

Red Moon Rising

Part 01 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 01 of 30

Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2014

Published 2014/08/01

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed within are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for the personal entertainment of the reader. It is the copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed without the express written consent of the author.

“Point me to the sky above,
I can’t get there on my own,”

- Misfits, *Dig Up Her Bones*

The truck stop door opened with a chime and in walked a black knight.

He was a young man, a little older than college-age. He had close-cropped hair and an intense, vigilant expression. He was shirtless, his pants were tattered, and he was covered in dust as though he’d been drug through a desert. After surveying the late-night truck stop and its total absence of customers, he turned back to the door that he’d held partially open it. “Marilyn,” he said in a gentle tone with a strong voice.

In came a woman with fair skin that had gotten more sun than she was used to. She had long brown hair that was matted. Her clothes were just as torn as those of her knightly escort. Her green eyes gravitated to the back where, through aisles of junk food and cheap country music, she saw the drink coolers. She licked her chapped lips and started right for them. She stopped two steps in and turned back. “Everett,” she asked but the knight just nodded, as eager as she.

The two almost ran to the back and grabbed the largest water bottles they could find. They both chugged quickly and heavily, emptying the bottles, while standing in the cool air of the open doors. “Water never tasted so good,” said Marilyn with a smile.

Everett nodded and said, “I’ll get us some food. Grab some clothes.”

“You’re one to talk, muscles,” she teased. She poked his almost-impossibly defined shoulder as she walked by him.

A few moments later, Everett and Marilyn deposited their bounty on the counter by the register; two sets of clothes, cheap sneakers, several more bottles of water, and the healthiest pseudo-food the gas station had to offer. The woman behind the register, who’d seen their dehydrated arrival, looked none too pleased. Everett added a disposable cell phone and calling card to the top of the pile, saying “How much for a shower stall?” Just a step behind Everett, Marilyn’s eyes went wide and she looked at him like he was crazy. “Are two available?” he said, unaware of Marilyn’s reaction.

“Two showers,” said the woman behind the register as she started the tally on the register. “And how are you paying for this?” she asked condescendingly.

“With cash,” Everett said as he took from his wallet out his wallet over a hundred dollars. The woman looked almost disappointed but she continued tallying up the lot. As she did, Everett spotted cheap knives on sale by the register. He took one from the woven basket and opened it. A simple black hard plastic sheath held a spear-point stainless steel blade. He closed it and added it to the pile.

It was almost 2am and Everett was sitting on the curb of the truck stop out in the hot night air. It was perfectly silent except for the buzz of the lights and the very rare car driving by the lonely highway out past the pumps. At Everett’s feet were the wrappers of protein bars, energy bars, and beef jerky. He was finishing a second water bottle while toying with the cell phone he’d just purchased.

The truck stop door opened and Marilyn stepped out. Freshly showered like Everett, she was wearing an ‘America, love it or leave it shirt’ over black jeans. Combing her hair with her fingers, she sat down next to him on the curb. They shared the silent night for a moment before Marilyn said, “Thank you. For, you

know, saving my life.” Everett stopped fiddling with the phone and turned to her. “For...” she settled in for a long list. “Coming to rescue me, for keeping me safe, for keeping the book hidden, for believing me.” She looked sincerely at Everett and repeated, “Thank you.”

Everett smiled and shrugged a little. “No problem.”

“Yes it was,” Marilyn said with an incredulous laugh. “You were nearly killed. Repeatedly. Just tonight. That whole airplane thing alone was...” She just shook her head, at a loss to even begin to describe what they’d been through.

Everett said nothing more on the matter, instead changing subjects by informing her “I’ve called Morgan. He’s on his way to pick us up,”

That seemed to bring Marilyn crashing back to the real world. She looked momentarily overwhelmed. “What are we going to do?” she asked. Everett looked at her, confused. “Am I going to have to drop out of school? Change my name? Go on the run?! The Brotherhood of the Sun is everywhere!”

“You can do what you want,” Everett said. With a worried swallow, he risked saying “I wish you wouldn’t change your name.” Marilyn looked at him through damp hair, but said nothing. Everett looked out at the blackness beyond the truck stop. “I’m not running. You can do what you want, but I need Morgan to take me to meet up with the other knights.” He looked back at Marilyn who looked stunned. “All flattery aside, my dear,” he said with an apologetic tone, “But rescuing you wasn’t the only thing we had to do tonight. We’re behind schedule and the others are waiting on me.”

“To do what?” Marilyn asked.

Everett shrugged at the obviousness of it. “Storm a fortress.”

It was nearing the end of night, with the first vestiges of dawn teasing at the horizon. From that horizon came the sound of a powerful engine. A black Charger pulled into the truck stop and came to the side where Everett sat waiting. Marilyn had dozed off against an ice unit and awoke when the car came to a stop. Behind the wheel, an impatient-looking man gestured at the door. "Marilyn," Everett said, standing up. He opened the door and let Marilyn slip into the backseat. Once she was buckling herself in, Everett got in himself, saying "Thanks, Morgan," as he shut the door.

Morgan didn't really respond, he just shifted the car into reverse and pulled out. Morgan didn't say anything at all until they were back on the highway headed into town. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Solaritec's main campus," Everett said. "The others should be there already."

"Yeah, Ledger's worried what they've got planned since they've had six hours or whatever to get ready," Morgan shared. "Of course, Sydney and Armand are ready to go. Roland too."

"Good," Everett said, looking out the passenger's window at the darkness passing by beyond the highway.

Morgan looked back through the rear view mirror at Marilyn. She couldn't tell if it was an accusatory look or a questioning one, but it made her uncomfortable and a little defensive. Morgan settled for just a moment before saying, "Okay, look, I know I said..." The act of recalling his own words made him mad at himself. "I know I said I didn't want to know but...but, okay, now I do." He looked at Everett. "What the hell is going on?"

Everett looked back at Morgan and said with the most I-told-you-so tone Marilyn had ever heard Everett use, "We've picked a side. The knights have gone to war."

Morgan blinked and yelled, “What the hell does that even mean?!” He faced forward and settled into his driving. “Look, just, pretend for a second I don’t have a clue what’s going on. I don’t know about the Brotherhood of the Sun or any of what you idiots have been up to for the past couple of weeks. Start at the beginning. And I mean the beginning-the beginning.”

Everett thought for a second and smirked. He looked through the rear view mirror back at Marilyn in the back of the car. He sighed. “It started like any story involving knights starts: with a damsel in distress.”

.....

–14 Days Ago–

Marilyn Johnston was running for her life.

Clutching a massive, leather-bound tome to her chest, she was running on bare feet over the pavement of an empty city street. Her black dress and stockings were torn and her club makeup was running from sweat and exertion as she ran in fear.

Behind her, almost a block back, a young man in a black suit stopped and took aim with a sawed-off rifle. He fired a shot and Marilyn’s long brown hair was kicked into the wind. Across the street ahead of her, a blue mailbox rent violently inward. The far side of it ripped open and fiery letters along with other shards of parcels went flying out into the dark city air.

Marilyn screamed as she scrambled to keep from falling. She clutched the big book to her chest, panting fearfully as she backed away from the shooter. He approached her slowly and steadily, cocking his rifle again. He lifted it, aimed it, and pulled the trigger. Marilyn clamped her eyes shut, awaiting her impending doom, when all she heard was a loud click. She opened her eyes and looked at him, seeing the embarrassed shock as it registered that he was out of bullets.

“HELP ME!” Marilyn screamed to the nighttime city. Tall buildings lined the street she was backing down. Light came from windows. Yet there was no sound. No TVs playing, no talking, no cars. A dead silence illuminated by cold light from fake homes and street lamps that stood over the streets like bearers over a casket.

Marilyn turned and ran as the shooter quickly loaded more rounds into his rifle. She raced down the street, devoid of the slightest signs of life. She checked over her shoulder before darting across the street and ducking down an alley. Her feet hurt as she sprinted between garbage cans and splashed in puddles of rainwater. Her lungs burned with every gasp of frantic breath she took.

Marilyn stumbled through the exit of the alley, crashing out between empty wooden boxes. A bright light, as though from heaven, shone across the street. A gas station convenience store was open, the blinding bright lights inside seeming to keep out the horrible night. Marilyn saw the man behind the register reading a textbook while wearing a garish orange shirt that was the uniform of the gas station. She nearly collapsed with hopeful relief. “HEY!” she screamed as she ran across the dark street without looking. She waved her hand frantically, screaming again and again. She reached the door into the convenience store and yelled “Some guy’s trying to kill me!” She pulled the door shut, just before the glass bowed in abruptly. The bulletproof glass stopped the bullet meant to go right between her eyes. Marilyn froze in terror as she looked at the warped glass and the bullet lodged inside it. Her quaking eyes looked through the glass as her pursuer exited the alley with a determined murderous intent.

Not even aware she'd dropped the gigantic book, Marilyn grabbed both handles of the door and pulled them shut. She looked to the college-age student behind the register and yelled "Call the police!" as she braced herself to keep the door shut.

The glass bowed in again with a second shot, now threatening to break. A spider web of white lines crossed through the pane of bulletproof glass as a third shot struck right behind the first. Marilyn screamed again. A hand reached across her hands and turned the latch, locking the doors. Marilyn looked up through panic-stricken tears at Everett. He gently but firmly guided Marilyn back from the door. "Look at me," he told her calmly. Another shot and the glass warped inside even further. The glass of the window was almost entirely white now, the cracks ready to give. "Look at me, look at me!" Everett said over her fear. "Just focus on me," he said as he guided her to the back of the store. Just as he got her behind the farthest set of aisles, the window burst inward as a gunshot knocked open the door.

The gunman entered the gas station with the caution of a predator. He was wearing a black suit, shirt, and tie. His dark brown hair, cut close, made his fair skin the only real color about him. He looked to his left at the register worker, who immediately lifted his hands in surrender. The wage slave began to jibber about not wanting any trouble when the gunman shot him in the chest. His back erupted behind him, spraying blood and bits all over the cigarettes and lottery tickets.

The shot made Marilyn shriek, getting the gunman's attention. He turned back towards the rear of the store and began to quickly approach. The store was brightly lit, almost needlessly so. Lights ran along the edges of each cooler door and along the ceiling of each aisle. Shadows practically didn't exist inside the sterile, corporate environment.

The gunman came to the final aisle and stepped around the corner, gun ready and aimed, only to find the aisle empty. A moment of confusion passed into panic and he stepped back to the previous aisle and looked down it, seeing it just as

empty. Panic went back to confusion, like he was confronting an impossibility. He glanced back down the final aisle just in time to see Everett's sword slice at him.

The knight swung horizontally and nearly decapitated the gunman with a single swing. The man stumbled away defensively, taken back by the sudden offensive. Everett pressed his attack, slicing a katana in a rapid blur of swings. The gunman backed up against the counter and Everett swung overhead as though to cleave him in two.

The katana was blocked with the body of the sawed-off rifle. Held up almost like a shield, the gunman jeopardized his weapon to save his life. He elbowed Everett in the face and then shoved him with his shoulder. Everett was pushed back a step but rebounded with a kick to the gunman's head.

The blow landed like a metal baseball bat and knocked the gunman staggering. Everett sliced again with his katana, slicing the man's coat and drawing a slash through his shirt beneath. The rifle was brought to bear but Everett kicked under the weapon and knocked the gunman back against door he'd shot open. He swung his sword again and the gunman blocked with his rifle.

The two began to trade blows, Everett hacking with his katana and the gunman blocking with his gun, trying and failing to open up shots. They hit with absolutely anything they could – elbows, fists, feet, knees – in an effort to gain ground against the other. The rapid barrage of strikes and attacks moved too fast for Marilyn to follow.

With a final swing of his katana, Everett tried to behead the shooter, only for his sword to break at the impact against the rifle. The gunman extended the gun to fire at Everett but the knight seemed nonplussed at losing his sword. In the same motion of the swing that cost him his blade, he dropped low and swept in for a takedown.

Everett's left shoulder slammed into the gunman's solar plexus while he chopped both his hands into the back of the gunman's knees. The man was taken off his feet in an instant as Everett slammed him onto the tiled floor of the convenience store. The gunman hit hard and was dazed for just an instant. Everett grabbed the rifle and threw it away, the weapon going spinning across the floor and landing atop the book that Marilyn had dropped by the door.

The gunman managed to wake up from Everett's takedown. He wrapped his legs around Everett's waist and tried to grab Everett's arms. Everett postured up but the gunman yanked him down with an ease that surprised Everett. He tried to pull his arms free but the gunman held them fast and started trying to pull Everett down. The gunman broke open his legs and tried to swing his right leg over Everett's shoulder, going for an arm bar. Everett went with the submission rather than fight it and rolled to his right. He forced the gunman to roll as well and the two spun across the tile floor to collide with the drink coolers.

Contact made, Everett managed to break free of the gunman and got to his feet. The gunman stood cautiously as well, his hands up in a fighting stance. Everett's weren't. His arms were crossed, his left hand held defensively in front of him. His right hand was inside his black trench coat. The gunman glanced down, trying to see what Everett might have had in there. The second he glanced to see, Everett rocketed forward with a fast punch that struck the gunman in the eye. Everett followed the left jab with his right elbow, catching the gunman in the right side of the jaw, before snapping his hand out to chop the gunman on the left side of his neck. He came around with his left hand but the gunman managed to block the strike and punched Everett in the stomach. The gunman drew back to punch him again and Everett blocked the punch. He turned into the strike, hoisting the gunman over his hip and taking him off his feet. The gunman was slammed down with such force that the tiles of the floor cracked under the impact.

Everett stumbled back, surprised. He looked down at his hands, then at the gunman. "Huh," he seemed to marvel. Remembering himself, he turned around to

where he and Marilyn had been hiding at the rear of the aisle. She was standing now, surprised by the fight she'd just witnessed. "Are you okay?" Everett asked.

A light flashed over them and they both looked out to the gas pumps as two black SUVs pulled in. "The book," Marilyn said, the situation returning to her. She started to run for the door but Everett grabbed her.

"No time," he insisted. Grabbing her arms, he spun her around without any trouble and practically shoved towards the rear of the store. She stumbled forward and he put his hand on her back, pushing her towards the door past the bathrooms. Everett opened the door out to find two men in suits just as surprised to see Everett and Marilyn as they were to find the two men lying in wait. But in the time it took the two men and Marilyn to process the encounter, Everett went into gear.

Everett kicked twice, once to the groin of the man on his right, followed by a kick to the stomach of the man on his left. Everett's foot never touched the ground. Everett let his weight shift with the second kick and he leaned into a fast back fist to the man's jaw, knocking him out instantly. That same hand was used to come back around with a monstrous overhead strike to the first man's temple, also knocking him out instantly. Both men fell to the ground, not even getting the chance to make a sound or draw the pistols from the holsters on their waists.

Everett turned and looked back at Marilyn, about to ask if she was okay. She pre-empted him by exclaiming "Who are you?!"

Seeing behind her into convenience store, he said, "Someone in a rush." He grabbed her arm and pulled her into a run. They began to run from the gas station, staying in the shadows behind the blinding light of the convenience store itself.

"Eli. Eli!"

The gunman awoke with a start, scrambling defensively. He crawled backwards across the floor of the convenience store, grabbing for the gun that wasn't there. But when the young man got his bearings, he realized the only person near him was another man in an all-black suit, about a decade his senior. "Raphael?" Eli said in a daze. He looked around the convenience store and began to panic. "Oh god. Oh no!"

"Eli, snap out of it!" Raphael said, leaning over the veritable boy.

"Did she get away with the book?" Eli asked, wiping sweat from his face.

"That's about the only part of this operation that didn't go to hell," Raphael said condescendingly to Eli. He helped the young killer to his feet.

"So long as we've got the book," Eli said, surveying the cleanup underway. Five men in all-black suits looked like they were inventorying the scene, like they were taking stock of a bill to be settled later.

"Two people are dead," Raphael said. He stood a head taller than Eli and looked to be at least thirty pounds of muscle heavier.

"This was an assassination," Eli reminded Raphael.

Raphael looked annoyed. "An assassination means it was somebody with political power, or at least the killing was politically motivated. And besides, it would still mean one dead body, not two. Nor should there be a witness to BOTH murders!" Eli fluctuated from looking in control to being a terrified boy. Raphael's anger warped from rage into mere disgust. "Take Gibbons and Fairview and return to the campus. Report to Jericho. All of it," he spelled out clearly and emphatically. "Once I have the situation under control, I'll join you there."

"Right," Eli said, as though he were in a daze. He walked out of the convenience store slowly, bending down to pick up his sawed-off rifle. Raphael

didn't say anything as Eli's hands brushed right over the big book and he didn't notice. The gunman called his escort and departed.

Raphael walked over to the door and picked up the book and laid it on the counter next to the register. It was a huge book, one that would put the largest of Bibles to shame. The corners were capped with iron and a complex lock kept it securely closed. Raphael sighed, almost with fear, as he ran his fingers over the cover of the book.

He looked across at the dead body of the register worker who was now more or less devoid of a chest. "Bad night for you, pal," he said. He glanced at the modern art book on the counter that the guy had been reading. Suddenly intrigued, he picked up the book and began reading where the dead student had left off.

Marilyn and Everett both ducked into the alley together. Marilyn was gasping. She slumped down against the course brick and slid down to the pavement. The floor of the alley was sloped just slightly down to metal grates that ran into the sewer. The mouth of the alley was brightly lit and the horns and motors of cars could be heard in the distant nighttime. The air was electric, full of Wi-Fi signals, radio waves, and TV stations.

Everett wasn't panting. He wasn't even breathing hard. Marilyn seemed to take that like a personal affront. "Do you ever get tired?" she gasped at him. She put her hands to her heaving chest, as though she might be able to physically force herself to breath slower.

Everett didn't respond. Instead, he looked out at the nighttime before asking "What changed?" He glanced down at Marilyn. "We ran for almost five blocks before we even heard a sound. Another two before we saw a car or another human being." He looked back out at the night. "It's like we escaped from the Twilight Zone or something."

Marilyn got to her feet and took stock of herself. Her shoes were gone, but she was glad she'd slipped out of them rather than break an ankle trying to run in heels. Her stockings were torn in so many places; it almost looked like she was wearing leopard print leggings. The little black dress she'd worn to the club was stained with dirt and torn in a few a places as well. She couldn't see it but she was certain her makeup was beyond ruined. She didn't even want to think about her hair. Instead, she focused on Everett.

He was reasonably tall and looked to be in good shape, though with more of a sleek build than overly muscled. He was wearing a black trench coat and slacks with a red button-up shirt underneath. His skin was a moderate brown, just a little lighter than his eyes. "Who are you?" Marilyn asked as she tried to get some sense of the man.

"My name's Everett Kendall," he said. He seemed to hesitate for just a second before adding, "I'm a knight."

Marilyn blinked. "A knight?" Everett just sighed, like he was used to this. "Like, King Arthur and...and the Round Table?"

"A modern update, but...yes," he acknowledged. Marilyn opened her mouth but said nothing. She closed it again and looked away. Everett started to speak, then swallowed nervously. "Um...why...was that guy chasing you?"

"I don't know," said Marilyn, Everett's stammer lost on her. Now it was Everett who looked incapable of believing what he'd just been told. "I don't," Marilyn insisted. "Mostly. Not entirely." Everett scratched the side of his jaw, his expression making clear he wasn't going anywhere. "Look, I really appreciate what you—"

Everett shook his head. "Uh-uh. Something was going down there and I want to know what." He had to speak up as a car drove, the roar of its engine an alien sound compared to the absolute silence of even just a few moments ago. When

Marilyn still didn't speak up, his expression softened some and he offered "Look, maybe I can help." He smirked. "I've already helped once tonight."

"Yeah, and it's been a crazy enough night as it is," she said. She rose from the ground and brushed down her torn and filthy black dress. "Thank you," she repeated again. She started for the street.

"Hey, wait," he called after her. "How far do you expect to get?" Everett asked after her. Internally, he cursed himself for sounding so stupid. Marilyn stopped and looked back over her bare shoulder at him, but didn't turn around. "I can't help you if you won't let me." She half-smiled and resumed walking away from him. Everett swallowed and called again, "Wait." Again, Marilyn stopped and turned her head just enough to look through her bangs. "At least give me your name."

Her lips curled in an unwitting smile and she shared, "Marilyn." She turned forward and resumed walking confidently into the city night.

Everett fell back against the brick wall of the building and exhaled. His smile grew bigger and bigger until he had to shake his head. "Wow," he said to himself. He sighed deeper than he ever had and took a second to realize how harsh her absence was. "Wow," he repeated. He fished his cell phone out of his trench coat pocket and whispered again "Oh wow." He called up the first number on his phone under 'Armand Gessetti' and called it.

The instant the phone picked up, a voice bursting with exuberance asked "Everett, you okay? You're not at the rendezvous. Do you need backup?"

"Armand, I'm fine," Everett said. He couldn't stop himself from looking out of the alley and down the street where Marilyn had disappeared. His heart fluttered and then bottomed out when he didn't see her. He exhaled and shook his head again. "Listen, I need a pickup. I'm..." He looked across the street, not recognizing any of the businesses. "Where the hell am I?" he wondered aloud.

-Now-

“Yeah, I remember this,” Morgan recalled with a smirk. He was settled into the driver’s seat of the Charger. He looked across the car at Everett, the look alone all the teasing he needed to give his friend. “That was a big night for you.”

“Yeah, it was the World Alliance’s first field mission,” Marilyn said from the backseat. Morgan rolled his eyes and looked at Everett, mouthing ‘field mission?’ in amused incredulity. “We’d been tracking rumors of human trafficking in the city for the whole fall semester,” she began to explain, sitting forward between the seats. “Once the spring semester was in full swing, we decided to get down to business.”

“And this involved stealing a big ass encyclopedia?” Morgan asked Marilyn’s reflection in the rear view mirror.

“No,” she retorted curtly. “It involved doing what no one else could, or would; getting real, hard evidence of organized human trafficking in the city.”

—14 Days Ago—

Marilyn dropped down from the ceiling like a ninja. Spiraling through the air, she landed silently in a crouch. One hand on the floor, her head slowly rose as she took in the scene. She'd infiltrated the secret command room of the slavers. On the powerful computer sitting on the huge desk was the evidence she'd come all this way for. Standing in the stunning black dress, she began to saunter towards the computer like she was approaching an old lover.

.....

—Now—

“Oh come on!” Morgan exclaimed in protest.

“What?” Marilyn exclaimed back.

“More fact, less...James Bond,” said Everett.

Marilyn sat back with a bit of a huff, crossing her arms petulantly. “Every good story deserves some embellishment,” she quoted at them.

“Yeah and this ain't a good story,” Morgan grumbled back at her.

.....

—14 Days Ago—

Deep down, Marilyn Johnston felt like she was dressed like a whore.

The semi-transparent black thigh-high stockings were something she thought she might be able to get used to. The black dress was another matter. Sitting way too low on her chest and coming up way too high on her thighs, she felt like at any moment, both ends would come spiraling together like blinds from some Donald Duck cartoon, leaving her with nothing but a belt that had once been a tight dress. Her black heels had seemed like a good idea back in her dorm room, but she was now resisting the urge to take them off and use their narrow heels to club a fashion designer. While she knew her makeup wasn't too bad, she still felt like a clown with all the heavy rouge and eyeliner.

It didn't help that it was cold and she was standing on the sidewalk, in a long line with what looked like the entire population of the city. Sans the people already inside the popular club Australia, of course. So Marilyn shivered for a moment, hugging her arms and trying not to look too uncomfortable in an outfit her friend Ruwani had dubbed an 'I-want-sex getup'.

"Come on," complained Malcolm from behind her. Marilyn looked back to her two escorts. Malcolm was the shorter of the two, with slicked-back hair and a suit that looked more like he was mocking his Hispanic heritage than trying to look good for the club. With him was Victor, in slacks and a long-sleeve t-shirt, he seemed the least garishly dressed of the three. "What's taking so long?" Malcolm complained as he tugged at his collar like a young boy rebelling against his Sunday best.

“Once the club gets hopping, people don’t leave,” Victor said confidently. He leaned in to Marilyn and said quietly, “We should come back.”

“We can’t wait,” Marilyn said, trying to stifle a shiver.

“We may have to if we can’t get in,” Malcolm said pessimistically. He stood up on his toes to see the front of the club several dozen club goers ahead of them. “Is it really that packed or are they just trying to make it seem exclusive?”

“Best Nightspot In The City, three years running,” Victor quoted blandly. His eyes wondered a bit as a pair of women left the club. Walking right by the line, as though flaunting their superiority for leaving where so many wanted in, their curves took Victor’s eyes with them.

“Ahem,” Marilyn said as she glared at Victor.

“What? I’m sorry, but I can’t help it,” Victor apologized insincerely.

“I’m going to have to side with him on this,” Malcolm told Marilyn. “I’m gay and even I had to look.”

Marilyn seemed to grow genuinely angry. “We’re here to get evidence of human trafficking and you two are cracking jokes about treating women like meat?” She glared specifically at Victor. “And to your girlfriend, no less?” Both guys fell silent. “Let’s go over it again,” said Marilyn.

Both guys sighed but relented. “The Australian Club’s owner is named Steven Sizemore,” said Malcolm, speaking in low and casual tones so as to continue being ignored by his neighbors in line. “We find him, we find his office, and we try to find evidence that this place is, in fact, a front for human trafficking.” He glanced down the line behind him. “We know the plan, Mar.”

“Steven Sizemore,” said Victor, standing between Marilyn and the front of the line. “Sounds like a street name.”

“Guys, if we get caught...” Marilyn urged cautiously. “These guys are into a lot of stuff, not just trafficking. They’re probably not going to call the police.” Malcolm said nothing. Victor just scoffed and looked away. Marilyn was about to say more when the door to the club opened and several people coming out. The line began to shuffle a few steps forward as the lucky club-goers at the front of the line were allowed inside. “We need to find this guy first,” Marilyn reminded them. “Once we have eyes on him, then we can figure out where his office is. Once we find his office, then finding evidence should be a piece of cake.”

“We know, Marilyn,” Victor said. “It’s just, how are we going to find him?”

Rather than try to answer, Marilyn turned back to face the line that shuffled forward a few steps, condensing further. It was slow going, but as the evening wore on, the line moved steadily to the front. The slow approach gave Marilyn the chance to better appreciate the size of the club. Made out of a former office building, it was four stories tall, with only the first two utilized for the club space. The two floors above were marked ‘for rent’ but the signs seemed faded and forgotten. The club itself took up most of the block, with the double-door entrance in the very middle of the southern front the only way in or out for visitors.

Around midnight, Marilyn and her two escorts arrived at the doors. They were held back by the red belt rope for only a few moments when a party of six departed in a loud, alcohol-fueled rush. The rope barrier was pulled back and Marilyn, Victor, and Malcolm were allowed in.

Through the double doors was a small vestibule that looked more like the entrance to a high-end restaurant than a dance club. Really the only giveaway was the thumping music that could be more felt than heard. An expensive cover charge and bright green hand stamps later by gentlemen wearing tight ‘Security’ shirts and they were nodded through the black doors.

Passing through the doors was like entering another world. The instant they parted, intense and humid heat hit the three college students. They were

bombarded with intense light of innumerable colors and intensities while a rushing din of noise practically barred them physically from proceeding.

Once through the doors, the club split down the middle. A wall no wider than the length of a car stood before them, with two separate atmospheres on either side. To the right was a pop club with bright lights and bubblegum dance music that rattled the mirrors and glasses of the neon bar along the far right wall. To the left was an industrial club of black and garish neon, with a throbbing bass that threatened to bring down the whole establishment. The wall before them extended onward at subtle but increasing angles, so that the far ends of the long dance clubs seemed to be almost occupy different worlds entirely. It was only here, in the 'shallow end' that the music and atmospheres fused.

"Here we are," Malcolm had to yell to be heard over the music. They had gravitated away from the industrial club and were now immersed in techno-dance versions of Top 40 Hits. "What's the plan?"

"We need to find evidence of sex trade," Marilyn said as they buffeted out of earshot of anyone else, not a small feat given how crowded the club was. "Malcolm, you walk around and just see what you can see. I'll do the same. Victor, hang out by the bar. See if you can spot any customers being led away to private areas or anything." Both guys confirmed their assignments and the trio broke.

Victor headed straight to the brightly lit bar and had to muscle his way to some space. Four bartenders were working together. They didn't take orders by voice but received texts, a novelty Victor found neat. Monitoring the four bartenders turned consuming however and Victor found himself struggling to keep track of who came and went from the crowded bar.

Malcolm encircled the entire pop side of the dance club twice, staying near to the walls. There seemed to be no space anywhere in the club that another human being wasn't within arm's reach, if not just about on top of you. He could feel cold

blasts of air from the ceiling, like icy incorporeal pillars, but there was only so much even the most powerful air conditioning could do against the heat.

Marilyn followed her nose around the club, circling from the pop club over to the industrial section. Few lights were overhead, leaving the flashing dance lights and neon tubes to create multi-colored shadows on the mostly-black walls. The crowds were a little less dense on this side, with most people gathered around the walls, standing and watching or seated in the dumpster-found furniture. Those dancing in the center of the room were flailing wildly to the pulsing music that seemed to be coming from everywhere.

A bright light caught Marilyn's eye. A door had happened at the far end of the blackened dance space and she made for it. The far wall seemed completely featureless, made up of black cardboard spray painted even blacker. Marilyn touched the wall, sliding her fake rave nails over the surface. She found a crease and dug her fingers into the space, pulling as best she could. With some relief, the blackness pulled open with a violent white light blinding her. Marilyn pulled it open just wide enough to slip into a men's bathroom.

It wasn't filthy. In fact, at first glance, the bathroom seemed pretty clean. The floors were yellow and the walls and ceiling were as black as the club walls outside. Flyers and the remains of flyers were stapled and taped to the walls and on the mirror. Two urinals and a toilet were situated on the far end of the tiny space.

Marilyn sighed, refusing to give up. She flushed the urinals and the toilet and stepped back, waiting for a secret door to open up. When none appeared, she looked more irritated than disappointed. Her eyes drifted upward and she considered the spray painted black ceiling. One tile wasn't particle board like the others but a metal vent. Without a hint of hesitation, Marilyn stepped on the toilet and pushed on the vent. It lifted with tremendous ease and she could see the large metal vent inside. She smiled and grabbed the edges of the vent's lining and pulled herself up.

Being in the ventilation shaft wasn't anything what Marilyn had expected. It was far, far colder than she could have imagined. Every inch of the way up, the air around her seemed to drop several degrees, but once she was fully inside the steel ventilation shaft, it felt downright arctic. She began to shiver almost immediately, her tiny dress doing nothing to stem the cold. Worse, the metal was painful to slide along, like her exposed flesh was sliding along ice. It wasn't just the cold. It was dark in the ventilation shaft, and loud. All the noise from the club rattled the steel and echoed endless inside of it. It was like being inside the drums at a rock concert.

Noise, dark, and cold were bad enough but it was also tight. What seemed like plenty of room and then some from the bathroom was terrifyingly narrow once inside. The instant Marilyn was fully inside, she was attacked with horrifying thoughts of getting wedged in some tight corner or the ceiling collapsing beneath her or any of a number of terrifying scenarios that ended with her freezing to death or being stuck to die of degradation and starvation.

Her fears were silenced when the fear of being found was triggered. Noise came from the bathroom and Marilyn shrieked, then covered her mouth. She shimmied along the painful steel to get out of sight as someone entered the bathroom. Terrified she'd be discovered but aware that she didn't have the room to turn around, Marilyn stayed still. Every thought went through her mind, from the dangerous fears of security being called and her being sold into white slavery, to trivial fears of someone looking up through the hole in the roof and seeing up her dress.

The sound of a commode flushing and the door closing again brought some peace back to Marilyn. Feeling trapped but also emboldened that she hadn't yet been discovered, she began to sidle forward. She tried to crawl like she remembered soldiers doing in old war movies and made some way down the line, shimmying along the square metal tube.

Light caught her eye as she crossed another vent. Her long brown hair was pulled down the vent and she grabbed handfuls of her hair to keep control of it as she looked through the metal slats. She was looking down at a cubicle. A metal cot like out of an emergency shelter was the only furniture. On the cot was a man grunting. Marilyn was transfixed for a moment, not understanding at first what she was seeing. Then the man shifted and a pair of eyes peered out from the shadow beneath the man. A young woman, Marilyn's age or thereabouts, was lying motionless on the bed, staring vacantly up at the ceiling. Her eyes, like her mind, were a million miles away as she tried to distance herself from the immediacy of what was happening.

The scope of what Marilyn was witnessing struck her like a truck. She tilted her head and was able to see just past the cubicle directly beneath her. A veritable office of tightly-packed cubicles was just beneath Marilyn, just on the other side of the thin metal sheet.

A pang of self-anger hit Marilyn as she cursed her stupidity. In her mind, she recalled precisely where she'd left her phone – and its camera feature – in Victor's car. She clamped her eyes shut as she resisted the urge to yell at herself. She glanced down through the vent on last time and saw into the eyes of the woman beneath her, a man between them. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I'm going to get you out of here," Marilyn pledged to the woman.

In a strange way, it took Marilyn more effort to crawl past the woman below her than it did to tear the vent off and drop down and confront the man. "They'll capture you," she told herself, whispering as means to keep going and to keep warm. "You'll be just another sex slave down there, chained to a bed, having god knows how many guys doing god knows what to you." She was growing numb and having trouble staying awake. The fear of getting stuck had frozen into silence inside her soul.

Her lips chapping badly, Marilyn crawled on until she reached a corner. She had to use her hands to feel the way through realizing she was at a T-intersection. She was struggling to think straight and beginning to sweat. She felt hot and the metal she was crawling along felt like it was warming up.

She spotted some light just to her left and she began to crawl towards it. Getting through the turn in the near-absolute darkness was awkward, but Marilyn was too tired and hot to care about getting stuck. She contemplated sliding out of her dress, she was so warm. She made it to the vent and peeked down inside, seeing only a few tiny green lights. Not knowing or caring what that meant, she pulled up the ventilation tray and slid it past the opening. She crawled headfirst down out of the air conditioning shaft and nearly fell. Once her stomach was sliding out, gravity took over and she started to fall, catching herself with her feet on the edges of the shaft. The metal cut into her stockings and her flesh and she yelped. She fell onto the floor, collapsing into a shivering heap.

The cold returned and she felt stabs of pain, like pin pricks. She touched her forehead and realized her sweat had crystallized. She felt like she'd been punched in the mouth and when she touched her lips, she realized they'd split and blood dotted her lips. Her muscles ached as she stood in the darkness, trying to figure out where she was. She saw a small wall of green and yellow lights, like tiny LEDs of electronics. She felt around in the dark for just a second before she finally found a light switch.

A click later and a single desk lamp came on. It hurt Marilyn's eyes for just a second but they adjusted soon enough. She found herself in a cramped and cluttered office. Cheap office furniture like from a bargain retail outlet lined the walls, with the only thing of any significance being a metal filing cabinet in the corner. On the desk next to the door sat an ancient computer with a bulky screen that weighed down the typing surface. Various drives and peripherals lined the desk, most newer and nicer than the computer itself.

Marilyn grabbed an external hard drive, and then a booklet of burned discs. She hugged them to her chest, a chill running down her back. She looked at the frigid air coming down out of the now-open air vent and shivered. She realized she'd be leaving evidence if she didn't close the vent back, but the thought of even going near the vent made her heart race in dread.

She glanced around the room, determined to take something she was certain would be of value. All she saw were flash drives, hard drives, and various computer parts. She had no grasp what might be of value, until her eyes fell on a large book.

The cheap black shelves looked more befitting a college dorm room than a businessman's office. The shelves were all bowing down from the weight of their contents, except the second shelf from the bottom. That shelf looked ready to break due to a massive book lodged diagonally into the shelf. It was a large tome, bigger than any printed book Marilyn had ever seen. It had a red cover made of leather and metal corners at the edges. Marilyn knelt down and pulled the book out of the shelf, surprised by its weight. "Why are you here?" she wondered aloud. She hoisted the book against her chest and, with the hard drive and disc case; she faced the door and the challenge of leaving.

Marilyn's hand made it to the handle of the door when she heard voices. She froze in panic and backed away from the door, shivering again but not because of the cold. Her huge, terrified eyes locked on the door as she waited for it to be thrown open and her invasion discovered.

Instead what she heard was a gunshot.

Her hand flew to her mouth to keep from screaming. She nearly dropped everything, but bent halfway instinctively, catching the stuff against her legs with her left hand. She was as silent and still as a corpse as she listened. She heard footsteps approach. They stopped just outside the office door. The handle jiggled and Marilyn's heart nearly stopped. The door didn't open.

“Christ, where are they?” she heard a man say. She heard him kneel down in front of the door. “Where’d you put them, you goddamn pervert?”

She heard rustling through fabric and it dawned on Marilyn that whoever was beyond the door was searching a body.

She closed her eyes and readied for action. Her heart raced as she approached the door, her desperation turning into stupidity. She secured the book, hard drive, and disc case in her left arm and took the office door handle with her right. The act of turning it caused the rummaging sound beyond the door to stop. It was now or never.

Marilyn shoved open the door with all the force she could muster. The door pushed over the still-warm body of a large man in a tan suit, which in turn knocked over a young man who had been crouching over him, searching his pockets. Marilyn didn’t stop to look at either of them. With the door knocked open enough to get out, Marilyn ran down the hallway, leaving both men behind.

She reached a corner and turned, running for all she was worth. Her heels began to slip off and she kicked them behind without hesitation. Sprinting on bare feet now, she ran right into a large open office area. Four men, all with guns, stood at the corners, while the cubicle farm around her was silent compared to the throbbing music of the dance club beyond the wall.

The cubicles space went farther than Marilyn had seen from her vantage in the air conditioning duct and she realized the space continued along the divider wall between the two clubs. She looked ahead at a door at the far end and ran for it, only to realize as she drew near that two men with pistols were moving to intercept her. She couldn’t decide if she should run or stop when she heard a pop from behind her. She slowed to look back and saw the man who had been outside the office. He was holding a rifle with both the stock and the barrel sawed off. When she looked back at the exit, she saw one of the men had been shot through the chest. The fury on the face of the shooter behind her warned her that he hadn’t been the intended target.

Marilyn ran for the door, hoping her feet would carry her faster than the shooter could fire again. The guard with the pistol took aim to fire but ducked out of the way at the last second. Marilyn screamed when another gunshot splintered the doorframe of Marilyn's exit. She threw open the door, relieved when it gave without a struggle and leapt outside.

Marilyn erupted out into the club proper, slamming into Victor without warning. He managed to keep from falling and stabilized the hysterical Marilyn. "Hey!" he exclaimed as he tried to support her and keep her from falling over.

"That's awesome!" Malcolm exclaimed as he looked at the hidden door. He glanced through it and saw a man with a gun approaching at a brisk pace. "Holy sh—!!"

Marilyn kicked the door shut and threw herself at Malcolm, pushing the disc case into his hands. "Go!" she ordered, shoving him towards the exit. She gave Victor the hard drive and pushed him too.

"What's going on, Mar?" Victor exclaimed.

"Run!" she all but screamed as she shoved him out the door. A glance back saw her armed pursuer exiting the hidden door. Marilyn and Victor rushed into the vestibule exit, running out into the night.



-Now-

“And he followed you,” Everett summarized as he rode next to Morgan. He shifted to look at Marilyn in the backseat.

She nodded. “Yeah. Once we got out of the club, me, Victor, and Malcolm all went different directions. He went after me.”

“So he was after the book,” Morgan said. He faced forward into the nighttime they were driving into. “And at this time, we had no idea...you had no idea,” he corrected, “who this shooter-guy was? Or who he was with?”

Everett shook his head. It was Marilyn who said “We didn’t know the shooter was part of the Brotherhood of the Sun.”

.....

–14 Days Ago–

“You will be perfect,” pronounced Jericho Kingston as he paced at the front of the giant, industrial room. The long blonde hair swung behind his back as he walked confidently amongst his warriors. Down on the ground in the steaming-hot room, the men and women were doing pushups with their hands on the scalding floor.

“Seventy-six,” he shouted. They lowered down, their noses touching the surface of the floor.

“You will be the best that is,” he yelled before saying, “Seventy-seven!” They lowered again.

“The best that ever was!” He paused. “Seventy-eight!”

“The best that ever will be!” At the far end of the line of iron warriors, he smiled with pride. “Seventy-nine.” He stopped. He watched the lines that filled the room. The floor was turned to water from their sweat. Their hands and bodies ached against the pain of the training. Yet they held themselves as rigid as iron.

“Do you feel that?” Jericho said, pleased at the strength he saw as he studied each and every one of them. “Do you feel the pain? That pain in your arms. That pain in your chest. That pain in your lungs. That pain in your body. Do you feel that pain?”

He smiled a cruel smile, his eyes lighting up with pride. “That is the pain you will inflict. That is the pain that your name shall bring. You are the Hand of the Brotherhood of the Sun and where you go, you shall be the harbinger of pain like no other. With you as the enforcers of the Hand, none shall dare stand in our way. We shall be perfection. We shall be the very definition of the unattainable goal, for we will have achieved it. With our strength, the Brotherhood shall rise up and form a new age for mankind. We shall be the ultimate force, a force for the good that the Brotherhood stands for.” He smiled again. “Eighty!”

As Jericho was about to count to eighty-one, the door at the head of the room opened. Through the portal of light into the sweltering room stepped a tall man in a suit that he immediately opened. Jericho left the enforcers at the top of their pushup position and joined the newcomer at the front of the room. “Sir, there’s been a problem,” said the man in the suit.

“Raphael, the Hand of the Brotherhood of the Sun does not like problems,” Jericho responded in an intense voice. “As the leader of the Hand,” he further specified, “I especially do not like problems.”

“Knights, sir,” Raphael clarified. “A knight interfered in tonight’s operation at the Australian Club.”

Jericho's confidence gave way to recognition. He looked back at the enforcers on the floor and announced, "Dismissed." He followed Raphael out, drawing his strawberry blonde hair into a ponytail as they walked. In the dark subterranean halls, it felt frigid compared to the superheated room they'd just left. "Is Steven Sizemore dead?" he asked the physically larger yet still less imposing Raphael.

"Yes," confirmed Jericho's aid. "Eli was able to accomplish that much."

"Well, whatever else," Jericho said with feigned optimism. "At least it won't be a total waste."

"That. Is. Awesome!" Alan yelled, his eyes huge as he stared across the all-night restaurant table at Marilyn. The rail-thin college student in a university sweater nearly jumped up and down. "You guys kicked ass all over the place!"

"Calm down, honey," Kim said, next to her boisterous boyfriend, her arms wrapped around his arm, trying to keep him quiet. Her short blonde hair hid most of her face, seeming to accentuate her brilliant blue eyes.

"Dude, she's right, Alan," Malcolm said, still visibly shaken, sitting on the opposite side of Alan. "Keep it down. If the cops find out..."

"Dude, you guys are heroes, man," Alan said, his voice still a hair too loud. "You went in there and got the stuff, even with the shooting and stuff. That's awesome!"

"So you said," Malcolm said with a sigh, trying to keep his paranoia under wraps. "But man, a man is dead. He was just...he was shot."

"Yeah," Alan said, his enthusiasm notwithstanding. "That part kind of sucks."

“What are you going to do?” Kim asked Marilyn as she brushed her hair back. It immediately fell back into precisely the same place. “Are you going to call the police?”

“And tell them what?” Marilyn asked with a nervous laugh. She pushed her empty midnight breakfast plate away. “I was at this club and saw this guy’s dead body and was pursued by the shooter?”

“Yeah,” Alan said. Malcolm looked at him; surprised to see he was serious.

“No,” Marilyn said, leaning back. As if for the first time that night, she started to come down off the rush of the night. “I want to know who those guys were.”

“Guys?” asked Kim. “I thought you said there was only one shooter.”

“Not just him,” Marilyn said. “We also need to find the guy who saved me.” She betrayed a hopeful smile and said, “I’m thinking we can get him to join the World Alliance.”

Jericho Kingston walked with a purpose. Down the long hall of the medical wing, he passed empty triage rooms, set up and ready to receive patients. He passed labs with dimmed lights and quieted machines for the late night. The only signs of life were the bright lights overhead and the sound of Jericho’s heavy footfalls. Up ahead, one room was brightly lit and it was there that Jericho headed. “What happened?” he said before he’d even stepped inside.

Sitting on the exam table like a scared teen was the gunman, Eli. He’d taken off his suit jacket and the black shirt beneath and was wearing a white tank top that showed off small but chiseled muscles in perfect proportion. He was holding an ice pack to the back of his head, his dark brown hair turning black from the condensation. He looked too afraid to speak. Taking the initiative, Raphael reminded Jericho, “We have the book, sir.”

“So you’ve said,” Jericho said. “That’s good.”

“No, sir, it wasn’t,” Raphael respectfully but firmly disputed. Eli looked imploringly at Raphael with fearful eyes, but the senior agent continued. “Sizemore is dead, and we have the book, but there was a complication. A woman, who led our agent here, our enforcer, into a street chase, necessitating the use of the device. This culminated in a death outside the operational parameters of the mission...” Raphael all but glared angrily at Eli. “And a confrontation with a knight.”

Jericho looked back and forth between the two men. “What woman?”

Eli sighed and licked his lips. “Some girl beat me to the book. She was inside the target’s office. She ran and I gave chase. I got the book back, but there was a guy and he and I—”

“Stop,” Jericho said very firmly. Some of his hair had come free of the ponytail and he brushed it from his face as he leaned forward, like the weight of trying to comprehend this news was physically taxing. “You were sent to kill Steven Sizemore and retrieve the book.”

“Yes sir,” Eli said, knowing how these berating sessions went. This wasn’t the first time Jericho had yelled at him, but each one felt like it could quite literally be the last time.

“He’s dead,” Jericho confirmed.

“Yes sir,” Raphael confirmed in Eli’s place. Jericho made his stance clear on Raphael speaking out of turn with just a glare. Raphael stepped back, giving Jericho plenty of room to address Eli.

“And someone beat you to the book,” Jericho said.

“Yes sir,” Eli said. His young voice was shaking. “A-a woman. S-she had the book and ran out of the club. I chased her. We had to use the device.” Jericho

clamped his eyes shut, trying desperately to control his rage. “I pursued her to an anomaly, a gas station that wasn’t affected by the device.”

“And what happened after that?” Jericho asked angrily.

“I encountered resistance.” Eli fell silent.

“The knight,” said Raphael.

Jericho glared again at Raphael but the expression softened quickly as he processed the report. He stood up from looming over Eli. “Doctor Hoffman and his team are in the next section,” Jericho said to Eli. “They tell me you might have a concussion.” Eli looked on the verge of tears, out of fear of Jericho and shame for failing Jericho. “Go and have them check you out.”

Eli looked up like he’d been given an Eleventh Hour reprieve. “Y-yes sir!” he said with joyous relief. He hopped off the exam table and disappeared out the door.

Once Eli was gone, Jericho turned to Raphael. The two were equal height, though not size. “A knight?” Jericho asked with great need for clarity.

“Eli’s a moron,” Raphael told Jericho for not the first time. “I think the test serum is wasted on him. But,” he conceded almost unwillingly, “he’s untouchable when it comes to combat. Until tonight.”

“He lost the fight,” Jericho concluded unnecessarily.

Raphael smirked at the understatement. “Oh yeah. This guy took him out in under half a minute, and took out two more of our regular agents in under two seconds. Ran off with the girl, leaving the book behind.”

Jericho nodded, turning to lean on the exam table. “And he wore black and red?”

Raphael nodded. "Black and red." He turned and joined Eli facing at nothing, leaning against the table.

Jericho sighed and lamented, confirming, "That's a knight."



[BACK TO SERIALS & STORIES](#)