was on its floor — better than nothing.

Leon unhooked the anchor and stepped from the pier into the boat, gazing at the rippling water around him as the engine coughed and spluttered to life. In a matter of minutes, he was off. *Alright, Del Lago. Here I come.*

The shore was now a featureless line on the horizon. Eyes frantically darting around the lake, Leon was surprised to find no signs of whatever had emerged from the lake to eat the police officer. Perhaps it wasn't hungry anymore.

Leon stood up, reaching for one of the harpoons and gripping it tightly.

The water exploded in front of Leon before he could sit back down, launching the boat backward and bowling him over as Del Lago broke the water's surface.

As Leon smacked against the back, he was greeted with an inhuman shriek that showcased the lashing tentacles ready to pull him inside and the rows upon rows of fangs prepared to shred him into mince meat.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Del Lago dived back under the water's surface. Leon leaped to his feet and stood in the middle of the boat, a harpoon ready.

*Wait, where's the anchor?*

Leon dropped the spear and lunged to the front of the boat, where the anchor had fallen into the lake. "Shit!" Leon exclaimed as he wrapped his hands around the rope, ready to pull it back. His efforts were largely fruitless, his arms too exhausted.

Eventually, Leon stopped pulling and opened his hands, and stepped back. The rope was jerking left and right, apropos of nothing.

*Uh oh.*

Leon could only watch in horror as the rope started to rise. He dropped to his knees and held onto the boat's sides as Del Lago sliced through the water, screaming in pain as blood pooled from the anchor embedded in its back. It tore its way through the lake, pulling Leon behind it.

As he held on for dear life, pelted with lake water and flecks of Del Lago's spraying blood, Leon watched as the creature stopped at a nearby cliff wall, writhing in agony.

In response, Leon grabbed a nearby harpoon and flung it toward the amphibian aggressor. It sailed through the air, embedding itself firmly into the

creature's grey, blubbery flesh — creating another oozing wound.

Del Lago sank back under the water. Leon took this opportunity to snatch another harpoon, hovering over the side of the boat, looking for anything that could signal Del Lago's presence.

*The anchor!* Leon examined the rope closely, trying to track the creature's movements. However, it stayed solitary, right up against the hull of the little motorboat.

*Maybe I killed it,* Leon thought, only for his eyes to widen with realization as the rope remained in place, but it slowly went taut.

**CRASH!** Leon was launched into the air, along with the boat, as a roaring Del Lago burst from underneath. Gripping the harpoon as tightly as he could, Leon braced for the water's impact.

In a split second, Leon went under. The impact smacked into his back and shoulders, the sudden cold shooting towards his brain and firing in all directions as water filled his mouth and nose. His eyes were met with an infinitely stretching darkness.

He kicked his legs, hoping Del Lago was too busy licking its wounds to notice that he was fish food.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

He broke the lake's surface with a gasp, taking in big lungfuls of air as he tried to blink the grimy water from his eyes. He could spot the boat not too far away and, by some miracle, not capsized.

He could also feel a deep sea stirring around him. *Move or die, Kennedy!*

Leon kicked his legs, gripping the harpoon tightly as he slowly approached the boat.

The pain was excruciating. Leon could feel his muscles tightening — his body telling him to give up.

Del Lago resurfaced, its powerful tail weaving through the water as it propelled itself at high speeds.

Leon tossed the harpoon on the boat and clambered in, narrowly dodging as Del Lago sailed past like a depth charge. Before Leon could catch his breath, he was being pulled again.

As Leon held on, waiting for the ride to end, he eyed the boat's interior, glad that he held onto that one harpoon. The others had fallen into the lake, no longer helpful to anyone.

*Gotta make this last one count.*

Eventually, Del Lago came to a stop, its movements slow and clumsy. Its wounds were starting to get to it. It dived under. Knowing what to

do, Leon moved to the center of the boat and braced himself.

Sure enough, the boat was launched into the air. Leon tried to guide its descent with his arms this time, keeping the boat parallel to the lake. The landing was clumsy, with Leon smacking his arms against the boat's sides as water spilled in. At least everything was upright.

Del Lago was frustrated. It clearly expected that second attack to prep its dinner for it. It was out in the open, letting out another anguished scream. Leon stood up, fighting the damp cold that permeated his body and the throbbing pain in his arms. He grabbed the harpoon and, with a forceful yell of his own, drove it into Del Lago's exposed eyeball as it swiveled in the bulging mass of its head.

*Here's hoping its brain isn't in its ass or something.*

Del Lago went limp, blood oozing from its freshly done eye piercing. It rolled over, sinking beneath the lake.

With a deep breath, Leon slumped back onto the boat's bow seat.

*It's over. Another monster, dead.*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon watched as the anchor's ropes were pulled down with his adversary's corpse. *I should probably cut that. It'll just weigh the boat down. Just — gimme a minute.*

Suddenly, a constricting pain seared through his leg, causing him to cry out.

Leon was wrenched forward, the back of his head colliding with the seat. He managed to get dragged to the deck before his feet held against the rim, keeping him in place.

Woozy, Leon fumbled for his knife, slotting it from the sheath. Through blurred vision, he reached for the rope with his free hand, slashing at it with the knife. The rope tightened, ready to rip his leg off and send it to the lake floor.

*SNAP!* The rope burst, sliding down to join Del Gado in its watery grave.

Leon could feel himself blacking out — all of the pain in his body mellowing out into dull sensations...

... the numbness of his leg...

... the thudding of his head...

... the movement in his chest...

# EIGHT

Ingrid was at her wits' end.

Part of it was worry, part of it was boredom, and part of it was trying to explain herself once the mission was declared over. When her comms buzzed, she leaped at her desk, slamming the button, overjoyed to hear Leon's voice.

"Hunnigan?"

"Leon, it's been six hours since our last transmission! Are you okay?"

" I fell unconscious. I can keep going if that's what you're wondering."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

"Yeah. But Leon, are you okay?"

There was a pause. Ingrid tentatively hovered over her files, hoping she'd have anything to help Leon with whatever he said next.

"Yeah, I'm fine. A bit banged up, but nothing I can't handle. Thanks for asking. Leon out."

With that, Ingrid was left in silence. She took a deep breath, wishing there was more that she could do.

After taking the boat to the other side of the lake, Leon stumbled through an unforgiving torrent of rain into a cabin, where he sat before a fireplace. He bathed in the warmth as the fire he made lapped toward him. In his hands was a note, which he had found on a table nearby.

Congratulations, Leon.

If you're reading this, you are one step closer to getting Ashley from the church (don't worry, she's alright). The item you're looking for is hidden in the falls. Fair warning, though. Getting back to the church is not going to be easy. They've deployed something called an "El Gigante."

Watch your back.

P.S. As for what's happening to your body, I'm sorry. I'd help if I could.

*What would any of this be without puzzles or riddles?* Leon thought, wracking his brain over who could have sent the note. Luis made the most sense. And yet...

Still, it was nice to have someone on his side. And, whoever this El Gigante was, it couldn't be any worse than Del Lago. At least he'd be on solid ground.

The waterfall was connected to a dam. Leon couldn't help but feel impressed by the sophisticated design as he approached it. There were a series of wooden platforms leading to a crank handle that he suspected would control the flow of the water, potentially allowing it to be distributed throughout the village.

As he imagined the villagers working together to build this system in the 15th century, the idea struck Leon that made his heart sink. *What if I'm not dealing with crazed religious fanatics? What if they were ordinary people, infected with something controlling their will? What's the difference?*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

He remembered the zombies back in Raccoon — people that had gone from living their perfectly ordinary lives to chasing down and eating their loved ones as their skin rotted and their bodies mutated. It was sobering to see them, knowing that he could do nothing besides put them out of their misery or run.

Trying not to dwell on it, Leon jumped from platform to platform before climbing a ladder to reach the crank handle. As he turned it, a wall at the dam's edge slowly rose, cutting off the waterfall's flow and leaving a bone-dry walkway at its center.

*Great, I won't have to get wet again.* Leon jumped down to the walkway that led to a darkened space. The key to the church had to be in there. Leon primed his handgun, ready for anything, as he entered the waterfall.

Ashley stirred, jolting awake for the tenth time that day. Was it even the same day? The room that Ashley was shoved into didn't have a window. It was disorienting, to say the least.

She had made attempts to escape, but her options were limited. The room was practically empty, and she wasn't much of a fighter. The men guarding her door barely broke a sweat when they threw her back

inside the room, resisting her attempts to kick and claw at them.

Help was going to arrive eventually. Ashley was the President's daughter, after all. Was this a regular thing? Were all first daughters kidnapped at some point? She couldn't imagine why. It's not like her father ran on a particularly incendiary platform. It was something they'd argued over many an awkward family dinner. Her father was very much a man who wanted to keep his donors and constituents placated, even if it meant avoiding substantial change.

*Your life is in danger, and you're thinking about politics. Typical.* That was always Ashley's way of dealing with fear, especially the powerlessness it engendered — whether she was at home, in the figurative shadow of her father, or in the literal shadows of a cell in Southwestern Europe.

*Right now, that's what you are — a scared little girl hiding in the shadows.*

Leon felt the weight of the emblem he recovered from the waterfall as he made his way along the path back to the church. It was a thick metal cylinder bearing what he'd now understood as the Los Illuminados symbol. He had placed it in a pouch on

his belt, which dug into his skin. *At least I'll be at the church soon.*

A roar stopped Leon in his tracks. It had been the same one he'd heard on the way to the church, only this time uncomfortably close, shaking the ground beneath his feet.

With a deafening thud, both exits were suddenly obstructed by thick wooden walls. Leon grabbed the shotgun from his back, watching iron gates slowly open with a sickening creak.

Through those gates stepped something... well... gigantic — the size of a two-story house. El Gigante certainly lived up to the name; a gray, muscular colossus somehow bound in rope, being dragged into the arena by a score of exhausted villagers.

Leon raised the shotgun, not sure what to shoot first. One of the villagers tripped on the rocky terrain, falling flat on its face and prompting the others to stop.

El Gigante flew into a frenzied rage, picking up a villager and snapping their spine like a twig, grinding another villager's body into a bloody mass of pulp with its foot, biting the head off another villager and swallowing it whole as it tossed the spurting corpse to the ground like a ragdoll.

Before Leon could process the ensuing massacre, El Gigante was bounding towards him, covered by a purée of gore from his former captors.

Leon dived out of the way as El Gigante stomped the hard ground, rolling to a stop and immediately firing the shotgun in its face. The creature recoiled, revealing its rotten teeth as the round tore flesh from its mouth.

As Leon pumped the shotgun, El Gigante lowered its head, running its foot over the ground like an enraged bull.

It charged towards Leon. He attempted to dodge, but he wasn't fast enough. El Gigante slammed into Leon, causing him to drop the shotgun and fly into the nearby cliff wall.

He fell to the hard ground, struggling to breathe as the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. *I'll be surprised if I don't get at least one broken rib.*

Still, no giving up now. Ashley was waiting for him. Leon got to his feet, spitting a mouthful of blood aside and pulling out his handgun. El Gigante let out a triumphant bellowing roar, ready to end him like it did the villagers.

Leon smiled. He wasn't going to give it the satisfaction of an easy kill.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Before their twisted little joust could begin, their attention was snatched by a sudden barking. *Great, do these guys have zombie dogs?*

Leon turned to see a dog standing defiantly atop the cliff surrounding them. It let out an intimidating howl as Leon spotted its leg, which was sporting a wound — a bear trap wound!

The dog leaped into the arena, running towards El Gigante the second it hit the ground. Leon moved as the beast's attention was occupied, swinging its gargantuan arms clumsily at the agile canine.

With a war cry, Leon fired several shots into El Gigante's back, all as close to its body as possible. No matter how big it was, there was no way it would shrug them off.

El Gigante collapsed onto one knee, groaning in pain as its spine was exposed to the world, surrounded by bloodied petals of pallid, writhing flesh.

Leon fished some shotgun shells from his pouch. He was about to slot them into the shotgun when an undulating mass burst from the center of El Gigante's back — a translucent, bubbling creature with clicking insect limbs and a thick carapace, all wrapped around its host's vertebrae.

Knife in hand, Leon leaped onto El Gigante's back, holding the creature with one hand, sawing through it with gritted teeth as it oozed thick green pus in his face.

El Gigante was starting to stir. Leon could feel it beneath his feet. Gotta end this quickly. Leon took one last slice at the mucus-laden creature, severing it from El Gigante's back.

El Gigante slumped over as Leon landed on his feet. As he sheathed his knife, the dog bounded towards him. His first instinct kicked in, and he started petting its head.

"Good boy!"

He and Claire were talking about getting a dog back home. After today, he was gonna push the idea a little stronger.

The dog turned, running off again, leaving Leon to stare at the dead creature in his hand. It resembled the cult's symbol with its lengthy body and angular legs. *This could be the Las Plagas that Ingrid mentioned.*

Leon tossed the carcass aside, where it landed against the ground with a sickening splat.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Bitorez sat in the front pew of the church, hanging his head in shame as Saddler stood over him, making no efforts to hide his immense displeasure.

"You said you would take care of it."

Bitorez kept his head down. Intuition would tell him when to respond.

"You said the American wouldn't be a problem. You said you would deal with Sera — that you would handle the assassin as well. Is that not true?"

"That is true, Lord Saddler."

"So, you can see why I'm concerned?"

"I can, Lord Saddler."

Saddler paused. He needed to maintain his calm demeanor lest the Plagas respond.

"You've had your encounters with the American. He is no longer your concern. Focus on the scientist."

"But, my Lord, the American is killing my congregation!"

Saddler snapped, "If we lose that sample, your congregation is already dead!"

Bitorez flinched. In that split-second, before Saddler calmed himself, there was a searing flash of bright light, drilling a hole into his head and needling in his chest.

Their God was getting restless.

# Πῖπε

It didn't matter how long she had been lying there, how tired she was, how much her brain and muscles had atrophied — Ashley jumped to attention the second that door opened.

This time, her cell was occupied by somebody new — he looked to be in his late twenties and was definitely not Spanish. He wore dark tactical gear, and he was covered in weapons. Fatigue wracked his face; blood and gunk matted his hair and stained his clothes. He smelled like shit, and his movements were erratic, as though every step brought him pain.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

He looked unhinged, which was probably why they picked him to kill her. *This is it, Ashley Graham. Time to fight or die.*

She flinched as her assailant stuck out his hand, “Ashley Graham, my name’s Leon Kennedy. I’m under the President’s order to rescue you.”

Ashley stood there, dumbfounded, brain scrambling for a response.

Leon snatched Ashley’s wrist, leading her into the church’s main hall, leading her to a pew as he fished his walkie from his belt.

“Hunnigan, I’ve succeeded in extricating my subject.”

Ashley watched him talk in fascination. There was an inherent warmth to him. Maybe it was the deepness of his voice or his inexplicably ludicrous haircut. He didn’t come off like an emotionless soldier.

Before she could answer, he ended the call and approached her.

“I’m going to get you out of here. Just follow me.”

“I think not.”

Leon and Ashley turned to see a specter in ornate, royal blue robes with gold trim. He was carrying a

staff that appeared to be made of a deep pulsating burgundy wood covered in fleshy lesions.

He peered at Leon through sunken eyes, giving Leon the same jackal-like grin he had when injecting the Plagas into his neck.

“I am Osmund Saddler, the leader of this religious community.”

Leon defiantly stepped forward, “What do you want?”

“To demonstrate our immense power, of course. Centuries ago, we were driven into the shadows by those who were afraid. Soon, we will re-emerge, and we will give them all something to truly fear.”

“And what am I?” Ashley chimed in, “A ransom? A bargaining chip?”

Saddler responded with a devilish chuckle, “On the contrary, my dear, when the time is right, we will deliver you to your loving father, safe and sound.”

Leon’s brow furrowed. *Why would they kidnap the President’s daughter just to hand her back?*

Then it hit him. His hand went to his neck, feeling the mark left by the needle. Hunnigan’s words echoed through his skull.

“They injected you with something... something that, in enough time, will turn you into one of them.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Ashley clearly put two and two together as her alarmed expression prompted sadistic laughter from Saddler.

The doors to the church swung open, revealing cultists in plain black robes, their pearl-white faces scrunched as they aimed crossbows at Leon and Ashley.

Leon grabbed Ashley and led her away, narrowly avoiding a pair of airborne crossbow bolts as they ran toward a nearby window.

Ashley couldn't believe what she was about to do, yet they jumped through a colorful plate glass window from one of Ashley's guilty pleasure action movies.

They landed on the rough ground outside in a hail of shards. Ashley's body felt bursts of adrenaline she never even thought possible.

Leon led Ashley around a corner to the cemetery in front of the church, where the darkness of the night was pierced by the torches of various villagers, all chanting in an eerie chorus of Spanish as they advanced up the path past the gravestones.

A terrified Ashley turned to Leon, "What do we do?"

Leon pulled out his handgun, aiming at the villagers, "Gimme a second."

Ashley watched in awe as Leon turned his gun to a nearby wagon, firing a single shot at one of the barrels it was carrying.

The barrels exploded in a spectacular fireball on impact, blasting some villagers onto their backs. The explosion caused the wagon's wheels to move, sending it down the path where it mowed down the villagers — a flaming fist that sent its enemies in all directions.

As she followed Leon down the newly vacated path through the cemetery, Ashley felt infinitely safer than she did ten minutes ago.

Luis hid from the ensuing madness inside one of the village's abandoned houses. Everybody else was patrolling the area for signs of their target. *Signs of me.*

He had fond memories of Valdelobos. It was his hometown, after all. He remembered the beautiful sunrises, the cool morning mist as his father taught him to hunt, the warm fire as his grandfather prepared supper and taught him of the Los Illuminados religion, his mother cultivating his love for science and teaching him about the wide, wonderful world just beyond the village.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

When he was a boy, he was vaguely aware of the dark forces hovering over the village — intruders with their own evil machinations, whether it was the Castellans and their weakened bloodline of decadent Catholics or Saddler, a foreigner who mysteriously appeared one day and uncovered the Plagas, converting the entire village to his nebulous cause.

Luis was mad at himself for believing any of Saddler's lies. Saddler convinced him that they were one of a kind, both trying to bring Valdelobos to the world. They could spread the word of Los Illuminados while bringing modern innovations to their village — healthcare, agriculture, communications- endless possibilities!

Then, the next thing Luis knew, he was forced to watch while the villagers, all people he had known and loved, were turned into test subjects. He regarded these people as his family, and now he hid in fear as they hunted him down.

*On the bright side, you know Saddler can't kill you until he has the sample.* Luis cursed how long it was taking for the villagers to disperse. The second he saw an opening, he would return to his lab, get the sample, and get out of there.

Ada was perched on a rooftop when she heard the commotion below. The villagers were pissed.

*Could be Leon*, she thought, trying to figure out where he had previously disappeared. She had been searching the island for hours with no sign of him. She was beginning to lose hope. Perhaps the village had finally given him a challenge from which he couldn't walk away.

*Looks like you might have been wrong about him again.* With a sigh, Ada fired a grappling gun into the distance, swinging to another vantage point.

# † E Π

Ashley helped Leon bar the doors and windows as they frantically hurried across the bottom floor of the wooden cabin they had just entered. Once they were safe, Ashley took a second to catch her breath, digging splinters out of her fingers.

"Thanks for the help," Leon said, "I'll check upstairs and seal all the entry points. When the mob tires out and moves on, we'll head to the extraction point."

"What if we take too long?"

Leon gave her that warm, reassuring smile, "They'll wait all night for us if they have to-"

Leon was interrupted by the buzzing of his walkie. He answered the call.

"Hunnigan, what's happening?"

After a second, Leon's face dropped. His eyes darted towards Ashley, relieved to see that she was too distracted with the last splinter, which had dug itself quite deep.

"Can you send another one?"

After another pause, Leon stared pensively at the floor, his mind racing.

"Got it. Leon out."

He clipped his walkie back to his belt and turned to Ashley, "they lost contact with the chopper."

"What?"

"It's okay; they'll send another one. It just means that we'll have to wait a little longer, and the extraction point will be further out. Nothing we can't handle."

Ashley tried to give back a reassuring smile but couldn't hide her concern. The cult would only let her go on their own terms, and those terms were based on a monster growing inside of her. It was a truth that was hard not to dwell on.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Suddenly, footsteps made their way down from the second floor. Ashley jumped and hid behind Leon, expecting a fight to break out as he pulled out his handgun.

The footsteps were those of another person carrying their own gun. *Great, this was going to be a shootout*, Ashley thought.

Instead, the second their eyes locked, both combatants lowered their guns.

"Luis!"

"Small world, after all."

Luis stepped forward, curiously eyeing Ashley, "I see the President armed his daughter with ballistics, too."

Ashley scoffed, "I'll have you know my figure has little to do with my standing!"

Luis gave a grin, clearly reveling in getting under the skin of the President's daughter. It may not have shocked anybody that he had a low opinion of those associated with US politics. When he looked at Ashley, he saw a weekend warrior brat who occasionally did her good deed for the day to avoid thinking about her massive privilege and the millions of displaced people that kept it intact.

Once he was satisfied with Ashley's discomfort, Luis switched his attention to the doors and windows, only to be puzzled.

"Why'd you two board all the doors and windows? You expecting trouble?"

"Something like that," Leon said as he unloaded his pistol and checked the mag. He had bullets, but he was cutting it a little close.

*Shit, Luis thought. I hope he didn't just lead the villagers right to us. That's gonna slow me down even more. My contact's gonna have some words about that.*

Before Luis could plan his escape, a voice rang out.

"¡Eh, acá!"

The mob had found them, and those two American idiots had boxed them all in. Luis turned to Leon, "Game time."

The walls rattled as the villagers launched themselves against the doors and windows. Leon grabbed Ashley by the shoulder, "Find a place to hide!"

She broke away from the duo as they raised their guns, following the din outside as it weaved from wall to wall in search of an opening.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

There was nowhere to hide down here. There was a table, some shelves, stools — nothing of use. Ashley made her way toward the stairs when a nearby crash caused her to jump, followed by gunshots.

She broke into a run, reaching the upstairs area. It was a bedroom, where a large cupboard beckoned her inside. It'd be perfect.

But before stepping in, she spotted a picture on a nearby table. Given the strong resemblance, it was likely that the people in the picture were a boy and his father. Both looked to be having a pleasant time, decked out in winter clothing and brandishing hunting rifles.

*It looks like the man downstairs, Ashley thought. Where the hell are we?*

The window next to her exploded. The villagers were trampling each other to climb inside. Ashley ran towards the cupboard and yanked it open, shoving aside clothes and slamming the door shut behind her.

She clasped a hand over her mouth, hyperventilating as a cascade of enraged groans converged outside the door. They knew she was in here. It would only be a second before those doors flew open, and they reached in and tore her apart.

Her eyes closed, anticipating the end. More gunshots rang out from the floor below. Despite how hard she tried, Ashley couldn't keep her eyes closed. She opened them to find that she was still inside the cupboard, untouched. Whatever was happening downstairs had everybody occupied.

Leon pumped the shotgun, watching as the spent cartridge hit the floor. He was out of shells. So, he switched to his pistol, pointing it at an advancing villager and shooting them point blank in the head — an instant kill.

And a good thing, too. As Leon and Luis observed the bodies of their fallen enemies, Leon could feel the emptiness of his pistol.

"How are you doing for ammo?" Luis asked.

"Completely out."

"Me too."

"Then, let's hope that was the last of them."

Leon could tell Luis was unnerved.

"You okay?"

"I knew these people," Luis muttered, "every man and woman you see here."

"I'm sorry, man."

"Don't be. They were dead long before you arrived."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*And it's my fault*, Luis omitted before turning to Leon,

"I think I know where to get you some more ammo."

As Luis turned towards the stairs, another sound filled the space around them, chilling both men's spines.

It was a chainsaw.

The door was kicked open as Chainsaw Man burst inside, revved up and ready to carve, waving his roaring instrument of death in a war dance.

"Looks like we're having a house call."

"What do you mean?"

"Leon, meet the village doctor."

Leon did a double-take before turning back to his comrade.

"Luis, can you get me that ammo?"

"That depends, can you keep our friend occupied?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Luis clapped him on the back, "Just be careful, okay? This is my house. The furniture's been passed down for generations."

Before Leon could ask, Luis was rushing up the stairs. Leon dived out of the way as Dr. Chainsaw Man slashed at him, tearing through the wooden

furniture. *Sorry Luis*, Leon thought as he snatched a nearby plank off the floor. Leon smacked the plank across the good doctor's head, which imploded on contact.

The burlap sack covering the doctor's face was now hovering towards the ceiling, carried by a tentacle — one of many tentacles that had exploded from a stump atop his shoulders. Two eyeballs hanging loosely from knotted optic nerves were at the center of this mass of fibrous red tentacles.

This creature lunged, thrusting his chainsaw at Leon. Leon jumped to the side as the chainsaw slammed into the wall behind him. *Excellent, just bought myself a couple of s-*

Before Leon could complete his thought, the doctor threw an arm out, wrapping a hand around his throat. As Leon struggled with the doctor's vice-like grip, Luis emerged at the top of the steps, firing shots at the doctor with his freshly loaded pistol.

Luis took closer steps, trying to get a more precise shot. The bullets might as well have been wads of paper for the damage they were doing. As Luis reloaded, the doctor whipped one of its tentacles out, knocking him over and pulling him closer.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

It then caught Luis with its other hand, holding Leon and Luis aloft. Its tentacles slithered around the chainsaw's handle, pulling it from the wall.

The chainsaw's whirring blade was mere inches from Leon's face, enraged teeth ready to tear through his skull and grind his brain into a paste.

Blood spattered the struggling men as a rifle round tore through one of the doctor's exposed eyeballs. It dropped Leon and Luis to the floor as it fell onto one knee, the tentacles in its head desperately flailing in all directions. They turned to see Ashley on the stairs, peering through the scope of a freshly fired rifle, a plume of smoke from the barrel.

She dropped the rifle, rubbing her shoulder and wincing in pain. Luis reached for his gun.

"Leon!"

The second Leon turned, he found Luis' gun flying towards him. He caught it, feeling its weight — fully loaded!

He aimed it directly at the center of the writhing mass of tentacles and fired every single shot, one after the other.

The tentacles let out a high-pitched shriek as they retreated into the doctor's neck stump, leaving a decapitated body that slammed against the floor.

Leon handed Luis' gun back, examining the doctor's body as Luis ascended the stairs to greet Ashley.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot, Seniorita."

"You're welcome."

"That was a nice shot."

"You're not the only one whose Dad took them hunting."

Luis' eyebrows raised. The man was impressed.

He and Ashley went upstairs, returning moments later with boxes of shotgun shells and pistol rounds.

"Ashley!"

The duo turned towards Leon, who was back on his feet.

"You ready to head out?"

Ashley nodded, making her way down the stairs and joining Leon.

"Luis?"

Luis waved dismissively. "I have some business to take care of. I'll catch up with you later."

Leon shrugged as he led Ashley out of the cabin, the door closing behind them.

An exhausted Luis trudged towards the splintered remains of the table, stepping over the corpses of the people he used to call his friends, slumping down on a wooden chair.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

He reached for a bottle of scotch lying nearby, taking a long drink and savoring the warm sensation that slid down his throat, settling in his chest.

The second his throat was clear, he asked "So, how long've you been here?"

Ada entered the room, taking a seat opposite Luis.

"I just got here," she responded.

"I would hope so. You'd have to be a real piece of work to see our predicament and not intervene."

"I also wouldn't be doing my job."

"And, what exactly is that?"

"Making sure you do yours."

Luis took another swig, "What do you actually want to do with that sample?"

"I don't want to do anything with it except make sure it gets into the hands of my employer."

Luis eyed Ada with suspicion. When he realized Saddler's true intentions, his immediate response was to contact his old college professor back in the States and urge him to get the word out. The world needed to know what was waiting for them.

Initially, all Luis got in return was radio silence.

Then Ada reached out, offering to help. Luis was more than happy to comply. He was always a people-pleaser... and a sucker for beautiful women.

However, the longer their correspondence, the clearer it became that he didn't trust her much. Having met Leon, Luis was no longer sure he needed Ada or her mysterious employer.

"Luis," Ada interjected, "I'm going to make this incredibly clear. The only reason you are still alive is because everybody needs that Plagas sample."

"I'm aware."

"Then you know how important it is to grab it before anybody else can find it."

"I also know that the second I grab it is the second you stop needing me alive."

Ada froze, almost letting her poker face slip. *Now is not the time for a gambit, Mr. Sera.*

Luis enjoyed shit-stirring, and he felt satisfied knowing that he was irritating Ada — someone who clearly needed to feel like they were in control. She needed him, and he wouldn't let her forget it.

Luis chuckled heartily, "Don't worry, I'll grab the sample. I was going to grab it anyway when my friend led half the village to my doorstep."

"Of course he did."

"You know him?"

"I met him when he was a cop."

"Only for a day, though."

"He told you that?"

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

A smile crept across Luis' face, "You have feelings for the man, no? I can see it on your face."

Ada grimaced with disdain, cursing the professionalism stopping her from giving this sleazy Spaniard a bullet. After all, she could find the sample on her own.

Not as quickly as she could with Luis alive, though. She didn't want to stay in this village longer than she had to, especially not with Wesker in her ear.

"What're we reminiscing for, anyway?" Luis said as he placed the bottle of scotch on the floor, got up from his seat, and headed for the door, "We're both on a deadline. I'll get the sample. You do... whatever the hell it is you're doing."

Then, Luis was gone, leaving Ada with a swirl of thoughts and emotions she thought she had buried back in 1998.

Trent wasn't paying her enough.

## ELEVEN

*This was bad, Leon thought as he led Ashley through a winding path that stretched on into the night. We're dealing with a cult that has their own B.O.Ws and the ordnance to take out a chopper, and we don't have any extraction.*

*We've just gotta keep moving. As long as Ashley's with me, they can't complete their plan, whatever it is.*

The path ended near a large building made from corrugated iron. Maybe that'll be the right spot to

lay low; contact Hunnigan, and figure out our next move.

The entrance was two doors made from reinforced steel — perfect for keeping everything out. Leon shoved the doors open, and he and Ashley went inside.

They took a few steps before their senses were barraged by their surroundings. This was a slaughterhouse with rust-covered iron walls, animal carcasses hanging from meat hooks, a cacophony of grinding machinery, and a miserable stench of death.

“Leon!”

Leon turned to Ashley, noting the terror in her eyes as she pointed to the entrance.

Mr. Big Cheese grasped the large door handles in his strong hands and twisted them against each other into a metallic pretzel. Leon and Ashley weren't leaving any time soon.

The hulking reverend took thundering steps toward them with a sadistic grin. Now that there was nowhere to run, the heathens would suffer slowly for their insolence.

Leon wasn't going to take chances with the pistol. He immediately pulled the shotgun and fired several shots at the Priest. The bullets tore through

his coat, rendering it tattered. *Great, except I'm trying to kill the man, not undress him.*

The Priest ignored his lacerated skin, tossing the rags that used to be his coat aside. “That’s what you get for stealing my jacket!” Leon yelled. It wasn’t much. But, damn it, it had to be said! That jacket meant a lot to him.

Big Cheese was unamused. As he took steps towards Leon, his torso burst from his body, suspended above the floor by his now hyperextended spinal column, now peppered with twitching centipede legs. Pincers snapped through his back as he centered his gaze on Leon.

Suddenly, Leon heard a grunt nearby. He turned to see that Ashley had knocked over an oil barrel, its contents seeping and pooling underneath the Priest’s feet.

Leon fished his pistol from its holster and pointed it at the puddle, firing off a “¡Hasta luego!” followed by a bullet. Ashley and Leon huddled together as the oil ignited, engulfing the Priest in a spectacular fireball.

“Glad that’s over!” Leon called out, “Good thinking, Ashley!”

But, some sounds signaled otherwise — flesh tearing, the disembodied clicks of scuttling limbs,

bones knitting, a harrowing pained scream. It wasn't over yet.

Leon and Ashley looked over as the flames dissipated to see a pair of disembodied human legs. Whatever the Priest was now, he probably didn't need them anymore.

"Stay close!," Leon ordered as he holstered his pistol and scanned the ceiling, shotgun at the ready.

"What's going on?" Ashley whispered, her voice shaking

"Don't worry," Leon whispered back, "I've got experience with this type of thing."

Leon realized with frustration that the space above them was bathed in shadow. Finding his enemy was going to be difficult.

Ashley wailed, her scream traveling upwards. Leon whipped around to find the space that she occupied now vacant. *Oh shit!*

Leon continued to point the shotgun into the dark. *At least you know he's not gonna hurt her because he needs her alive.*

*He just wants to kill you. That's the bright side!*

A whooshing sensation prompted Leon to duck, narrowly avoiding a swipe from the Priest's pincers. Leon raised the shotgun but stopped himself from firing. *Can't risk hitting Ashley!*

Slinging his shotgun, his mind raced as he surveyed the room for anything he could use — not much besides implements for preparing meat. He picked up a large metal tenderizer, hoping a plan would come together.

“Leon, look out!”

He turned as the Priest made another attack, hanging upside down as he directed his pincers toward Leon. Leon raised his arms like a boxer throwing up a guard, feeling the pincers slice through the skin of his arms.

Reflexively, Leon swung the meat tenderizer, watching it collide with the Priest’s jaw, ripping it from his head where it fell to the floor.

The Priest collected himself, reorienting so he faced Leon the right side up. Entrails and drool spilled onto the floor from his gaping open maw. He wasn’t going to deliver any sermons ever again. That much was certain.

The creature outstretched its arms, fangs bursting from the cavity in its head. Leon clubbed it with the meat tenderizer again. Its glass eye popped from its skull, hitting the floor and rolling like a marble.

Leon grabbed the disoriented creature by the shoulders, swinging it onto an exposed meat hook, which punctured it through the chest and created a

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

mosaic of blood and shattered ribs. It swayed back and forth, futilely trying to snatch at Leon with its gnarly arms.

With a smile, Leon procured his shotgun, angling the barrel in the void where the Priest's jaw used to be.

“Lights out, Padre”

Leon pulled the trigger, blowing apart the Priest's skull and blending his brains into a cranial soup.

As the Priest's dead body hung from the hook, Leon called out, “Ashley! You there? It's safe to come out!”

“Uh... can you catch me? I'm a bit high up.”

Leon outstretched his arms, “Sure!”

“Okay. One... Two... Three...”

Ashley emerged from the darkness, Leon catching her in his arms and helping her to the floor.

As Ashley's attention was on the hanging, dripping monster corpse in front of her, Leon picked up the fake eye off the floor, turning it in his fingers as an idea percolated in his head.

“Sorry, Stranger.”

The Merchant dismissively waved Leon away, “I can't accept that, I'm afraid.”

Ashley stared at Leon in dismay. *Great, he's my rescue, and he's completely lost it.*

"This belonged to the village priest," Leon bargained, "It's completely unique. It's gotta be worth something, surely."

"You misunderstand me, Stranger," the Merchant responded, "the problem is not that this eye has no worth. Quite the contrary. However, I have the feeling you're gonna need it."

*What the hell is he talking about? Ashley thought. Who was this weirdo, and why was Leon even talking to him?*

With a sigh, Leon pocketed the eye. The Merchant probably wasn't trying to scam him, but who knew what agenda that man had? *It also doesn't help that it means I have no money. Imagine that — I'm a secret agent for the Government, and I'm flat broke.*

His eyes drifted towards a 9mm handgun the Merchant had propped on a table. It had a German build — semi-automatic with a box magazine in front of the trigger, a wooden shoulder stock, and a bulbous grip. It was a powerful gun.

The Merchant followed Leon's gaze, "Ahh... a choice of an avid gun collector. It's a nice gun, Stranger."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon looked up at him, “Don’t suppose I could cut a deal with you for it?”

The Merchant shook his head, “Not enough cash, Stranger.”

Saddler entered the smoldering remains of the abattoir, regarding his old subservient with pity as he hanged from a meat hook like slaughtered swine, his disembodied entrails gathered at the floor beneath him in a pile. Mendez deserved this. The man had been granted the incomparable gift of the Plagas, yet his congregation lay dead at his feet. He was clearly not worthy.

Now, the Americans were heading for the castle, where Salazar was waiting for them. The thought of their inevitable encounter brought a smile to Saddler’s face. Salazar may have had a weak resolve, but he could be a real vindictive and sadistic son of a bitch when he wanted to.

The Americans’ luck would be running out very soon.

## TWELVE

Ashley watched in disbelief as Leon held the glass eye aloft. They were standing in front of a large iron gate with a bust of a face at its center. The glass eye faced a slight metallic ring covering the bust's eye. It must have been some kind of retinal scanner.

Sure enough, the gate clicked open, and Leon tossed the eye aside, turning to Ashley with a wry grin.

“Typical Umbrella. They love shit like this. You get used to it.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“Wait,” Ashley replied, “Umbrella? The old pharmaceutical company? What do they have to do with this?”

Leon looked confused, then flinched, “It’s nothing. Sorry, a force of habit.”

Ashley’s brow furrowed inquisitively, so Leon continued, “I was in Raccoon City, Umbrella had a lot of stuff like this.”

It took a second, but Ashley recoiled, “You were in Raccoon City?”

Before Leon could answer, a cascade of shouting erupted behind them. Whatever villagers were left had gathered in a last stand.

Leon and Ashley sprinted, following the path behind the gate. It led to a drawbridge at the foot of an extravagant castle that stretched out into the night — towering over the entire village.

On the other side of the drawbridge was a pair of crank handles. Leon approached one, waving Ashley towards the other. As bodies emerged from the path, weapons primed and faces contorted in rage, Leon and Ashley turned their crank handles as far as they could.

The drawbridge groaned as it slowly rotated upwards. Eventually, it was perfectly parallel to the castle, where it stopped with an echoing thud.

The duo struggled to quell how impressed they were at this grand, enduring relic of 15th-century European architecture, even with the likelihood of walking into another death trap.

Beyond the doors were the castle's outskirts — a series of elevated platforms connected by winding stone staircases.

Leon told Ashley to wait before scouting ahead. The area was full of robed cultists, all pacing back and forth, murmuring under their breath. If only Leon had stuck with the rifle.

He craned his neck, trying to peer a little further out.

“¡Mátalo!”

A flaming boulder slammed into the ground a mere inch from Leon, bursting into shards of rock on impact.

*Well, there goes our cover,* Leon thought as the cultists suddenly turned towards him. They outstretched their arms, continuing their incessant murmuring.

Leon fired his pistol at them, putting them down as efficiently as possible.

“Leon, help!”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

In a second, Leon rushed back to where he had left Ashley, only to find a cultist fireman carrying her over his shoulder, flanked by some of his peers.

As Ashley struggled, her captor tried to carry her towards the exit. “Oh no you don’t!” was Leon’s response as he lowered his pistol and put a bullet through the man’s leg, punching out his knee.

The cultist dropped Ashley, only to be met with a kick from Leon, causing his head to explode on impact. The other cultists tried to grab Leon, who quickly incapacitated them with good old-fashioned CQC techniques.

To Ashley’s dismay, tentacles burst from the cultist’s neck stump, pulsating and hovering in place in search of fresh meat. Leon grabbed her wrist, and the two broke off into a run. At least these cultists weren’t going to break their vow of walking.

However, once they reached the corner, Leon stopped, pulling Ashley back as a distant cry of “¡Mátalo!” heralded another flaming boulder slamming right next to them.

“I think there’s cover up ahead,” Leon explained, “Make sure you follow me closely, okay?”

“Uh, Leon?” Ashley tittered, pointing to the decapitated cultist, whose neck tentacles aggressively sought out enemies to slash.

Cursing under his breath, Leon grabbed Ashley and pulled her through the open space. They barely reached the next cover, pressing against the cold, stone wall as they heard another “¡Mátalo!” The headless cultist continued to advance, only to get flattened by the ensuing flaming boulder.

“Alright, move!” Leon barked as they scrambled towards the next available cover.

Luis was growing tired of all of this running around. The path to his lab had been lined with Salazar’s crazed minions. After his fair share of close scrapes, he was ready to go home, draw a bath, settle in with a glass of wine, and nap until the outside world returned to normal.

Instead, he turned to find Leon and Ashley standing at the castle’s main hall entrance. Leon was frustratedly yelling into his walkie.

“Hunnigan! Hunnigan? Damn!”

Luis took steps towards them as Leon clipped the walkie back onto his belt.

“Leon!”

He got their attention, “I’ve got something for you!”

Luis’ hands went to his pockets, only to frustratedly pat them.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“Oh, shit!” He exclaimed, “I must have dropped them on the way here!”

*How did I not check my damn pockets?*

“What did you drop?” Ashley chimed in

“Something to help with your... condition,” Luis nervously announced.

Leon folded his arms, “I knew you weren’t a cop.”

Luis raised his hands defensively, “You got me. I told a fib. If you wanna arrest me over it, go ahead. But you’ve got bigger problems right now.”

Ashley wasn’t amused, “What’s going on?”

There was nothing jocular about Luis’ expression. All the cheek he’d previously used to diffuse the mood had been wholly sapped, leaving a severe frown in its place.

“The eggs that you were injected with; it’s likely they’ve hatched by now.”

Ashley gasped, prompting Luis to interject, “Don’t worry, there’s still time. Just, uh... not a lot of it.”

Luis motioned to leave, “I can help, though. You two keep moving. I’ll catch up.”

With that, Luis left the two, rushing off into the night.

The castle’s dim torchlit interior boasted an opulent design, projecting unrelenting decadence

with its spacious halls, elaborate tapestries, ornate chandeliers, and large stone pillars. As Leon and Ashley made their way across, every step echoing against the tiled floors, they were being watched.

Their host was a slight aristocrat wearing 18th-century nobleman garb. He resembled a child, but his skin was sickly, wrinkled, and textured like parchment. He was flanked by two-robed guards; one jet black, one a deep crimson hue.

The Nobleman excitedly clapped his hands with a gleefully high-pitched cackle.

“I was wondering when you might notice us.”

Leon stiffened, “who are you?”

“Me llamo Ramón Salazar, and I am the eighth Castellan of this magnificent architecture.”

Salazar’s gaze transfixed onto Ashley, his unsettling grin widening as she shifted with discomfort.

“I, too, have received the gift from Lord Saddler — the same that he has bestowed into you. Perhaps you will willingly join us as brethren.”

Leon broke Salazar’s gaze with a razor-sharp “No thanks, Bro!”

That caused the aristocrat to scowl, shifting his attention to Leon as he brimmed with disgust, “...

then she can join us as a hostage. You, on the other hand, are not worth a penny. You can die.”

Salazar turned, retreating further into the castle. The room began to rattle violently as a wall slid upwards from the floor, blocking Leon and Ashley’s path. At the center of this obstruction was a brass relief depicting an ancient soldier riding a winged horse, brandishing a spear. Next to this warrior was a recess with a unique shape.

Ashley turned to Leon, trembling.

“Leon, we’re not gonna become one of them, right?”

Leon turned to her, exuding a sincere confidence that helped ease that nagging voice at the back of her head, and he replied, “No way. We’ll find a cure.”

He turned to the relief before them, “First thing’s first; what’s this?”

Ashley leaned in, taking in the relief’s details.

“I think this is the Chimera,” she noted

“Chimera?” Leon responded, “I guess that makes sense. Chris told me about that B.O.W designation — apparently, there was a group of them down in the Spencer Estate. I figured they’d look different though. He described them as like human-fly hybrids, not whatever that could be.”

He turned to Ashley, who was staring back at him, bewildered.

“Leon, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Chimeras, right?”

“Yeah, the creature from Greek mythology — a lion, crossed with a goat and a serpent — slayed by Bellerophon as he rode the Pegasus. That’s probably what goes here.” She pointed at the recess.

There was a pause as Leon ran an exasperated hand through his hair.

Ashley’s face scrunched up, “Who’s Chris? What’s the Spencer Mansion? Human-fly hybrids?”

Leon responded with a sigh, “Long story. I’ll tell you all about it when we get outta here.”

# THIRTEEN

“Time to weigh up our options,” Leon declared as he and Ashley idled in one of the castle’s many elegant rooms, “we have a creepy door, or we could go around the corner-“

“Corner,” Ashley interjected, “Corner wins.”

Leon shrugged, “Corner, it is.”

They turned the corner, greeted with two large brass busts resembling the knights on a chessboard, flames spewing from their equine faces. Ashley gulped as she stared at the constant fire-blast blocking their path, “Creepy door wins, after all.”

*Creepy was an understatement*, Leon thought as he made his way down stone steps towards a dimly lit dungeon, Ashley watching his back from the top of the stairs.

His eyes had yet to completely adjust to the lack of light, but he could make out some empty cells and a large bell hanging from a wooden frame. That bell's ring would be torture in a cramped space like this.

Leon could spot a giant lever as he approached one of the cells. *Well, it's not like there's anything else to do besides pull it*. Leon gripped the lever, only to flinch.

Next to him was a slender, muscular figure, a full inch taller than him. It wore an iron helmet covered in sharp spikes. Strapped to its forearms were extended blades, almost reaching the floor. It stood perfectly docile.

*I'd like to personally thank whoever shackled this guy to the wall*, Leon thought as he pulled the lever, followed by, *and if that lever doesn't end up springing a trap, maybe I can thank them for that too*.

Leon took a few steps away from the cell when he heard a loud, metallic snap.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“Leon!” Ashley called from the top of the stairs, prompting Leon to turn and see that the slender figure had shattered its shackles and was now free.

Leon brandished his pistol, aiming it at the Prisoner, whose attention was on Ashley.

“Hey!,” Leon fired at the Prisoner’s exposed torso. It growled in response, tensing its muscles as blood trickled from its wounds.

*Why am I even carrying a gun if these guys shrug off every bullet I shoot at them?* Leon lamented as he dodged an oncoming charge from the Prisoner, who sliced the nearby wall, leaving jagged marks.

Leon observed the Prisoner whipping around and slicing at the air. His gun was feeling light, so he ejected the mag. Empty. He haphazardly tossed it aside.

The second the mag hit the floor, the Prisoner froze. With an enraged snarl, the Prisoner dashed to the empty space where the mag landed, ferociously swiping at it. Leon felt relieved, knowing he wasn’t in the way of those deadly claws.

*This thing’s blind!* Leon realized. The bell suddenly made more sense. If only he wasn’t out of pistol ammo. He dug a full mag from one of his pouches. He turned to check on Ashley, who was

crouched atop the stairs, shaking as a hand was clasped over her mouth.

With a wince, Leon slid the mag into his pistol.

*CLICK.*

And Leon was knocked to the ground as the Prisoner slammed into him. With a wave of the Prisoner's clawed hands, Leon felt a tear in his side, followed by a searing pain.

His body wanted to succumb to the sudden shock and freeze in place, but he willed it to move through gritted teeth as he pulled back the slide.

The Prisoner swung down, ready to deliver the final blow, when Leon fired at the bell, causing its earthy ring to blast through the enclosed space. The Prisoner stumbled, rocking back and forth as the sonic pain practically bowled it over. It wrenched its head towards the bell, letting out a vengeful howl.

Leon got to his feet, one hand cradling the wound on his side as it oozed warm, sticky blood, the other shakily pointing his pistol at the Prisoner.

As the Prisoner let loose onto the bell with its claws, Leon spotted its weak spot – a Plagas creature wrapped around its spine, pulsating from its back. Leon fired toward it, hoping the bullets would hit their mark.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

They must have because the Prisoner slumped over. Leon wasn't going to check, though. His first instinct was to trudge up the steps, despite the aches and pains radiating through his tired body.

Ashley helped him back into the other room, slumping onto a nice chair in front of an elegantly set dinner table, keeping the pressure on his wound and waiting for the bleeding to stop. *Imagine eating at this place; his mind rattled. Then again, knowing these freaks, I'd probably be on the menu.*

Pulling that lever had clearly had some effect on those horse busts around the corner, as they were no longer spewing endless streams of hellfire. Leon and Ashley made their way through the newly open hallway.

The two ended up in a grand hall the size of the village, with clean tiled floors accentuated with large torches illuminating the bright walls and plate-glass windows. In the center of the room was a water feature resembling a moat. They'd need to find a way to cross if they didn't want their journey to end there.

"Look!" Ashley blurted as she pointed off to the side. Atop an elevated platform was a crank handle, "that'll probably help us cross."

Leon glanced at the platform, “how can we reach it?”

“Hear me out,” Ashley responded, “If you can give me a boost, I’ll turn the crank.”

“You sure?”

Ashley nodded, “Just make sure you cover me!”

As Ashley got to work on turning the crank, Leon watched her from below, handgun at the ready. The room was eerily quiet, Ashley’s efforts providing the only sound to fill the gargantuan space.

In the time it took for Leon to blink, the room was suddenly filled with robed cultists and chants of “Cógedlo, cógedlo, cógedlo, cógedlo.”

Leon sprung to action, firing shots at pockets of cultists rushing himself and Ashley. Killing all of them was a pipe dream, so Leon aimed for limbs. Anyone unlucky to get close to Ashley had their kneecaps shot, falling to the water below.

But, it was getting harder to keep track of Ashley and deal with the oncoming attacks. Leon was barely dodging his own adversaries, let alone incapacitating Ashley’s.

His limbs were grabbed by the cult, and he was forced to struggle and kick in all directions.

“Leon! Help!”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*Shit!* Leon wrenched himself free, whipping his shotgun and blasting at his aggressors. The second they were dead, he slung the gun and switched back to the pistol, aiming at the cultist who had picked up Ashley and attempted to carry her away.

The shot was clumsy, barely missing Ashley and slamming into the cultist's chest. He dropped Ashley, tumbling from the platform. Leon lunged forward as Ashley dangled over the side, holding on with all the strength she could muster.

The cultist had wrapped its arms around her leg, sinking its teeth into her flesh. Leon aimed his pistol with the most care he could muster, pulling the trigger as a bullet slammed into the cultist's forehead.

Leon watched the cultist crumple like paper and sail into the water below as Ashley returned to the platform. *That was too close, Leon. You need to pay more attention.*

He kept his gun trained in Ashley's direction as she continued to turn the crank. Finally, there was a loud thud. A bridge had formed from one side of the room to the other, granting them passage.

Leon watched as Ashley slowly and carefully made her way from the elevated platform back to the floor.

He was about to approach her when he suddenly heard the sound of metal slicing through flesh, disturbingly close to his ear. He cried out as a burning sensation burst through his shoulder.

Behind him was a cultist, raising a sickle above its head — the blade covered in Leon’s dark red blood.

“Síííí, ¡Quiero matar!”

Leon cut the cultist off with a roundhouse kick that sent the robed menace onto his back. Ashley watched, perturbed, as Leon slammed his foot onto the cultist’s head, which burst like a watermelon, leaving a puddle of gore underneath.

The Merchant eyed Leon with a sedentary poker face as he rambled, “Sorry, I know I’m out of money, but surely we can work something out, right? Maybe I can write you an IOU — you could get compensated by the President himself!”

After a pause, the Merchant shrugged, “Sorry, Stranger.”

Leon looked down at his body. Ashley had managed to patch him up with gauze that she found in one of the castle’s many rooms, but he was in a lot of pain, and he didn’t know how long he could keep this up without firepower.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Ashley reached the Merchant's table, cradling her sweater in her hands. Leon wondered why it wasn't wrapped around her shoulders like usual.

"How about this?" She asked as she laid the sweater on the table, opening it to reveal several gems with their own mesmerizing colors.

The Merchant's eyes widened, "I'll buy 'em at a high price!"

Ashley turned to Leon with a satisfied grin. He simply stood there, bewildered.

"What? I found them while I was looking for something to patch you up."

Leon turned to the Merchant, who was shoveling the gems into his backpack.

"Let's do business."

"Aye, Stranger."

A few transactions later, Leon was decked out with a .223 caliber semi-automatic rifle where the shotgun used to be, a tactical vest over his torso, and a brand new pistol in his thigh holster.

"Let's go," Leon announced with the vigor that only new hardware in the face of insurmountable danger could bring.

Leon and Ashley continued through the castle's winding halls. There was a lack of resistance as they

continued to move — a fact that they found both surprising and unsettling.

Then it happened; Ashley was stopped in her tracks with a violent cough, pulling her hand away to see a small pool of blood and phlegm. She turned to Leon, shaking and drenched in sweat.

“This is it, isn’t it?”

“Ashley, don’t panic!”

“This is what Luis was talking about, wasn’t it? Those eggs inside us – they’ve hatched and now we’re going to turn into some kind of mutant freak with parasites wrapped around our spines and bursting out of our heads!”

Leon didn’t blame Ashley for freaking out. It took him years of training, and he barely held it together. However, now was a horrible time for a panic attack.

*Crap, this is really not my thing*, Leon thought as he tried to extend Ashley a reassuring hand – that they were in this together, and he wouldn’t let her turn into a monster any time soon.

Instead, Ashley recoiled.

“Don’t touch me!” She cried, tearing off into a run across the corridor.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“Ashley!” Leon called out. The second he stepped to follow her, metal spikes shot through the floor, cutting him off.

All he could manage was a limp “Wait!” as Ashley reached the other end of the hall, leaning against the wall and trying to process everything that had happened in the last five minutes.

There was a click, and the wall rotated as Ashley clung to it with a scream. Before Leon could react, she was gone.

*Nice going, Leon.*

“Don’t worry, Ashley!” He called out, hoping she could hear him, “I’m coming for you!”

## FOURTEEN

As Leon tried to plot his next move, his walkie buzzed. It looked like Hunnigan finally solved their communication problem. He answered the call, railing into the static, “Hunnigan, what happened? Our communication went down.”

On the other end was a cackle that shivered Leon’s spine. Through gritted teeth, Leon uttered, “Salazar, you’ve jacked the line.”

“It was the only way to keep your big fat American mouth shut.”

“Where’s Ashley?”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“See what I mean? Now that we know you’ve lost her, we’ll double our efforts to ensure she’s properly recovered. Don’t you worry”

Leon realized how hard he was gripping the walkie and eased up. He wasn’t sure whether or not he could break the walkie with a flex, but it probably wasn’t worth finding out – even if the alternative was talking to this absolute scum.

“While we worry about our friend, Ms. Graham, you can exercise my miserable insects. They get so bored down in the sewers.”

“I’ll keep ‘em occupied,” Leon retorted, “In the meantime, you can worry about what I’ll do when I find you. I’ve killed monsters today that are ten times your tiny size-”

There was a click, leaving Leon with static. He had hit a nerve. *Good.*

*This wasn’t so bad*, Leon thought as he ventured through the enclosed sewer space. Maybe it was because this was inside an extravagant castle, but nothing about it screamed sewer beyond the water that wasn’t even ankle deep. Even the smell was somewhat tolerable. The ventilation was undoubtedly an improvement.

*The sewers under Raccoon City were way worse, not just because of the giant man-eating alligator that nearly swallowed me whole.*

Leon wondered what Salazar had meant by his insects. Could they fit a Plagas egg inside a bug? It's not like that's entirely out of the question. Nothing was out of the question anymore.

Still, whatever Salazar had in mind, it was taking its time. All Leon had to accompany him was the sound of dripping water.

Although, dripping water was supposed to follow a rhythm.

And water didn't get closer with each drop.

Leon took the rifle, peering through the scope at the water stretching before him. Something was out of place, and the key to finding out what could be as small as a bug.

Movement! The water shifted in a small, contained splash. Leon didn't hesitate, pulling the trigger. A creature materialized directly in front of Leon as the .223 round launched it off its feet and hurled it towards the other side of the room, where it slammed into the brick wall and landed in a crumpled heap on the floor.

It was humanoid, standing about 7ft tall but resembled some kind of insect, with segmented

limbs and a dark exoskeleton. It even had wings, which made Leon wonder what the hell it was doing wandering around a sewer.

*So, these things can camouflage.* It was just like the final section of *The Planet*, where Leon had to flee through a simulated city, pursued by ravenous hunters that were invisible to the naked eye.

Leon continued through the sewer, scanning his surroundings for any signs of even the slightest movement. The rapid fluttering of wings caused him to jump. This one wasn't going to let the water reveal its location.

*Good thing I've got the semi-automatic,* Leon thought as he fired multiple shots. Two missed, but two were a direct hit, revealing another insect and blasting it to the ground with splurts of fluorescent green viscera.

This gauntlet was exhausting – the intense concentration required and the toll the rifle's recoil took on his injured shoulder. Still, these insects were dropping like flies.

But Leon couldn't help but feel like he was forgetting something — something evident that he would kick himself for once it hit him.

Then, it literally did. Leon felt a powerful kick against his chest, winding him as it sent him onto his

back with a splash. *Nice going. You were too busy checking the walls and the floor that you forgot to look up!*

Leon struggled to catch his breath as he felt the insect's invisible limbs on his chest, keeping him down. There was no sense in going for the rifle; it'd take too long to take the shot.

With the closest his collapsing chest could muster to a deep breath, Leon swiped the pistol from his holster and fired into the air, hoping that at least one of those shots was a hit.

Leon felt the pressure leave his chest as the insect appeared, recoiling in pain as it clawed at the bullet holes in its carapace. He sprung to his feet, plucking the rifle off the floor and pulling the trigger. A shot punched through the insect before leaving Leon with a series of clicks.

*Okay, now this sewer is getting on my nerves.*

Salazar sat at his study desk, observing pieces of parchment under the warm candlelight, shaking with excitement.

For many years, the Salazar family has served as the castellans of this castle. However, not everything is bright, for my ancestry has a dark past.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Long ago, there once was a religious group that had deep roots in this region called Los Illuminados. Unjustly, however, the first castellan of the castle took away their rights and powers.

I may be the eighth Castellan, but I felt that it was my duty and responsibility to atone for the sins of my ignorant ancestors.

I knew the best way to atone for that sin was to give power back to those we once took it away from. It took a little time, as expected, but we rejuvenated the once-sealed Plagas. With this success, I was one step closer to the revival of Los Illuminados.

I released the Las Plagas from deep under the castle and gave them to Lord Saddler not only to repay my ancestors' sins. Lord Saddler is a man with a vision for a better world, and I must do whatever I can to make that vision a reality.

We will do more than cleanse the souls of the wicked. We will bring them into our family and give them a reason to live. After all, that was the kindness that Lord Saddler had bestowed upon me.

And after the Lord has succeeded in creating the world he has envisioned, then the sins of my Salazar family will be atoned for.

This was Salazar's masterpiece — a mere sample of the memoir he would publish once Los Illuminados revealed itself to the rest of the world.

They would soon know the name, Salazar, as he took his rightful place amongst the world's most influential, not because he inherited it from the Castellans before him, but because he earned it himself.

*Not long now* was the delightful refrain playing through his head. They had the girl, and the American was close to death.

All they needed was the dominant Plagas sample from that biologist, and he was running out of places to run. All of the pieces were falling into place.

## FIFTEEN

Ashley's knees were beginning to ache, but she didn't dare make a sound. Right now, the only thing keeping her alive was that it was dark and that she kept her head down and kept moving.

Cultists wandered back and forth in a daze as she crawled along the stone floor, using any furniture she could for cover. Ashley wasn't sure what scared her more – that she knew the violence they were capable of or that they seemed to have no agency.

*That's going to be me, her mind rattled. In a matter of time, I won't exist anymore – just a flesh*

*puppet for a parasite that will kill everyone I love. Am I even going to be conscious while it happens?*

*What would be the better option?*

Eventually, Ashley hit a wall, forcing her to stand. By this point, her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and she could see that all eyes in the room were now staring at her.

“¡Ahí está ella!

A swarm of robed cultists rushed towards her, arms outstretched. She turned to run, cursing as she immediately stubbed her toe on a nearby table.

His journey in the sewers long over, Leon strode into another grand hall with decadent decoration. Indeed, this wasn't where you'd release a monster that could ruin the elegant carpeting or damage the art adorning the walls.

Leon approached a nearby chest. They probably wouldn't appreciate him rifling through their stuff. Then again, he didn't enjoy fighting bug people in a sewer.

“Screw ‘em,” Leon muttered as he opened the chest to find a brass, goat-shaped ornament.

As Leon pocketed the ornament, a voice squeaked from afar, “Must you insist on being the itch I cannot scratch, Mr. Kennedy?”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon followed the voice to see Salazar peering at him from several floors above. *Anything to make himself feel bigger, eh?*

Leon let out a patronizing laugh, “Maybe if you stopped sending your goons after me and faced me like a man-“

Salazar spoke with a renewed smugness, “I refuse to lower myself to the level of any man — not when I am so, so much more!”

Leon couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Salazar might not work for Umbrella, but he might as well with that attitude.

“Still, if it’s another challenge you so desire, then so be it,” Salazar snapped. Turning to leave the room, Salazar made a dismissive wave.

*Just wait until we’re standing on the same floor, Asshole,* Leon thought. Hooded cultists quickly surrounded Leon, all brandishing scythes, the curved blades menacingly jutting in his direction, calling for his blood.

Without Ashley to worry about, Leon could give these guys his full attention. He gave his knuckles a satisfying crack.

One of the cultists rushed forward, swinging its scythe. Leon ducked, weaving towards the cultist and grasping the scythe’s long wooden handle.

“Thanks for the opening.”

Leon wrenched the scythe from its owner, repositioning himself so everyone was in his sight.

His training with polearms was minimal, but he felt like a master as he spun his body, swinging the scythe at the horde. The freshly sharpened blade had no problem slicing through flesh and bone, and Leon lowered the weapon to find multiple upright bodies, all missing heads.

“Do I get points for style?” Leon wisecracked. One by one, the decapitated bodies fell to the floor. However, there was one that stayed defiantly upright.

“What’s the matter? You shy or something-”

Leon jumped as a Plaga clawed its way through the neck stump. It wasn’t like its tentacled brethren. This one was bulkier, resembling a muscle-bound centipede with its limbs flailing in all directions, ready to tear the nearest victim apart.

In the face of such unspeakable horror, Leon smirked. With a hip fire from his rifle, the creature burst open, deflating with a stream of fluorescent pus as its host fell to the floor to join its brethren.

With that, Leon put his hands on his hips as he surveyed his handiwork. The Castellan was as good as dead if that was the best he could do.

Time slowed to a crawl for Ada Wong as she huddled inside a small residential space, seated on a soft four-poster bed, checking her mags. She wasn't hurting for ammo. Still, no sense in firing any shots unless she had to.

These cultists were ruthless, but they weren't very coordinated. Ada had found it all too easy to give them the slip.

Still, she was getting bored. Maybe she could've gotten away with killing Luis after all. If he wasn't dead already, he might as well be with how long he was taking. Ada was beginning to wonder if there even was a sample. Maybe Luis was making it up so he could have leverage against the entire village.

Ada snapped to attention as she heard a shuffling outside. Someone was coming. Whether it was Luis or another cultist, she had to be ready.

Leon approached the entrance to a hedge maze, his pistol at the ready. Who knew what Salazar had waiting for him in here?

As Leon followed his gut, shifting around corners past the immaculately maintained vegetation, he could hear a faint skittering — rapid, yet delicate, like a dog's paws. *Maybe my friend's*

*back. I wonder if he'd let me adopt him. At this point, I'll sign the paperwork right now.*

He turned to find a dog, but this one was different. Its fur was darker, matted down with dirt and blood, barely covering lesions on its skin. Its eyes were sunken and pearl-white. Thin rivulets of saliva looped around its gaping snout. It immediately greeted Leon with a series of sharp barks.

“Easy,” Leon uttered, hoping it'd be enough to appease the rabid canine, especially as more of its pack made their presence known by drowning out the silence in a cavalcade of wolf-like howls.

Razor-sharp tendrils punched their way through the dog's back, leaving fur and pulpy flesh in their wake, twitching and writhing as the dog arched its back, ready to lunge. Leon took a deep breath. If he missed now, they'd tear him apart.

Ada could hear the gunshots from the outside garden, accompanied by the yelps of Salazar's dogs. They could only mean one thing. Leon was on his way.

*Because you can't go back the way you came, Ada realized, you have nowhere to hide.*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

She tensed up. It wasn't how she wanted to reveal herself. Of course, in the best-case scenario, she wouldn't have to.

*Things never used to be this complicated*, Ada mused as she maneuvered into position. Her window of opportunity was going to be small. *You better make it count.*

Sure enough, Leon shouldered through the door, slamming it with a grunt against a hail of snarling hellhounds.

Leon wiped the sweat from his brow when cold steel pressed against his back. Whoever this was, they couldn't be Los Illuminados. He'd have been dead already. Does that mean there's a third player in all of this?

It didn't matter. Leon wasn't here to figure that out. He was here to save Ashley. There wasn't time for this distraction. So, he acted quickly, shifting his body and catching the assailant's arm, wrenching it behind their back and grabbing their pistol with his gloved hand.

For a split second, Leon mentally blanked, staring into the eyes of a woman he had thought to be long dead. He lost all feeling in his legs, his heart pounding against his ribs, his throat closing up with the coarse texture of sandpaper.

She took advantage of this, launching a kick that pulled herself free from Leon's grasp, freeing the gun from his grip and sending it spinning into the air.

Leon snapped out of his trance. Letting instinct take over, he unsheathed his knife and lunged toward the woman. The second she caught her gun, he intercepted her, using one hand to pull the weapon aside and the other to hold the knife to her throat.

She wasn't a trick. This was Ada Wong.

The last time Leon saw her, she was falling to her death in an underground Umbrella facility as it was in the middle of its self-destruct sequence, having just sacrificed her life so that he could escape Raccoon City.

And now, she was, eyeing him with a cold gaze suggesting it all meant nothing. They had been through hell together, and she'd never thought to call. It might have helped with the tidal wave of survivor's guilt, if nothing else.

Leon tried not to sound bitter as he uttered, "Bit of advice; try using knives next time. It works better for close encounters."

Ada let her guard down as she smiled at him and replied, "It's good to see you, Leon."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

With a sigh, Leon pulled Ada's gun from her grasp, emptying it and tossing it aside. He sheathed his knife, "So, you're not gonna tell me why you're here or how you got out of Raccoon?"

"Maybe, when the time is a little more appropriate."

"A call would've been nice."

"Not in my line of work. Besides, we wouldn't want to make Claire jealous, would we?"

That stung. Leon wasn't about to let her know that, though. Instead, he pushed forward, questioning, "Let me guess; did Trent put you up to this? It sounds like something he would do."

Ada bit her lip, visibly irritated. It did nothing to deter Leon, who continued, "That would be the only explanation that makes sense. He dicked us around at the Planet, and we still don't know anything about him except that he's ex-Umbrella. Is this the next step in some power play? Was he messing with us the whole time?"

"See you around, Leon," Ada uttered as she pulled a royal blue grenade strapped to her thigh. Leon tried to brace himself as she pulled the pin and slammed it against the floor, filling the room with a cascade of blinding white.

As Leon's senses painfully returned, the ringing in his ears and the blurriness in his vision slowly subsided, and he could see that Ada was gone. In her place was a small brass ornament resembling a lion.

His brain reeling, Leon plucked it off the floor. *At least, this time, she's left me a parting gift.*

## SIXTEEN

Ada's cell phone started to rattle as soon as she was a safe distance away. She contemplated letting it ring, only to remember that; if Wesker was calling, he was probably watching too.

As soon as it flicked open, Wesker wasted no time with a pointed "Luis has succeeded in recovering the sample. He's waiting in the castle. Get in contact with him ASAP."

"Understood"

“And, that US government agent, Leon; if you encounter him, put him out of commission. We can't let him interfere with our plans.”

Ada's grip tightened.

“He has no idea what's going on. He's nothing we need to worry about.”

Wesker shook his head, oozing condescension.

“We can do without the distraction. Take Leon out.”

With that, the call was over. Ada wondered if that order was coming from Wesker or Trent?

Leon was right about Trent. She didn't know him. She made it her business not to know him. What if that's what he was counting on?

Ada wasn't the kind of person who worried about the moral values of her clients. Assassination wasn't the kind of game you got into if you did.

But she didn't want another Umbrella Corporation, and she especially didn't want another Raccoon City.

Leon ventured further into the castle, letting his mission to find Ashley drown out thoughts of Ada and just how tangled this web was getting.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Luckily, the cultists' resistance was enough to keep his mind occupied as he went from opulent room to room.

He stopped at a pillar with a chest atop it. At first, Leon was going to dismiss it. But, he remembered the Merchant and decided the chest's contents may be worth it.

With a grunt, Leon pulled the chest open, peering inside to find it empty.

*Oh well, it could be worse.*

Suddenly, Leon jumped as his surroundings filled with steel bars. A cage was lowered around him, blocking his escape. As Leon searched for the exit, a heavy mass landed next to him with an ominous thud.

The Blind Prisoner stretched his limbs, letting out a roar as he flexed his muscles, claws at the ready. Suddenly, Leon became hyper-aware of just how cramped the room was. The Prisoner wouldn't have to stretch that far to reach him.

As if that wasn't enough, Leon could sense movement around him. On the other side of the cage, rowdy cultists were yelling a chorus of Spanish. Could he understand what they were saying? No. But he wasn't an idiot. They were telling their Prisoner where to attack.

Leon braced himself. He wasn't going to get caught off-guard like last time.

The Prisoner charged toward Leon, unleashing a flurry of blades in his direction. Leon dodged to the side, planting his back against the bars, creating as much distance as possible. A sharp pain hit his shoulder – not enough to break the skin, but enough to make him audibly wince. A cultist had poked him, trying to push him back into the fight.

The Prisoner responded kindly, lunging towards Leon and jutting its gauntlets out. Leon side-stepped its attack, watching as the claws slid between the bars, impaling the cultist standing in their way.

As the Prisoner withdrew the blades from the rib cage of its unfortunate victim, Leon ducked under its arms, emerging behind the pillar. He aimed at the Prisoner, firing off rounds with his pistol, trying to hit the parasite on its back. The shots missed, and it wasn't long before the Prisoner shifted toward him.

Leon took a deep breath, flinching as the Prisoner swiped at him — only for its blades to bounce from the pillar. Maybe the cramped space wouldn't be so hazardous after all.

He reloaded his pistol as the Prisoner readied another attack. He fired at its iron helmet. The shots

echoed on impact with the metal, causing the Prisoner to flail in pain.

Leon dove to the floor as the Prisoner's arms shot out, the claws getting caught in the bars. Once Leon saw his opening, he fired directly at the parasite, watching it deflate with every shot.

It wasn't long before the Prisoner slumped against the bars, never to move again.

Luis rushed through the castle's winding halls, a syringe in one hand and a pill bottle in the other.

Before the journey, he had felt a weight lift from his shoulders, not only because he finally had the sample but also because he had finally made a decision. He knew he couldn't trust Ada. But, now that Leon was here, he no longer had to.

He might have had reservations about the US Government, like any reasonable person, but Leon seemed trustworthy. At least Luis knew who Leon worked for. So, Luis decided to reconnect with Leon, give him the sample, and get out of Valdelobos.

After what felt like an eternity of running through corridors and shouldering doors, Luis burst into a room to find Leon staring back. With a sigh of relief, Luis tried to tell Leon everything.

As hard as Luis tried, the words weren't coming out. Pain swirled through his abdomen as Leon watched in horror. Luis looked down, wondering what could be causing this agony, only to see a pincer resembling a scorpion's tail poking through his torso.

Luis cried out in pain as his stomach tore open, ropes of intestines and bile hitting the marble floor with a wet splat as his body lifted upwards. His strength was ebbing rapidly, but he kept his grip on the sample syringe.

Then it slipped from his fingers, landing in the outstretched hand of Salazar, who tossed Luis to the floor.

“Now that I have the sample, whatever usefulness you've had has just run out.”

As Saddler exited, Leon rushed towards Luis, crying out his name as he crouched beside him. Luis wasted no time grabbing Leon's arm, lifting his head, and presenting him with the small pill bottle.

“Listen, because I don't have much time. This medicine will help suppress the parasite inside you and Ashley until you can remove it in my lab. You have to get the sample back from Saddler.”

“Luis, I'm sorry-“

“Don't be! I deserve this.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Luis winced, “Please, don’t let the world die from my mistakes.”

With that, Luis Sera was dead.

Ashley tried to ignore the feeling of the parasite gripping her spine like a fist as she slowly moved down a long stone corridor. Torches on the walls offered the bare minimum in light, doing very little to assuage Ashley’s discomfort as medieval suits of armor stared imposingly down at her.

Through the corner of her eye, Ashley thought she saw something move — perhaps a slight shift of the arm. Great. On top of everything else, she was losing her mind too. Maybe she could get an extension on her dissertation when she got back.

*That is if I get back.*

Her journey ended in a small dungeon. Four stationary knights stood around a waist-high brick pillar. Atop this pillar was a series of plates, all with some etching on their surface. The result was an incoherent series of shapes that Ashley couldn’t help but be intrigued by.

It was a puzzle, and those were her forte.

So, she started to shift the plates around. An insignia began to form before her the more tiles she

moved. It was almost complete. She could feel it in her gut.

Then, she froze. Her brain was screaming at her; *something just moved!*

But that didn't make sense. Sure, the lighting was dim, but Ashley could see that the room was empty, save for the suits of armor.

Ashley shuddered. *They had to be decorative, right?*

She returned to the puzzle once her heart stopped thundering in her chest. She could tell that she was close to the solution.

Soon, the plates formed a detailed and eloquent insignia. Ashley presumed this had to be the family crest for that Salazar guy. There was a click as the plates slid open, revealing a brass ornament shaped like a serpent.

As Ashley cradled the ornament in her hands, her mind trailed back to the chimera imprint she had seen earlier. They had to be connected.

Her trail of thought was interrupted as, on the other side of the room, light poured through a small opening in the ceiling, a ladder sliding to the floor with a thud.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

She couldn't help but swell with pride. She'd made it to the end of this nightmare. It was time to reunite with Leon.

Then the movement started again. Loud, clanking footsteps echoed throughout the space as the suits of armor suddenly assumed a fighting stance.

With a scream, Ashley raised her hands, running towards the ladder as she could feel the cold, iron hands grabbing her skin.

She threw herself towards it, climbing up the rungs with an athleticism she never knew she had.

Just as her fingers could feel the marble floor above, she the weight of a cold medieval gauntlet wrapped around her ankles. She held on as one of the knights tried to pull her back into the darkness below.

Her arms were seconds from bursting from their sockets. She could feel her fingernails digging into her palms and drawing blood. Her hope was draining with every passing second.

“Ashley!”

And it all came flooding back as Leon stood over her, pointing the rifle at her medieval assailants. With a deep breath, Leon fired several shots, and Ashley could feel the grip on her leg sailing away.

She turned to see a mass of Plagas tentacles trying to reform the suits of armor it had been holding together. The creatures writhed under a sea of metal, tendrils snapping towards Ashley but unable to reach her.

Leon reached down, lifting Ashley out of the exit. As she collected herself on the floor, he lifted the trapdoor and slammed it shut.

Ashley got to her feet as Leon turned to her and asked, “You okay?” with another disarming smile.

No. Ashley wasn’t. She was sure she’d barely be able to walk. She was hurting all over. Her ears were ringing. There was a parasite growing inside her. She was tired and scared, and she wanted to go home.

But, all of that went away for a second, giving way to relief as she threw herself at Leon, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his shoulder.

## SEVENTEEN

“So, that’s the chimera,” Leon grumbled as Ashley slotted the ornaments into the recess.

“Mmm hmm. I never thought I’d be trying to recall Greek mythology today.”

She stepped back as the wall slid into the floor, revealing more of the castle.

“Then again,” she added, “I don’t think I could’ve predicted anything about today if I tried.”

Moving further through the castle, Ashley and Leon found themselves on the comfortable leather seat of

a luxurious cart as it slowly drifted along a rail, taking them through a surprisingly calm tour of one of the castle's many opulent sections.

It was a welcome change as Leon took the time to catch his breath and clear up his head a little. It helped that the pills Luis gave them were working. The parasite felt more docile — sedated, even.

He turned to Ashley, who fixated on the wooden floor of the cart.

“Hey,” he said, getting her attention, “you’re doing great.”

Her response was a half-hearted “Thanks.”

So, Leon cleared his throat and continued, “I mean it. A lot is going on here, and you’re handling it well. Keep it up, and I guarantee we’ll make it.”

Ashley turned to him, trying to hide her doubt, but asking, “You’re not just saying that to calm me down, are you?”

Leon smiled, “I’m saying it because you remind me of someone.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We met a few years ago, and she wasn’t that different from you — just a college student forced to face an army of monsters with nothing but her talents and know-how.”

“Was she with you in Raccoon City?”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have made it out.”

“What’s she like?”

“At the time? She was just like me — scared, uncertain, tired. But we were determined to make it out of there, so we worked together, and we survived. Now? She’s a certified badass. She has been through things I don’t think I could ever comprehend, and yet she’s still going — still fighting for a better world.”

“She sounds amazing.”

“She is. But that’s not my point.”

“I get it,” Ashley responded, “and I appreciate it.”

That didn’t convince Leon, but it didn’t matter. He said his piece. So, he took in the pleasant surroundings while Ashley fiddled with an expensive-looking watch clasped around her wrist.

The second she clicked the wristwatch free, she handed it to Leon, who recoiled, taken aback.

“Excuse me?”

“Take it,” she insisted.

“I’ve got a watch,” Leon retorted, pointing to the standard issue timepiece issued to all US Agents.

“Yeah, but you can sell this to your merchant friend.”

“Ashley-“

“I’m serious. You need all the help you can get. Use it to buy more ammo or something.”

“He probably won’t want it anyway.”

“Tell him it was a gift from the President of the United States. It’ll be worth something.”

It was clear that Ashley wouldn’t take no for an answer. So, he accepted her dainty little watch and placed it into one of his pouches.

“Thanks.”

“Get me home, and you’re more than welcome.”

Salazar sat atop his decadent throne. This time, however, was the first time he had felt as though he had earned it. It had been his birthright, granted by his bloodline. But, while his ancestors were conquerors, he was nothing but an aristocrat. He yearned for the bloodshed his forebearers handed out with righteous fury — a chance to prove that he was worthy of the greatness thrust upon him.

That was what Lord Saddler had offered him. In embracing Los Illuminados and helping Saddler unearth the plagas, Salazar had gained his opportunity to leave a mark on the world that his bloodline could never have dreamed of.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

The thought filled him with glee as the doors burst open, and Leon marched inside, Ashley in tow.

Leon lowered his gun as his eyes met Salazar's, jabbing him with, "You're a lot shorter in person."

Salazar couldn't hide the giddy energy radiating through his body as he responded, "And you, Mr. Kennedy, are a lot dumber."

Leon whipped his head around to see Salazar's robed guards snatching Ashley and pulling her aside.

"Thank you for bringing her right to me," Salazar continued, "you make quite the lapdog!"

Leon turned back to Salazar, biting his lip. He knew when to fold.

That made Salazar even giddier. "Unfortunately, I think you've lived long enough," he said as he clapped his tiny, sickly hands together, "perhaps you'll know your place in the next life."

Salazar clicked his fingers, and the ground disappeared beneath Leon's feet. The agent had disappeared, sailing into the darkness below. A twisted grin formed on Salazar's blackened lips as he leaped from the throne and made his way to the opening in the floor, hoping to hear the pulverization of this bothersome whelp once his

body hit the cold, hard ground — assuming he wasn't impaled on the jagged rocks first.

But, no sound came. Salazar wondered if he missed it in all the excitement when Leon's voice echoed through the darkness.

“Hey, short round! If you wanna kill me, you're gonna have to try harder than that!”

For a second, Salazar's mouth hung open in disbelief, “What? How are you still alive?”

“It's called a grappling hook, and it's standard issue!”

With a bang, Salazar jumped as a bullet sailed upwards from the void, clipping his ear. He retreated from the trap door, his once ghostly-white face now an intense beet-red as he turned to his guards.

“The disrespect! This absolute worm!”

He pointed to the Guard in red robes. “You!” He barked, “find the American and kill him!”.

The Red Guard nodded, turning and leaving the room. The Guard in black robes awaited Salazar's instructions, “Take the girl to Saddler so he can begin the ritual!”.

As they led the trembling Ashley away, Salazar returned to the throne, cradling his stinging ear as blood oozed from the freshly made wound. He

wouldn't let this setback ruin what would otherwise be the most important day of his life.

From dark caverns, Leon emerged into a series of tunnels. The pungent odor that filled the air let him know he was in yet another sewer – more repulsive than the last.

Hitting this point home was a loud crunch that echoed from above, causing a tuft of dust to burst from the bricks above Leon's head.

Leon stumbled upon an elevator, its steel door shut. As he thumbed the button, he scanned the ceiling as the sounds of movement got closer. The ceiling burst open, revealing a thick, knotted tail that swung towards Leon like a barbed pendulum. He crouched, narrowly dodging it as it retreated upwards.

So, Leon followed the winding sewer, hoping to spot a way to turn the power on. He kept his gun trained at the ceiling in case the tail decided to make another appearance.

Whatever was above him was moving around, no doubt planning its next attack. Eventually, Leon reached the end of the sewer, entering a dark maintenance room.

With this tight space, it wasn't long before he found a large switch. If this wouldn't turn the power on, nothing would. As he pulled it, lights crackled to life, causing the room to fill with a soft electrical hum.

Leon turned from the power unit, ready to make a desperate break for the elevator, only to find Salazar's Red Guard towering over him.

The Guard tossed its robes to the floor, revealing its dark insectoid exoskeleton and its infernal piercing eyes. As it lowered its head, its tail poised to attack, Leon's instinct kicked in. He swiped his pistol and fired at a nearby red canister, hoping it would explode and buy him some time.

Instead, the canister burst, showering the Guard in liquid nitrogen. It recoiled in pain as a thin layer of frost formed over its segmented limbs, holding it in place.

Leon shifted past the creature, running through the sewer and praying it'd stay frozen until the elevator arrived. Was it just him, or was the sewer longer than he thought?

He reached the elevator, only to be overcome with a sinking feeling as he realized it hadn't arrived yet. His brain rattled as it tried to figure out how

long the liquid nitrogen would last. Was it worth going back to check?

His answer came quickly with the crushing of his windpipe, the prongs of the Guard's tail digging into his neck as it wrapped around him. He lost his balance, but the Guard kept him upright as it pierced his skin.

He unsheathed his knife and tried to cut his way through the thick surface of the tail, but it was too resilient, even for the reinforced steel of a combat knife.

The Guard rotated its tail, turning Leon around so their eyes met and pulling him closer. Leon could tell they wanted to watch the life drain from him with whatever fleeting time he had left before his lungs gave out.

But, it didn't realize that it gave Leon an opening. He thrust the knife directly into one of its eyes, gouging it and filling it with a fluorescent red liquid. Leon could feel the pressure around his neck ease as he pulled out the knife. The Guard dropped him to the floor.

Leon scrambled to his feet, stumbling across the floor as he desperately tried to take in oxygen through violent and desperate coughs.

The Guard stirred, trying to regain its composure as its fangs clicked. Leon knew he had seconds to figure out his next move. He stumbled back to the maintenance room and lunged towards another liquid nitrogen tank. Perfect.

He wrapped his hands around the container's rim, pulling it with all his strength. It was heavy, and Leon's already exerted muscles threatened to give out. Still, it fell to the floor, creating a loud clanging that throbbed through Leon's head.

Leon dived over the tipped canister as the Guard's tail slammed downwards, its tail slicing through its metal surface and creating another spill of liquid nitrogen. Once Leon rolled on impact, he turned to see the Guard embedded in another layer of frost. It was time to make a decision — fight or flight.

So, Leon pulled out his rifle, aiming it at his enemy's now empty eye socket. Letting this creature live wasn't an option. It was too dangerous.

He fired a single shot, watching the bullet sail into the Guard's head, turning whatever twisted brain it had into soup. It fell to the ground, cracks forming in its ice-covered exoskeleton.

Leon stepped over the dead creature, massaging his neck, hoping there was still time.

Saddler could feel it when one of his creations died. It was another absence in the great web of consciousness that the Plagas had made him the center of. Did he cry for his flock as their numbers diminished? No. Enlightenment always came at a cost. It was better to sacrifice one's life than live in a veritable dark age at the hands of the Castellans.

And the time of judgment was almost at hand! He had the sample. He had the girl. But, the American was still alive, which threatened to be a problem if not addressed. Salazar may need some help.

Luckily, Saddler had his secret weapon. Jack Krauser received his order: Eliminate Leon Kennedy. It was an order that he was more than happy to oblige.

## EIGHTEEN

Leon left the elevator to find more caves. There was mining infrastructure at every turn, but what were they mining? Did they export precious metals? Is that how they paid for the castle's maintenance bills? Is that how they paid for the weaponry to take down a military helicopter?

“This watch was a gift from the President of the United States!” Leon exclaimed to the Merchant, who had set up shop nearby.

“Aye. But how can I prove that, Stranger?”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“You can trust me.”

“I can, but the person I sell this to might not.”

Leon sighed. How was this more exhausting than fighting Salazar’s guard?

“Tell you what, Stranger,” the Merchant said, “For that timepiece, I can tune up your weapons a little bit, and I can throw in these.”

The Merchant placed a pair of blue grenades, much like the one that Ada used to end their awkward confrontation.

“Really? Flashbangs? Not even real grenades?”

“Your enemies have eyes, don’t they?”

Leon gave his eyes a rub. “Fine,” he muttered as he placed the watch on the table.

Once the transaction was complete and Leon had his tuned-up weaponry, the Merchant held out a small leather-bound notebook.

“What’s this?” Leon asked as he took the book and eyed it with curiosity.

“A gift from your late friend,” the Merchant responded, “he paid me a pretty penny to give it to you.”

With that, Leon opened the book. On the pages were a series of notes scrawled in pen.

## II. E. STRIDE

The first castellan buried the Las Plagas deep underground below the castle to hide their existence. But when Salazar released the Las Plagas, no one thought he could bring them back to life. Because when Salazar found them, they were all just fossilized remains.

Everyone knew that the parasitic organisms could not survive without their hosts. They couldn't sustain life on their own. But when Salazar and his men excavated the remains, it almost appeared as if the Las Plagas were waiting for their discovery so that they could resurrect.

Several years later, unexplainable convulsions occurred among the villagers who helped excavate the Las Plagas.

Then one day, all of a sudden, these villagers turned into violent savages.

They later found out the Las Plagas caused it. Although they appeared fossilized, they survived

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*the long years by lying in a dormant state at the cellular level, remaining spore-like.*

*The villagers inhaled the spores during the excavation, and the parasites became active within their bodies. That is how they resurrected the Las Plagas.*

*Even as I'm writing, the excavation of the Las Plagas continues.*

*God only knows how many of the Plagas they have resurrected, not to mention the countless Ganados they created.*

*All of this inhumane activity needs to end. If we cannot stop Los Illuminados, people worldwide could become victims of this crazy cult organization.*

Leon cursed his failure to save Luis, grateful that the late Spaniard had the foresight to leave a warning. Now, Saddler's plan made sense. He would send Ashley back to the President so she could infect him with a plagas of his own, presumably the kind that Salazar and the Priest had inside them. With the President's help, Saddler would turn the rest of the

world's leaders into puppets of Los Illuminados. From there, they'd infect everyone else.

From there? Nobody knew but Saddler.

Behind this harrowing warning, Leon found a crude map on the notebook's pages. It looked to be a map of an island of some kind. Who knew how it connected to this village? Besides Luis, of course.

Leon placed the book inside one of his pouches, giving a nod of appreciation to the Merchant, who responded with a hearty "Till next time, Stranger!"

Even with everything going on, the mining operations didn't stop. Leon observed the workers through his binoculars as they excavated further and further. Seeing the "Ganados," as Luis had called them, was fascinating. They perfectly coordinated together, operating complex machinery with staggering efficiency.

That was the point. That was Saddler's utopia – an entire world of obedient workers unified all under him. All that talk and he was nothing but another megalomaniac.

*Still, Leon thought, as long as they focused on excavating, they won't notice me.* After the constant fighting, it was a breath of fresh air to sneak past some enemies. For once, all of their tools and

cutting implements wouldn't be aimed directly at his head.

It was a question of how short-lived this moment of peace would be. The more uneventful the following cave sections were, the more unsettled Leon felt. It was almost a relief when a fluttering of wings broke the silence.

These giant bugs didn't do Leon the courtesy of cloaking themselves. Why bother? It's not as though they needed the element of surprise. They had strength in numbers, and ample open space, as they barrelled towards him from a gigantic pulsating hive connected to the ceiling by thick, membranous strands of mucus.

But Leon had a gun, and he had a mission. It wasn't just about saving Ashley anymore. The world was at stake — a world he had spent too long fighting to protect to give up. So, he fired at them, and they dropped like flies.

It wasn't enough, though. Even Leon's finely tuned weaponry struggled to keep up with the sheer number of bugs clawing out of their immense cocoon.

Leon took off across a suspended platform overlooking a drop down several feet. He knew what the bugs would do before they did, and he

unsheathed his knife, prepared to slice at his flying enemies as they tried to get close. Their most significant advantage was that they could fly. So, they planned to take advantage of that fact by dive-bombing him, hoping he would lose his balance.

What the bugs weren't counting on, as semi-intelligent as they were, was Leon's proficiency with his knife. They bombarded him with their claws outstretched, only for him to slice through their wings, sending them to the depths below.

It was tiring and required constant alertness, but Leon slashed his way toward the exit. Eventually, he reached it, only to be blocked by a large stone pillar slamming to the ground before him, blocking his path. It slowly lifted back up as soon as it touched the hard ground.

Great, there was another security mechanism — just as batshit as all the others.

Leon watched the pillar, trying to determine the exact pattern that dictated its lethal movements. As he watched it pulverize the ground, he didn't notice the bugs gaining ground on him.

One wrapped its lengthy claws around his shoulders, trying to dig through his tactical vest. Before it could get its grip, Leon grabbed it by the

leg, pulling it to the ground, where it landed in front of him.

*WHAM!* The pillar shot downwards, flattening the bug like a pancake, spraying its sickly green innards in all directions. Leon dived through the opening that the post left as it rose back into the ceiling, many hopes cycling through his head — that he cleared the pillar, that his assailants wouldn't follow, that bug guts washed out easily.

Ashley stewed in another dark room, pacing back and forth, trying to calm herself down.

It didn't help that whatever drugs Luis had given them started to wear off. The once-sedated parasite in her torso was starting to become restless. And there was all this talk of a ritual. Presumably, this was where they'd ship her back to the US so she could do god knows what.

Assuming that was still the plan, of course. Maybe Ashley's captors had given up on grafting the parasite to her, and they were tossing her inside a wicker man to burn to death.

And yet, her anxieties weren't as hardcore as they were inside the church. She wasn't hyperventilating, sweating profusely, or shaking, and she didn't feel numb. The situation didn't look good, and under any

other circumstance, her brain would be catastrophizing like crazy.

But, this time, she believed in Leon. She believed in him, damn it! She knew she was no longer in the village. But, wherever she was now, he would find her, and they would figure this out together.

So, she continued to pace back and forth, anticipating her inevitable rescue.

Leon held on for dear life in the center of a series of minecarts that sped along a track, erratically shifting back and forth, threatening to derail with every slight movement. He kept his eyes on his surroundings, looking for signs that he was heading in the right direction.

Then, in the distance, he spotted an oncoming loading platform carefully constructed above the track. Two women stop atop it, their grimy dresses matted with blood and gasoline, their faces crudely wrapped in gauze. They each raised chainsaws over their head, pulling the ripcord with the same ferocity they'd use to pluck a man's eyes out.

Leon's training kicked in as the two women leaped from the platform, landing in other carts. He couldn't start firing bullets. One stray shot and these

carts could derail. One miscalculated chainsaw swing, and they'd go flying into the caverns below.

*That's if they don't disembowel me first*, Leon thought as he readied himself for their attack. The sisters moved through the carts until they were each in the ones adjacent to Leon, one in front, one behind.

Something close to a plan formed loosely in Leon's head as he dodged the clumsy chainsaw swings of the sisters. With a wail, the sister in front of Leon leaped over the cart wall between them until she stood before him.

Now was his chance. She attempted to cleave his head with her chainsaw, so he ducked underneath the blade. The weight of her weapon caused the sister to swing her body around. As soon as her back was to Leon, he sprung to his feet and wrapped his arms around her waist.

She tried to wriggle free from his grip, but Leon bent his knees and proceeded to suplex her, throwing her into the cart behind him, colliding with her sister, both falling to the floor.

Leon spotted the latch connecting their mine carts and immediately grabbed it, trying to unlatch it with his gloved hands.

He let go of the latch, leaping back as a chainsaw blade swung downwards, causing sparks. The latch tore itself from the wood of the mine cart, the Chainsaw sister flinching at the shower of splinters.

Leon wrenched his pistol from his holster as the mine carts uncoupled from each other. These sisters weren't giving up. He aimed at them and saw that they were getting ready to jump. No human could clear the gap, but these two weren't human.

So, Leon fired a series of shots at their cart, both at the wood and the fiercely spinning wheels. Just as he was about to run out of bullets, their section buckled, flying off the rails in a spray of wood and metal, the Chainsaw sisters shrieking as they fell into the darkness below — nothing to greet them but cold, wet stone.

Leon turned to see the light at the end of the tunnel. He could hear the echo of their bodies crunching against the ground below. He anticipated the other side, hoping to never see another chainsaw for as long as he lived.

# ΠῖΠΕΤΕΠ

*Just how big is this place?* Leon wondered as he left the mines to find even more of the seemingly never-ending Castle Salazar.

Hitting this point home was the 30ft statue towering over Leon — a metal monstrosity depicting Salazar in his fancy-lad outfit. *Someone's overcompensating for something.*

The statue didn't seem to appreciate Leon's mental barb as it began to suddenly stir, shaking with a vigor that caused the whole room to vibrate in unison.

Leon smacked his forehead in disbelief as the statue began to move; because, of course, it did. At first, its steps were slow and clumsy, as though it had just awoken from a deep slumber full of mechanical sheep.

Then, it took massive strides toward Leon, creating tremors with each step that threatened to knock him off his feet.

Leon turned and ran towards the exit, which felt miles away as his feet slammed against hard marble and his arms tired from constantly pumping. He didn't dare stop, though, not even for a second. He knew that even a moment's hesitation would familiarize him eternally with the floor.

As he approached the door, he spotted a giant padlock adorning its surface – another obstacle. Not breaking his stride, he wriggled his pistol free from its holster and held it aloft, fighting against the recoil as he fired several shots – hoping enough bullets would hit the target before it was too late.

Leon slammed into the door, shoulder first, ignoring the pain that shot through on impact. He stumbled onto a castle rampart, leading to a tower that stretched into the night sky. Before Leon could even catch his breath, the wall exploded behind him

in a shower of stone bricks. Salazar-zilla wasn't done with him just yet.

So, the chase continued across the rampart; Leon sprinting as fast as his tired body would let him versus the casual stride of Salazar's statue.

Leon could feel the ground shifting underneath his feet as he closed the distance. Against his better judgment, he looked down to see cracks forming in the stone.

Leon leaped forward as the ground crumbled under the weight of Salazar's personified ego, outstretching his arms to catch any part of the rampart that was still upright. He resisted the urge to look down as he clung to the jagged stone, trying to will the strength to pull himself up with an elongated, painful grunt.

The second Leon was back on solid ground, he satiated his curiosity by peering over the edge, struggling not to throw up as he realized how high he was off the ground. A dense fog had gathered, obscuring the remains of Salazar's statue. *Good thing I jumped.*

Leon turned to the tower, hoping the real Salazar was inside. He was looking forward to giving that little pipsqueak a long overdue beating.

Salazar was too preoccupied to hear the commotion outside. He prayed to the Queen Plaga that hung from the ceiling — a writhing mass of carnivorous plants, thanking it for the bountiful harvest it had brought the village with its spawn.

With the prayer complete, he regarded its magnificent form with awe, meditating on all they had achieved together. Now, Lord Saddler had the sample, he would have the girl, and the American had to be dead by now. The plan was back on track! Glory was about to accompany the family name, Salazar. He cursed his ancestors for keeping the Plagas sealed underground — how short-sighted they had been.

His bodyguard stirred, its mandibles rattling beneath the hood of its black cloak. Salazar paid it no mind. Nothing could take this moment from him, not even the sharp pain in his hand.

Wait, why was his hand in such intense pain?  
And why couldn't he move it?

Salazar turned to find his hand pinned to the wall behind him by a giant knife — a large American combat knife.

His once pale face now beet-red with seething hatred, Salazar turned to see Leon Kennedy, still

very much alive with that trademark smug smirk on that face of his.

Before Salazar could grind his teeth to the gum, his bodyguard reached out, wrapping its claws around the knife's hilt. In a rapid motion, it pulled the knife from Salazar's hand and tossed it back at Leon — aiming directly for his heart.

Leon plucked the knife out of the air, sheathing it with cocky aplomb. For Salazar, this was the last straw. This man could not draw first blood and live!

“I think it's time I paid my due respects towards your impressive and stubborn will, Mr. Kennedy!”

The Castellan held his arms aloft, wordlessly calling to the beast above. It responded by draping large flesh-covered vines towards him as though sizing him up — determining whether he would be a suitable host.

Then, the tendrils struck, whipping into Salazar — tearing through clothes, digging through flesh, worming through his body, and merging with the plagas nestling inside, helping it grow until its body was Salazar's. They were no longer parasites and hosts — now, they were a whole new symbiotic entity. The pain was unimaginable, but so was the thrill of knowing he was mere seconds from the ultimate power.

More tentacles burst from the Queen, wrapping around Salazar's bodyguard and pulling him into its undulating mass. From inside the Queen, Salazar watched as his bodyguard had its segmented limbs broken and separated by more tendrils. Its parts recombined into brand-new adaptations that would make the Queen even more perfect.

The bodyguard's head burst from the Queen, now the size of a truck, as it hovered at the end of an extended neck made from a pulsating collage of flesh and muscle.

All Leon could do was watch as Salazar emerged behind it, now the center of the Queen Plagas, lifted off the floor by its gargantuan might. He let out a deep inhuman cackle, the vines of the Queen manipulating his torn vocal cords beneath his translucent skin.

"I want you to suffer like Ashley will."

Leon was unphased, retorting with, "Soon, you'll be one less monster to worry about."

As expected, the American went for his guns.

How pitiful. Of course, he'd resort to such an offensively primitive strategy.

So, Salazar responded in kind, flailing his tendrils at Leon and gazing in awe as they spanned the room's length and moved with uncanny speed.

Mr. Kennedy would have to be superhuman to dodge these attacks.

*So, how the hell was he dodging them?* There was a natural athleticism to Leon as he deftly avoided each of Salazar's attacks. It wasn't long before Leon fired several shots from his pistol. As clumsy as they were, a few got dangerously close. As though on instinct, gigantic walls of sinew wrapped around Salazar, obscuring everything from view. The Queen was trying to protect him.

At first, Salazar wanted to protest. How could he revel in Leon's slow and agonizing death here? But then, he realized the weight of his new responsibilities. The Queen had honored him to be her brain and heart. If he was to lead her to her rightful place as the conqueror of all, she had to protect him at all costs.

Though he could not see the battle, Salazar felt every second of it. He could feel the Queen's newly formed head as it tried to clasp its razor-sharp fangs around Leon and grind him to a pulp. Salazar could feel every bullet as it harmlessly bounced off the Queen's impervious flesh. He could feel its tendrils managing to hit Leon as his pathetic human body began to tire. It wouldn't be long before he'd feel

what it was like to consume Leon's body and pulverize it into food for the Queen.

Pain radiated throughout the Queen's body like a concentrated bolt of electricity. Salazar seized as the walls around him slowly unfurled to reveal the room, which had been torn asunder by the battle. Leon held his rifle against his shoulder as a wisp of smoke rose from the barrel to the ceiling. Below Salazar was the head of his bodyguard, its eye shot out — he'd managed to hit its one vulnerable spot. Now, Salazar had even more responsibility thrust upon him, as he was to also serve as the Queen's eyes. He could see that Leon thought the battle was over. His arrogance knew no bounds.

But Salazar had an ace up his sleeve. He communicated telepathically with the Queen, his thoughts ordering her to do what she was brought to this Earth to do — to birth her children!

The Queen's birth canal opened, heralding a legion of spiders, each pale and the size of a human forearm, with needle-like legs and a tail covered in pincers. Salazar didn't relent with his attacks as they scuttled towards Leon en masse. The Queen's children would tear this pest apart if tendrils didn't obliterate him.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

The American retired his guns, opting to use his knife, which pleased Salazar. For Leon to die with the blade that pierced his hand was poetic. Leon desperately slashed at his surroundings, both spider and tendril alike.

The man was skilled, as much as Salazar hated to admit it. But, he was becoming overwhelmed. The Queen was efficient, and the ground beneath her quickly became a haven for crawling arachnids. Leon had gone from slashing at them to huddling inwards and trying to protect his face as they crawled all over his body, thousands of tiny legs piercing his skin.

Salazar mentally egged on his arachnid spawn to keep fighting. All they needed was to pierce an eye or crawl into his mouth, and the fight would end. They were so close!

But Leon had one last trick. He grabbed one of the flashbang grenades strapped to his chest and pulled the pin. Suddenly, the walls wrapped around Salazar yet again. He couldn't see the ensuing bang but heard the wailing cries of thousands of spiders followed by a dead silence. He could feel their bodies as the sudden, bright light vaporized them.

The Queen felt it too. Her flesh burned, and keeping Salazar safe took every ounce of effort.

Leon hadn't just escaped their trap. He had figured out their weakness.

From inside the Queen's makeshift fortress of flesh, Salazar could sense her pain. Leon was deliberately aiming his shots so that they would penetrate her burned skin. The walls around Salazar were slowly retreating as the Queen recoiled in pain. His options were running out. It was now or never.

Salazar willed all his tendrils off the floor, screaming in agony as he felt a weight pressing against his engorged chest. He was going to crush this worm under their weight.

But Leon was ready, pulling the pin on another flashbang grenade and hurling it at Salazar. The grenade spun through the air. Salazar knew his time was up. He was out in the open, unable to defend himself against what was coming.

As death hovered an inch from his face, Salazar felt peace. Saddler had given him a life that made him worthy of his ancestors. The work that they had done together would live on forever.

Then the grenade burst open, and a searing bright light blasted Salazar into oblivion.

Leon caught his breath as the remains of the Queen Plagas dripped onto the floor, piece by piece.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“Leon!”

Ada descended gracefully from the ceiling. The second her heels touched the floor, her grappling line retracted with a short zip. She holstered her grappling gun as Leon struggled for words.

Ultimately, he settled with, “I wasn’t expecting to see you again so soon.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“It looks like you’re more preoccupied with whatever you got going on.”

“I can’t check in on an old friend?”

*We’re not friends*, Leon wanted to say. Instead, he pointed to the pile of monster viscera gathering nearby and responded, “I’m doing just fine.”

Ada folded her arms, radiating disbelief as she asked, “You know where Ashley is?”

There was an awkward pause as Leon mustered the faux-confidence to reply, “I’ll find her.”

Ada smirked, seeing right through him again, “Not here, you won’t.”

A refreshing ocean spray filled Leon’s sweaty pores as the speedboat tore through calm ocean water. Ada was at the wheel with the calm demeanor of a Sunday driver.

“Why’re you here, Ada?”

Her eyes remained ahead. “Sorry, Leon. I don’t reveal mission details to anyone, not even you.”

“I mean here,” Leon added, “why’re you taking me to Ashley.”

“Because I know where she is.”

“Yeah, but you don’t need to save her, do you? Something tells me you’ve just made things complicated by even talking to me, let alone giving me a ride. What’s the deal?”

There was another long silence. Leon could tell that Ada was trying to answer his question sincerely, and he was starting to recognize the Ada he knew from back in Raccoon.

“Leon, you know what I think about when it comes to Raccoon City? Because, it’s not the monsters. It’s not Umbrella and all of their shit. It’s not even how many people died.”

“What is it?” Asked a curious Leon.

“It was how, when I first met you, I thought nothing of you. This job — it teaches you to see the worst in people. So, I figured you’d be nothing but an obstacle. Maybe you’d be another self-serving survivor, maybe you’d go on a power trip and try to play hero, or maybe you’d be completely useless and just get in my way. I even considered the

possibility that I might've had to kill you for the sake of the mission."

Leon gulped, "So, what changed your mind?"

Ada smiled, "I saw you in action. Sure, you were good with a gun, but you were also just... good in general — a good person. Those are hard to come by."

She turned to him, "You're right. It's not my mission to save the girl. But, Raccoon City taught me that people like you are sometimes worth being unprofessional for."

As she turned her eyes back to the waters ahead, Leon piped up, "Why don't you join us? Forget your employer. We might not pay as much, but you'll be helping us to fight the good fight—"

"I'm done fighting," Ada interjected, "I'm only here because I owe someone. Once that debt's repaid, I'm out."

Leon shrugged, "Fair enough. I'm gonna miss you."

"Trust me. I know," she said with a wink before procuring her grappling gun and firing it at a nearby cliff, zipping away into the distance.

As Leon stumbled to the driver's seat of the boat, he saw his destination — an island that beckoned towards him with its ominous aura. Searchlights

reached into the night sky through a thick, icy fog, giving hints of its buildings and inhabitants.

As he got closer, Leon could sense that the final battle was dead ahead.

# TWENTY

*Los Illuminados isn't just a cult. It's a goddamn private militia!*

Leon hid behind rubble as he scouted the battlefield ahead. Patrolling soldiers populated bombed-out ruins. They wore fatigues and scraps of combat armor, but the one that caught Leon's eye stood atop one of the buildings, its second floor exposed from some previous blast. This muscular specimen carried an M134 Minigun, its six barrels practically begging for action.

Before Leon could plan his approach, his walkie crackled. He rushed towards a nearby cave, hoping none of Saddler's goons heard him as he answered the call.

"Hunnigan?"

Saddler's calm voice slithered, "I hate to break it to you, Mr. Kennedy, but we are still in control here."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but Salazar's dead."

"I am aware of that—"

"So, why don't you just give up Ashley and call it a day?"

Saddler responded with an eerily pleasant chuckle, "Ashley will be set free when she is ready. As for you — perhaps you are disillusioned with overconfidence, just because you killed my small-time subordinate?"

"Saddler, don't kid yourself. You're small time too."

Without missing a beat, Saddler replied, "Writhe in my cage of torment, friend," before hanging up.

Leon was perturbed. Either Saddler had a longer fuse than Salazar, or he was as close to his goal as he projected. Either way, Leon had to get moving.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Returning to the cover he had taken before, Leon could spot a gate on the other side of the battlefield, marked by the Los Illuminados insignia. That, coupled with the fact that the guards concentrated in higher numbers towards that gate, told Leon that was where he needed to go. It also told him that stealth wouldn't be an option for long.

He aimed his rifle at a red barrel that stood in the center of a crowd of soldiers and fired. The second the bullet penetrated its steel surface, an explosion burst, knocking the soldiers in all directions. There weren't many casualties, but it was a solid distraction.

Leon ran from one building to another, diving against new cover. Inside was a soldier waiting for him, decked out in khakis with a helmet and brandishing a stun stick that crackled with electrical current. The soldier swung his weapon, only for Leon to use his training to dodge and whip out his knife, stabbing it into the soldier's throat. As he wrenched the blade free, blood gushed from the wound.

There was shouting behind Leon – more soldiers on the way. He spotted a nearby ladder and leaped towards it, climbing the rungs. As soon as he was at the top, he crouched, pointing his pistol at the

ground below. The second more soldiers burst in, he opened fire on them, leaving their bullet-riddled corpses in a pile at the foot of the ladder.

A rattling caught Leon's attention. In the distance, the minigun's operator was firing it up, its barrels spinning rapidly. Leon jumped back down from the ladder as a hail of heavy machine gun fire slammed into the building, colliding with its concrete walls amidst a noisy rattle.

Leon holstered his gun. He couldn't risk waiting for too long. Who knew whether the wall would hold or not? He leaped over a nearby windowpane and charged towards the next available cover, the trail of minigun fire not far behind.

In a nearby building was another duo of soldiers, both carrying hatchets. As they turned to face Leon, he dove to the floor. Minigun bullets poured through a nearby opening, tearing into the soldiers – reducing their bodies to gory ribbons that sailed to the floor in a hail of blood and bone.

Soon, the rattling came to a stop. Either the minigun was out of ammo or overheated.

Regardless, Leon had his opportunity. He burst from behind his cover and ran towards the gate, not bothering to look behind him as he pulled the thick metal doors open and slipped between them.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

The gate led to a large industrial building, where Leon navigated dusty corridors lined with rusty plumbing and supply crates. Enemies were lurking around every corner.

Eventually, Leon fought his way into a surveillance room, approaching a stack of CRT monitors. This building was a prison, and each monitor displayed the inside of a cell.

Sure enough, Ashley leaned against a steel door, peering through a small slot into the darkness outside for even the slightest sign of rescue. Behind her were two guards – one restlessly pacing back and forth, the other standing entirely still, blank eyes trained on the prisoner.

That was until he turned his head, his gaze meeting Leon's. Was it a coincidence, or did the soldier know he was there? The soldier must have known as he barked orders at his comrade, who rushed out of frame. A second later, all of the monitors went blank.

*Amateurs*, Leon thought. *Just hang in there, Ashley.*

The journey deeper into the facility was relatively quiet. Whatever was preoccupying Saddler's men, Leon didn't want to know.

Unfortunately, the answer came sooner than he had hoped, as he entered a medical wing that had seen better days. It wasn't winning an award for sanitation any time soon, that was for sure.

In front of Leon was a hospital bed, where a necrotized corpse lay, vertically bisected from its head to its waist. One of the spiders Salazar had secreted during their battle was hovering above the rotten corpse. It was as dead as its host, its legs held apart by some surgical apparatus.

Dried blood splatter covered the walls. Dead medical staff slumped over at various points on the floor, chunks of gore torn out from their lifeless bodies. A massacre had taken place.

One of the corpses cradled a small case in its skeletal hands. Leon reached down to pick it up, feeling its heaviness as he set it on a nearby bench. Opening it revealed a note written in Spanish, a series of murky photographs, and a rifle scope.

As Leon slotted the stock scope out of his rifle, replacing it with the new one, he examined the photographs. The details were hard to make out, but he could discern sharp fangs and bloated grey skin.

A loud thump outside caused Leon to turn towards the door. There were slow and loud footsteps, and they were getting closer. Whatever

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

was on the other side, its breathing was ragged. It wasn't human.

Leon raised his rifle as he took cautious steps toward the door. It slid open, and a creature stepped in. As the photos suggested, it had taut, grey, lifeless skin and a mouthful of jagged teeth. It took awkward steps towards Leon, its movement not that different from the zombies he had encountered in previous missions. What the hell was this thing?

Now wasn't the time to stick around and find out – not with Ashley so close. Leon hip-fired a rifle round into the creature's leg, severing it at the knee. It flopped to the floor, twitching erratically.

Leon took a step, only for it to launch itself toward him like a torpedo, colliding with his torso and knocking him to the floor. As Leon tried to catch his breath, tentacles burst from the creature's leg stump, wrapping around each other to form a new leg on which the monster now stood. It became evident how the carnage in this room came to be.

The creature's jaw unhinged, lowering towards the ground to reveal even more razor-sharp teeth, ready to mulch Leon's head. Leon responded with another shot, removing the creature's head from its shoulders. Leon got up and observed his lifeless

enemy as it slumped to the floor again. *Like a zombie, you only have to shoot it in the head.*

Except the creature was stirring. It wasn't long before it was back on its feet with a brand new head and a sinister grin, newly formed teeth bared. *Jesus, this thing's indestructible!*

But then Leon remembered the scope that came with the case. There had to be a reason why it was so important. Leon raised it to his eye. The room turned a vibrant shade of blue, with the creature's flesh now a fiery orange. He was using a thermal scope! As he examined his enemy in an entirely new frequency, he spotted the organisms nestling in different parts of its body. Perhaps they were its weak spot.

Leon took a deep breath, firing multiple shots at the slowly advancing creature. Each blast caused it to recoil in pain as its body started to writhe and fluctuate in form.

Just as Leon was about to give up and rethink his strategy, the creature burst, leaving nothing but its legs in a pile of its malleable flesh. Leon wiped the sweat from his brow, hoping there wasn't another one around the corner.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Ashley, for the first time since her capture, was feeling bored. She sat on the floor, staring mindlessly into space as her captors watched her unblinkingly, frozen. Her body was too exhausted to respond to the fear that circled in her brain. She was resigned to her fate, though she knew Leon couldn't be too far away.

Something stirred outside the cell — a distant sound to discern, but it caught the guards' attention. One stayed next to Ashley while the other rushed towards the door, peering through the slot and barking orders.

*CRACK!* The guard's scalp exploded with a red mist, launching him backward. His partner grabbed Ashley, wrapping his arm around her throat and yelling orders as he held her hostage. Ashley closed her eyes, hoping that her hunch was correct.

Another crack and Ashley felt the grip around her neck loosen before the other guard fell onto his back. She turned to the dead body at her feet, struggling not to gag at the brain matter sludge that oozed out from between his shattered skullcap.

Holding her nose, she bent down and scavenged his bloodstained clothing for the keys to her cell.

The second they were in her hand, she threw herself at the door, relentlessly trying every key

until there was a click, and then the door slid open, scraping the floor.

On the other side was Leon, greeting Ashley like they hadn't spent their entire time together going through hell.

"You okay?"

She nodded, and she meant it. No matter what was going on, they were going to make it.

"Good. Let's get out of here—"

He stopped himself, raising his fingers to the back of his head.

Ashley nervously chimed in, "is something wrong?"

Leon turned, his gaze going down to the floor, where a paper airplane was lying at his feet. On one of the wings was a lipstick mark.

Leon picked up the airplane, opening it to reveal an immaculately written message.

*Perhaps you have figured it out already, but you might be able to get out of here by using the waste disposal vent.*

"What is it?" Ashley wondered aloud.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“A helping hand,” Leon responded. *Good ‘ol Ada*, he thought. It was reassuring to know that they wouldn’t have to try and leave through the front, where Saddler’s army was likely still on patrol.

Of course, there was still the matter of the parasites growing inside them. Luis’ medication was working, but it wasn’t a permanent fix. He’d mentioned they could remove the Plagas in his lab, but where was it?

Then, the answer hit him like a freight train. His hand dove into the pouch where Luis’ notebook sat.

He dug it out and opened it to the map the late Spaniard had drawn. As he eyed the map’s content, it all made sense. Leon knew precisely where he had to go.

Leon led Ashley out of the small cell, ready to enact his new plan and end this nightmare.

# TWENTY-ONE

Ashley couldn't help but notice how the halls displayed the aftermath of Leon's efforts to reach her as they traversed the facility. So many henchmen were lying there, dead. Some had bullet wounds; some were sliced open, some had their necks snapped, and some even had their heads stomped in.

She had always known about the Raccoon City Incident. You couldn't live in the modern world and not have at least heard of it. But, few people knew

details beyond that, as few survivors could give their accounts.

Despite herself, Ashley pondered what went down that night. Whatever it was, it took the man in front of her and molded him into someone capable of raw and intense brutality when the situation called for it. She was curious about who Leon Kennedy was before the incident. But, moreso, she was grateful that he was on her side.

Their journey ended at a garbage chute the size of an Olympic swimming pool. The stench was overwhelming, and the pile of trash bags pooled at the bottom didn't exactly scream, "This will break your fall."

Leon didn't look phased as he said, "Looks like this is it."

Ashley cupped her nose and mouth in disgust, "it stinks."

"Sure does," Leon concurred before turning to her with an apologetic shrug, telling her everything she needed to know.

"No way, Leon!"

"Way," Leon replied as he grabbed her arm, and before she knew it, they were sailing down towards the garbage pile. As she screamed, the pungent odor got more and more unbearable.

The trash broke their fall, but the ensuing miasma made Ashley almost wish it didn't. Who knew what kinds of waste these freaks had, anyway? They were probably walking through a biohazardous dump.

Leon seemed nonplussed by this possibility as he scouted the area. It looked like none of Saddler's goons felt like sifting through their garbage. All they had to do was find the exit, and then they could keep moving.

"What the hell is that?"

Leon turned to see Ashley standing over a lump in the garbage pile. It was a body similar to the regenerating creature he'd encountered earlier. This one, however, had needle-like spikes protruding from its skin.

Leon raised his rifle, ordering, "Ashley, get away from there!"

"What?" She croaked as the Regenerator suddenly stood upright, its spikes extending as it let out that sickly breathy rattle.

Looking through the scope, Leon lined his shot with the floating weak spots of the Regenerator as it kept its attention on Ashley. With a deep breath, he pulled the trigger, only to be greeted with a click.

*What?* He checked his pouches, his heart sinking as he realized he was completely out of rifle ammo.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*Shit!* He had to think of something quickly, or Ashley would become a pin cushion.

Heart racing, he took one last glimpse through the thermal scope of the Regenerator's body, trying to memorize where its random weak spots were. As the Regenerator raised its spiked fists, ready to slam them into Ashley like the organic morning stars they were, Leon pulled his pistol, hoping he still had some bullets left.

The gun discharged, firing multiple bullets into the Regenerator's skin. The Regenerator doubled back, its body distorting and warping. Ashley didn't need a hint, stepping over garbage bags to end up behind Leon. His sight snapped towards the pistol. It was out of ammo too.

But the Regenerator wasn't done yet. Its body returned to normal and advanced towards the duo, one step at a time.

"Ashley, stay back!" Leon ordered as he unsheathed his knife. Under any other circumstance, Ashley would've joked that he didn't need to tell her twice. Instead, she merely nodded.

Leon held his knife in a reverse grip, trying to picture where the remaining weak spots would be. There was no room for error. He and Ashley were

dead if he was off by an inch. It didn't help that the next few seconds would hurt like hell.

With a cry, Leon plunged the knife into the Regenerator's skin, its spikes sticking through his forearm. Both Leon and the Regenerator peeled away from each other, recoiling in mutual agony.

"Leon?" Ashley yelled as he grabbed her and pulled her to the ground, shielding her with his body.

The Regenerator exploded, its spikes shooting out in all directions. As its dismembered legs dropped to the floor, Leon noted that he didn't seem to have any new spikes sticking into his body, profusely thanking his past self for buying body armor that was paying off in dividends.

Once they were sure all was well, Leon and Ashley got to their feet, cradling his forearm as rivulets of blood ran down his glove.

"Leon, your arm!" Ashley exclaimed with concern.

"It's alright. Not as bad as it looks."

He wasn't lying to keep Ashley calm, either. It was just a bit of blood.

"I'll be fine, I promise. Let's just get outta here, okay?"

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

But Leon couldn't help but feel slight unease. Without ammunition, this was going to get a lot more complicated. Who knew what resistance was waiting for them around the corner?

Leon felt a tinge of joy when they reached the end of the garbage depository without incident. Wherever Saddler's monsters were lurking, they weren't there. Instead, the only thing waiting for them was a bulldozer.

Ashley excitedly climbed into the driver's seat.

Before Leon could protest, she cut him off with, "You rest, okay? You've more than earned it."

"You sure?"

"Leave it to me, Leon!"

With that, Leon took the passenger seat, easing up as Ashley turned the key in the ignition and the bulldozer's powerful engine roared to life. He did need a breather, after all. Besides, anyone stupid enough to run at them would probably end up trapped under their wheels.

It wasn't long before Ashley had the bulldozer moving as she gleefully plowed through the large metal sliding door in front of them, leading to a gigantic tunnel. It was good to see that she was having some fun in all of this.

Leon consulted Luis' map, determining they were heading in the right direction.

An echo of running footsteps layered over each other cascaded throughout the tunnel. Leon craned his neck, turning to see another squad of Saddler's soldiers rushing towards them, weapons held high.

With a groan, Leon pulled himself from the passenger seat, climbing the bulldozer's frame until he stood in the back, facing the ensuing mob.

"Can't this thing go any faster?" Leon called out, even though he knew the answer. The soldiers had no problems catching up to the vehicle and trying to climb onto it. Leon fought back, stomping on their hands and kicking at their face. He was deterring them, but how long could he keep them away?

A horn blared through the tunnel as a truck wormed toward them, barreling through any of the soldiers that weren't fortunate enough to jump out of the way. Leon, lamenting his lack of ammo, braced himself as the truck slammed into the back of the bulldozer, causing him to fall backward, landing on the rugged metal frame.

A pair of soldiers jumped from the truck, landing in front of Leon as they brandished their stun sticks. They continued to tailgate the bulldozer, their driver staring forward. Leon feigned disorientation before

kicking out at one of the soldiers, shattering the man's shin on impact. Leon leaped to his feet as that soldier buckled, intercepting an attack from his squad mate. Leon yanked the soldier's stun stick away, following up with a roundhouse kick that sent the soldier flying backward into the truck's windshield, causing it to shatter. The driver shouted obscenities as he swept his unconscious passenger off the truck's dash, watching as he fell to the ground, where his body folded in half with a sickening snap.

Leon turned to his injured enemy, who was making several futile attempts to strike back, despite barely being able to stand. For his efforts, Leon grabbed him and tossed him underneath the truck, the wheels grinding his spine into dust.

With that, Leon turned his attention to the truck, which continued its pursuit. Leon scanned his surroundings for anything he could use as a deterrent. He settled on the glowing stun stick in his hand, throwing it through the truck's broken windshield at the driver, hitting him square on the chest.

The effects were instantaneous. The driver seized as several thousands of volts shot through his body, causing his hands to jerk the wheel sideways. The

truck lurched, slamming into the nearby tunnel wall and flipping over, its contents bursting into flames. That would leave the perfect barrier for anybody looking to rush the bulldozer. Things were starting to look up.

Leon clambered back into the passenger seat, giving a reassuring nod to Ashley. Their destination was dead ahead — another large, closed rolling door. The bulldozer made short work of it, crumpling the barrier like paper as they sailed through to the next area.

Waiting for them on the other side was Saddler himself, staring them down like a gunslinger at dawn as he outstretched his arm toward them. Run the sucker over! Leon thought, but Ashley didn't seem to agree as the bulldozer came to a stop.

Then, Leon felt it — the parasite inside him was getting restless, writhing back and forth as though it wanted to escape its flesh prison. Leon doubled over in agony, tensing his muscles as hard as he could, as that was the only thing stopping his body from feeling like it would tear itself apart.

“I can feel them growing ever so strongly inside you,” Saddler purred.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Ashley wasn't in the excruciating pain barraging Leon's body. She was downright lucid, staring blankly forward.

"Perhaps, you can resist. But, you cannot disobey."

Leon tried to reach out for Ashley as she climbed out of the driver's seat, standing upright.

"Come to me, Ashley."

To Leon's dismay, Ashley obeyed, walking towards Saddler and taking his hand.

"Ashley!" Leon called out as Saddler led her out of the room.

The second the door closed behind them, the pain within Leon subsided, and he could finally stand up.

He cursed his rotten luck.

# ΤΩΕΠΤΥ-ΤΩΟ

Ada watched as Krauser tossed his knife up and down, catching it by the hilt before tossing it back up. It was a weapon that made Ada uncomfortable – resembling a sadist's machete used to hack off a person's limbs, not a blade that efficiently and professionally eliminated a target. Adding to the discomfort was the knowledge that Krauser's knife tossing was an act. He was pretending to keep his concentration on the knife, but he was sizing her up while he suspected her guard was down.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“What’s the news on our friend, Leon?” He asked her in his deep, raspy voice. It was as loaded as a question could be. They both had orders to kill Leon, and Krauser thought he’d be the only one to act on them.

“I don’t know,” Ada lied, “I haven’t seen him since our run-in at the castle.”

Krauser grumbled in response, visibly unconvinced. She responded with a pointed “What about you? Is Saddler onto you yet?”

“If he was, I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

“Perfect.”

Krauser was unamused by her barbed response, pointing his knife at her.

“Just so we understand each other clearly, I don’t trust you, nor does Wesker. If you try to do anything clever, I will kill you.”

*Yeah, no shit, Ada thought. You wouldn’t be here if Wesker trusted me, either.*

Her employer clarified that she would work with Wesker to retrieve the sample. Then, all of a sudden, Wesker introduced this new operative with a history involving Leon. It didn’t make sense, and Ada wasn’t entirely sure it was an authorized move. But she wasn’t in a position to cause a fuss over it. All that mattered was getting that sample, making her

employer happy, and finally retiring comfortably. Wesker's agenda, whatever it was, wasn't her problem.

Still, she couldn't pass on the opportunity to rile Krauser, suggesting, "I know Wesker better than you do. Whatever you two have going on won't end well for you."

However, Krauser smiled, an expression that filled Ada with dread.

"We'll see soon enough," he retorted.

Albert Wesker poured over the mission data, hands twitching as he chewed his lip in frustration. *What the hell was Ada doing?*

Luis was dead, the sample was still in Saddler's possession, and Leon was still alive. Either Trent grossly overestimated her abilities, or she had an agenda – one that could potentially interfere with his. His intel suggested Leon was now on the island without mentioning how he possibly got there. Could Ada be working with him? What would she get out of that? Trent allowed her a new life by helping her escape Raccoon City. She wouldn't waste that by becoming a pawn for the US Government.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

*Whatever*, he decided, *it wasn't worth the effort*. He had a plan B if he couldn't rely on Ada to retrieve the sample. Trent could deal with her later.

It was undoubtedly a blow to the credibility of someone with a penchant for being as hypercompetent as Trent. The man orchestrated the death of the Umbrella Corporation from within their ranks, and they never even suspected a thing. Now, he was allowing his children of the dead to run amok. Perhaps victory had left Trent complacent.

Maybe Trent was losing his edge.

Leon wandered into a dark and expansive room. He was standing on a grated walkway, surrounded by large industrial equipment and piping. Something wasn't right. His instincts told him that danger was nearby, its presence making the hairs on the back of his neck stand upright.

Sensing that the source of his unease was behind him, Leon carefully readied his knife, gripping it tightly. He whipped his body around, only to find the space behind him empty. Maybe it was just paranoia.

Then, the shadows made themselves known, lunging at Leon from above. He raised his knife as cold steel sliced his cheek open. The second he

steadied himself, his eyes adjusted to see Krauser before him.

Krauser broke the deafening silence, "It's been a long time, Comrade!"

Leon had so many questions he didn't know where to start. He blurted out "Krauser!"

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

"They told me you were dead."

"I was. But, I guess everything around you has a hard time staying that way."

Krauser dashed towards Leon, slashing at him with his knife. Leon parried and dodged as best as he could, struggling not to buckle against Krauser's relentless aggression.

"So, you're a convert to Saddler's cult?" Leon gasped in between attacks.

"You're a fool if you haven't yet realized that this is bigger than Saddler."

"So, who're you working for?"

"Enough talk. Fight or die, Comrade!"

Krauser dropped into a crouch, knocking Leon off his feet with a sweep kick, causing him to drop his knife. The second Leon was on his back, Krauser launched forward, plunging his knife toward Leon's exposed neck. Leon raised his arms, intercepting Krauser's attack. Both men pushed against each

other with all of their might, but Krauser had the advantage of not having to fight his way across the island.

Leon found himself drenched with sweat as the knife's blade drew closer and closer to his flesh. His muscles felt inflamed, his bones like they were about to snap. The very tip of Krauser's knife pierced the top layer of skin, breaking the flesh and causing it to sting.

He was about to give up. He was about to die.

*POW!* Krauser and Leon turned to see Krauser's knife tumbling over the catwalk's edge. Leon kicked into Krauser's stomach, knocking him backward.

The two men got to their feet, following the trail of the gunshot that disarmed Krauser to see Ada proudly brandishing her smoking TMP, a fully automatic machine pistol. She stood on another walkway higher up, resting the gun on her thigh.

"Well, if it isn't the bitch in the red dress," Krauser growled.

Ada responded by pointing her TMP at him, "Easy, big guy. You're outnumbered and outgunned."

Krauser stared at the pair like a wild animal, ready to maul them with his bare hands. Then, he eased up, pointing to Leon with a wry smile and

saying, “You may be able to prolong your life, but it’s not like you can escape your inevitable death, is it?”

Leon then watched in awe as Krauser performed an inhuman jump, backflipping into the darkness above – disappearing. He was then jolted back to reality by Ada, who had used her grappling hook to lower herself next to him.

“You know that guy?” She asked.

Leon turned to her, “It looks like you do too.”

She holstered her TMP, “Is this the part where you beg me to tell you who I’m working for?”

Leon picked his knife off the floor, sheathing it, “I think I already know.”

She turned to him, unable to hide her disbelief.

He shrugged, “I’m out here chasing ghosts. There’s only one man I know who could put together something like that.”

Had Leon not met Trent on that plane trip to the Planet facility, he would’ve assumed the man was a myth. Trent was the puppet master — always where the action was, pointing the STARS members where they needed to go. The man had information, resources, and a hatred for the late Umbrella Corporation that rivaled all of STARS combined.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

But why would Trent get involved in this? He got what he wanted. Umbrella was dead. Then again, things didn't have a habit of staying that way. Was Umbrella yet another ghost for Leon to chase?

Ada interrupted Leon's train of thought by firing her grappling gun toward the ceiling.

"I hope you're wrong, Leon, for both our sakes."

With that, she zipped upwards, leaving Leon with more questions than answers.

Then, his walkie broke the silence. He picked it up to hear Saddler's calm, erudite voice.

"Did you enjoy the reunion with your old friend?"

"As a matter of fact, I did."

Saddler chuckled, "Wonderful. I wouldn't want my special guests on the island feeling unattended."

"Guess I'm supposed to thank you, right?"

"If you truly wish to show your gratitude, you can always keep it occupied for me."

"What's it supposed to be?"

"I'll introduce you two. Have fun."

The call ended, leaving Leon to wonder what "it" was as he got moving once again. Ashley needed him. There was no time to waste.

Leon's journey led him to an anachronistic corridor. Gone was the vintage castle and the ruins,

now replaced with sterile white walls and a large stainless steel door with a switch beside it.

Is this where it's supposed to be? Was Leon's only thought before being presented with deep red laser beams shooting out vertically and horizontally, all parallel to his body.

The first two configurations were simple geometric patterns that Leon only needed to duck underneath as he crossed the hallway.

As if the room sensed Leon was having it a little too easy, a cascade of lasers suddenly appeared at the other end of the hallway, sliding toward Leon. He dove headfirst through the small opening, landing with a perfect roll that left him crouched. He turned to see the lasers reach the entrance to the hallway before dissipating into thin air.

Hopefully, that was the end of it. Leon strolled down the rest of the hallway, vigilantly checking for signs of potential laser activity. Then he saw sparks from the corner of his eye. Leon kicked into a backflip, narrowly dodging as several lasers fired into the space he was occupying a second ago.

Leon could see the lasers racing toward him as he landed back on his feet. Their shapes were too elaborate – this would not be easy. Desperate, Leon launched into another backflip, keeping his body

tight as the lasers sailed past him. He could feel the heat radiating off each beam as they shot past him, and he slammed onto the cold, hard floor.

He ran towards the door, trying to turn the handle, only to find the door locked. He turned to see the lasers making their final assault as they floated toward him. This time, their arrangement was a configuration that looked unavoidable. Leon steeled himself, ready to try something crazy.

He gave himself a running start by backing away from the exit, only to turn and charge towards it. The second he reached the door, he kept his momentum as he ran upwards and then kicked off from it, using the added height to backflip over the lasers as they reached the entrance. As soon as Leon landed, the lasers disappeared.

Seizing the breathing room this gave him, Leon slammed the switch, causing the door to click. So, he shoved his way through the door.

Eventually, Leon found the elevator leading him out of this cavernous underground hellscape. As he pressed the button to call it, the ground shook around him. *Great, did calling the elevator start a cave-in?* Leon thought as the tremors became increasingly aggressive.

He got his answer when it slammed through the cave wall next to him, blasting debris in all directions. Leon fell backward, landing on the floor of a gigantic suspended caged platform lined with shipping containers. When Leon got to his feet, he saw something blocking the exit. It was an inhuman abomination — a humanoid head and torso with a split lower jaw that gave way to razor-sharp fangs and a lengthy tongue, a bulbous insect body, and powerful spiked reptilian limbs. One of its arms resembled a barbed tail poised to lash out and do some severe damage.

*Well, Leon realized, this is It.*

It lunged at Leon, who pressed himself against one of the nearby shipping containers to avoid one of Its swipes, cursing himself for not paying attention to his ammo count. There was no getting around It; moving further into the shipping container maze was the only option.

Leon ended up in front of an emergency shutter with a big red button next to it. He slammed the button, crouching underneath the door as it slid upwards. Behind the door was a console covered in buttons and switches.

He spotted a lever labeled “Emergency Release,” ducking as Its powerful arms swung from the ceiling

like a pendulum, trying to grab him. Leon reached over the console, pulling the level and rolling away. It was likely that the emergency release controlled the container rig. If he didn't find the exit, he'd be splattered against the ceiling as the segment of containers plunged to the ground.

So, he ran, ducking and weaving around Its various attacks as he searched for the exit. Eventually, he saw an opening, leaping into the next container-rig segment as the previous one was released, falling into the abyss below. Hopefully, that takes care of It, Leon hoped.

*WHAM!* It landed in front of him, its nightmarish face contorted in pain. Leon shielded himself as Its back tore open, the human head and torso sagging vacantly as a corrugated worm slithered out from the opening, sporting rows of needle-like teeth, as well as two large serrated mandibles that could cut through several heads in an instant.

Leon backed away from the advancing creature, trying to find an opening to keep moving. However, he backed away too far, losing his balance. It thrust its mandibles at Leon, forcing him over the edge of the container rig. He reached out with his hands, catching the platform and hanging on as It loomed over him, ready to decapitate him.

*Now's not the time for strategy! Do something, and do it now!* Leon let go with one hand, pulled out his knife, and jammed it into one of Its scaled feet. As he pulled the knife out, the creature reared its head back and screeched in pain, allowing Leon to climb back up and squeeze beside it.

Leon reached the next console, pulling the emergency release lever. The clock was ticking. He navigated the shipping containers like a good little rat, ending up at the exit. There was only one problem; the door didn't lead to another container rig. Instead, it led to a small platform attached to the container rig.

He had reached a dead end.

Heart racing, Leon looked behind him. It had shrugged off the knife attack and was charging towards him. It wouldn't be long before It was slicing him in half with its blades. It would only be slightly longer before they both fell to their deaths. He turned back to the platform, where he spotted his last chance for survival. It was a crane hook hanging slightly beyond, no doubt used to transport these containers. If he didn't make this jump, they'd have to send whatever bits of him they could find back to Claire in an envelope.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

So, Leon charged towards the safety rail at the platform's edge, using it as a springboard to leap towards the hook, outstretching his arms as far as they'd go without popping out of their sockets.

Before Leon knew it, his hands were wrapped around the chain, his feet using the hook as a platform. The hook swung outwards, and Leon could see the cliff that would lead to safety. He didn't have enough momentum to move towards it safely, so he pulled on the chain, trying to get it to swing further out.

It worked. Leon was gaining speed as the chain swung away from the cliffs. But, he realized where he messed up as the chain turned towards the platform where It was waiting for him. What could he do? Try to dodge? What if that made him lose his grip? He had to do something; It was getting closer and closer.

As It tried to snap its mandibles around Leon's waist, he could hear the container rig release from its bindings. The ground disappeared beneath Its feet as it snapped its jaws shut, gravity pulling it beyond Leon's reach. Leon watched as it fell further toward the abyss. It would take a miracle to survive that fall.

As Leon heard the faint sound of Its body smashing against the ground, he looked forward to rubbing his victory in Saddler's smug face.

# TWENTY-THREE

Krauser knew he would not have liked the man that Albert Wesker used to be. Wesker had been very candid about his old ways — being a greedy corporate shitkicker whose only values involved feeding his id at any cost. He had heard about how Wesker had betrayed his Umbrella superiors and his comrades in STARS' Alpha Team to make some money, a fact that confirmed the two would not have gotten along.

Of course, the old Krauser wasn't exactly the ideal person either. He was weak and aimless — a

soldier without a cause to fight for. With every mission he completed, he became increasingly restless at the lack of catharsis it brought him. The only change it brought was a body struggling to keep up.

Then, they selected Krauser for Operation: Javier. Because he had been such a good boy, they trusted him with the truth – about Raccoon City, bioweapons, and the Umbrella Corporation and how they conquered death. He picked at Leon's brain, trying to ascertain what it was like to face something that defied death and then destroy it.

Then, Krauser got to experience it for himself more than Leon ever could. After his run-in with Javier, Krauser was declared legally dead and scheduled for cremation. Then, he woke up to see the face of Albert Wesker, a kindred spirit connected to him by death and rebirth. They bonded through the different strains of T-Virus that coursed through their corpses and kept them animated.

Wesker helped Krauser acclimate to the effects of the T-Veronica virus — all the pain, mental anguish, limbic stasis, and everything else a dead body needed to endure to live again. It was only a matter of days before Krauser had reached a level of strength and agility unattainable in his mortal state.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

In return, Krauser infiltrated the Los Illuminados cult, allowing his heightened body to become a host for their parasite. He ingratiated himself with Lord Saddler, kidnapping the President's daughter as the ultimate sign of goodwill. He was sure Saddler suspected nothing.

Krauser pitied Saddler. The man had access to unprecedented power, and all he could think to do was turn the populace into enslaved, mindless zombies to do his incredibly menial bidding.

Wesker, however, was a man with a vision. He knew being a king among enslaved people meant nothing when you could be a god among gods. Wesker set his sights on a new world, and Krauser felt honored to make it a reality.

Leon stepped out into more bombed-out ruins, walking past broken buildings and destroyed pillars lit by raging torches. It wasn't until Leon reached the center of this arena that Krauser made his presence known, stepping out from behind cover.

"So," he grumbled, "Ada's not here to save you now."

"Where's Ashley?" Leon growled.

Krauser pointed into the distance, where a gate stood, obscured by the debris.

“You’re so close, Leon. She’s right beyond that gate.”

“Lemme guess; you’re gonna do everything you can to stop me?”

Krauser lifted his own TMP, this time equipped with a laser sight that he trained right on Leon’s chest.

“Affirmative.”

Leon looked down at the green light dotting his peccs.

“Well, Krauser, you’ve got this all figured out.”

With a swift move, Leon plucked his grappling hook and launched it toward Krauser, who batted it away.

As Krauser aimed his gun and started firing, Leon dived behind cover, trying to determine his next move without any ammo.

*Think! What do you know about the TMP? It’s light, so you can’t make a break for the gate without catching a bullet. Krauser has made sure he’s far enough away that when he needs to reload, he’ll be able to before you can reach him, and there’s not enough cover between you two that you can close that distance through multiple reloads. And who knew how many mags Krauser had left? He could be shooting for a very long time.*

*Shit.*

Leon's only hope was a hut nearby, its upper floor wholly blown apart. He could force Krauser to come to him if he could reach it.

The second Krauser stopped firing to reload his gun, Leon barrel-rolled from his cover, sprinting until he slammed through the door and entered the tight space. *Perfect!*

Leon unsheathed his knife as he heard Krauser leap from his position, landing nearby with a harsh thud that no doubt cracked the ground around him. After rapid footsteps, the door split in half from Krauser's powerful kick, and Leon was instantly on him. The duo fought and grappled as Krauser tried to fire off his weapon while intercepting Leon's skilled knife techniques.

But Leon was ready, and he got the upper hand. He grabbed Krauser's arm and slammed him to the ground. As Krauser lay on the ground, Leon held his enemy's TMP and emptied the mag into his head and chest before holstering it. Leon spotted the ladder leading to that second floor and wasted no time climbing it as Krauser stirred on the ground.

"Run all you want, Leon! You won't get far!" Leon heard as he reached the top. As long as Krauser was still alive, Leon knew he wouldn't make it

through the gate. In front of him was a path with more cover, leading to a cylindrical tower — the highest point in the immediate vicinity, making it perfect for a final stand. He would make Krauser come to him.

Leon hurried along the path, hoping Krauser didn't have another gun ready. As the walls of cover flew past, Krauser jumped out. The bullet wounds on his head and torso had already scabbed over.

The two combatants desperately unleashed a flurry of knives at each other, unable to get the upper hand. Eventually, Krauser frustratedly plucked a flash grenade from his chest and tossed it at the ground, leaving Leon in a burst of light.

As Leon's senses returned, he noticed that the TMP was no longer on his person. He had to move post-haste while Krauser was no doubt reloading, dashing towards the tower, his body struggling to stay balanced amidst blurry vision and ringing ears.

Leon stumbled into the tower, closing and bolting the door behind him as he stood at the bottom of a spiral staircase. Two windows on either side of Leon could serve as vantage points for Krauser. The high-pitched whine of rotor blades filled the space around him.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

A large drone occupied each of the windows with chrome plating. Attached to each of these drones were machine guns. So, Leon took off and began climbing the steps.

As he ascended higher and higher, he noted the various open windows dotting the way up. He couldn't afford to linger near any of them if he wanted to stay bullet-free, so he kept moving, ignoring his body's pleas to stop and take a breather.

Amidst the gunfire colliding with the stone bricks on either side, Leon heard Krauser announce, "I can see your every move, Leon!"

If Krauser thought that would psyche Leon out, he had another thing coming. But Leon still didn't know what to do once he reached the top of the tower. Even if he outran Krauser, those two drones would await him.

So, Leon stopped, standing next to a nearby window, his back to the wall. Instead of trying to escape the drones, he could draw them to him. He held out his knife, staring at the surface and hoping the reflection would indicate that the plan was working. The drone drew closer to the window, trying to get a better shot.

The second it was close enough, Leon turned to the window, stabbing wildly with his knife. Amidst

a hail of sparks, circuitry, and smoke, Leon could see the drone as its mangled form spiraled toward the ground below.

*One down. One to go.*

Further up the tower, Leon tried the same strategy, waiting with his back to the wall for the drone to draw closer. Eventually, he turned and swiped — only to misjudge the distance.

*Shit!* Leon could hear the drone's gun warming up. He had seconds before it would shred him into paper maché. Hoping his next move would count, Leon picked a particularly vulnerable spot and sliced at it, cutting through a series of wires.

Leon's eyes closed as hard as they could, teeth gritting and muscles tightening as he anticipated a swarm of bullets turning him to human soup. Instead, he was ecstatic to hear the sound of the drone's gun powering down as it continued to hover in the air.

With that, Leon continued to the top of the tower, anticipating the showdown. Krauser was waiting for him, arms folded.

“So, Leon, you made it.”

“Surprised?”

“Not one bit.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

“So, Krauser, you gonna finally tell me why you’re doing all this?”

Krauser took a second to articulate his answer before responding, “I want to bring order to this chaotic world.”

A mixture of disbelief and confusion flooded Leon’s face, “I don’t get it.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

Krauser raised his arm — the same arm Leon watched get destroyed back in Operation: Javier. Krauser tensed his arm muscles with a guttural roar, causing them to bulge and distend.

Leon fought against his gag reflex as he could hear Krauser’s flesh tearing and his bones breaking, shifting, and knitting.

Krauser let out a sinister cackle as he flexed the six-foot-long blade that replaced his arm.

“Prepare for your death, Leon!”

Whatever distance was between them, Krauser cleared it in a second, his newfound agility catching Leon entirely off guard. These attacks weren’t the clumsy, heavy flailing of Krauser’s more monstrous counterparts. These were quick and deliberate, taking everything Leon had to stay alive.

Staying alive was the goal. Krauser ensured there were no opportunities for a counterattack, and every

time his blade broke Leon's flesh, drawing blood and a familiar sting, Leon had to bear it.

Eventually, Krauser tired of toying with Leon, throwing him to the ground. As Leon lay there, Krauser pointed the blade at his neck, holding him at bay.

“What are you fighting for, comrade?”

This question was the last reprieve — a twisted form of faux-mercy. There was no answer Leon could give to satisfy Krauser enough to spare his life. *So, use that time to find a way out of this!*

Leon feigned coming up with the answer as he took in his surroundings, trying to throw together something that could passingly resemble a plan. His options were limited, but there was always a way out.

Deep in concentration, Leon realized that there was a familiar sound nearby. The drone had made it to the top of the tower and was now observing their every move, trying to fire a gun that would never go off as its rotors continued to spin.

“Well?”

Krauser was ready for the answer. Unbeknownst to him, Leon was ready too.

“My past.”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

It was honest and sincere. Perhaps Krauser didn't expect that, as he didn't react when Leon flung his knife toward him.

The blade punctured Krauser's eye, causing him to double back in shock. Leon sprung to his feet, hoping the rest of his half-baked plan would work before Krauser would inevitably recover.

Leon turned to the drone as it timidly approached him, its advanced technology trying to compute why its target wasn't dead yet. Like a jungle cat, Leon pounced, gripping the drone's underside. He noted how light it felt in his grasp, probably to ensure its ease of movement.

It would be perfect.

"Hey, Krauser, the party's over!" Leon declared as he charged toward his enemy. Krauser wrenched the knife from his eye socket, unperturbed by the sudden ensuing blood flow.

Leon channeled the aggression of the chainsaw villagers as he swung the drone against Krauser's malformed body. The rotor blades sliced into Krauser's arm, spraying Leon with blood as they warped and bent against the malformed bone.

Krauser screamed in agony as his severed blade fell to the ground. Leon tossed the damaged drone

aside, scooping the arm blade up and ramming it into Krauser's chest with a grunt.

Krauser's eye widened as the blade punched through his back, his mouth hanging open as though he no longer had control over his jaw. After a second, he fell backward onto the ground, his body remaining slightly upright.

Leon regarded the man with pity – another life callously lost to a misguided lust for power. He said nothing as he soberly approached the tower ladder and started his descent.

## TWENTY-FOUR

As Leon reached the gate, his comms sparked yet again – another call from Saddler.

He answered, “I’m starting to think you miss the sound of my voice.”

“Perhaps,” Saddler responded, “but I will not miss our friend, Krauser. Thank you for dealing with him.”

Leon froze.

“You knew,” he uttered.

“It’s a shame that your old friend resents being a useful idiot. He was very good at it.”

“Yeah, well, he’s dead now. Won’t be long till I reach Ashley.”

“Assuming you even make it this far, it won’t be long until you’re under my control. I think I’ll make you my personal guard.”

“Oh yeah?” Leon scoffed, “what’s waiting for me behind that gate?”

“Let’s just say, Mr. Kennedy, that you’re not the only one that did me one last favor.”

With that, the line went dead. Dumbfounded, Leon pushed the gate open and stepped through.

*Oh, great*, Leon thought, his inner monologue piling on as much sarcasm as possible. Saddler was right. Krauser did him a huge favor. As the two had their battle atop the tower, Saddler mobilized several of his troops, and they were now all staring Leon down.

These guys were armed to their rotten, jagged teeth, brandishing crossbows with flaming arrows, standing at mounted turrets, and carrying rocket launchers. The cherry on top was that this included the goliath with the minigun, perched atop a watchtower with fiery resentment from not getting to mulch his target with high-caliber gunfire.

*No. Forget that. The perfect cherry on top is that I still don’t have any ammo!*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

All of the synapses in Leon's brain started firing at once, the details stumbling over each other as Leon tried to figure out his escape plan. The cover that stood between him and Saddler's army was practically useless. Surviving this battle would take divine intervention at this point.

Leon's train of thought derailed, making way for the deafening din of helicopter blades. Before he could process what was happening, heavy-duty artillery fire rained onto the soldiers below, tearing their bodies apart like acid. In minutes, Leon was staring at a puddle of gore in bewilderment.

"Now, that's what I call backup," Leon announced as his comms lit up.

"The name's Mike. If you're lookin' for firepower, you've come to the right place."

"The President's daughter is dead ahead. D'you think you can cover me?"

"You got it, Agent!" Mike exclaimed, "Lead the way!"

Leon plucked a crossbow and bolts from one of the bullet-riddled carcasses and carried on to the next battlefield. More soldiers were waiting for them, training their weapons on Mike.

That allowed Leon to thin the enemy's numbers with headshots. Did the crossbow handle as

elegantly as a gun? No, but it certainly got the job done. As soon as the helicopter was ready to fire, Mike would mow down the rest of the enemy combatants in a hail of torrential fire.

The plan was working! Leon was sifting through the red mist left of Saddler's men when he reached a cliff's edge, where Mike's helicopter hovered to greet him.

"It looks like you're home free, partner!" Mike announced through Leon's comms.

"Only thanks to the cavalry," Leon responded.

"Go grab Miss Graham," Mike ordered, "I'll pick you up as soon as you're out."

"Drinks are on me."

"I know a good bar."

Leon turned away from the cliff, triumphantly marching towards the next gate.

A loud metallic crunch forced Leon to turn around. It was Saddler, his unblinking eyes trained on Mike's helicopter as he speared it with his scorpion tail — the same one he used to gore Luis to death.

Leon charged Saddler, radiating with fury, only to be stopped as the cult leader outstretched his hand. This time, there wasn't just the pain of the restless parasite in his body. Leon's limbs moved

independently, turning his neck to stare directly at Mike. Saddler wanted him to see what would happen next.

What happened next brought Leon's blood to a boil. Saddler wrenched his tail through the helicopter's chassis, slicing it in half. An explosion burst through the cockpit, cooking Mike alive as the mangled helicopter debris fell to the cliffs below.

It was another stupid, senseless death — only because Saddler wanted to make a point, or was it retribution? *Think about all of those people that you and Mike just killed.*

But Leon and Mike didn't have a choice! They needed to get to Ashley, and soon.

*And Saddler had a choice? You've invaded his village, murdered his followers, killed his generals, and destroyed all his creatures — you'll end his life's work!*

He hurt innocent people. *He swatted bothersome insects. Have you not done the same?*

"Yes, my child," Saddler purred as Leon struggled in his telepathic grasp, "you're starting to see things my way."

Ada was surprised to find Leon staring absent-mindedly at a nearby wall. He was so close to

Ashley; what was he doing? Maybe the job was finally getting to him, and he needed to stop for a second.

“Leon, you okay?” She asked, failing to hide the nervousness building in her voice. Leon wasn’t just anyone. He was someone that she trusted. It unnerved her to see him like this.

He turned to face her, and she gasped. She was caught off guard by how clammy his skin had become behind a thick layer of sweat. His eyes were bloodshot, the veins on his neck a deep crimson.

What threw Ada off more than anything else was Leon’s smile. It wasn’t the same kind smile he gave during Raccoon City or even earlier in the village — it was cruel and sadistic. It was Saddler’s smile. It was too late.

Leon wrapped his hands around Ada’s neck, crushing her windpipe as that smile turned into a gnashing of teeth. Ada’s reaction was near-instant, digging her knife into his leg before kneeling him in the gut, sending him to the floor.

As Ada assumed an attack stance, ready to retaliate as soon as Leon got up, she could feel her stomach knot. If this were anybody else, she wouldn’t hesitate, but not Leon.

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon raised his hands defensively. His body had returned to normal, a look of horror on his shocked face.

“Ada, I’m so sorry!”

As Ada caught her breath, she refused to let her guard down in case Leon changed back.

“We need to get that parasite out of you, Leon.”

“Not until I rescue Ashley.”

“Then I’m sure you won’t mind if we split up.”

It was a fair call, and Leon made no effort to stop Ada as she walked out of the room. Instead, he looked down at his hands, wondering how long they’d remain under his control.

Leon reached another facility, opening the door to find Ashley. She looked serene as she lay unconscious inside a giant incubator. Saddler observed her, turning to greet Leon with the same smug shit-eating grin.

“Come to observe the ritual?” Saddler asked, arms outstretched.

“I’ve come to take Ashley back,” Leon asserted, “whether you like it or not!”

“Ah, the audacity of youth.”

The second Saddler finished that sentence; he dashed towards Leon in the time it would take to

blink. Leon felt a battering ram in his stomach as Saddler punched him, sending him into the incubator.

As Leon struggled for breath, Saddler took small, gleeful steps towards him. He was going to enjoy ripping Leon apart with his bare hands.

Saddler's stride was broken with the rattling of gunfire as sparks and blood splatter burst across his chest. As Leon got to his feet, he spotted Ada on a walkway above them, brandishing a smoking TMP.

Leon couldn't help but smile, only for her to yell back.

"Leon, now!"

Snapping out of it, Leon turned to the incubator, where a bright green button practically called to him. He slammed it with his palm, causing the whirring sound of depressurization to fill the room as the door to the incubator opened, relinquishing a drowsy Ashley.

As Leon held her close, keeping her upright, he turned to see Saddler standing in place, deep concentration frozen on his face as he twitched with intense energy.

Then, Saddler placed his arms by his sides, outstretching his fingers. A stream of modified 9mm TMP bullet casings ejected from his palms, hitting

the floor below – enough for the contents of a single TMP mag.

Saddler peered at Leon and Ashley through thick wisps of gun smoke, the smile returning to his face. “Leon, for god’s sake, move!” Ada yelled before firing another mag into Saddler, keeping him in place. Leon helped Ashley out of the room as they stumbled into the open.

They barely made it a few steps before an explosion roared behind them, shaking the ground beneath their feet. Leon turned to see the building in flames, the exit blocked by debris. Ada had bought them more time. It was up to them to make the most of it.

It wasn’t long before Leon used Luis’ book to find the lab, and he and Ashley approached a surgical chair made from cold, sterile steel.

As Ashley admired its intricacy, Leon hurried towards a nearby computer terminal, booting it up to reveal a modified operating system. Luckily, his time with STARS Exeter Team had taught him a lot about navigating complex IT systems, even if most of the text was in Spanish.

So, Ashley watched as Leon typed away. Eventually, he looked up from the screen.

“Ashley, I got good news and bad.”

“Yeah? What’s the good news?”

“This is the device that can remove the Plagas from our bodies.”

Ashley paused, anticipating the answer before giving up and asking, “and the bad?”

“It’s gonna hurt like hell.”

Ashley didn’t care. She demanded that Leon strap her down. The sooner they were Plagas-free, the better. She didn’t know Leon omitted an important detail — if the parasite had developed for long, the removal process could kill her. Still, what was the alternative? This machine was their only option.

So, Leon ignored Ashley’s nervous shakes and focused on her determined scowl as he keyed in the details to start the machine. An electrical hum filled the room.

A burst of light emanated from the machine, causing Ashley to writhe and scream with blood-curdling agony. Leon had to fight his impulse to stop the procedure prematurely.

He needed to believe in her. She survived everything else that this nightmare threw at her. She’d survive this too.

Eventually, the machine powered down, leaving Ashley gasping for air. Leon rushed towards her,

quickly undoing her restraints and grabbing her by the shoulders.

“Ashley, how are you feeling?”

At first, Leon prepared for the worst. Perhaps he got something wrong. Maybe the machine didn’t kill the Plaga. Maybe it did, but the damage was too extensive. There was an incalculable number of ways that this could have gone wrong.

But Ashley’s breathing stabilized. She was smiling — no, she was ecstatic.

She turned to Leon with an energy that told Leon everything he needed to know. The dread that hung over her throughout their time together had seemingly evaporated.

“Leon!” She exclaimed excitedly, “it worked!”

# TWENTY-FIVE

An eerie calm had settled over their surroundings as Ashley and Leon emerged from Luis' lab to another cold and damp section of the sprawling island.

Typically, this would have put Leon on edge. He would have naturally tensed up, trying to anticipate where the next attack would come from. From which corner would one of Saddler's screaming zealots jump out?

But being free from the Plagas changed everything. It dawned on Leon how invincible he felt without the parasite gnawing on his insides. It

was as though his body was now free to operate at its total capacity.

He was going to get Ashley home. God help anyone that got in his way.

Eventually, they reached a steel tower overlooking the ocean — a part of the island still under construction, surrounded by metal frames and massive equipment. What untold horrors did Saddler have planned for this space once it was complete?

“Ashley,” Leon said as an elevator carried them to the top, “we’re almost out of here. Whatever happens; get behind me and stay close.”

Ashley nodded. She had a renewed sense of hope, too. They were going to make it.

At the top of the tower, they found Ada suspended in the air, tied to the hook of a crane. Leon squinted, trying to determine whether she was still alive. She was too far away for him to tell.

Knowing for sure would have to wait as Saddler was approaching them. He didn’t say anything, gesturing towards them with an outstretched hand. Leon could see it on the man’s face — Saddler thought he still had them under control.

It took a few seconds for Saddler’s trademark grin to sag to a vexed blankness that Leon

recognized immediately. It was the same expression that all these monsters had when they realized they'd lost.

Leon slotted his knife from its sheath with a brave smirk and quipped, "Better try a new trick, 'cos that one's getting old!"

He speared the knife at Ada's bindings, watching as the ropes burst on impact, leaving her to the mercy of gravity.

The world slowed to a crawl as Leon dashed towards the falling Ada, quickly closing the gap between them. With a grunt, Leon caught her in his outstretched arms, sighing with relief as he could see she was still alive. She was conscious — maybe a little dizzy, but breathing nonetheless.

As Leon helped Ada to her feet, Saddler chuckled, making his skin crawl. *Doesn't this guy ever let up?*

"What's so funny now?" Leon fired back.

"I can see it on your face. You think you have prevailed, like a cliched American hero in one of your Hollywood movies. You're quite entertaining, Mr. Kennedy."

"Laugh all you want, Saddler. It's all over."

"You're right. It is."

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Saddler opened his mouth, his unhinged jaw stretching to reveal a green eyeball that swiveled back and forth.

Suddenly, several gory masses of dark carapaced flesh burst from Saddler, forming spined limbs that speared themselves into the ground. The remains of Saddler's human body hung limply beneath this mansion-sized monstrosity. At its peak was Saddler's new head, where a single eyeball used his distended jaw as a socket, protected by mandibular spikes on either side.

One by one, more eyes opened on this creature's body, turning to face Leon with an all-consuming hatred.

Leon could see Ashley where he'd left her, cowering in fear. He didn't dare talk to her. He needed to ensure Saddler's attention was always on him.

Ada asked, "How much ammo does that TMP of yours have?"

Leon pulled the light machine gun from its holster and held it up, "I'm all out."

"Right," Ada replied as she ejected the mag from her TMP and handed it to Leon.

"You're on big guy duty."

“What?” Leon responded as he turned to find the vacant space that Ada once occupied, leaving him with the zipping sound of her grappling hook.

*Well, time to go to work,* Leon thought as he loaded the mag into the TMP, staring down Saddler’s newly minted monstrous form. Hopefully, Ada had a plan.

Leon’s surroundings quickly filled with Saddler’s monolithic limbs as they rammed the ground, crumbling the floors beneath their powerful pincers.

He maneuvered himself around them, scouting for weak spots with the red dot sight of the TMP. It has to be the eyes. It’s always the eyes.

Leon was conservative with his rounds, firing single shots at whatever eyes opened near him. As each one burst on impact, more would open up in its place. Saddler didn’t notice as he crawled back and forth, trying to spear Leon with his limbs.

Of course, Leon knew what he needed to do. Forget the eyes on Saddler’s limbs. They might as well be just for show. The one inside Saddler’s mouth had to be their ticket out of this nightmare.

All Leon had to do was keep Saddler away from Ashley until he could find an opening.

*Easier said than done.*

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

The two were at a standstill. Leon couldn't get a clear shot at Saddler's head, and Saddler was struggling to grind him into the ground with its powerful legs. They had to rethink their strategies.

Instead of trying to get amongst Saddler's limbs to wait for the right moment, Leon moved back to try and create some distance. Far from the melee, Leon could see Saddler's head towering over the construction site, a weak spot exposed to the world.

Still, it was too far away.

Leon aimed his TMP, carefully trying to position the red dot. Saddler threw his gruesome head back and let out an infernal roar that threatened to level the building site. He then reached towards a stack of steel beams, picking a couple off the ground and hurling them in Leon's direction.

There was no rolling out of the way — not when the projectiles were as wide as the buildings they were supposed to support. There was only one desperate option, and Leon took it as he jumped over the edge, his free hand grabbing the frame underneath. The beams sailed over Leon's head, flying several miles before landing in the water with a thunderous splash.

*Now to climb back up.*

As he gripped the frame, Leon used his other hand to try and reholster his TMP. He looked up to gauge whether Saddler was close. Saddler's monstrous form reflected in the moonlight — distant at first but quickly getting very close.

Oh shit!

Leon let go of the TMP as he gripped the frame with both hands. Saddler slammed the ground in front of him, violent tremors throwing Leon back and forth as he clung with all his strength — hoping his arms wouldn't tear off from his torso.

As Leon's world returned to normal, he looked up again to see Saddler's face slithering towards him. He could feel the giant eye in Saddler's jaw gazing directly at him, reveling in his helplessness. *Maybe I can gouge his eye out*, Leon thought, hoping his thumb would be up to the task.

Suddenly, Saddler's head tilted upwards, letting out a gurgling, agonized howl. *Was Ada back?* Leon tried to peer through Saddler's limbs for signs of her return.

Instead, Saddler turned his body around with a flailing of his gigantic arachnid legs; his back now turned to Leon. Clearly, his attention was elsewhere. Leon pulled himself upwards, climbing back onto his feet as he spotted what had caused Saddler's pain

— Leon’s knife was sticking out of one of the eyes on Saddler’s legs. *Ada must’ve picked it up! She must be back!*

An idea formed in Leon’s head, and he found himself climbing Saddler’s limbs, using each corrugation on its cold shell-like surface as a handhold. Leon plucked his knife from Saddler’s leg-eye, wiping the blood and eyeball fluid on his pant leg.

Leon leaped towards Saddler’s head, pulling it towards him and slicing its exposed eyeball. Saddler’s legs buckled as his torso hit the ground, fluid leaking from his wounded eye.

Ashley approached Leon as he slid off Saddler’s back, sheathing his knife.

“Leon, you’re okay! I thought I lost you for a minute there.”

“No way. I’m getting you off this island, even if it’s the last thing I do!”

The duo turned to Saddler, whose body was lurching back and forth as his eye foamed with a pus-like discharge.

“Is he dead?” Ashley tittered.

“Not yet.” Leon responded, “We’ve gotta hit him before he gets back up.”

He turned back to Ashley.

“Where’s Ada?”

“Ada?”

“Woman in the red dress. She saved me from Saddler just now.”

Ashley shot Leon an incredulous look that caught him off-guard.

“What is it?”

“Leon, I saved you from Saddler just now.”

“What? You...”

Leon’s eyes drifted to his knife, then back to Ashley.

Ashley smiled, “I saw it lying there. I had to do something!”

“Ashley, I... holy shit!” was all Leon could muster as Ashley found herself beaming with pride.

Leon turned back to Saddler, who was now stirring, his eye reformed and shaking in its socket.

“We still need to deal with this guy.”

“What’re we gonna do, Leon?”

“Hey!”

With a loud clang, a heavy metal object clattered across the ground in front of Leon. It was a rocket launcher, freshly loaded.

“Don’t just stare at it!” Ada called out from above, “use it!”

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Leon didn't wait for Saddler to get back up. He picked up the rocket launcher, placed it on his shoulder, steadied himself, and fired.

The effect was instantaneous, the rocket sailing into Saddler's eye and exploding on impact. The ensuing fireball disintegrated Saddler's head, leaving a mass of melted flesh that sank to the ground, still encased in Saddler's still-intact exoskeleton.

As Leon tossed the rocket launcher aside, he spotted a small metal item amidst Saddler's oozing remains. It was the syringe — the dominant species sample, the Plagas that Saddler was going to use to infect the President of the United States, sitting right there.

*You've done it, Leon. You saved the world. It's okay. It's all over.*

And yet, when Leon crouched down to retrieve the sample, he heard Ashley gasp. Then, he felt cold steel press against the back of his head. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was happening.

“Sorry, Leon.”

His heart sank, and he turned to see Ada pointing a pistol directly at his face. As Ada picked up the sample, Leon tried to decide what felt worse; the betrayal or the fact that he didn't see it coming.

“Ada, you know what that is, right?” He stammered.

“Don’t worry, Leon. I’ll take good care of it.”

“Whoever’s asking you to do this... you can’t let them-“

“I’d be more worried about getting off the island if I were you.”

As Ada finished that last sentence, she pulled out a handheld device and pressed a button on its surface, causing a red LED to start blinking. Leon recoiled in shock.

“Ada, what the hell are you doing?”

“Following my orders. I can’t let whatever’s left of Los Illuminados escape. Unfortunately for you, that means you’d better get your ass into gear.”

With that, Ada tossed Leon a set of keys. He caught them, examining them in his palm and trying to decipher their use. Accompanying them on the ring was a tiny teddy bear.

“They’re for a jet ski, parked at a pier not too far from here. You can’t miss it.”

Leon wanted to ask more questions, but Ada fired her grappling gun into the distance and sailed away.

All Leon could do was turn to Ashley and shrug before grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her away.

## TWENTY-SIX

At least Ada wasn't lying about one thing — the jet ski was, in fact, at the pier. Leon and Ashley climbed aboard, with Leon wasting no time in inserting the key and gunning the engine.

With a roar, the jet ski speared its way through the water, greeting Ashley with a torrent of ocean spray as she held onto Leon's waist for dear life. This escape would be intense as they barreled through winding caverns at breakneck speeds.

One wrong move, and they'd either die instantly in a head-on collision or in the explosives that Ada

had planted around the island. Sure, it was nice of Ada to give them a jet ski. But couldn't she also tell them how long they had been before the island exploded? Even Umbrella had the courtesy to tell Leon how long he had to escape Raccoon City.

Whatever. It wasn't worth thinking about. Leon had to concentrate on not wiping out as he weaved his way through the uneven terrain. His experience with jet skis was minimal — practically non-existent, even.

Of course, he didn't tell Ashley that.

Eventually, the jet ski reached an exceptionally expansive section of the caverns. On the other side was an opening where inviting rays of sunlight poured in. Leon and Ashley had to make it to the other side, and they would finally be free.

As if on cue, an intense rumbling surrounded them like an enraged serpent, cracks slithering across the rocky terrain and causing pieces of debris to break away and fall into the water around them.

This was it — the final stretch.

Leon maneuvered the jet ski with a virtuosity he seemingly pulled from mid-air, dodging the enormous pieces of rock as they slammed into the water around him with ease. Perhaps it was the adrenaline surging through his veins. Maybe it was

Ashley's grip tightening around his waist, reminding him he had to make it out of here for both their sakes. Perhaps it was the thought that they couldn't fail now — not after everything they had been through.

Whatever it was, Leon quickly approached the opening to the caverns. Suddenly, a piece of rock made itself known, landing in front of them with a loud splash that drenched them with water.

Was there enough time to go around it? It was too big. Navigating it would be a nightmare.

Leon's instinct took over. He gunned the throttle, the plan in his head being so absurd that it would either work or kill them both instantly.

The jet ski sailed along the rock's surface, using its momentum to carry itself as it used the surface like a ramp.

Sensations barraged Leon as the jet ski burst through the cavern's opening, landing in the open water — from the warm sun's rays gracing his skin to the cool air rushing through his hair to Ashley screaming in his ear.

Leon hit the brake, stopping the jet ski so that he and Ashley could catch their breaths. He felt an intense relief as his comms made their presence known, turning to Ashley as he procured his walkie

and answered it. Was there another Los Illuminados ghoul that he'd forgotten about? Was Krauser not dead after all?

"Hunnigan, please tell me that's you!"

"Leon!" Hunnigan responded with a cathartic sigh, "The line's finally jack-free! I was so sure I was losing my job for a second there."

"Trust me, you got nothing to worry about."

With that, Hunnigan cleared her throat, her professional demeanor returning.

"Leon, give me a status update on the mission."

Leon gave Ashley a smile that told her everything would be okay.

"I've rescued the subject. We're returning home."

Hunnigan told Leon a mixture of debriefings and congratulatory praise, but it was all white noise as Leon concentrated on Ashley's exhausted face. Her relief said it all. It was slowly dawning on her that the nightmare was entirely over. She escaped a scenario that she was so convinced would be inescapable. To Leon, moments like that made every fight worth it.

It was why he was never going to stop. Umbrella could come back. Maybe somebody else would rise from Umbrella's ashes with their own sick, twisted

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

designs on the world. It didn't matter. He would fight back for as long as he could.

Eventually, Leon's call with Hunnigan ended, leaving him and Ashley to soak up some rays and take in the delectable ocean breeze as they waited for their extraction to arrive.

## EPILOGUE

Trent had given Albert Wesker his final test, unaware he'd already failed.

On paper, it was simple. Once Ada retrieved the sample, her final objective was to give it to Wesker. Once he verified its authenticity, he was to deliver it personally to Trent.

Wesker knew exactly why Trent organized it this way. He was testing their loyalties, as he knew how malleable they could be, even to someone who brought them from the brink of death. It was

unfortunate that Trent was going to be disappointed by both of them.

The second Ada gave Wesker the sample, he knew she double-crossed him. It was not the dominant species sample that Trent had asked for. It was a dud — she probably destroyed the real thing. Kennedy had softened that bitch's heart just like he did in 1998.

However, Wesker had a contingency plan from the get-go, and its name was Jack Krauser. It didn't pain him to see the fear in Krauser's eyes — the unspoken begging for mercy he was trying to project as Wesker extracted the dominant species sample from his still-healing body. Unfortunately, the procedure would not only finish Krauser off the way Leon had failed to do, but it had to occur on the island without the luxury of anesthetic.

Was Wesker going to lose any sleep over ending Krauser's life? Of course not. Krauser's life was a sacrifice in the name of something greater. What more could a soldier ask for? It was, however, a bit of a waste that Krauser would not be in attendance for the next phase. He proved himself to be both a powerful ally and an obedient asset.

But Wesker already had all the allies he needed. Between following Trent's orders and surveilling Ada's progress, Wesker made calls of his own.

Sure, Umbrella was dead. But Trent seemed to think that reset the board, whereas Wesker knew the game would continue as normal. Umbrella's hold on the market was powerful, but it wasn't a monopoly. They had competitors, and it would only be a matter of time before one took the late pharmaceutical company's place.

It wasn't long before Wesker had Umbrella's most prominent rival at his beck and call. The deal was simple — he had all of their resources at his disposal, and he would divulge the many secrets that he had amassed working for Umbrella. Wesker was looking forward to dishing out orders instead of taking them.

Of course, this meant that conflict with Trent and The Agency was inevitable. There was still so much that Wesker didn't know about his mysterious soon-to-be adversary. Was Trent even his actual name? Ultimately, Wesker decided it didn't matter. The only fact about Trent that mattered was that he was an enemy of progress.

And Wesker was well equipped to fight back, with all kinds of viral weaponry in his arsenal. All

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

he had to do was unlock the secrets of the dominant species sample, the T-Veronica virus, and everything in between, and he would be completely unstoppable.

Forget this pathetic underground war. Wesker was done with operating in the shadows for a stake in some tired, pithy corporate agenda. He had a vision for humanity. He wanted the world in his hand.

He was going to crush anyone that got in his way.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

N.E. (Nevile) Stride is a writer with screenplays and the occasional prose under his belt (sometimes, he even gets paid for it!). When he's not trying to earn a living, he's doing passion projects like this. He's a huge fan of horror and science fiction, especially the *Resident Evil* series (in case that wasn't already abundantly clear).

# **not sure what to read next?**

Find the rest of the *Resident Evil™*  
novels, including game and movie  
adaptations, as well as other novels by  
S.D. Perry at

**titanbooks.com**

**Project LRE Presents**

**The Chilling Novelization**

# **RESIDENT EVIL**

**The Movie**

**Coming Soon**

# BEYOND THE MANSION. BEYOND THE DISASTER. EVIL LIVES AGAIN.

U.S. Agent Leon S. Kennedy has been deployed to a remote village in Spain to recover the President's missing daughter. While the mission sounds simple on paper, it quickly devolves into a nightmare - one with the kinds of horrors that Leon thought he'd left behind in 1998. As he battles his way through abominable monsters, a diabolical cult, and the ghosts of his former comrades, Leon learns that the most terrifying evil of all is the one that lies within.

# RESIDENT EVIL™

## LOS ILLUMINADOS

Find out more at [projectre.itch.io](https://projectre.itch.io)

FREE/\$0.00 US/\$0.00 Can



Intended for  
mature readers.  
Based on the  
M-rated video  
game from  
Capcom.

**CAPCOM**

RESIDENT EVIL™ &  
© 2005  
Capcom Co. Ltd.  
All Rights Reserved.

PRINTED IN AUS