

Red Moon Rising

Part 02 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 02 of 30

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“It has to start some place,
It has to start some time,
What better place than here?
What better time than now?”

– Rage Against The Machine, *Guerilla Radio*

—Now—

“So you stole a mysterious book from a white slaver and some gun-toting idiot chased you through downtown where you ended up being rescued by a knight,” Morgan summarized. He checked in the rear view mirror of his car. Marilyn sat in the backseat, smiling at the not-incorrect summation of events. Morgan sighed from the very pit of his soul and rubbed his eyes. He lied to himself that it was the obscenely early hour that was making him so exhausted.

“I prefer to think that Everett helped me, not saved me,” Marilyn said as she leaned forward between the seats to talk to the two men. The A/C was blowing hard against her truck-stop attire. “No offense, Ev,” she said off-handedly to him in the passenger’s seat. “But ‘saving me’ insists that I couldn’t have saved myself.”

“No offense taken. I enjoy it when you trivialize my efforts to keep you alive,” Everett said plainly, staring forward into the pre-dawn darkness.

“Well, you guys seem to think I’m some helpless damsel who just gets into trouble so that I can be rescued by some do-gooder who just happens along.”

Marilyn looked at Everett and asked, “Can you see how that is a little condescending?”

“Can you see how ‘he just saved me before I was going to get around to it’ is equally condescending?” Morgan supposed.

“I broke into the central hub of an international white slavery operation and left with evidence that would expose them,” Marilyn told Morgan. “I’m sorry, but however ultra-badass the gunman might have been, I WAS going to find a way to get away from him.” Silence followed and Marilyn’s indignation softened. “Though I still appreciate the help.” She squeezed Everett’s shoulder. As she sat back, Morgan looked over at Everett, to his shoulder, and smiled subtly. Everett blushed and looked away.

“Okay, so the gunman and his team of nefarious goons got the book,” Morgan said, getting back on track. “We didn’t know who ‘they’ were at this time, nor did we know what they’d done with the book, correct?”

“Correct,” Everett said, looking out the window at the passing nighttime vegetation. “But from what we’ve pieced together since, we’ve got a pretty good idea of what followed.”



—13 Days Ago—

“Put your brother on,” said Maxine Drywell as she hobbled on one foot, trying to get her heel on. Her cell phone was clinged between her ear and one shoulder, her imitation high-end briefcase dangling from the other. “Hey, Aaron,” she cooed as she stood up in only one heel. “How’s mommy’s little man?”

Her heart broke as her eyes welled up with tears. “Soon, baby,” she assured him. “Daddy and me just need to get a few things worked out with the courts and then I’ll be able to spend every weekend with my boys.” As her youngest son spoke to her over the phone, she held it against her chest. She looked up at the sky, fighting with every ounce of strength to not break down into tears. “I know, baby,” she said, with a little more strength. She slipped on the other heel and headed for the door of her tiny top-floor apartment. “But I’ll be coming to see you boys next weekend. And in August, you two will both be staying with me for two whole weeks!” She tried to make it sound like the fun it would be for them and not the reminder of their absence it would be for her.

“Put your father on, baby,” she said as she opened the door, heading out in the early morning. “Hey Jerome,” she said. “Are the boys eating good? They’ll put up a fight over the vegetables but make sure they—” She was cut off. “Yes, I know they’re your kids too. I’m not trying to talk down to—” She was cut off again. She let him go as she started down the steps. Alternating periods of intense heat from the windows and the morning chill in the shadows made her shiver. “Will you please just—”

There was a high-pitched crack of glass breaking and a whistle of something moving through the air. On the stairs, Maxine’s body fell to the knees, then collapsed on the landing. Blood began to pool out onto the tile floor as the body lay lifeless, the cellphone dropped next to her. Her ex-husband was calling her name, the electronic voice echoing down the stairwell.

Space being the commodity it was in his apartment, Everett had to push the living room furniture to the side to use his barbell. He didn't own a stand or a bench, just the barbell and a whole lot of plates. Today, he'd set up the barbell in front of the TV and watching the news between sets.

Chief Carl Dotson was on the steps of city hall, saying "And for such a young life to be cut short, by such senseless violence, is a tragedy." As the older police chief continued lionizing the deceased, Everett bent down and deadlifted the mid-three digits of weight on the barbell. Finishing the reps, he set the weight down gently on the carpet, barely even panting hard. "The investigation into this tragedy is, of course, ongoing," the chief was saying. "For such a bizarre shooting, we will be mobilizing all our resources."

"Bizarre shooting?" Everett wondered. He looked past the TV, out the only window in the one-bedroom that was halfway built into the slope of a hill. The day was only beginning, the first light of dawn only beginning to cross the cloud-dotted sky. Everett walked to the bedroom door and knocked, then opened the door. Two single beds were on opposite sides of the room, a young man of Indian descent in the nearer of the two. He awoke with a start and instinctively grabbed for the massive sword by the head of his bed.

"Armand," Everett said. "I think something's up. The shooting from last night is on the news."

Armand yawned, calming down from the abrupt waking. "Okay?" He stretched a bit. "And?"

"I want to go check it out," Everett said. He left the door partially cracked, saying, "Time to get up."

“The operation initially went off without a hitch,” Jericho reported as he stood in the center of the black void. He could feel the vastness around him, despite the reality that it was an illusion. “Steven Sizemore was killed and our assassin made his escape, albeit with some trouble.” He paused and took a breath. Doing so knocked a lock of his blonde hair loose and it fell in front of his right eye. “The trouble was due to the appearance of a knight.”

“The knights,” said the third voice. “How many?”

“Just one,” Jericho said, his hands in his black jeans pockets. “But one was enough. He jeopardized the operation, however we were able to salvage the book.”

“Excellent,” said the first voice. “Have you confirmed which book it is?”

Jericho shook his head. “I have no. We’ve been unable to complete any tests on it, or even open it successfully.”

“What was a knight doing, involved in this operation?” asked the third voice, returning to the previous and puzzling complication. Jericho turned towards the voice in the absolute darkness. “How did a knight become involved?”

Jericho hesitated for only a second. “He was at the club,” he lied expertly. “We suspect it may have simply been a coincidence. Nothing more.” He shifted and looked about, more a predatory habit than to see anything. “Be that as it may,” Jericho said coldly, “something must be done.”

“Worry not,” said the third voice. “Soon shall we attend to this matter. As for now, patience is to be observed. The Brotherhood has survived for centuries because of its patience. Against the Illuminati we have survived, against the knights we have survived. Waiting a bit longer will cost us nothing.”

The darkness evaporated like a mist in a hot morning sun. The room that remained was a simple, unfinished metal room with no windows or decorations of any kind. Unremarkably large, it echoed as Jericho took a deep breath. He turned

and exited through the only door. He stepped out into a small vestibule that looked like a simple sitting room outside a high-end doctor's office. He wiped his face and exhaled.

Raphael was waiting. "What did the Triumvirate say?" he asked, standing and buttoning his suit jacket. "What are our orders?"

"Nothing new," Jericho said. "Not yet anyway."

"So what's the next move?" Ruwani asked, glancing up from her paper to Malcolm. "You got the club guy, right?"

"Has everyone heard about that?" Malcolm mumbled under his breath, both working quickly to copy down the figures on the board in the college classroom. On the fourth row of the thirty-five-row room, they shared a clear view of the board. Their teacher also had a clear view of them.

"Well, you're a hero," Ruwani grinned playfully, her black hair falling over to the other side of her head. The dawn was still visible through the window just beyond her. "You went into the lion's den and all that. Everyone in the Alliance is really psyched now. Everybody feels like we've got some real energy, like it wasn't all just talk and stuff."

"I guess that's good," he said quietly, less than convinced. "It's just..."

"It's just what?" the dark-skinned girl asked. "We've, I don't know, struck a blow for good and all that. Let's go for it."

"I don't think it works like that, Ru," Malcolm said, putting his pencil down. He wasn't finished, but he was done. His face was awash with concern and paranoia. "If what I'm afraid of is true, then I think we might have a bigger problem."

“Which is?” she asked with a bright smile.

Malcolm wasn't cheered by it. “That we fell onto something bigger than just human trafficking.”

In the dawn light, the corporate office looked new and pristine. Gray tile floors ran throughout the whole facility. White walls with wooden hand railings were uniform floor by floor. Lots of bay windows letting in the early morning light. Whole walls seemed nigh-transparent, looking out over the vast sea of trees and grassy fields that stretched to the northern expanse of the corporate campus. The trees swayed in the wind that combed the grass and seemed so close, one could just reach out through the window and touch it.

Neither Jericho nor Raphael seemed impressed, or to even notice. They walked down the empty halls, their heavy footsteps on the tile floors echoing down the long hallway full of doors. They came to a large foyer that looked out over the campus from eight stories up. Two glass elevators waited with the doors open, but they bypassed them and turned right. Fewer doors now. They walked to the door at the far corner. Jericho didn't even knock; he just let himself in.

Behind a large and stylish desk in an otherwise empty office was a young man with a curious look. “Sure, come on in,” he told the two just before Jericho deposited the large red-covered book onto the semi-reflective surface of the desk.

“Phillip, I need you to figure out how to open this book,” ordered Jericho.

The young man at the desk sat back in the very nice chair. He finger-brushed his black hair off to his right side and looked negatively puzzled. “Spent too much time on your Kindle?” he asked Jericho flippantly. Raphael looked unamused. Jericho even less so.

“Try it,” Jericho said very slowly and clearly, as a challenge.

Phillip considered the book’s heavy structure and metal clasps before saying “It’s clearly locked, but picking it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“No it shouldn’t,” said Jericho, like he was talking to a moderately smart dog.

“I’m guessing you refuse to use a saw or a torch,” Phillip further considered. Jericho said nothing, he only waited. Phillip slid the book across the desk towards him, surprised by the weight. He studied the clasps, joints, and lock with increasing scrutiny. “What kind of key fits in here?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” Jericho said. He and Phillip met eye-to-eye, knowing stares colliding head-on. Phillip was the one to look away, both men smirking. “I need your top men on it.”

“My top men are busy. They have their own projects,” said Phillip.

Jericho put his hands firmly on the surface of the desk and leaned forward. “The Hand of the Brotherhood of the Sun needs this done.”

Phillip put his hands down on his desk, imitating Jericho’s same posture. Given his smaller size and stature, it looked comical in comparison. “The Miracle Worker’s Clan is not the Hand’s personal servant.” He stood up, glancing at Raphael before looking back at Jericho. “I will look into this,” he offered Jericho as a compromise, “but I will not divert any of my men to work on a project like this.”

Jericho stood back from the desk and squared his broad shoulders. “Fair enough,” he said, like he was doing Phillip a favor by allowing it.

“Just out of curiosity, does this have anything to do with last night’s shooting?” Phillip asked as he studied the book’s lock more closely. He used his cell phone as a magnifying glass.

Jericho, who had already turned for the door, stopped and pivoted back around. "It does," he said in a firmly indifferent tone.

"And this morning's?"

Jericho grew worried as Raphael asked "This morning's what?"

"Shooting," Phillip said. When the two Hand leaders looked at one another, Phillip seemed astonished. He took a remote from one of the desk drawers and turned on a screen set into the far wall. Jericho and Raphael both turned as a news site came up. All over the main page of the site was news of a shooting not more than a few hours ago. "You guys don't know anything about this?" Phillip asked.

Raphael shook his head. Jericho said "No." He added with concern, "No we did not."

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—Now—

"The shootings started the day after?" asked Morgan. He seemed surprised and took a moment trying to reconcile the timeline in his mind. "I didn't realize all of this had happened so soon." He thought for a second. "Man, has it really only been two weeks?"

"That's the nature of conflicts; they occur without warning," said Everett.

“No they don’t,” Morgan disputed in a chastising tone. “That fatalism crap is just something the incompetent use to justify their inability to be aware of their surroundings. Conflict never comes from out of nowhere. There are always signs, early indicators. Failure to pick up on them doesn’t mean they weren’t there.”

“What if you get mugged?” Marilyn asked indignantly.

“What were you doing walking down that street?” Morgan asked rhetorically. “Why’d you walk so close to that alley where the mugger came out at you? How did you not hear his steps, his heavy breathing? What had you done to signal to a mugger that you were a viable target with something to steal?”

“So you’re blaming the victim?” asked Everett.

Morgan looked across the car. “I’m not allowing the victim to pretend like they had no part in the events. Tragedies require some cooperation from the victims.”

“What about a wife who gets beaten by her husband?!” Marilyn exclaimed indignantly.

“First of all, different circumstances from a mugging,” Morgan contended. “Secondly, the wife has to tolerate the abuse. She has options, including leaving.” Both Everett and Marilyn readied to unload on him. “I’m not saying they’re easy!” Morgan conceded quickly. “I’m not saying she can just leave at any time and it’s that simple. I’m not saying that there’s not a myriad of factors that don’t complicate the hell out of things. But it’s a systemic thing, which occurs regularly. By definition, sheer pattern recognition alone will tell you if it happened three times last week, it’s gonna happen again this week. You can’t tell me it’s unexpected. You can’t tell me domestic violence comes without warning.”

“I want you to share this opinion with the people who were shot from a quarter-mile away,” Everett told Morgan pointedly.

Morgan shared no retort. He instead said, with some somberness, “I remember when I heard about the shootings, the first one. I was on my way to campus. I couldn’t find a radio station that wasn’t talk. Almost the whole drive, I was just trying to find music. It wasn’t until I pulled in to the music school that I actually listened to what was being said.”

“You have a parking space on campus?” asked Everett.

“I use Edgar’s,” Morgan smirked.

“I barely slept that night,” Marilyn shared without prompt. “I don’t know if it was the adrenaline or what, but when I heard about the shooting, I thought for the longest time it was in reference to the club owner.” She looked down at her hands in her lap. “It wasn’t until later that morning that I realized there had been a second shooting.”

She threw her hair back with some deliberate effort and began to bundle it up. “I wonder if these shootings will be, like, a thing for our generation? Like my parents with 9/11 or my grandparents with Kennedy?”

“People remember tragedies,” said Morgan.

“They also remember the Moon Landing,” Everett suggested.

“Pearl Harbor, Kennedy, 9/11, versus the Moon Landing,” Morgan tallied up. “Humans remember the good, but they remember the bad more often.” He looked at Everett and asked “What were you doing when you heard about the shooting?”

Everett seemed a little uncomfortable by the question. “I didn’t know about it until Roland called me later that morning.”

“What? Were you preoccupied?” Morgan asked. Everett’s blush was all the answer he needed.

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—13 Days Ago—

“So, the owner got killed,” said Kim, brushing her blonde hair as she sat on Marilyn’s bed in the small brick dorm room. “I mean, I’m not big on killings and stuff, but it sounds like he, I don’t know, deserved it or something. He was running a white trafficking thingie.”

“White slavery, or human trafficking,” Marilyn corrected, half-dressed as she typed away at her computer. In the scalding heat of the small room, the stagnant air only magnified the discomfort. The fan clipped to Marilyn’s bed stirred the molasses-thick air without offering any meaningful reprieve. “And he was at the center of it. He knew stuff. Somebody killing him wasn’t a crime...I mean, yeah, it was, but I mean he knew stuff.”

“What happened to him when the bouncers got there?” Kim asked, laying back on Marilyn’s bed. She kicked her feet up, like she was trying to touch the ceiling.

“I didn’t see,” Marilyn clarified, turning around in her chair, waving her hand as the oscillating fan blew air in the other direction. “I was already running. Victor and Malcolm were with me, but once we got out of the club, we split up. I guess the bouncers didn’t follow us.” She shrugged. “I guess that wasn’t their job, I suppose.” She resumed typing on her laptop.

“Their job?” Kim said, rolling onto her side. She sat up, looking at Marilyn as she typed. “Mar, those guys were working for a human trafficker.”

“Yeah,” she nodded before glancing back at Kim. “So?”

“So,” Kim said, stretching her reasoning to support her theory, “They probably were also working at that slavery ring-thingy. They were probably involved. Maybe not just in the slavery. Maybe in everything Sizemore was into.”

Marilyn turned to her. “You think they had a hand in killing him?” She thought about it. “Why?”

“More money?” Kim shrugged.

“In a populated club on a busy night?” Marilyn reasoned. “It would have been too dangerous.” She casually glanced at the closed door and leaned forward. “Listen, you have to promise not to tell this to Victor or Malcolm, alright? I’m serious.” Kim’s eyes lit up. She nodded furiously, a smile crossing her face as she sidled forward to the foot of the bed. Marilyn took a breath. “I think Sizemore might have been into something else. Like something arcane. Why else would he have a big book like that?” Kim, all ears, just nodded, following but not sure what it meant. “I think there’s something there,” Marilyn said. “I think that book is the key to something big.”

Everett stood just behind the crime scene tape, his hands in the pocket of his black trench coat. The morning rush through downtown had died down, but the day hadn’t quite set in. The crowds on the street were absent, most noticeably because of the police investigation underway at the gas station. Several police cruisers were parked strategically in the parking lot, the yellow tape stretched between the cars. Uniformed officers seemed to be doing little except keeping a vigilant watch on the surroundings. Inside the gas station itself, Everett could see crime scene investigators working in their white lab outfits, but so could the half dozen other curious onlookers standing at the tape with Everett. Only one local news station was

still on the scene, the camerawoman and reporter chatting mostly against the perimeter of the crime scene.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Armand, coming over to Everett’s left. Half a foot shorter than Everett, Armand was a bit stockier with a lighter brown tone to his skin. His hair was grown out, almost shaggy. He’d shaved that morning and Everett had not, not that it was particularly noticeable.

“What plan?” Everett asked, turning around to Armand.

“The plan to...find the guy?” Armand said, struggling to come up with an idea. “You said some—”. Everett’s deadpan stare silenced Armand. “Right!” he deduced. “Don’t talk about it in front of the crime scene.” Everett face-palmed.

He grabbed Armand by the arm and physically urged him away from the crime scene of the gas station. “You ARE a knight, right?” Everett chastised him as they walked down the urban block. “You weren’t just goofing off back in Boston, right?”

“Hey!” Armand protested, jerking his arm out of Everett’s hand. “Yeah, I am a knight and I handled my business back home just fine.” He adjusted his own trench coat, popping the collar. “I just...never dealt with anything like this. The only gas station robbery I ever saw was one dude with a little pistol that turned out to be some Chinese air soft gun. I never seen something like this.”

“Neither have I,” Everett told him. He glanced back at the gas station now a block away, making sure their departure hadn’t raised any attention. “This wasn’t a robbery,” Everett reminded the young knight. “This gunman – and his team – were after this woman. She was...” He had to take a breath, but his cell phone interrupted him. He answered, saying, “Roland, what’s up?”

Everett suddenly looked confused. He put his hand over his ear and turned away from the street. “Say again? We’re at the scene.” More confusion followed. “What do you mean inside a building? This was at a gas station.” His face went pale.

“A second shooting?!” He and Armand looked at each other. Everett looked horrified, Armand ecstatic. “Ledger’s with you, right? Keep looking and we’ll meet up in a bit. Cool, bye.” Everett hung up and told Armand “There was a second shooting early this morning, at a residence not too far from here.”

“I thought this city was safe!” Armand protested, clearly enthused. “Are they related? Please say they’re related.”

“You are a seriously morbid dude,” Everett said, returning his cell phone to his pocket.

“I carry a sword for a reason,” Armand all but bragged.

Everett’s face went pale for the second time in as many minutes. “Oh my god, please don’t tell me you have your sword on you!” Armand looked indecisive. “You’ve lived here for five months! You don’t even have a driver’s license for this state and you’re going around under arms in public?!” Again, Armand looked indecisive. “Your sword’s over four feet long! How the hell are you even—” Everett turned suddenly and abruptly away, clamping his mouth shut.

Everett whirled back around, ready to berate Armand further when the younger knight asked, “Who’s that guy?”

Everett immediately forgot his rant and turned. He followed Armand’s gaze to the top of one of the nearby buildings directly across the street from the gas station. With shops and offices on the first floor and apartments taking up the rest of the space, the residential tops of the buildings were all flat, making the solitary figure stand out against the pristine blue sky no matter how subtle he tried to make himself.

“No idea,” said Everett. “You want perimeter, or you want to play interception?”

“I’m on it!” Armand said, starting into a trot, his hand already going into his trench coat.

“Oh my god, what is wrong with you?!” Everett exclaimed, catching Armand’s arm. “You’re in more of a mood than usual.”

“Evil’s afoot and we must smite it,” Armand said eagerly. Everett smacked him on the back of the head.

“Just for that, you’re perimeter,” Everett said. “Find a vantage to see the most likely exits of the building away from the street,” he reminded Armand of what he knew all too well. “I will confirm he’s not hostile, I will confront him, or I will drive him to you.”

“Got it,” Armand groaned.

“Do we have to have the lethality talk?” Everett asked through grinding teeth.

“No,” Armand groaned again, rolling his eyes.

“Do you understand not to draw your sword unless in mortal peril or your opponent draws his own weapon, and never in front of NORMAL PEOPLE?” Everett whispered loudly.

“Yes,” Armand confirmed like a bored teen. Everett seemed less-than-enthused by Armand’s responses but he took what he could get. He broke from Armand and started for the building in question, crossing the street in a casual trot. The building was a four-story structure of modest age with a dry cleaner and a pizzeria at the base. Between the two was stoop leading to the doorway to the apartments.

Everett approached the front door to find it locked. He looked straight up and saw the man on the roof looking down at him. The two made eye contact and the man on the roof disappeared. Everett backed slowly away from the door but didn’t rush.

A moment later, on the rear of the building, a metal security door opened slowly. The same blonde man with brown glasses from the rooftop peeked out and glanced around, then exited the door. He adjusted his suit jacket over a t-shirt and began walking casually down the alley. As he started walking, Armand revealed himself from behind the door by pushing it shut without standing up from the wall he was leaning against. The hipster whirled around, terrified. “What’s your interest in the shooting?” Armand asked the man.

The nerdy-looking guy spun around, startled. “I-I write for a blog,” the man stammered, backing away from Armand.

“Nobody who writes for a blog calls it a blog,” Armand disputed, standing from the wall. He began to slowly approach the man.

Everett came around the corner of the building, boxing the guy in between them. The scared man looked between the two knights and brought his hands up defensively. “Don’t do that,” Everett said in a bored tone. The bespectacled man threw a punch at Everett that the knight batted out of the air like he was fanning a fly away from his face. Everett happened to glance at Armand and saw him drawing out his brand, a massive sword with a thick handle and heavy blade. “Put that away!” he yelled.

“He’s escalated the conflict!” Armand argued.

“Who are you maniacs?!” the guy yelled.

“Shut up!” both Everett and Armand yelled back at him. “Put the sword away,” Everett repeated to Armand.

“He—” Armand tried.

“We are not having this discussion again. Put. The sword. Away.” Everett immediately turned to the guy, just as he threw another punch, this one with more conviction. Everett instinctively parried it and swept the man off his feet with a hip

throw. The suspect hit the pavement of the alley hard, abruptly stunned and unable to do anything for a moment but cough.

Everett shook his head, irritated. He pulled out his phone and began to snap pictures of the guy, the clicking sound effect waking him up. The man was confused and asked, "What are you doing?"

"What's your name?" Everett asked conversationally, sifting through the pictures to make sure at least a few of them were good. "I'm Everett."

"Ian," the man said. "What are you doing?" he asked more emphatically.

"Ian, we're part of the neighborhood watch," Everett said.

"Do all of you guys carry swords?" Ian asked, adjusting his jacket.

"Yes," Everett said casually, unnerving Ian even more. Everett showed Ian a picture of himself on Everett's phone. "We have a time-stamped picture of you, Ian. If you show up again or harass anyone about this matter, or if you prove to be in any way connected to this shooting...we will seek action." He lowered the phone and said firmly but politely, "Please leave."

Ian looked like he wanted to argue a dozen different points, but between Everett's earnest stare and Armand's hand perpetually twitching to go for the sword only partially hidden inside his coat, Ian opted to say nothing. He just walked around Everett and disappeared out onto the street. Once Ian was out of sight, Everett said, "When need to go, in case he tells the police."

"He'll have to admit he's stalking a crime scene," Armand argued. "Why are we letting him go?"

"For starters," Everett began his lecture, walking briskly down the alley, the opposite direction Ian had gone. Rather than turn left at the end of the building, he kept walking down the alley that ran between the buildings facing parallel streets.

“We don’t know that he did anything wrong. There’s nothing illegal about being morbidly curious about a crime scene. We are, after all. And we DID do something wrong: harassment.”

“Oh come on, that dude is suspicious!” Armand argued.

“Yes, but that’s not illegal,” Everett pointed out. “And less so than a maniac concealed-carrying a medieval brand. Need I remind you that we – knights – are not an enforcement group? We have no legal power or authority. We are civilians in the eyes of the law.”

“We are not civilians,” Armand argued as they reached the far street. “We swore to the Oath of Chivalry.”

“Which means nothing to the cops,” Everett said. “Our sense of duty - our loyalty to right, fair, just, and moral – is not recognized by the police or even society at large. While we may consider ourselves to have an obligation to use might for right, we still must act as civilians.”

A very subversive “Yeah...” was all Armand would give Everett as they took the long way back to their car.

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—Now—

“Refresh my memory, why’d you take Armand on as an apprentice?” asked Morgan.

“He’s not an apprentice,” Everett groaned, clearly resuming a discussion he’d partaken in more times than he ever cared to.

“Is he your squire?” Marilyn giggled from the back of the car.

Everett turned back to glare at her. “Why does everybody make that joke?”

“Because it’s funny,” Morgan smirked, glancing approvingly back at Marilyn.

“Did I just see Morgan Brandywyne smile?” Marilyn laughed.

“It does happen,” Everett confirmed.

“Once in a blue moon,” Morgan chuckled at himself.

“Anyway, Armand’s not a bad guy, or a bad knight,” Everett defended. “He’s...he’s just exuberant.” Everett seemed fairly proud of the descriptor he’d chosen as he looked to Morgan for his inevitable retort. “He’s young and he wants to use what he knows, show what he can do.”

“He’s a young guy who wants to wave his sword around,” Morgan rephrased.

“Innuendo aside, yes,” Everett concurred. “Anyway, he knew he needed some guidance. That’s more than a lot of people. The knights in Boston are all asses apparently, and I know his dad. We met and one thing led to another.”

“Yes, but Armand’s nineteen and you’re twenty-one,” Morgan pointed out. “If he’s supposed to be learning from sage advice, he should be studying under Edgar.”

“I actually made that introduction but Edgar advocated that I be the one to take Armand on,” said Everett.

Morgan shook his head, grumbling “Of course he did.”

“So you haven’t known Armand that long?” asked Marilyn, sitting forward again. “Armand’s not one of your circle of friends or whatever?”

“Nope,” said Morgan. “He’s a transplant.”

“Yeah, Armand moved in with me about half a year ago,” Everett said. “He’s only been a knight-errant for...four years or whatever?” He looked at Morgan, who gave him back a ‘what’re you asking me for’ look.

“Knight-errant?” Marilyn repeated. “I’m guessing that’s not a knight that runs to the grocery store and picks up the dry cleaning.”

“Closer than you might think,” said Morgan. “Errant and errand come from the same root word, meaning ‘to handle stupid menial task’.” This garnered a harsh stare from Everett. “There are designations for knights. They’re pretty random. It’s kind of like ‘power player’ or ‘franchise player’ in sports. They have some significance but not much. A knight-errant means, basically, the knight comes and goes. He or she doesn’t have a designated ‘territory’ or whatever.”

“As opposed to a knight-defender, which kind of stakes a claim on a region or even a whole city,” Everett said.

“Which are you” Marilyn asked Everett.

“Defender,” he said a little sheepishly.

“And which were you?” she asked Morgan, emphasizing the past-tense.

“Errant,” he said. “I don’t like this city enough to call it home.”

Everett smirked and teased, “I’m going to tell your mom you said that.”

“See if I come pick your ass up in the middle of the night at the ass-end of town again,” Morgan grumbled.

Everett laughed and looked forward. “Anyway, Armand’s not a bad guy. And he can handle himself. He’s got a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and blue belt in Brazilian Jujitsu and a white-braid or whatever the hell it is in that western sword fighting style he used to do. And he’s a History and English major.”

“He’s double-majoring now?” Morgan remarked.

“Yeah, he wants to flunk two majors at one time apparently,” Everett confirmed with a shake of his head. He shifted in his seat so he could angle a bit better towards the back of the car. “Armand’s dad works for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. I write grants for them from time to time and that’s how we met. It came up one time that Armand was a knight – his dad had to bail him out for fighting with gang members or something – and I told him I was a knight. Armand and me talked a few times and, well, one thing led to another. Armand moved in with me about half a year ago and I’ve been helping him out since then.”

Morgan cried shenanigans. “Dude, you’ve gotten him involved in a guerrilla war against a giant, international cult that’s trying to destroy the world. I’m not sure ‘helping him out’ is the best description of what you’ve been doing for him lately.” Everett said nothing. A bitterness lingered in the air between Everett and Morgan, so the driver turned his attention back to Marilyn. “So, Everett here was off playing CSI with his squire.” Everett rolled his eyes and Marilyn smirked. “What were you up to the morning after?” In a very rare event, Marilyn said nothing. “I assume you were orchestrating a blood drive for the shooting victims or handing out blankets or something.”

“Nothing so noble, I’m embarrassed to say,” said Marilyn quietly, looking down at her hands.

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—13 Days Ago—

'No search results'

Marilyn had read those familiar words so much that night, she felt like they were burned into her eyes. Her computer screen itself seemed to burn her. She slid back from her computer, to only now realize that it was well into the morning. She yawned into a sigh and looked glumly at her computer. It sat sadly on a desk made out of cinder blocks and wooden planks. Except for the mattress and the desk chair, all the furniture in her tiny unfurnished dorm room was made of the same materials. Her bookshelves in the wall space between the door into the dorm halls and her half-bathroom were filled with charity, non-profit, and business ethics books. They looked nothing like the giant tome she'd had in her hands not even a dozen hours ago. Marilyn again mentally kicked herself for finding some way to lose a giant book the size of a tire.

She stretched her arms wide and popped her neck, then settled in to resume the search. Her fingertips just barely brushed the keyboard when there was a knock at the door, causing Marilyn to jerk her hands back from the keyboard as though it was a viper. When the second knock came, Marilyn looked down at herself, still in her thigh-highs and black dress, makeup having dried, her hair a mess, leaving her looking like some kind of morning-after gone horribly boring. "Who is it?" she asked, standing up and banging her knees on the thick wood that was her desktop. She winced and rubbed her bare knees, twisting in pain.

"It's Malcolm."

Marilyn checked the time on her phone and opened the door. Malcolm was on the other side, Alan with him. Taller than Malcolm, Alan looked every bit the struggling guitarist he was. Marilyn let them both in, then promptly hid the clothes strewn across her bed by flinging her comforter over the whole affair. “Hey guys.” She tried to play up the act as casual. “What’s going on?”

“Campus security is telling people not to walk alone, so we wanted to come get you,” said Malcolm, looking around her room. He tilted his head to read off a yellow legal pad next to Marilyn’s keyboard. “Tobin’s Spirit Guide. Necronomicon.” Marilyn grabbed the pad and shoved it away. “Planning to run a D&D game?” he asked sarcastically, making Alan smirk.

“No,” Marilyn answered smartly. “I...was looking for news on the shooting last night and got distracted.”

“With HP Lovecraft?” remarked Alan.

Malcolm looked the more worried of the two. “Are you okay?” he asked Marilyn sincerely. “What you told us, about the guy with the gun and, and the gas station...”

“I’m fine,” Marilyn insisted with all the confidence she could muster. “I mean, yeah, it was unnerving, but...I mean, we knew that was possibly going to happen.”

“Getting shot at was never part of the plan,” Malcolm insisted. “It wasn’t even tangentially connected to the plan.”

Marilyn sighed synthetically. “We’re after white slavers, Malcolm. There are risks.”

“Risks we pawn off to the police, I thought,” said Alan, joining the discussion more seriously. “We’re a charity.”

Marilyn didn't argue but instead set about trying to find some more presentable clothes. Her lack of correction to Alan wasn't lost on either him or Malcolm. "Why do they want people not to walk alone?" asked Marilyn as she pulled together an outfit.

"The whole city's under a kind of lockdown," Alan said. "The police have cops everywhere. The police chief made a statement and everything. It's pretty wild. Whole town is spooked."

"I guess we hit a nerve then," Marilyn said with some pride.

Rather than argue with her, Malcolm said "Victor's up. He's going through the discs and the hard drive."

"Is he in his room or at his lab? Let me get dressed and we can head over," said Marilyn. She disappeared into her closet-sized bathroom and pulled the curtain shut. "Have you guys seen anything about the shooting?" she asked as they heard her changing clothes.

"Which one?" asked Alan.

Marilyn peeked through the curtain. "What?"

"That's what the cops are going on about; there was a woman killed by a sniper this morning," Malcolm told her. "There was the shooting at the gas station that you told us about, but then there was a second shooting."

Marilyn pulled the curtain back, wearing hastily-selected clothes. She looked stunned as she exclaimed "What?!" She stared at Malcolm and Alan. "When did it happen?"

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—Now—

“Wait, wait, wait,” Morgan interrupted. “Let me get this straight: you got chased through downtown, got shot at by a maniac, nearly killed, rescued by this dufus,” he said with a gesture at Everett who looked over at him curiously, “And you didn’t go to the cops or anything; you stayed up all night trying to find out what that weird book was?”

Marilyn sighed, growing irritated. “Yes. And please tell me how much of an amateur, nerdy, stupid girl I am for it.”

“The word I was going to use was ‘badass’,” said Morgan crossly, surprising Marilyn. She was left apologetically speechless. Morgan looked over at Everett. “This is when you guys had your first pow-wow, right?”

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—13 Days Ago—

“Okay,” Everett said as he rubbed his face, trying not to give into frustration. “Chivalry is based around what?”

Armand, who was sitting on the couch in their apartment, looked like a bored high school student getting quizzed during a tutoring session. “Right, Fairness, Justice, and Morality.”

“And what are those?” asked Everett from his seat facing the door.

“Incredibly vague,” said Armand. Everett gestured for him to keep talking. “The way I learned it back in Boston was ‘right is everybody gets something to eat; fair is everybody gets the same amount to eat, just is everybody makes sure nobody takes away your food, and moral is your food is properly cooked’.”

Everett thought about that for a moment, weighing its accuracy. “Those are the principles that govern chivalry,” he said slowly, still reasoning through Armand’s example. “Right is what you have, fair is your relationship to others, moral is your relationship to yourself, and just is when there’s a conflict. But they are, as you said, vague. They’re concepts. You have to accept that chivalry has to bend to the realities of the world.”

Something in Everett’s word choice and tone rubbed Armand the wrong way. His jaw clinched and he said nothing, though it was clearly an act of will to remain quiet. Before Everett could inquire, however, a knock came from the front door. Everett grumbled about the universalness of interruptions and got up. He checked through the peephole and then sighed, opening the door. Waiting on the other side, Roland looked like a frat boy and Ledger looked like a gangbanger.

Everett wondered how he was friends with them as he let them into his apartment. Both were wearing black and red, but Roland was in a t-shirt and black jeans with a sports jacket, while Ledger was wearing a big oversized jacket and baggy cargo pants. He had the face of a razor while Roland had the face of a prankster. “Hey guys,” Everett said as they entered.

“WE have got a killer!” said Roland with far too much enthusiasm. “Seriously, man, this dude is a serious sniper and he’s pulling off some impossible goddamn shots.”

“It’s true,” Ledger concurred as they stood in Everett’s living room. “And we both think he’s gonna hit again.”

“A serial sniper?” asked Armand from the couch Roland and Ledger both had their backs to. “Like the DC Sniper from a whole back?”

“Better,” Roland said eagerly. Everett just sighed at the amount of bloodlust in the room with him. “We gotta start going on organized patrols again,” Roland pushed.

Everett sighed and wondered what he’d done in a past life to deserve friends like this. “No...just...just no.”

Roland ignored Everett and sat down on the couch, smacking Armand on the leg to make room. “Okay, so check this out.” He pulled up a picture on his phone, showing it to Everett as he sat down in the adjacent chair. “So this is Kimberly Abster.” Roland leaned around to look at the photo with Everett. “Kinda looks like your sister.” Everett said nothing. “She’s a low-level VP for Solaritec.”

“They pretty much run all the power in the county,” said Ledger, sitting down in the opposite chair. “They’re entirely sustainable energy: wind and solar. They provide power to the city and adjacent towns.”

“So the sniper’s a...like an anti-Eco terrorist?” Armand asked. Ledger shrugged, clearly not ruling out the possibility.

“Ms. Abster here was on her way to work,” Roland told Everett. “Her apartment was on the top floor. She was walking down the stairs between the third and second floor and ZOOM!” He mimed a shot. “Right between the eyes, man. Right between the eyes!” He jumped up and down excitedly.

“But this is the best part, man. The police reports said it was the same type of gun that was used at the club shooting.” Roland looked among the others in the room. “Come on, guys, that’s got to sound suspicious as hell, guys.”

“Suspicious, I’ll grant you,” Everett agreed. “But I don’t think it’s automatically cause for alarm. Not yet, anyway.”

“Then what is?” Ledger asked, looking over at the Everett as he leaned against the high armrest of the couch. “Five people? Ten? Twenty?”

“Look.,” said Everett. “I’m not being insensitive here, but let’s face it: we simply don’t have much to go on. Somebody gets shot at a dance club with a twenty-two rifle. Then somebody gets shot going to work with a twenty-two. Tragedy? Yeah. Suspicious? Maybe. But what do you want to do? Start going on patrol?”

“Like we’re the damn Batman,” Roland said without missing a beat. “Come on, Ev!” he exclaimed. “When did you get so passive?”

“When he saved that girl’s life,” Armand said. Everett glared at him. “Dude, you...” He didn’t continue the sentence. He just held up his hands and got up to pace.

Everett looked back at Roland and Ledger, both of whom had huge, curious grins. He sighed, exhausted and facepalmed. “So, then, what’s the connection between the two victims?” he asked, hoping the smiles would fade when he opened his eyes. He peeked through his fingers and Roland and Ledger were only growing bigger.

“I want to hear about this girl,” Ledger said.

“Me too!” Roland said, practically hopping up and down. Everett sighed again. “Fine dude, forget the woman. Let’s focus on the shoot. I want to bring this dude down, man. I want to bring this dude down bad!”

“You think we can?” Everett asked, meaning as a challenge.

“Ev,” said Ledger, “This guy is stupid-good. The only way the cops are going to catch this guy is if he makes a mistake. And he won’t. Not before the body count gets a lot higher.” When Everett hesitated, Ledger asked, “Man, what is wrong?”

“I’ve got a lot on my mind,” Everett said. “I’m still trying to get my mind around the shooting at the club.”

“Passivity is not a trait to be admired,” Ledger all but warned.

“Yeah, you brood much more and you’ll be Morgan,” Roland teased.

“That would suck,” Armand griped, still pacing. “I don’t like him. A former knight’s...not a...” he continued to grumble.

“Hush,” Roland told Armand, snapping him down. “Morgan’s an ass of the highest order but he’s one of us.”

“He’s not a knight,” Armand insisted.

“No, but he is our friend,” Ledger said without looking back at Armand.

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—Now—

“It’s sweet that they look out for you,” Marilyn said with a smile towards Morgan.

“Somebody has to,” Everett said.

“So did you guys start, like, patrol routes and stuff?” she asked eagerly.

“No,” Everett said noncommittally.

“Yeah, why be methodical?” Morgan muttered.

Everett ignored him. “We...we just kind of go out and look for...”

“Trouble?” Marilyn asked hopefully.

Everett chuckled. “No, just...just go wherever we think we might be helpful.” He again shifted and looked back at her. “I’d like to think we – knights – have more to offer than just our swords.”

“No, but there is a reason you carry them,” Morgan said. “Otherwise, you’re just...wondering cool heads.”

“Is that a bad thing?” asked Everett. Morgan seemed disinclined to pursue the dispute.

“So how were you at that gas station?” asked Marilyn. “Was it on that route? The route you didn’t have?”

Everett shrugged. “I dunno. I just....followed my nose.”

“Followed your nose?” Marilyn laughed.

“What?” Everett smiled. “You never heard that expression?” Marilyn laughed, shaking her head. Everett chuckled and faced forward, quietly beaming. Morgan noticed and shook his head, amused. “What were you doing?” he asked Marilyn. Her smile dwindled a little.

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—13 Days Ago—

The audio-visual department always felt unreasonably cold to Marilyn. Dressed in jeans and a long-sleeve t-shirt, she shivered from time to time. The broadcasting school on campus seemed opposed to windows and color. The floors, walls, and ceilings were all startlingly white with few if any decorations. What broke the monotony were the metal shelves arranged for use rather than aesthetics or convenience, which were filled with five- to thirty-year-old technology. Near one such shelf, Victor was facing a desk full of displays and dials whose purpose Marilyn couldn't even begin to guess.

As Marilyn, Malcolm, and Alan approached, Victor stood. He hugged Marilyn around the waist and kissed her with more enthusiasm than she expected. "I'm glad you're okay," he told her passionately. He went back to the desk, leaving her a little surprised. "Okay, so I haven't gotten to the hard drive yet," he said seemingly as much to the computer screen as the three looking over his shoulder. "I may have to call in some favors with some guys I know at the business school to hack it, but I have gotten into some of the discs."

On the screen before him, he summoned up a vast collection of green letters on a black background. "What are we looking at?" asked Alan, standing with Malcolm behind Marilyn.

"Spreadsheets," Victor told them. He wagged a pen at the screen. "This is the raw data and code for spreadsheets. It's not easily comprehensible to most people but if you know how to read code, it's legible."

“What does it say?” asked Marilyn.

Victor sighed. His darker skin looked washed out in the light of the audio-visual department. “Very little that looks out of the ordinary.” He scrolled through numbers that were just so much alphanumeric gibberish to the other three. “Food orders, alcohol, permits, expenses.” He sat back in the rotating chair. “Nothing out of the ordinary, and no large numbers that look suspicious either. In fact, this looks like they’re very generous,” he said, mostly to Marilyn. “They donate money to a lot of charities.”

“I saw them, Victor,” Marilyn told him. “I saw the women, I saw the cubicles where they had to...” She couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. The eyes of a woman, that girl, looking up at her, burned across her mind.

Alan leaned forward and studied the code. “What’s that say?” he asked, indifferent to interrupting Marilyn and Victor’s bickering.

Victor looked at the screen and read with some trouble, “Instruments of Change.”

Alan nodded, standing up. “You know that?” asked Malcolm.

“Yeah,” he said. “They give musical instruments to local schools.”

Victor began to scroll through the data for a few minutes. “Looks like most of the charities are arts. Cooking, modeling, music.” He shrugged, not seeing the significance.

Marilyn leaned forward and scrutinized the code. “Can you show the names?” she asked. Victor worked digital magic and opened another window, showing black letters on a white background. Marilyn commandeered the screen, with Victor rolling his eyes as she took over control of the list.

“What is it?” asked Malcolm.

“They’re arts,” Marilyn whispered. “And not endowments....they’re staffing.” She stood up, thinking. “They’re mostly charities,” she said slowly, her thoughts gaining cohesion, “that involve getting people into specific places.” Malcolm, Alan, and Victor all shared confused looks. “They’re ‘come here and work’.”

“So?” Alan pondered.

“They all involve artists, who are likely struggling to do their art,” Malcolm said, getting on board with the idea.

“Desperate people,” Marilyn said. “People who might be willing to overlook dangers and warning bells at the chance to follow their dream.”

“You’re really stretching, Mar,” said Victor, the only one of the four seated.

“Maybe,” she acknowledged distantly, her thoughts elsewhere. “Can you get a list of all the charities?” she asked Victor.

He shrugged. “Sure, but why?”

“Because they may be additional fronts for human trafficking,” Malcolm said. “These charities might be how they’re getting the women they’re enslaving.”

Marilyn agreed, saying “This could be even bigger than we thought.”

The elevator doors parted for Jericho and Raphael. “I want to know what the police have on the shooter,” Jericho was saying. “Whatever connections we have in the department, in the city, contact them. Coordinate with Phillip if needs be.” He led the way out of the elevator, down the wide hallway. “Do we know what department the victim worked in?”

Raphael shrugged as they walked. “Advertising? I couldn’t tell you. I know she was management, but…” He shrugged. “Half this company seems to do nothing but manage the other half. It’s like only one out of ten people actually do anything useful; the other nine either tell that one what to do, or tell others about him doing it.”

“Who’s got it out for us?” Jericho asked rhetorically as they arrived at an open door.

“Who doesn’t?” Raphael remarked as they stepped inside.

In the small medical room, Eli sat on the bed. Shirtless and with an IV stuck in his arm, he sported a few small bruises from the previous night. “How are you feeling?” Jericho asked as he picked up the young man’s chart. He looked through a few pages. “Signs of the concussion seem to be receding.”

“Yes sir,” Eli said eagerly. “I think I’m ready to—”

Jericho silenced him with a gesture. “Get better. Be ready when we need you.” He looked more closely into the chart. “You remain our most promising candidate.”

Eli smiled proudly. “Thank you, sir.”

At the door, Raphael looked away. The squeak of a wheel behind him got his attention. A medical tech was pushing a cart down the hall, with dozens of hanging bags identical to the one feeding Eli’s IV. Raphael wandered after the tech, following him to the next open door. As the tech passed through, Raphael looked inside and saw two dozen men in absolute peak physical condition. Doing one-arm push-ups with their heels together, their bodies rigid, they moved with hypnotically slow motions.

Jericho arrived next to Raphael and looked at the men exercising. He looked at Raphael and smiled. “Anxious?”

“I’m not anxious,” Raphael said, confessing to envy. He looked over at the chemical bags being prepped for injections. “I’m ready.”



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