

Red Moon Rising

Part 03 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 03 of 30

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“Hey everybody, when you walk the walk,
You gotta back it all up but can you talk the talk?
Hey everybody, when I hear the knock,
Don’t wanna measure out my life to the tick of a clock,”

– Poe, *Walk The Walk*

—12 Days Ago—

The door opened slowly, almost fearfully. “Christine? Baby?” A stooped old man pushed the door open further, the light from the hall spilling over the hospice bed. Beneath thin light blue blankets, a skeleton of a woman lay perfectly still. Her breath was almost nonexistent. Her pulse monitored by half a dozen machines that dotted the shelf above her head and around her bed.

“It’s a beautiful day, Christine,” the old man said, hobbling over to the window. His jacket made noise with every move, the fabric rubbing loudly. He absently tugged at a string that had come loose from one of the elbow patches. “I saw a blue bird today,” he commented as he opened the blinds. “Those are supposed to be good luck. Remember?” He turned and looked at the perfectly still silver woman on the bed. “From that Shirley Temple movie?”

The lack of a response made his eyes water. His chin quaked. “You remember,” he insisted in a delightful tone, desperate for a response. “Her little brother and she are poor and they go to the land of toys, or makebelieve, or somewhere like that, all to find a bluebird.” He picked up the woman’s hand. There was no reaction from the machines monitoring her pause between life and death. “You loved it,” he said. He stroked her cheek.

As he touched her, trying to convince himself tears weren’t eminent, a sparkle of light caught his eye. He turned and looked out the window and asked, “What is th—”

There was a shrill crack of glass and he fell over his wife, the blue blanket slowly coated in a spreading pool of blood. A second crack and the machines over the bed registered the final beat of the woman’s heart.

Today was apple fritters.

Mayor John Herman sat his briefcase down in the seat next to the small antique table in the middle of his office. He picked up one of the pastries off the two-shelf silver serving tray, smiling to find the fritter still warm. He held the glove-sized treat with his middle finger and thumb and closed his eyes to enjoy the bite.

Before he could take that bite, his office door opened briskly and in came the chief of police. “Mr. Herman, Chief Dotson insisted on seeing you,” said the mayor’s assistant just before Chief Dotson all but shut the door in her face.

Herman went ahead and took a bite of the pastry and enjoyed it, although far less so than he would have with some solitude. “Care for one, Carl?” the mayor asked, taking a napkin with him as he walked around his desk in the Oval Office-inspired workspace. “Part of my morning routine,” he said, checking the litany of

post-it's and other messages on his desk. "I try to eat healthy but I find the sugar rush in the morning helps me springboard into the day."

"Thank you, no," said the police chief. He stood somewhat at attention, awaiting for the mayor's undivided attention. He was dressed in his uniform blues rather than a suit, though the outfit looked almost black in the pre-dawn darkness that came in through the curtains of the office.

Once Herman had finished with his messages, he sat and asked "What's on your mind, Carl?" He took a noisy bite of the apple fritter.

"You know about Steven Sizemore's death." The chief didn't say it as a question. He took his hat from behind his back and shuffled with the rim. "Between his, uh, passing, and the Australian Club's temporary closure, that leaves our city with a real...staffing problem." Herman stopped chewing for just a second. "I won't say the entire industry of this city hinged on him, but he was a lynchpin. And his club was a central hub. With him gone, things may unravel."

Herman finished his fritter with an oversized bite. He chewed as he looked across his wide desk at the chief of police. When he was finished, he wiped his hands slowly with the napkin. "Carl, the entire entertainment industry of this city is a machine. If a part breaks, you simply slow the machine down until a replacement can be installed." He finished cleaning his hands and wadded up the napkin into a ball. "Nothing about Steven Sizemore was unique, or even remarkable." He tossed the napkin into the trash basket like it was a basketball. "And certainly not irreplaceable."

The chief of police seemed less than optimistic. "I'm sure there are plenty of guys in his organization who are anxious to, uh, get a promotion," the mayor said more confidently than knowledgeably. "And if not, or if they don't pass our...vetting process, someone else can always be found. This town's entertainment industry – and this town's informal reputation – will not suffer unduly due to this setback."

“And if some of the independents try to step up?” asked the chief.

“Then the city’s police get some banner arrests,” the mayor smiled, confident he’d thought of everything. “And if on the off-chance it’s something you can’t handle,” he gestured to the phone on the corner of his desk, “Solaritec and their ‘private security force’ is just a phone call away.”

“Private security is on my mind,” said the chief. He quit fidgeting with his hat and came and sat down in the right of the two chairs before the mayor. “This shooting wasn’t a drive-by or some mugging-gone-wrong. I wouldn’t say it was a professional hit, but it looks closer to that than something accidental or street-level.”

The mayor didn’t bother hiding his confusion. “You think Solaritec’s security might be involved?” he asked cautiously. The chief shook his head in an absence of anything to suggest. “What could they possibly have to gain? The revenue from tourism this town enjoys in no small part from our entertainment sector pays for the infrastructure that they rely on. A big but centralized company like Solaritec does NOT want to find itself on the bad side of the city that gives it its tax breaks.”

“I don’t know,” the chief said, his hands up in conversational surrender. “I don’t care to speculate what those weirdos get up to. All I know is that plant and that campus are a fortress. And in many ways, they are e power in the realm. They’ve got more security than any single precinct in the city. I know for a fact that the ATF and the FBI...well, they both know the name Solaritec.”

For once, the mayor didn’t speak immediately. He tapped his fingers nervously on the rich lacquered surface of his desk. “That’s something we don’t need; federal attention. If Solaritec IS up to something, that’s bad for us. That company runs most of the city’s utilities. We’re one of the first cities in the world fully powered by renewable energy, and that’s directly due to Solaritec. And that’s not even addressing the fact that they practically fund the university!” He turned in his chair, growing more upset. “If there’s something to handle, then we need to handle it but we need evidence. We need to know for absolute certain if they did

something and why. If they just want to put their own guy in charge of all the sleazy sex in this town, that's fine. I don't care." He calmed a little and resumed, speaking in quieter tones. "But if those lunatics are up to something big, we need to know about it. And we, not the Feds, we need to handle it." The police chief nodded, the two in agreement.

Marilyn awoke gently, the soft rays of the sun kissing her long eyelashes like a doting lover. She awoke with a smile and sat up. She stretched with feline grace and smiled at the glorious day and looked around her spacious dorm room, as pristine as she.

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—Now—

"Marilyn," Morgan grumbled from the front seat. "As sure as I am that Ev is happy to hear about you in your unmentionables in bed, I don't think you wake up with perfect hair and the makeup of a movie star."

In the backseat of the Charger, Marilyn sat back in a huff. "Fine," she likewise grumbled. "You guys are no fun."

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—12 Days Ago —

It was the bedside alarm that finally got Marilyn to wake up. Her lamp didn't do it. Designed to wake her gradually, its soft light very gently grew to simulate the rising sun. Marilyn had gotten it as a Christmas present and it hadn't once woken her. Likewise, the alarm on her computer, which began playing soft classical music, usually didn't wake her up either. Nor did her phone's alarm. It was the loud, blaring beeping of the bedside alarm clock that finally forced her from sleep's embrace.

Marilyn was perpetually the product of late nights and early mornings. Still dark outside, she looked out the window, bleary-eyed and sighed. She slipped out of bed and pulled on some running shorts and her sneakers, yawning almost more frequently than she breathed. Armed with an MP3 player and her keys, she headed out for a jog.

Every morning, Marilyn circumnavigated the wide campus. She'd planned to try eventually start doing it twice, but she gave up on that when she realized she never had that much time in the morning. So instead, she'd begun working to make the circuit in less time.

Marilyn returned to her dorm just as the sun was starting to come up. A few early-morning types were exiting the building, coffee and portable breakfasts in hand. Most didn't seem to notice Marilyn, or the world around them either. Like every morning, Marilyn skipped the elevators and sprinted up the stairs instead. A quick shower later and she was answering emails while eating breakfast and

applying her makeup. Toast and coffee sat with mascara and blush while Marilyn tried to plan next week's blood drive, next month's fund raiser, and a charity dance for next semester. She sent two homework assignments she'd finished the night before and emailed one paper that she'd written last night as well and, despite it being twelve pages long, she couldn't recall any of it or even what it was about.

Just ten minutes later, Marilyn exited her dorm room, dressed in a beige and pink work uniform. Looking like a cross between a southern waitress and a French maid, she read over a chapter in one of the many textbooks she carried in her overstuffed backpack while listening to an audio recording of a lecture on her MP3. She looked up just often enough to not get hit by traffic as she made the trek to work.

She arrived at the tiny sandwich shop and unlocked it, just as the distant bells tolled 7am. She slipped inside and quickly logged into cash register before the digital counter could strike 7:01. Clocked in, even with none of the opening procedures done, Marilyn fished out her laptop and sat it down next to the register. "Come on, come on," she said as she brought it out of hibernation. She checked the front door to make sure no customers had shown up yet.

The computer fully awoke and Marilyn activated an academic log-in program, revealing a live feed of a stodgy old man behind a podium saying "Johnston?"

"Here, sir," Marilyn said cheerfully. She immediately turned off her mic and exhaled with relief, slumping back against the rear of the counter in the sandwich shop. She looked around the shop, the lights all off and none of the breakfast materials delivered yet. She stood and popped her back, taking her time turning on the lights to the tune of the professor continuing to call roll.

The white door of the tiny hospital room opened and an old man creaked as he came inside. With a comb of a mustache and a head devoid of hair except on he sides, he smiled as he pulled back the curtain. "Hello, angel," with a cheerful tone.

On the bed, an old woman lay motionless.

The man sat down a small brown bag on the rolling bedside table that extended over the woman's lap. "I brought your favorite, honey," he told her. He reached for her hand. The instant he touched it, though, she rolled away, moaning loudly in protest. "Honey, honey," he said soothingly, trying to calm her. She kept rolling away from him and moaning louder. He drew back from her and she calmed. He absently turned his golden wedding band around on his finger as he watched the figure resettle into the bed and stare at the ceiling. "Angel..." he whispered tearfully. He swallowed and had to look away.

He walked over to the window of the small room, barely large enough for her bed and the plethora of diagnostic devices that surrounded it. He opened the blinds, the room filling with morning light of the sun cresting over the rooftops of the city. His wife turned away from the light and moaned. "Honey," he said patiently, coming over to the bed. "Some sun will—"

Glass cracked and the air whistled. The old man fell over the bed, the back of his head covered in blood. The woman screamed and pushed at the body of the husband she didn't recognize. She frantically flailed like a newborn shoving at the dead body invading her space.

A second crack in the window, and a second whistling, and the woman's body went as still as her husband's. The two were joined in silence.

"Only the Hoover Dam has sturdier walls."

The blonde man on Phillip's wall screen looked far too handsome and too well dressed for the construction site he was reporting from. He looked like a model or a movie star pretending to be a construction overseer. But every time he opened his mouth, Phillip was reminded it was an engineer he was speaking to.

"Principle construction is more or less complete," the man went on. "Five floors, roughly six and a half million square feet, all laid down and complete." He smirked. "We've got most of the doors installed, too. Internal construction is underway, but we're working off generators until the reactor goes online."

"Is everything ready for the reactor, Ken?" Phillip asked from where he paced slowly in front of his office video screen.

Ken seemed surprised, bordering on panic for just a second. "I wasn't aware the reactor was complete. We're still at least three weeks away from being ready to move-in even a tertiary staff. Three weeks at an absolute minimum."

"Relax, Ken; the reactor's not ready," said Phillip. "But it will be soon. And the situation is escalating fast. Three weeks may be a luxury."

"Is the Triumvirate pushing for the deadline forward?" asked Ken. "Because they've got to give me more manpower. More manpower and more funding! I'm working with migrant workers here. These are not the construction crews I was promised. Less than one in twelve working on this fortress is a member of the Brotherhood."

"Calm down, Ken," said Phillip. "Once the reactor's construction is nearing completion, the Miracle Workers' Clan will be diverting all available funds to this project."

"Money's not enough, Phil," Ken cautioned. "I need qualified, capable workers. And time. If the Triumvirate really wants this place to resist the constantly-inevitable Illuminati—"

Jericho burst into Phillip's office, the door slamming hard against the side wall. "Sorry, Ken," Jericho said, grabbing the control off Phillip's desk and switching the feed as Raphael came in seconds later. He told Phillip, "There's been another shooting."

Phillip's jaw dropped and he exclaimed "What?!" He awkwardly grabbed the remote from Jericho and shifted through the feeds, bringing up the news. The three men turned and watched the screen. Whatever the anchors were talking about was lost on them as they followed the news ticker at the bottom of the screen.

"Two dead," Phillip read. He sank back against his desk, Jericho and Raphael turning towards him. Raphael crossed his arms while Jericho waited expectantly. "Is this the same shooter? Is there any chance we know who this is?" Phillip asked.

"Are you insinuating that the Hand is—" Raphael began to threaten, Jericho calming him.

"No, I just...we have an intelligence network," Phillip reasoned. "We must have some way of finding out who's doing this."

"What little I've seen suggests these were professional-grade shots," shared Jericho.

"Yeah, but these are nobodies. Besides, we're a long ways from the nearest military base or..." said Phillip. "We don't even have a very big veterans community in this city." The three fell silent as they watched the ticker feed, waiting for more details.

Raphael hesitated to say it, but he finally summoned up the strength to say, "We may need to get the Investigators' Clan involved."

Jericho turned and looked at the screen. He sighed and said cynically, "At this point, they probably already are."

As Marilyn handed off a brown tray with two sandwich platters, Kim said “I’m scared.” Standing just off the side of the serving counter of the strip mall sandwich shop, Kim stood with Alan and Malcolm, the three a closely-drawn trio talking mostly to themselves as Marilyn worked to take orders and pass out food from the window into the kitchen. “That cute old couple,” Kim lamented.

“Yeah, I heard,” Marilyn said before greeting the next customer.

“Who would kill an old man on his way to see his wife?” asked Alan, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

“Who’d kill a vegetable?” asked Malcolm. Alan seemed unnerved by the question. “His wife, the guy that was shot? She was shot too. But she had, like, dementia or something. She was comatose or, or something like that. Definitely bedridden.”

“And somebody shot her? That’s so sad!” Kim sobbed. Looking more like a middle schooler than a college student, she clung onto Alan like he was her personal teddy bear. Alan kissed her hair absently.

Malcolm noted a momentary lull in customers. Marilyn paused to visibly catch her breath and take a sip of water. “The university’s talking about shutting down all early-morning classes,” he told her. “They’re advising people to walk in groups, everything.”

“Yeah, because walking in groups matters when there’s a sniper shooting people from far away.” Marilyn wiped her face with her apron and looked out over the restaurant. Everyone was munching away contentedly. “Doesn’t seem to be bothering anybody.”

“I think people are trying to turn a blind eye,” said Malcolm. “I imagine only the sick and twisted pay close attention to emergencies like this.”

“Or those dedicated to stopping it,” Marilyn retorted with a smile before she took her position at the register to greet the newly-arriving customers.

Ledger came away from the crowd of morbid onlookers. He strolled over to Roland’s car where a small collection of breakfast burritos were splayed out on the hood. Roland, dressed in burgundy scrubs beneath his black overcoat, was consulting notes on his smartphone as he ate.

Ledger flashed two fingers at Roland as he neared, saying, “Two dead.” Roland nodded taking a bite. Ledger joined him, getting a burrito. “Old man and old woman. Dude was a Korean War vet. Wife had Alzheimer’s or something.” Roland didn’t say anything, he just exhaled at that roughness. “You get anything on the shot?”

Roland gobbled down the rest of his current burrito and called up a different page on his phone. “The shot came from a ways away. Nobody heard anything. Not a car backfire or something, which means it was either a high-powered rifle or it was silenced.”

“Silencers aren’t real,” Ledger told Roland, his mouth full.

Roland stopped mid-report. “What?”

“Not real,” Ledger argued.

Roland looked incredulous. “Yes they are!”

Ledger shook his head. “I mean, yeah, you got sound suppressors and stuff, but they don’t make a gunshot sound about as loud as tearing paper. They take it from like, 90 decibels to 80 decibels or something. Makes a difference on a battlefield or something, but you shoot somebody with a suppressor, everybody in the damn building gonna hear it.”

Roland looked like he’d just been told Santa Claus wasn’t real. “But...but what about that thing that Javier Bardem had in No Country For Old Men?”

Ledger threw up his hands in well-worn frustration. “Goddammit, how many times do I have to tell you, the Coen Brothers are not the end-all of everything?!”

“I make all my life choices according to The Hudsucker Proxy!” Roland yelled back at Ledger.

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—Now—

“And they wonder why everybody thinks they’re gay,” Morgan snickered.

“Wait, they’re not?” Marilyn asked during the lull in the tale. “Roland and Ledger AREN’T dating?” she asked, sitting forward between the seats.

“Yeah, everybody’s kind of surprised by it too, but no, they’re not dating,” said Everett. Morgan made a noncommittal sound. “They’re just really good friends. Inexplicably.”

“Okay, slightly unrelated but since you brought up Ledger, I’ve wanted to ask; how can a knight carry a gun?” Marilyn queried. “Ledger always has that weird shotgun-thing. It’s really unsettling.”

“First of all, the Oath of Chivalry stipulates very little about weaponry,” Everett told her. “A knight can use whatever tool he or she feels is appropriate for the task.”

“Yeah, but guns kill,” said Marilyn.

“So do swords,” Morgan said.

“Yeah, but you can disarm somebody with a sword,” she asserted.

“Swords are instruments of war,” Morgan told her with a reverent tone. “In some ways, they were the first real weapons; everything else like axes and knives were just repurposed tools. And a martial art, a culture, whatever, can try to emphasize the character-building elements of the study of swordplay, the self-defense, the physical component, the blah blah blah, all of that. At the end of the day, sword use is about the taking of a life.”

“That’s part of why we don’t draw our weapons unless the situation absolutely requires it,” Everett explained. “Most knights use swords for artistic significance, heritage, and the fact that swords aren’t as closely monitored and stigmatized in our society as guns are. But there’s nothing written anywhere in all of knightdom that says ‘no guns allowed’. In fact, in some ways, you might say the general refusal to use guns is a sign of knights’ anachronism.”

“So Ledger’s just a gun toting maniac?” asked Marilyn.

“Bingo,” smirked Morgan.

“No he’s not,” Everett defended. “Ledger Smith is a knight-errant who swore to the Oath of Chivalry at fifteen. He’s a black sash in two different styles of kung fu and—”

“Shaolin and Wing Chun,” Marilyn chimed in gleefully. “He goes to the same school as me.”

“He’s also a blue belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, a high school wrestler of some repute, and he’s got six amateur boxing wins with no losses. And he’s certified through three gun-and-survival courses.”

“Not the only way he’s certifiable,” Morgan mumbled.

Everett ignored Morgan and went on. “He was awarded a scholarship for track and field, I think, but turned it down. And he currently works doing something on the Internet. I don’t remember if it’s Internet poker, or online businesses, or eBay, or what. But the point is, out of all of us, he’s probably the one most committed to knighthood. Everything he does is either as a knight or meant to further his abilities as a knight.”

“Ledger’s not a maniac, he’s just really intense,” said Morgan. When Marilyn didn’t ask any follow-up questions, he turned to Everett and said, “So, they were at the site of the second shooting.”

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—12 Days Ago—

“Both the old man and his wife were shot through window,” said Roland.
“Seemed to come from an equal or slightly downward angle. Low-caliber bullet.”

“How’d you get the angle information?” asked Ledger, pouring hot sauce on his breakfast burrito.

“This is an extended-care facility,” explained Roland about the building where the victims had been shot. “The bodies were in the hospital’s morgue inside of an hour. Soon as my buddy Dale told me, I went down to check out the body and compare it to yesterday’s victim.”

Ledger looked up, confused. “Are you on a coroner rotation or something? You’re an osteopathic doctor! What the hell are you doing in the morgue?!”

“God, you sound just like the ethics committee,” Roland griped. “Point is, I’m one hundred percent, absolutely pretty sure this is the same shooter. All the hallmarks are there. When I can get into the morgue later tonight and can really get a good, close look at the bodies,” Roland speculated.

“Meaning when you break into the morgue like Dr. f*¥king Frankenstein,” Ledger translated, pouring more hot sauce onto his breakfast.

“I can confirm it, but right now, everything I saw this morning indicates that it’s the same guy,” Roland concluded. He turned and looked at the building behind them as though it was the site of the shooter. “Which means we’ve got a shooter with a powerful rifle, a good scope, and some hardcore specialized training.”

Ledger concurred with an ambitious bite of the burrito. “Military or paramilitary.” He chewed then looked up at the building as well. “I’m all for believing in journeymen skills, but this would take some serious-ass precision.”

“And patience,” Roland nodded. “Possibly support staff too.” He looked at his friend. “If I get you a picture of the bullet, do you think you could identify the type?”

Ledger nodded as he took another bite. “Yeah, sure, I’ll run it against the FBI database and then maybe INTERPOL after that. No, you moron!” He glared at Roland for asking such a question. “What I wonder if maybe this was the same guy that Ev saw trying to kill his mystery hottie.”

“Doubt it,” said Roland. “That guy missed a lot of shots, chased her on foot, and was trying to get her from close-range. Totally different MO.”

“I don’t know,” Ledger pondered as he took another bite. “Different circumstances, you know. Different weapon. Maybe even different orders.”

Roland looked puzzled. “Different orders?”

“Like you said, man,” Ledger continued to speculate, looking to the rooftops. “Shots like this almost always require support staff and stuff. And the dude Ev saw had guys with him.” He glanced back at the crowd watching the police investigate. “This ain’t regular crazy; this is special crazy or something.”

A half-eaten sandwich, hastily wrapped in a napkin so as to be smuggled out of Marilyn’s work unnoticed, sat next to two open textbooks. Homework sat on the pages, as incomplete as the lunch while the quiet of the library was softly serenaded by the distant university bell tower tolling 4pm.

Sitting atop three forms for permits – one for a car wash, one for a sidewalk membership drive, and one for a protest downtown – were several books of provenance. Unlike the rest of the vast collection of ‘I’ll-get-to-it-in-a-minute’, these held Marilyn’s attention. She was poring through one of the books, turning pages slowly as she examined the descriptions of antiques and treasures, as well as the names of the art houses they had been sold through. On her left was her legal pad, notes and thoughts scribbled nigh-incomprehensibly across the pages.

The library around her was busy, with students using the computers for research and socializing, while a select few had turned to the vast collection of books on rows after rows of old wooden shelves. Away from the computers, Marilyn had a whole corner of the library to herself, leaving her to work in relative peace. All the same, she sat with her headphones on but no music playing, just as an added caution against being disturbed.

As Marilyn combed through the pages, an entry caught her eye. She sat forward, suddenly very curious. “Antique red book, measuring approximately sixteen by twelve by four. Estimated age at two hundred years. Believed to be part of a series.” Sensing her prey, she turned the page and read on.

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—Now—

“Wait, hold up,” Morgan interrupted. He looked back at Marilyn, like he had to visually show his disbelief. “You found this information in a provenance?”

“The book went up for auction,” Marilyn told him eagerly. “It was a silent bid and they took bids on the book into the millions of dollars!”

“And the human trafficker guy, Sizemore, he won the bid?” Everett asked.

“No, that’s the thing. He bid twice but then the book was ‘destroyed’,” she said, providing her own air quotes. “There was a fire in the auction house. Very

little was damaged. Only that book was completely destroyed.” She tipped her head to one side. “Convenient, I’d say.”

“I want to get back to how you know how to do this kind of research,” Morgan said. “I know masters students who can’t do this stuff. And you’re doing it on top of college classes AND running the bargain basement Justice League?”

“Hey!” Marilyn protested. “Everybody starts somewhere. What were you like when you became a knight or whatever?” Neither Morgan nor Everett offered a pithy response. “I want to save the world,” Marilyn said honestly and unabashedly. “The world could be better. It’s...it’s an ugly and unfair place sometimes. Maybe more of the time than not.” She looked down at her hands and shrugged. “So I wanted to save it. I dedicated myself to fixing the world, one problem at a time.” Indignation grew inside of her and she said loudly, “And what’s wrong with that?”

“You don’t have a sword,” Morgan told her.

Marilyn’s indignation multiplied. “You know who the greatest hero in all of comic books is?”

“Superman,” said Morgan.

“Batman,” said Everett.

“Lois Lane!” Marilyn all but yelled.

Morgan and Everett looked back at her from the front seat like she was crazy. “Oh, that’s a statement you’re going to have to justify,” Morgan said with some cynical eagerness.

“She’s committed to the truth, and rooting out corruption and wrong-doing,” Marilyn began. “She doesn’t have superpowers. Or billions of dollars,” she added with a look towards Everett. “She also doesn’t try to ‘handle problems herself’. She believes in people and the world and believes that if she exposes corruption and

wrongdoing, then people will do the right thing. She's the greatest hero in comics, not some dork in a skintight leotard that's got money coming out of his ears or superpowers that make the impossible easy. She's not super-smart or super...super anything. She's just committed." Marilyn sat back. "Like me. I founded the World Alliance to unify people under a common banner, a banner of doing good and helping to make the world better, helping to save the world," she said proudly.

"Look, I'm not saying founding a charity when you're still technically a teenager isn't impressive," said Morgan. "But—"

"It's not just a charity," Marilyn argued.

"You don't do blood drives for the Red Cross and car washes for the American Cancer Society?" Morgan asked rhetorically.

"Charities are reactive," Marilyn argued. "They see a problem and they try to buffer against it."

"They try to show compassion to the victims," supported Everett. Morgan looked across at him, a little surprised.

"Right," Marilyn agreed, seeming to shine at even the suggestion that someone else got it. "It's about bringing good into the world to help balance out the bad. And that's good and noble and all of that. And we – the World Alliance – support that. But what makes us different is we're also about stopping the root cause of evil."

"Which is?" asked Morgan.

"Apathy," Marilyn said with disdain, staring at Morgan through the rear view mirror. "Indifference. The emotional and intellectual inactivity in the face of corruption, injustice, and wrongdoing."

Now it was Everett's turn to look over at Morgan. He was sitting low in the driver's seat, one hand on the wheel. Noticing that he was the subject of Everett's scrutiny, he scowled and looked away. "All this sounds great," Everett said, more to Marilyn. "I got to be honest, though. I'm surprised you found people as committed and dedicated as you."

Now it was Marilyn who had to look away.



—12 Days Ago—

"Alright, I call this meeting to the World Alliance to order," said Marilyn as she stood at the head of the long table in the far corner of the atrium on campus. Before her sat the entire membership of the World Alliance, all five of them. Victor and Ruwani sat to her right, while Malcolm sat on her left with Alan and Kate beyond. "What have we got thus far?"

Ruwani, a woman about Marilyn's age with light brown skin and black hair, referenced a notebook. "We haven't gotten a lot yet," she began with a nod towards Victor. "All we've really been able to glean from the discs you swiped is that the Urbain Entertainment Group, which Steven Sizemore created and which owned the Australian Club, donated a fair amount of their net profits to charity."

"Like, 30-40 percent," Victor clarified to Marilyn.

“Forty percent of net profits isn’t charity; that’s a business model,” said Malcolm. “Did we get a full list of the charities they were donating to?”

“Yeah and it almost entirely art charities,” Ruwani said, consulting the notebook written in Victor’s handwriting as much as her own. “Mostly modeling and acting, but cooking and music too.”

“It’s the modeling that caught our attention,” Marilyn said, having to speak over some of the louder college jocks coming in for dinner. She glowered in their direction but her disapproval was lost on them. “What did you guys find?” she asked Malcolm’s side of the table.

Malcolm seemed hesitant to speak up. “We think…” He stopped and opened a notation program on his phone. “Kate and me dug around on Facebook and Twitter and stuff.” The young-looking woman beamed at her name being included. “We looked into these modeling agencies. They’re all international, and have pretty good reputations. Formally.”

“Yeah,” Kate chimed in like she was sharing a juicy piece of gossip with only Marilyn. “Turns out, two of the modeling people are on Amnesty International’s bad-guy list. There are TONS of allegations that girls sign up for modeling careers, get flown to the US, and then their families never hear from them again.”

“That fits,” Ruwani said. “A lot of human trafficking works that way. A supposedly-great job opportunity gets the women to fly overseas, and then the sex slavers take their passport and keep them prisoner. Tell them all sorts of horror stories about how the US hates immigrants.”

“We do,” Malcolm muttered cynically. He spoke more formally now, saying “It also looks like it goes both ways. American women get kidnapped too. They agree to go to the Middle East or Asia for modeling jobs, get over there, and bam.”

Marilyn seemed simultaneously mortified and galvanized. “We’ve got to do something about this. We’ve got to help those women in the Australian Club.”

“They’re probably gone,” Victor spoke up. “Urbain Entertainment is actually a pretty big company. And when Steven Sizemore was found dead, first thing they did was probably get those girls out of there.”

“But where?” asked Malcolm. “According to what Marilyn saw, there were at least twenty or something cubicles, maybe a lot more. Moving that many prisoners, even complacent ones, isn’t something that can be done easily or quietly.”

“If we assume the number’s accurate,” Victor said, like that was an egregious indulgence. Marilyn looked at him, offended, but he went on. “The likeliest thing they would have done is transport them to another location and get rid of them.”

“You’re talking about murdering twenty or more women!” Alan exclaimed.

“I’m just playing the voice of reason,” Victor defended. “First thing a criminal is going to do if they think they’ll get caught is get rid of the evidence. That includes the slaves, regrettably.”

“Even so,” Marilyn interjected, refusing to let the meeting degrade into an argument. “That means they have twenty women, or they have twenty dead bodies. Either way, they have to answer for what they’ve done.”

“It’s not that simple, Mar,” Victor told her like he was correcting her homework. “These modeling charities and organizations and everything, they’ve got some serious social clout. Social clout means political influence. We can’t just say ‘they’re the bad guys’ and have everyone believe us.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the meeting. The atrium’s ambient noise filled in the gaps as the six members of the World Alliance hesitated. Even Marilyn, eager to say something, seemed unsure how to respond to that possibility. “If we want to really do this,” Victor said sagely, like doing so was a huge mistake, “we have to start small.”

Marilyn considered that for all of a second before she said, “No we don’t.” The others all turned to her like she was crazy. “We have something,” she said, looking at Ruwani’s notebook like she was looking at the stolen discs and hard drive. “We use it. We can’t let twenty women, and god knows how many others, suffer because we think we have to play it safe.” She looked to Victor and Ruwani. “We know the charities that Steven Sizemore donated to, or his company did. Who else?”

“They’re huge charities, Mar,” Victor told her. “A lot of people donated to them.”

“Then who donated just in this state? Or even just the city?” she specified.

Victor looked put upon just for being asked. Ruwani looked embarrassed she couldn’t answer and afraid being able to answer might put her in danger. Alan and Kate were likewise silent. It was Malcolm who called up some info on his smart phone. He looked over a list and shrugged, saying, “Who didn’t? It’s like a list of all the companies and businesses based here. Everybody donates to these charities.”

“So we cross-reference the donations to the charities and see who else donated to all of them,” Marilyn said, trying to sound upbeat.

“Mar...” Victor tried to implore tiredly. His look for sympathy was shared by Ruwani, Alan, and Kate.

“Yeah,” Alan agreed, a little grudgingly. “This is a far cry from a bake sale. This is...”

“I’m seeing a lot of the same names,” Malcolm said, ignoring the waffling of the rest of the World Alliance. He switched from several pages. “Urbain Entertainment is up there, but so is the city arts’ council. Um...the usual corporate donations like Wal-Mart, a couple of utility companies...”

“What do you mean, utility companies?” Marilyn asked.

Malcolm looked back at the list. “Solaritec. It’s a technology company. They do renewable energy research and stuff.”

“They’re based here,” said Alan. “They’ve got a big corporate park just outside of town.”

“And they’re big,” Ruwani said. She pointed to a banner by the atrium cash register. Advertising a big mid-semester shindig, a variety of corporate logos dotted the corners, including the post-modern sun logo of Solaritec.

Marilyn left the head of the table and leaned over Malcolm’s shoulder, reading off his phone. She slowly took over more and more of the vantage space until he finally just surrendered the phone to her. She stood and read through it for a bit, finally observing aloud, “The donations aren’t from Solaritec’s PR department. They’re coming from some guy’s office – a VP of...development or something – named Phillip Reynolds.” She looked up from the phone to her team and declared, “I think we need to look into this guy.”

There was a knock at Jericho’s door. “I got to go, Ken,” said Jericho into his phone before calling, “Come in.” As he hung up the phone, Raphael joined him, extending a folder. “Eli’s test results?”

“Definitely a concussion,” said Raphael. “The knight seriously messed him up.” He nodded to the report that Jericho read thoroughly and quickly. “The doctors want him off the trial until he recovers. They’re worried about...something with his blood and rejecting the treatment while his brain is bruised. You know how they get.”

“No, Eli needs to stay on,” Jericho decided, handing the folder back to Raphael. “But keep him inactive until he’s cleared.”

“Will do,” confirmed Raphael. He lingered for just a second. “Did you know it was Tate this morning?” Jericho didn’t follow. “Emanuel Tate? You didn’t know Tate?”

Jericho shook his head. “No, who was he?”

“For the starters, he was the victim this morning, him and his wife,” said Raphael. “He designed the prototype for the solar cells we use; that the whole Brotherhood uses. He was one of, like, two hundred people to receive a direct commendation from the Triumvirate.”

“I didn’t know they gave commendations,” Jericho smirked.

“It’s that rare,” said Raphael. He pointed to his thumb. “It was remarked by this little tattoo of the Sircle, right here.” Raphael shook his head. “Tate was a good guy. I nearly went to the Miracle Workers when I first joined the Brotherhood because of him.”

“I had no idea you knew him,” Jericho said, as an apology. “Is there going to be a funeral?”

Now Raphael shrugged. “I don’t know. I imagine so, but he’d been retired for a decade or something. He retired when his wife got too sick.”

“That’s a shame,” said Jericho. “If you want to go to the funeral...”

Raphael shook his head. “There’s too much going on right now.” He nodded appreciatively to Jericho and began to back out of the office. “I’ll tell the doctors to keep Eli on the program.” He exited, leaving Jericho worried about him.

Edgar Blaine looked like how Don Quixote probably envisioned himself. Tall and debonaire, he looked like a cross between George Clooney and The Most Interesting Man In The World. He seemed to embody classic, timeless style, even as he was taken by the hand and twisted in pain.

“See?” said Ledger, holding Edgar’s hand at an awkward angle as he pressed two fingers from his other hand into pressure points on Edgar’s arm. “It doesn’t just hurt; it’s also a numbness.”

On the mat of the kung fu school, Edgar and Ledger were both dressed in black pants and red t-shirts. Off to the door leading to the small vestibule waiting area, Everett watched. He was dressed in black slacks and a red shirt as well, watching and listening. And laughing.

Edgar fought through the pain to strike his own neck with his thumb. “Don’t do—” Ledger started to warn just before Edgar completely crumpled. “Wrong meridian, son,” Ledger told the senior knight with a snicker.

Everett came over, chuckling. “You okay?” he asked with a laugh as he stood over Edgar.

“I don’t remember karate being is hard,” Edgar said, accepting both hands up.

“The fact that you pronounced it ‘curady’ and not ‘karate’ I think says something right there,” Ledger suggested.

“That I’m not an elitist martial arts snob?” Edgar said, getting some water from his bag. He noticed the time and asked, “You’re teaching a class next, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, Billy’s got a date,” said Ledger. “I figure that’ll never happen again so why not cover for him?”

“Are you really learning Dim Mak from Ledger just to improve your fencing?” Everett asked.

“A saber plus oriental pressure points will make for a dangerous combination,” Edgar observed, sipping more water.

“That’s like saying iced tea during a blizzard might be a bit nippy but whatever,” Ledger shrugged.

“How’s your investigation going?” Edgar asked Everett as he gathered up his things.

“Not well,” Everett said. “We haven’t been able to piece together anything the police haven’t. And we certainly haven’t identified a pattern. I was kind of hoping you could help with that.”

Edgar made a series of noncommittal sounds. “Guys, the semester’s picking up. And I’ve got a lot of dumb kids this year. And there’s the whole ‘my beard’s started to gray’ thing.”

“Yeah, yeah. Knights obligation is done when their beards start to gray,” Ledger waved off. “You can still consult. And by the way, are we done? Cause...” He gestured to the clock and made a shooing motion for them to clear the space.

“Plus I’m also helping to get Sydney squared away when she gets here next week,” said Edgar as he slung his bag over his shoulder. “Honestly, she’s probably the one you want. Now that she’s finished her thesis, she’s raring to get back into her knightly duties.”

“Oh, trust me, at the rate things are going, we’re probably going to ask her,” said Everett, following Edgar off the mat while Ledger practiced on the wooden dummy in the corner. “At this point, I’m even trying to get Morgan to help out.”

Edgar seemed amused by the prospect. “How’s that going?” he asked.

Everett shrugged. "About as well as asking Morgan to do anything. He SO hates having anything to do with the knights and he SO clearly wishes he was still a knight."

Edgar chuckled. "I think that's a bit of a stretch, but not wholly inaccurate."

"We've got one factor that the police aren't talking about," said Everett as they came into the vestibule and began putting on their shoes. "And that's the shooting downtown, late the other night."

"With the girl," Edgar suddenly grinned. "Yeah, Armand told me."

"I am afraid that the guy that chased the girl through downtown, that I fought," Everett explained, "may be connected to this shooter. Maybe it's even the same guy." Edgar waited patiently for something to be phrased as a question. Seeming to sense his patient, Everett asked, "How can I confirm that? Or disprove it?"

"Well, for starters, I'd say talk to the girl," suggested Edgar, clearly more encouraging of Everett's reconnection than any relevant information it might reveal.

"I don't have her phone number or anything," said Everett.

"What have I told you about rescuing damsels in distress and getting their numbers," Edgar comically chastised.

"I don't know that I'm ever going to see Marilyn again," lamented Everett as he looked out the door of the kung fu school and seeing Marilyn again. She froze mid-step in the parking lot, Ruwani and Alan nearly running into her.

Edgar came to the door, looking out. He smiled. "I see why she so enchanted you. Very...Taylor Swift meets Sasha Grey."

.....

—Now—

Everett sank down in his seat, rubbing his eyes as a means to avert them. He didn't have to look into the backseat to know Marilyn was glaring at him. Or over to the driver's seat to know Morgan was laughing at him.



—12 Days Ago—

Marilyn entered the kung fu school with a shocked look. “Everett,” she said in surprise.

His heart skipped a beat when she heard his name by her voice. “Marilyn,” he said.

Edgar looked between the two for a second, then extended his hand between them to shake Alan's hand. “Edgar Blaine. It's nice to meet you.”

“Alan Rockway,” he said.

“I'm Ruwani Rai,” she said, shaking his hand as well.

“And you must be the charming Marilyn, about whom I’ve heard so many good things,” Edgar said to Marilyn with a swashbuckler’s smile.

“Hi,” was all Marilyn could muster for a moment. Facing Everett, she said, “I didn’t know you took kung fu here.”

“I don’t, my buddy—” Everett said slowly.

“On the mat!” yelled Ledger, leaning in. “Come on, guys, class is starting.”

“Hey, it was nice…” Everett said slowly and awkwardly as Marilyn and the others stepped onto the mat.

Once on the other side of the flimsy divider, Ruwani turned around to Marilyn and whispered “Is that the guy?” Marilyn nodded, astonished and unprepared for the chance encounter.

Over the divider, they heard Everett whispering loudly, “Why didn’t you tell me she was your student?!”

“Dude, there’s probably a thousand Marilyn’s in this city,” said Ledger.

This was followed by the telltale sounds of striking and fighting, followed by Edgar’s voice saying ineffectively, “Alright, boys, break it up.”

“I think he likes you,” Ruwani teased Marilyn.

“I think he more than likes you,” agreed Alan.

Out front, Everett and Edgar walked into the narrow parking lot of the strip mall where the kung fu school sat between a Mexican bodega and a pawn shop. Everett turned around as they walked to their respective cars and simply exhaled. Edgar noticed and chuckled, saying, “You’ve got it bad.”

“I honestly never thought I’d see her again,” Everett confided, both relieved at the experience and heartbroken it was over. He shook his head in amazement.

“She’s...” He glanced at Edgar who was checking his phone. “Really?” he asked, feeling abandoned.

“I’m sorry but if I want teenage angst, I’ve got students who think they’re still in high school,” said Edgar. Everett rolled his eyes. “Hey, do you know anything about Solaritec?” asked Edgar. Everett turned fully to him, more confused than curious. “Yeah, turns out one of their VPs or VIPs or something may be involved in human trafficking right here in the city,” Edgar read off his phone.

Everett forgot his racing heart and came over to read the news alert off Edgar’s phone. “Really?” he remarked. “Truth and Just Us’ website? That’s your source for news?”

“Beats CNN,” Edgar countered.

“True,” Everett conceded, scrolling down the story. “Modeling and other scholarship opportunities linked to human trafficking, and heavily funded by Solaritec through...Phillip Reynolds.”

“Any idea who he is?” Edgar asked.

Everett shrugged. “I’m still trying to figure out what this has to do with the shooter.”

“For starters, not everything revolves around the shooter,” Edgar told him. “Secondly, corruption is often related. A person who will help kidnap and enslave others may not be opposed to ordering a hit or two.” He held the phone at Everett, referring to the story. “We need to follow up on this. And by ‘we’, I of course mean ‘you’.”

“Of course,” Everett acknowledged, still reading the news feed. “Who broke the story?” he asked rhetorically. He read the citations and looked puzzled. “Who are the World Alliance?”

“No idea,” Edgar said with a shrug. He closed his phone and said good night. He drove off while Everett lingered in the parking lot, staring in the vague distance of Marilyn and rehearsing things he knew he didn’t have the guts to say.



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