

Red Moon Rising

Part 04 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 04 of 30

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“Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

- Mike Tyson

Alexis walked out of the bedroom, yawning. In just her underwear, she walked into the kitchen and set about making coffee. As it percolated, she looked at her reflection in the oven set into the wall. Her brown roots were coming in through the red dye job. She picked absently at her hair, trying to recall why she'd started dying her hair to begin with.

The bedroom door opened again and out came Mark, her husband. He was buttoning his shirt, already dressed. “Hey,” he whispered coming over to kiss her. She turned at the last second so he connected with her cheek. Mark drew back, worried.

“I’m going to call in sick today,” she told him before pacing away.

“Baby, are you alright?” he asked, following her into the living room of their stylish uptown apartment. When she didn’t say anything, only kept her bare back turned to him, he accepted the obvious. He looked to their bedroom door, a pang of guilt eating him from inside. “This was supposed to be an adventure,” he lamented with her. “It was supposed to be fun.”

“I know,” she regretted, still unable to turn and face him.

“It was your idea,” Mark quickly said, almost as a defense. “You suggested him specifically.”

“I know!” she yelled. She shut her eyes tight and tried to keep from yelling or screaming or crying. “And it was fun last night. But all night, I...” She turned around to Mark and looked at him. The words were clogged in her soul, too much demanding to come out immediately so that nothing came out at all. “I’m not okay,” she told Mark.

Mark sighed and slowly nodded his head. “Yeah,” he acknowledged. “Me either.” He stopped trying to talk and instead took Alexis in his arms. She resisted only a little, then embraced him eagerly. “It’ll be okay,” were the last words he spoke.

Alexis heard glass pop like ice cracking, then felt a splash of warmth. She looked up at her husband and saw a vacant, dead expression drifting away from her. She heard another crack of glass and never heard anything again. The two bodies fell to the ground, still in each other’s arms.

In a dark room, under a single bright light, Phillip was reading the giant red book. The massive tome the size of a spare tire rested open on the research table, special lamps all around it. Only one lamp was on at the moment, a powerful but gentle white light directly over the book itself. The rest of the room was a near-impenetrable blackness. Hovering over the book, Phillip was studying the page, writing down every detail he could notice. Wearing white gloves, he wrote with a digital pen, storing the observations on a tablet computer sitting next to him.

In illuminated text, the two open pages held arcane sigils, deeply described and exhaustively annotated. Carefully drawn, details were highlighted and every conceivable aspect of the occult emblems were explained in tiny, dense handwriting. Phillip was entranced. His lips moved as he transcribed and translated the wealth of observations.

A noise broke his concentration, startling him. So lost in the text of the giant book, it took him a second to remember where he was. Finally processing it was his phone ringing, he grabbed it up and answered, "Yes?" He listened for a second, growing confused. "What?!" he exclaimed. He stood from the book and clicked off the light.

Phillip exited into an air-tight vestibule, leaving the darkness behind as an automated door shut with finality behind him. He waited impatiently as air was exchanged vigorously in a series of hisses and rushes. He bounced on his toes, grinding his teeth. The instant a green light flashed overhead, he pushed through the door out as the automatic locks were still disengaging.

He threw open the door and burst out into the hall, running at a brisk clip. He passed a few ambitious morning workers who were already settling into work in the early morning as he practically dove inside his office. The morning sun had only just crested the trees on the horizon, making it appear his office was above the sun itself. Phillip ignored the early morning view and grabbed the remote off his desk, cluttered with trays of takeout food and copious energy drinks from the previous night. He flipped on his monitor in the wall, almost growling when the screen didn't come alive fast enough.

The news informed Phillip that there'd been another shooting. Three victims this time. A reporter was on the scene, interviewing locals about what they didn't know. Phillip glared, waiting. The news of the shooting barely registering with him. The program went back to the studio where the two anchors shared and bantered about a recent poll among viewers regarding the shootings. Phillip ignored this as well. His eyes were following the ticker at the bottom of the screen.

'Solaritec executive implicated in human trafficking scandal'.

Phillip's jaw dropped open. He was too stunned for words for a moment, then he fished out his cell phone. A quick search and he found the story, blowing up all

over the web. And his name was boldly placed in each story. His shoulders slumped and he forgot the phone. He stared into space, in shock.



—Now—

“Okay, there’s no good way to ask this, so I’m just going to be callous,” prefaced Morgan. Everett snorted from the passenger seat. Morgan snapped him a look which amused Everett, then he continued. “What’s the big deal?”

“Why is slave trade such a big deal?” Marilyn exploded, gearing up for a verbal evisceration.

“No, implication,” Morgan specified. “With all due respect, Marilyn, a bunch of college kids drew attention to the fact that an executive at a giant corporation was donating money to scholarship programs and talent agencies that might have connections to human trafficking.” He hesitated as he drove towards the pre-dawn, trying to find the right words. “While I’m not saying that there’s not a story there, I don’t see why this would be the world-ending scenario for this group – Solaritec or the Brotherhood of the Sun, or both – that they apparently thought it would be. Less powerful people have gotten into a lot less trouble over a lot worse of scandals.”

“The Brotherhood of the Sun is a secret society that’s existed for hundreds of years on anonymity,” Everett ventured. “Anything that draws attention to them is going to be viewed poorly.”

“Solaritec’s a giant corporation,” countered Morgan. “They’re a utility conglomerate. Giant and publically-traded don’t mix too well with secrecy.”

“There’s also the fact that human trafficking is a shocking allegation,” Everett posed. “Most people in this country think slavery doesn’t exist now. Or if they do know about sex slavery and everything, they think it only happens in third-world countries. In their minds, human trafficking just doesn’t happen here in the US.”

“Oh yes it does,” Marilyn interrupted emphatically. “Over fifteen thousand people are brought to the US every year for white slavery. And they come from all over the world, not just one or two countries. And the Department of Homeland Security only gives out a maximum of five thousand visas to these victims. The rest are transported back to their home country, often without any support whatsoever when they arrive.”

“Almost a quarter of a million US citizens are victims of sex trade or sexual exploration for commercial purposes,” Marilyn went on from the back of the car. “Sex slavery DOES happen here. It happens a lot, in every single state. The problem is that nobody talks about it, and actively refuses to believe it when confronted with the evidence. And the World Alliance confronted them with the evidence.”

Morgan looked across at Everett. “I think I hit a nerve.” Everett gave him an amused ‘ya think’ look in response.

“Human trafficking is one of the principle concerns of the World Alliance,” said Marilyn. “We decided to target human trafficking because of how quietly pervasive a crime it is in the western world. Other crimes like murder, theft, even rape, are as often crimes of passion and opportunity as they are deliberate. They’re heinous but in some ways they pale compared to the systemic illness that is human trafficking. Slavery, in all forms but especially sexual slavery, may be the worst crime there is.”

“How did you get into it?” asked Everett. Realizing how the question sounded, he clarified, “How did sex slavery become your focal point?” Marilyn seemed confused. “You didn’t know anybody who...” Everett ventured carefully.

“Just because you haven’t been the victim of the crime doesn’t mean you can’t stand up against it,” Marilyn said. “It’s important that the people who haven’t been victims stand up for and with the victims too. It goes back to fighting apathy. You don’t have to be a minority to stand up for racial equality. You don’t have to be a woman to stand up for gender equality. You don’t have to be gay or bi or transsexual to stand up for sexual equality.” Marilyn sat back, crossing her arms, sounding strangely disappointed that she had to make this point. “I don’t have to have been a victim of white slavery, or know somebody who was, to recognize it’s a horrible crime worth fighting.”

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—11 Days Ago—

“Three more victims are dead this morning, bringing the death toll to six on this sniper’s rampage through the city,” said the reporter on the video feed.

“Oh my god,” Kim whispered, watching in horror from the head of Malcolm’s bed. She hugged a pillow close, closing her eyes at the very thought.

“I can’t believe it,” Alan whispered. He’d rolled aside in the computer chair so he and Kim could both watch.

“Six people,” whispered Kim. “Why would anyone...” She stopped. She didn’t want to know.

“The shootings occurred this morning, around dawn,” the reporter looked to the camera, her brown trench coat still stained from the slight rain that flew behind her, landing against the courthouse. “The police say they still have no suspect.”

“What do you think?” Armand asked, turning from the TV to Everett. Covered in a sheen of sweat from the morning workout, Everett said nothing. “Is this three shootings now, or four? Or is this even not the same guy?”

“It has to be the same guy,” Everett concluded. “No one else would do something like this. It’s got to be the guy that was chasing Marilyn.”

“Might be a copy-cat,” Armand suggested, purely for contrast.

“Not impossible but I doubt it,” said Everett as he stared, mesmerized by the report. “This is all...it’s all too...to methodical. Just doesn’t feel like a copycat.”

“I guess,” Armand said, unconvinced. He turned back to the television, his silence carrying more weight than his words.

“And while the police say they have no suspects,” the reporter went on. “They do believe they have confirmed the weapon as the same used in the previous shootings”

“Of course it was,” Roland yelled at his radio, as he waited at the traffic jam. A long line of cars ahead of his red sports car ended at the police blockade. The three-lane highway had condensed into a single lane, one that was being stopped at every car and searched by the police.

“Police have already set up traffic check-points, in an attempt to identify the shooter.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Roland yelled impatiently at the radio.

“Won’t do any good.” Edgar said, as he stood patiently on his balcony, his body covered in sweat as he held his rapier in his hand, the hanging rings before him. On the railing of the balcony, his cell phone set to the news feed continued rattling off the report.

“He’s too good,” Edger went on, more to himself. Without any hint or warning, he lunged forward, thrusting the weapon out away from him. His form sent the sword blade through the first two rings without flaw, but the tip of the blade nicked the third ring. He retracted the blade, disappointed. He took up his stance again, the nimble blade held ready.

“The police are still trying to identify the bullet type, in the hopes that it may lead to identifying the rifle’s owner and some explanation as to what triggered these ghastly events.”

“It’s power,” said Jericho as he watched the feed. “Just what kind of power, though?” Even after he muted the screen, the reporter continued to speak as though right at Jericho. He endured her stare, leaning back in his desk chair like he was leaning back from a physical fight.

A knock at the door and in came Raphael, folders in hand. “Here they are,” he told Jericho as sat down the folders, handing one to Jericho. “One of the victims was part of the Hand of the Brotherhood. Alexis ‘Alex’ Warren.”

“She was an engineer,” Jericho read. He practically shoved himself away from the desk. “Jesus, she was a...she was a geek. She was one step away from being a Miracle Worker.”

“Yeah,” Raphael nodded. “She helped develop the casing for the devices.”

Jericho shook his head as he read on. “Why is a psychopath out there killing our people? And how do we not have some kind of a lead on this?” he all but demanded. Raphael could only remain silent. Jericho thought for a moment, staring at the silent news feed. “Are our new Hand operatives ready for field work yet?” He looked at Raphael. “In your opinion.”

Raphael hated himself for saying, “I think Eli’s operation at the Australian Club is your answer. If we release them now, there will be casualties and collateral damage. Which we won’t be able to cover up. We’ll be exposed. It would just be a question of how much.”

“We’ve got to do something; we’ve got to put our people out there,” Jericho said desperately.

“Is there a chance this is retribution for the human trafficking?” Raphael asked.

“You mean Phillip?” he asked. Raphael responded with a nod. “No,” Jericho said certainly. He almost immediately allowed, “Maybe.” His certainty visibly eroded as he weighed that possibility.

“Why are we doing this again?” Ruwani groaned as she wiped her eyes. She started sipping her coffee but it turned quickly into a chug.

“Because the information we posted on the World Alliance website was too raw,” said Malcolm, sitting between her and Victor in the mostly empty university computer lab. At the front of the room, their sole companion was the student overseer who had dozed off at the information desk. “We’ve got to make the links and evidence quickly and easily digestible.”

“This isn’t a blog; the information packet is for news professionals,” griped Victor as he cut down image groups into single, relevant images with links to the originals. “They should be able to fact-check on their own time.”

“Yeah,” Ruwani agreed. “It’s not enough that we find the information, but we also have to format our sources in their favorite method?”

“It’s like getting a job,” Malcolm sighed. “It doesn’t matter how wrong it is; at the end of the day, they have the public audience we need to reach, so they make the rules. If they want us to deliver the evidence dressed in pink bunny suits and sung in iambic pentameter, then that’s what we’ve got to do.” He posted the first of many revised pages on the information packet, with links connecting to public records and other damning documents. “At least the World Alliance is getting credit for the find.” He looked down at Ruwani and Victor. “We’re really making a difference.” Victor yawned and Ruwani had more coffee.

Phillip was staring at himself in the mirror, brushing his black hair back again and again as though styling it. Dressed in a better suit than usual, he looked less nervous and more anxious. When the door to the small waiting room opened, he jumped a little. In came Jericho, along with a young black woman in a pantsuit. “Phillip,” Jericho said. “You remember Tanya Klinger, Solaritec’s new COO.”

“Mr. Reynolds,” said Tanya, shaking his hand. “It’s been unfortunate, you and me playing phone-tag all these weeks since I was promoted, that we finally meet

under these circumstances.” Phillip agreed but said little. “Do you understand what’s about to happen? We’re going to meet with the press and deny these charges summarily. You are NOT to take any questions, understand? Let PR handle that.” Again Phillip nodded.

Tanya checked her gold watch, commenting absently, “It’s fortunate that you made these donations from the company coffers. That provides you a certain level of legal protection.”

Something in the way she said that rankled Phillip. “You make it sound like I embezzled.”

Tanya looked at him and said directly, “These were not approved donations.” She stared at him accusatorially. “And it is not your department to make such donations on behalf of the company.”

Phillip looked beside himself with bursting rage and opened his mouth. “Why don’t you head on out there?” Jericho said, literally stepping between Phillip and Tanya. “Phillip and I will be right along shortly.”

Tanya looked very inclined to hear what Phillip wanted to say, but she finally nodded. “Good idea,” she told Jericho. She turned and walked out.

The instant the door shut, Phillip roared. He grabbed a chair from the dinette set in the waiting room and whirled around to throw it. Jericho caught the chair with one hand and tore it from Phillip’s hand. “Calm down,” he chastised Phillip.

“Calm down?!” Phillip yelled, bordering on hysterical. “This company gets implicated – I get implicated – in something like this, and then that...that...” He jammed his hand at the door through which Tanya had left. “That PUPPET gives me grief like that?!”

“She’s not a puppet,” Jericho told Phillip.

“WE run the company, Jericho,” Phillip reminded him.

“You run the Miracle Worker’s Clan; I run the Hand of the Brotherhood,” Jericho reminded him. “But she runs the actual Solaritec company.” Jericho stepped back from the enraged Phillip. “You broke rules, Phillip. Not rules anybody cared about, but technically...” Jericho made a noncommittal shrug. In the intervening silence, he let Phillip fume for a moment. “This will blow over,” he said, trying to sound sincere. Phillip snorted derisively. Jericho looked about awkwardly, racking his brain. “Has your sister said anything?”

“I haven’t talked to her,” Phillip said quietly. “I doubt she knows.” Jericho nodded while Phillip brooded. He began to pace, then asked Jericho, “I want you to find out who did this.”

“Did what?” asked Jericho. “You did donate this money.”

“Not the—god, would you get off the money?!” Phillip exclaimed. “Find out who found me out. Who broke this story. Find out who and silence them.” Jericho looked hesitant to agree to such a request but he finally nodded. “Thank you,” Phillip said sincerely.

Jericho nodded again, then exhaled and began to button his suit jacket. “Let’s get out there.” Together, the two headed out.

Everett opened the front door of his apartment to find Roland holding a watermelon. “Boom!” exclaimed the white knight as he half-danced into Everett’s apartment.

“What the hell’s gotten into him?” Everett asked Ledger as he came in behind Roland.

Ledger gestured at the watermelon Roland was setting down on Everett's kitchen counter. "You see the size of that thing?"

"So?" Everett shrugged. Ledger and Roland both stopped and turned at Everett like he was crazy. "What? I don't really like watermelon," he defended.

Ledger shook his head in disappointment. "The hell is wrong with you?"

"You know who else doesn't like watermelon? The terrorists," said Roland as he sat the giant green melon down on the bar countertop that separated the kitchen from the living room. "Why do you hate America, Ev?"

"Hey! Watermelon!" Armand exclaimed cheerfully as he came out of the apartment's single bedroom.

"Yeah, you want some? Where are the knives?" asked Roland. Armand pulled out the cutlery drawer and the two began to slice.

"Don't cut it on the counter; I want my deposit back!" Everett exclaimed, rushing to stop the chop-happy Roland.

"Eh, quit your bitching," Roland said as he sliced the melon longways. He diced up the top half with only a few cuts and began to pass out the wedges on plates Armand dug out of the cupboard. "There was another shooting this morning," Roland said to Everett after taking a bite.

"Yeah, the university's implemented a curfew," Armand added in support, selecting his own slice of watermelon and sprinkling salt over it.

"With this morning's shooting, we're up to six victims," Roland said, gathering up two pieces and a paper towel off the dispenser on the counter. He walked around to the love seat and two chairs around the coffee table, saying "The victims seem to have absolutely nothing in common."

“And you know this how?” asked Everett, wondering how his kitchen had turned into a buffet.

“Medical records,” said Roland. “Seriously, what’s point of being a medical student if you can’t abuse the power?”

Everett looked like he was in pain. “If I had a week, I couldn’t list all the ways that statement is horrifying.”

“Victim #1,” Roland began to explain as everyone but Everett came and sat down around the coffee table equidistance between the couch and the TV, the two chairs at either end, “A corporate pseudo-exec. Middle management type. High enough to get people fired but not high enough to get them raises, you know? I’m not going to say a nobody but she probably had about enough power to determine what color this year’s training folders were going to be.”

“Victims #2 and #3, were an old couple. Husband was visiting his wife in hospice. Wife had dementia and was bedridden and basically comatose. Husband was old but otherwise fine. You know, the usual cholesterol and blood pressure medications but the dude didn’t even have a hearing aid. Hardly qualified for a mercy killing, so that’s out.”

“Victims #4, #5, and #6,” Roland added with a lecherous grin, “appeared to have spent the night together. Husband, wife, and a, ahem, close friend. Husband and friend work at the same place. Husband was getting dressed and wife was in her underwear. Looked like they were just waking up. Friend was still in the bare and looks like he was shot in his sleep.”

“In the bear,” Armand grinned. “That’s hot.” Ledger and Roland both looked at him, confused and disgusted. “What?” he panicked. “That’s a sex position, right? In the bear?”

“And they have nothing in common?” Everett asked, still standing by the counter of the kitchen.

“Uh...” Roland began to look through notes on his phone. “No. Not physically. First victim was black, the others have been white. Brown hair, two white hairs, brown, blonde, and redhead.”

“First victim was middle management,” Ledger told Everett. “The old man was a retiree, and the three this morning were all entry-level workers. Two IT guys and the woman was an engineer.”

“Where’d they work?” Everett asked.

“Haven’t found out about the victims this morning,” Ledger said. “The first victim worked for the power company. And the second two were retired.” He shifted gears, saying “Anyway, the victims don’t seem to have anything in common but the shots might. All the shots occurred between six and eight in the morning. All were shot from afar. The first and third killings were shot from a downward angle; the second was from an equal angle.”

“What does that mean?” asked Armand.

“Killer was above them, shooting down rather than at,” Roland said, miming demonstratively.

“Bullets were all the same, but generic,” Ledger went on. “Hunting rounds. Can be purchased at any sporting goods store in the city, state, or country.”

“Anything distinctive about the shooter?” Everett asked, finally sitting down in the seat opposite Roland. He had a slice of watermelon, which Roland gestured at in protest. “I’m not a fan, but still,” Everett justified.

“All three shots were through windows,” said Ledger. “That suggests – but doesn’t necessitate – a polarized scope. And those can be pricey.”

“Finding the vantage points, likewise, suggests resources,” Roland said, after finishing his last slice of watermelon. “These had to be cherry picked spots. They

couldn't have been easy to find. And the fact that the shooter had them lined up and prepared, and that he had scoped out his prospective targets, suggests he has or had help."

"Maybe he just went to the locations to see who he could shoot," Armand suggested.

Roland waffled on how best to shoot down that idea. "Okay, while technically not impossible, so unlikely and improbable we're still going to file it under impossible."

"I don't see why," Armand said. "These are heavily populated areas, at times of major movement. I mean, come on, it's the morning rush."

"We've got a woman on her way to work, a husband visiting his ailing wife, and a couple – and apparently their lover – just waking up," Roland said. "There's no pattern there."

"Except that they were vulnerable through a window," Armand argued. "I'm saying our sniper-guy has picked these locations and is just shooting the first people who present themselves."

Before Roland could argue with Armand, Everett stepped in. "So you're saying it's the locations that are critical, not the victims?"

"Maybe neither," said Ledger, supporting Armand's idea. "Maybe this loon is driving around town and just finding a spot that looks good, goes on up, and shoots the first person or people he comes across."

"It's just an idea," Armand said. "But, really, what's more likely: that this sniper has meticulously picked out these unrelated targets? Or that he found some good vantages and is just shooting whoever is available? When it comes to human motivations, I default to laziness. I just can't imagine someone would put this kind of work into something like this."

“That may just be a lack of imagination on your part,” Ledger interjected. Armand wanted to retort but discovered he had no comeback. He bit down on his frustration and said nothing more.

Having listened to everything, Everett said, “I’m going to start morning patrols.”

“Bad idea,” Roland said immediately, Ledger nodding in agreement. “Dude in a trench coat just wondering around downtown, or wherever? If you go two days without getting arrested, I’d be amazed.”

“Yeah, and even if you don’t,” Ledger agreed, “people will think you are the sniper, give you as the description, and then the police may end up looking for the wrong guy.”

Everett heeded their advice but made clear, “We’re not going to sit by and do nothing.”

“What if we patrolled in pairs?” Armand suggested.

Roland seemed keen on the idea. “We could use Sydney as a cover. Say our friend’s moving back to town and we’re helping her find a choice spot. They don’t have to know Edgar’s already got her a place. And two idiots look a little less suspicious than one.”

“And is tactically less dubious,” Ledger agreed.

Everett thought about it and slowly nodded. “Okay. Okay, I’ll work out a patrol schedule based off the locations of the shootings. I’ll email it to you guys this afternoon and we’ll go from there.”

“Sounds good,” said Ledger as he checked the time on his phone and said, “I got to get to campus.”

Armand was confused. “You don’t take classes.”

“No, but I use Roland’s gym membership while he’s in class,” said Ledger. Roland did a double-take, surprised to learn this fact. “You want a ride?”

“I’m the one driving,” Roland protested.

“And we’re all very impressed,” Ledger waved off. Armand accepted the invitation and almost as suddenly as they’d arrived, Roland and Ledger were off, taking Armand with them. Everett went about rearranging the contents of the refrigerator to make room for the gargantuan watermelon half Roland had left behind. He was just shutting the door when his phone rang.

“Hey mom,” Everett said, answering the phone as he dug through some papers on the top shelf of his computer desk. He pulled out a map of the city as he said, “Yep, doing fine. I’ve got two grants in the works, so I’ll get paid soon.” He laid the map out on the coffee table, grimacing when he had to clean up some watermelon juice. “Yeah, Armand’s still living with me. Yes he’s paying rent,” he said as he rolled his eyes. He brought up a news site on his computer and summing information on the shootings. “Yeah, everything’s going okay.” He returned to the coffee table and laid down three quarters on the map where the shootings had taken place. He tapped where the Australian Club was and tried to step back mentally from it all and see a pattern. “Yep, everything’s...wait, what?!” he exclaimed. “I...what? I haven’t met a girl?” He suddenly sighed and sat down on his couch. “Roland said what?”



—Now—

“Oh my god, did Roland really tell your mom about me?!” Marilyn giggled.

Everett didn't respond; he just looked out the window for something to look at. He glanced over at Morgan who was snickering. “Shut up,” he told Morgan, smirking himself.

“Is Roland really a med student?” Marilyn asked, still giggling.

“Yeah, but he's training to be a osteopathic doctor, which is different from an MD,” said Everett.

“It's a medical doctor meets a chiropractor,” Morgan told her.

“It's also a pseudoscience,” Everett grumbled.

“You just write the grants, you aren't a medical professional,” Morgan reminded him.

“You write the songs, you aren't a rock star,” Everett countered.

Marilyn was completely lost. “Wait, what?” She sat forward, wedging herself between the car seats. “So how can Roland be a knight and a med student?”

Everett shrugged, at a loss. “The same way any of us have lives.”

“So then what's his story?” Marilyn asked.

Everett didn't know what to say. “Roland's a knight-errant. He swore to the Oath at fifteen or sixteen; I don't remember which and I don't think he does either. He's kind of a Japanese cultural purist, which is kind of weird given how much of a racially insensitive ass he can be. He's got a black belt in Iaido, Nihon Jiu-Jitsu, and Kendo. And blue belt or something in Karate. And he's a first-year in med school, after getting his degree in Exercise Science of all things.”

“Because the university’s biology department is run by tenure-secured curmudgeons who don’t like anything they don’t already know,” Morgan said in Roland’s defense.

Realizing they were starting to sink into an age-old argument, Marilyn sat back and asked, “Right, sorry about the detour. Where were we?”

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—11 Days Ago—

There were a lot of cameras at the press conference.

As the COO of Solaritec spoke from behind the podium, Phillip looked out at the small crowd of reporters. There seemed to be more cameras than reporters, which he couldn’t understand. He kept shifting awkwardly in his seat, glancing from time to time to Jericho sitting between him and the COO. The head of the Hand of the Brotherhood looked back at Phillip and tried to look encouraging, but at the same time advocate patience. Phillip just sighed and ran down the long list of things he could and should be doing.

Raphael appeared much as he always did, from out of nowhere and suddenly at Jericho’s side. He whispered into Jericho’s ear and then was gone. Phillip watched him leave and looked at Jericho expectantly. His face a mask, Jericho didn’t say anything at first. The update seemed inconsequential given Jericho’s lack of reaction, but it clearly had been important enough to not wait.

Jericho took a drink of water, then scribbled on one of the notepads on the table. He set it aside at an angle that Phillip could read it. It read 'Triumvirate are sending Aaron'. Phillip did everything within his power not to yell, freak out, or even show any reaction. He looked out at the crowd, suddenly even more contemptuous of the reporters and their infernal cameras. "This jeopardizes everything," Phillip whispered. Jericho didn't say anything. He just very subtly nodded in agreement.

It wasn't Marilyn's job to mop the floor but it was her job to make sure it got done, regardless of whether or not it was her job. So she slid the mass of grey, tangled dreadlocks back and forth across the brown tiles of the floor of the sandwich shop. Just far enough off campus to not be a college hangout, but close enough to walk to, the job had seemed ideal at first. But as Marilyn mopped the floor in her grey and pink uniform, complete with shift manager name tag that spelled her name 'Marylin', she was reconsidering that view.

She ignored the jangle of the bell at the door and kept cleaning. At only 11:30, the place was already an absolute mess. Among the usual bothers, a mother had brought in six kids. Tattered pieces of children's menus and shards of crayons were everywhere.

"Miss?" Marilyn looked up from her moody mopping and saw a sweet old woman at the register. "I'd like to order now." Behind the old woman were three more customers that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Marilyn looked at the empty register and then at the empty restaurant, wondering where the rest of the shift had disappeared to. Her shoulders slumped when she realized she was alone on the floor.

Marilyn gave the bucket a quick kick to push it under the corner table before sprinting across the restaurant and vaulting the latch-closed counter door. She ran behind the counter, sliding the last few feet with expertise born from practice, and said “Yes ma’am, what can I get you?” with a sunny smile, brushing back a few rebellious bangs.

“I’d like a chicken salad sandwich, on the rye bread please,” the senior began immediately as Marilyn rushed to log the order on the antique register. “But make sure the rye isn’t too tough, otherwise I’ll be full all day. And no lettuce please, but spinach instead. And do you have yellow tomatoes?” Marilyn stared like a deer in headlights. “Well, never mind, no tomatoes either way, please. And I’d like fruit cup instead of potato chips. Also, I want a small tea, no sugar. You have free refills, yes?” The woman smiled pleasantly.

Marilyn quickly rang up the order, aware of the impatient customers waiting. “That’ll be \$6.24.”

“Oh no, that can’t be right,” said the woman like she’d just been informed her cat had been run over. “It’s supposed to be \$5.93.” She took out her checkbook and turned the ledger of every single transaction for Marilyn to see. “See? Last Tuesday, I wrote a check for a chicken salad sandwich on rye bread, with spinach instead of lettuce, and the fruit cup and small tea with no sugar, and it cost me \$5.93.”

Marilyn grew worried and confused at the same time. She again brushed her bangs back as she said, “Ma’am, we don’t take checks.”

The old woman went from mortified to disappointed. “Well when do you start such a silly policy?” Behind her, the line was now five customers long. Marilyn was stealing glances at the second register, wondering why none of the others on shift had showed up to help.

“We’ve never taken checks, ma’am,” Marilyn said with an apologetic smile.

“Well of course you do,” the old woman all but declared, like anything to the contrary was just silliness. “I wrote a check last week.” The line was now six people long. “Well, never mind. Just give me what I had last week that was \$5.93” Seven people. The woman bent over the counter, ready to fill out another check. “May I use your pen?”

Marilyn’s jaw just hung open. “Ma’am, I don’t have a pen,” she stammered in astonishment. She glanced to the back, hoping to see someone she could call up for help but it looked like the whole back was empty, kitchen included. When she turned around, the line was nine people long, including several who were storming out, muttering about the poor service.

“Then how am I supposed to fill out my check?” the woman asked Marilyn, like the task was her responsibility.

“Ma’am, we don’t take checks,” Marilyn said, growing frantic.

“Well there’s no need to shout,” said the old woman. “And you’ve got a pen right there,” she said in an accusatory tone, pointing to the black marker in Marilyn’s apron. Marilyn looked down and, absently, handed it over. “No! This is much too thick,” the woman complained at Marilyn. “I need a regular pen.”

“Miss, we’d like to order today,” called someone from the middle of the line to Marilyn.

“Now how much was it?” the old woman asked Marilyn again.

A loud splash silenced the restaurant. It was followed immediately by the ear-splitting howl of a child crying.

In the very center of the restaurant, a young boy of about five stood in sopping clothes, the bucket Marilyn had pushed into the corner overturned over at his feet. As the boy howled like he was being eaten alive, his mother looked away from her

cell phone as if just now realizing her son's condition. She looked accusatorially straight at Marilyn.

Rather than panic, Marilyn just sighed.

"Eli's concussion is healing," explained Dr Hoffman. A stout man with white hair and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt under a white lab coat, he looked like a hippy playing scientist. "But he is nowhere ready to return to any kind of physical activity." Leaning against the bed in the exam room, Jericho was looking through the folder pertaining to Eli. "The problem actually seems to be the injections."

Jericho looked up, suddenly very fixated on the doctor's report. "What do you mean? How can the injections be slowing his recovery? They should be speeding it."

"They are," Hoffman explained, used to Jericho's sudden intensity. He started to cough a little. "They're just doing it inconsistently." He took a hit from an asthma inhaler. "Skeleto-muscular tissue is healing at an almost miraculous rate, but that's actually diverting recovery resources from connective tissue. Right now, if he were to flex too hard, he might tear the muscle right off the bone. And we know this is the case in his brain; we just don't understand how pervasive it is or what the long-term effects might be."

"Doctor," Jericho said, "I appreciate the concern, and the desire for caution, but these are men of action and they—"

"This isn't about tough," the nerd made clear to the jock. "All the first-round test subjects – including Eli – are exhibiting psychological changes as well as physiological changes."

“Those were to be expected when I created this program,” Jericho said. “None of those changes have been beyond the expected and anticipated standards of deviation.”

“No, but they have been inconsistent,” asserted Hoffman. “These men are all at a critical stage as the injections finally take real affect. Eli more than most because of his receptivity to the injections. But a concussion – which is very real and literal brain damage – could have pronounced short-term and maybe long-term effects. Remember, these injections are changing their entire body systems.”

“I am aware,” Jericho said tightly, frustrated at being spoken to like he was a layman.

“This is your project, Jericho,” the doctor said. “And we’re already well outside the bounds of medical procedure. But I cannot sign off, allow, or condone these men being put into the field. Not now, when they’re at such a critical stage. And definitely not Eli,” he added with extra emphasis.

“Noted,” Jericho sighed, unable to think about anything but the sniper.

“You’ve got to be more attentive,” said Marilyn’s manager in a tone like a grandparent talking to an infant. “It was simply careless of you to leave the bucket out in the open like that.”

Standing in the tiny office cluttered with training VHS tapes and motivational audio tapes, Marilyn tried to defend herself. “It was under a table,” she all but pled. “That boy had to pull it out and work to tip it over and dump it all over himself.”

“Miss Marilyn, his mother was very angry,” the manager went on, twitching his cheek so that his bushy mustache swished from side to side. His poorly-colored

mustache matched his meticulously pressed shirt devoid of the slightest food blemishes. “When you have children, are you going to be happy if some careless girl leaves cleaning supplies in the middle of your favorite restaurant?”

Marilyn wanted to object to the assumption she would have kids, but decided she didn’t have the energy. She relented and said with a sigh, “No.”

“And what is our number one rule here?” he asked like a school teacher quizzing an elementary student.

Marilyn said again, trying to not look too despondent. “The customer is always right.”

“The customer is always right, that’s right Miss Marilyn,” he said with a nod, flicking some gunk from his polished shoes. “And you can’t let customers back up like that. You need to be quicker with ringing them up,” he said.

“I was trying,” Marilyn said, unable to give in. “That old woman was being impossible. She insisted on paying by check, and paying the wrong—”

“Then you explain to her that we don’t take checks and ask her to pay a different way,” he said.

“I tried!” Marilyn implored.

“Miss Marilyn, the problem is never the customer,” he quoted to her with condescending certainty. She gave up for the second time in as many minutes. “We’re going to have to get you retrained on the registers, though, so that you don’t let a backup happen like this again.”

“I was trying,” Marilyn argued. “Where was everybody?”

“It was almost noon. It was time for the mid-day shift pow-wow,” he told her, disappointed she didn’t remember.

“And nobody came to get me?” Marilyn asked.

“You were watching the front,” he told her like he was informing her the sun was bright.

“Alone?” she said, gesturing back to the line that had gotten out of control.

Her manager looked disappointed. He sat back in his chair and said, “I thought you were the shift manager.”

Marilyn gave up three times.

There was a subtle, almost imperceptible buzz whenever Jericho used one of the devices. It didn't really bother him; it was just something he noted as he walked up the stairs of the apartment building. He drug his fingers along the wooden banister, feeling the texture of the wood and the chips in the paint. He found himself wondering what life was like walking up and down those steps every day. When he arrived at the fourth floor, most of the lights were off with only the sunlight coming in through the windows at the far ends of the hall.

He turned right at the deliberately antique-looking hall and went to the one door with police tape over it. He used a master key to unlock the door and bent over to get inside without disturbing the tape. His trench coat caught on the tape, forcing him to carry it through.

The apartment didn't look in bad shape, though it stank of dried blood. Immediately through the door was the kitchen. Like the adjacent bathroom, its floor was tiled unlike the hardwood of the rest of the one-bedroom apartment. Jericho peeked into the bedroom and saw the cracked window. A perfect little hole sat in

the middle of the windowpane, jagged cracks like lightning frozen in time extending from the point of penetration.

Jericho's phone began to buzz and almost ring, making noises like it was running out of power. He cursed and took out his phone. The screen was flickering but it showed Phillip calling. Jericho contemplated what to do but decided to answer it. Almost immediately, a strong buzz came through the phone as Jericho said "Yes?", wincing over the alien noises the phone was putting out,

"Where the hell are you, inside of a blender?" Phillip yelled.

"I'm at this morning's shooting," Jericho said. "I'm using one of the devices."

"That explains it," said Phillip. "Find anything of note?"

Jericho shook his head. "No. I didn't expect to, but..." He shook his head. "They're going after our people, Phillip. Whoever this is, they're going after the Brotherhood."

"Think it's the Illuminati?" Phillip asked. Jericho didn't even have a guess to suggest.

The gorgeous evening did little for Marilyn's mood. The afternoon had turned to dusk, with the night rolling in. Marilyn had missed the sunset and could only guess at its spectacular beauty from the remnants she could see from this side of the windows. She sighed as she mopped the floor of the restaurant for the third time that day. Part of her was hoping she'd get the chance to dump the gray, brackish water on some precocious little kid. Those vengeful thoughts made her feel guilty, so she focused on getting every corner of the dining room absolutely spotless.

She stood back from the mop and bucket, looking bitterly at the empty restaurant. Her uniform was filthy, which meant she was going to have to wash it again before she came to work tomorrow. Which would be an entire trip to the washing machines in her dorm. Which would cost even more money and take even more time. Time she was running short on.

The bell over the door jangled with a copper-plated tone and Marilyn stood from her mopping. “Hello,” she said with company-mandated cheerfulness.

The first customer in an hour, he was a tall man who looked like a former football player who still kept in shape. Broad shoulders and thick, strong hands seemed to conflict with his sharp black suit devoid of any tie. He smiled and asked, “I don’t mean to bother. I’m looking for an employee named Marilyn Johnston.”

Marilyn felt a pang of worry as she set the mop to the side. “I’m...” she began to say, but was momentarily petrified of the thought of leaving the bucket of water unattended for even a second. “I’m Marilyn,” she accepted, deciding brats got what they deserved.

“Hi, I’m Jerry Laughton,” he said, shaking her hand. He had a firm grip but not crushing. “I represent the Nobility Initiative,” he told her, putting his hands in his pockets. “We’re a political think tank and watchdog group based up-state. And to put it bluntly, we’re impressed.”

Marilyn blinked. “Wh-what?”

Jerry smiled and stood a little more casually. “Your work – and the work of the World Alliance – got our attention. Breaking the story, connecting the Solaritec VP with possible human traffickers is exactly the grassroots kind of activism and vigilance that the Nobility Initiative is looking to promote.”

Marilyn stared for almost a minute, and then shook it off. She smiled and laughed at the same time, both nervously so. “I...wow. I don’t know what to say. Thank you!”

“Well, hear me out,” he said as a segue. “I, uh, I imagine this isn’t the place to talk.” He looked around at the empty restaurant. “But we have incidences in this area that we need help investigating and we think you’re the ones to do it. And in return, we’re hoping that you will accept sponsorship. And maybe even membership into the Nobility Initiative Network.”

Marilyn laughed again, her eyes watering up with joy. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing right now,” Jerry encouraged her, smiling at her emotionalism. “Just tell me what time you get off work. We can discuss this further.”

Marilyn gestured to the empty nighttime restaurant, devoid of customers or any other front-line workers. “Is now good for you?” she asked with a shrug.

In an unremarkable house down an unremarkable street in an unremarkable suburb, Everett knocked on the green door. He looked to the driveway where the black Charger sat anomalously in the neighborhood of minivans and full-sized sedans. After knocking twice more, Everett sent a text. A moment later, Morgan opened the door. “Hey, what’s up?” Morgan asked. Standing half a foot taller than Everett and considerably heavier, he dwarfed the knight as he took up the whole doorway.

“Hey, I need some help,” Everett said, holding up the city map.

Morgan’s arm dropped from the doorframe and he sighed. “Official consulting hours are every third Tuesday, from never to never.” He turned back into the house and Everett let himself in after him. Through the door was a small but nice living room with a couch facing a big screen television and very neglected video

game systems. A few book shelves were off against the far side of the room that led into the kitchen.

“Look, I just want you to double-check some stuff,” Everett said, getting out of Morgan’s way as he shut the front door and opened another door directly behind it. Morgan led the way through a small vestibule into the control room of a very small recording studio. Three chairs crowded the room without anyone in it and the grey eggshell packaging the covered the walls and ceiling ate all noise. Everett shut the door behind him as Morgan sat down behind the control board. “Just take a look, huh?”

Morgan sighed and accepted the map. He opened it up over the controls and began to read over Everett’s hand-written notes. “This is about the sniper attacks,” he realized, getting a nod from Everett. “You don’t want to get involved in this, Ev,” Morgan warned. “Something this high profile? Even if you guys single-handedly bring him down, the FBI’ll come knocking the very next day.”

Rather than address that assertion, Everett told Morgan “I think the locations of the shootings are sequential. If we can find the pattern...”

“It looks like you’ve identified the pattern,” Morgan said, holding up the map. He drew his finger from one point to the next.

“No I hadn’t,” Everett remarked. “What makes you think it’s going like that?”

“That’s how you draw a pentacle,” Morgan said. He took a pen and drew a star on the corner of the map. “7 o’clock, 12 o’clock, 5, 10, 2, back to 7 o’clock.”

“So you think this is a star?” Everett asked.

Morgan looked at the placement of the locations and seemed less-than-certain. “If it is, it’s an ugly-ass star.” He sat back, considering the theory with more seriousness.

Everett let him think for a few moments, then looked around at the ill-lit recording studio. “You excited about seeing Sydney next week?”

“Very,” said Morgan in a tone Everett couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or gloomily honest.

Everett nodded. He ventured hesitantly, “You think you’ll ask her out again?”

“Oh yeah,” Morgan said with knock eagerness. “She and I can go out on a date with you and Marilyn.”

Everett threw up his hands. “Good god, does everybody know about her?”

“Yes,” said Morgan flatly. He stared at the map for a moment longer and decided, “Look, if I were a betting man – and I’d like to point out that I’m not – I’d say you’ve got some idiot that’s killing people in an arrangement derived from a geometric symbol. Figure out which symbol and you’ll likely be able to predict where the next shooting will take place.”

“Great,” said Everett, accepting the folded map back. “Just got to figure out which geometric shape this crack pot is using.”

“Well, you’re one step closer,” Morgan said, going back to his work. “At least your one step closer than you were yesterday. Imagine where you’ll be tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Everett grumbled. “But each delay means more deaths. I’m worried who might caught in the crossfire waiting for tomorrow.”

Under the hanging light over one of the tables nearest the register and over cups of sweet tea, Marilyn and Jerry talked shop. “I was majoring in journalism, but

most of the classes were more about broadcasting and citation methods than investigations. When I asked the professors about that, they seemed to think that we'd learn how to investigate on the job. That or when we got our masters in journalism," Marilyn told Jerry. "There really seemed to be this common assumption that, if you were serious, you were getting your masters." She shrugged comically. "I mean, why wouldn't you? It's not like people have a finite amount of money, or that they think a bachelors is enough to do the job or anything." Jerry smirked sympathetically. "So I switched to non-profit for a semester, and then finally business management." She shrugged and toyed with her straw. "I dunno." She laughed self-consciously and asked "What was the question?"

"What's your major?" Jerry reminded her, both of them laughing. "Well, I got my degree in sports science, if that makes you feel any better. I was going to be a doctor, and then a personal trainer, and then..." He just shrugged. The late thirty-something confided casually to her, "In a lot of ways, I'm still not sure what I want to be when I grow up." More laughing from both of them. "There's something to be said for the people who do, rather than worry about learning how to do, you know?" he said, a little more seriously now. "I mean, I'm not saying education isn't important, but I feel like maybe we've gotten a little too fixated on proving we know something rather than actually demonstrating that we know something." He chuckled. "Does that make sense?"

Marilyn nodded. "It does, yeah." Jerry sighed, clearly shifting intellectual gears. He glanced into the kitchen, just barely visible through the window between it and the register counter. Able to tell he was wondering where the other employees were, Marilyn told Jerry, "Jeff and Dale are in the freezer, getting high." Jerry seemed amused by her certainty. "We rarely get customers after sundown. They've already cleaned the kitchen." She shrugged. "I guess they think, why not?"

"I never got weed myself," Jerry remarked offhandedly. "Anyway, here's the thing," he told Marilyn. "We have intelligence that says that the material components needed for making a nuclear reactor are going to pass through this

city.” Marilyn’s jaw dropped. “The intelligence is good,” Jerry assured her. “But we, quite simply, do not have the manpower to follow this lead. And definitely not on the ground level needed to root it out and track it down.” He gestured to Marilyn. “That’s where we need the World Alliance. We think you guys can track this down for us, hopefully before anything passes through the city, on its way to god-knows-where.”

Marilyn seemed stunned. “Find it, find evidence, anything,” Jerry said. “Get the story out there. You guys get all the credit, we just...we just...if the material components for a nuclear reactor can be shipped across mainland USA? That just smacks of unadulterated corruption on a nation-wide scale. We HAVE to expose that.”

“I agree,” said Marilyn. “And, I mean, it makes sense that they’d come through here. Corruption of one type makes it easier for other types. Once you turn your head for one thing, like human trafficking, it gets easier to do it for others.”

“The catch is, you have to move on this quickly,” Jerry said. “Our intelligence says this is happening in the next month, if not the next few weeks.”

Marilyn nodded, already plotting out ideas. “That soon.” She kept nodding. “Yeah, I think we can help. The World Alliance has six members right now, but I think I might know of a few others in the city who can be called on in a pinch in the name of a good cause. Plus, since we’re already looking into the human trafficking in the city, it will be easy to cover the same ground.”

Jerry looked slightly concerned. “Marilyn, we will need you to put at aside. Come back to it. A nuclear reactor? That takes precedence.”

“We can’t,” she said. “We have to, you know, strike while the iron’s hot and stuff. This guy at Solaritec is just the tip of the iceberg, for human trafficking and it seems like Solaritec’s involvement in illegal goings-on as well.” She shook her head

and smiled apologetically. “I’m happy to investigate this reactor-thing as well, but we cannot drop the investigation into human trafficking.”

Jerry seemed disappointed. He sighed a little heavier than Marilyn thought was necessary but he slowly nodded, seeming to come around. “I guess I understand,” he said with a shrug. “It’s your pet project.” Having the fight against human trafficking called a pet project irked Marilyn but she tried not to let on. “And you don’t want to let go. Plus you want to see it finished. I guess I get it.” Marilyn wanted to inform him how much ‘him getting it’ mattered to her but she sipped her sweat tea instead.

Jerry looked around at the store and remarked “You weren’t kidding about no more customers, were you?”

“No,” Marilyn agreed, swishing her lips back and forth as she also looked around the often-empty sandwich shop. “In fact, we need to close up.”

“It’s after dark,” said Jerry. “Do you have a ride back to your place?”

“My boyfriend’s supposed to be here to walk with me back to campus. I guess he forgot,” Marilyn said, sounded annoyed and also used to the annoyance.

“I parked near campus,” said Jerry. “If you’re more or less ready to go, I don’t mind walking you back to campus.”



—Now—

“Oh my god, woman, you can’t be this dumb,” Morgan interrupted.

“Oh shut up,” Marilyn groaned from the backseat like she was getting lectured by her father.

“Seriously, Mar,” Everett concurred. Morgan mouthed ‘Mar’, looking over at Everett.

“Both of you, hush,” she said, more harshly than seemed necessary. “A really handsome guy found me, offered to support my dream, and was being nice to me.”

“Nicer than your boyfriend,” Everett said.

Marilyn glared at Everett through the seat and warned, “Don’t go there.”



—11 Days Ago—

“It’s really starry tonight,” Marilyn remarked as she and Jerry walked together. The campus seemed unusually quiet and still, with only the nighttime breeze stirring the trees that stood tall in the frequent pockets of grass. The buildings weren’t too close together, with green spaces of grass and a tree or two sprinkled all throughout the campus. Marilyn was walking with her book bag over her right shoulder, still in her uniform from the sandwich shop. She kept looking up

at the sky and smiling. There seemed to be magic in the air and in the breeze and in the stars themselves.

“Hard to believe there’s a killer out there,” Jerry remarked, also looking up at the sky as though infatuated. He then laughed and stopped. “Oh god, what an awful thing to say.”

“Yeah, a little bit,” Marilyn said with a smile, stopping as well. Jerry stood with his hands in his pockets and looked at Marilyn. He shook his head like he couldn’t believe she existed. “What?” she asked with a self-conscious giggle.

“You,” Jerry said. He shrugged and said, “You’re amazing.” Marilyn blushed and laughed, brushing her bangs back nervously. “You are, in so many ways, exactly the kind of person we want.”

“In the, uh, Nobility Institute?” she asked, all smiles.

Jerry shook his head. “No.” Marilyn’s smile faded just a little. “Honestly, if you hadn’t compromised Phillip, we probably would have let you live.” As he spoke, Raphael pulled his hands from his pockets and turned a dial on his watch. A strange, high-pitched squeal went through Marilyn’s ears and the campus that had seemed so still before seemed positively devoid of all life now. “Please don’t run,” he asked of Marilyn, like she would be doing him a kindness. “I’d rather you go looking peaceful than with signs of a struggle.”

Marilyn let her backpack fall from her shoulder and hit the ground. She didn’t back away or say anything at all. “Good,” said Raphael, seeming even more impressed. “It’s rare when someone accepts their fate.” He reached for Marilyn, as though to snap her neck with one quick motion. He didn’t expect her to grab his hand and twist his wrist. Pinning his arm behind his back, she turned him around as she locked a painful wrist-and-arm lock. He winced and lowered a little. “Really? An Aikido lock?” he said in a disappointed but pained grumble.

She torqued his wrist, making him wince more. “It’s kung fu, Jerry.”

He sighed, rolling his eyes in disappointment. “God, no one cares.” He exploded against the lock and knocked Marilyn off her feet. She hit the pavement of the sidewalk and practically bounced into the grass. “There’s a point of diminishing returns when it comes to all techniques,” said Raphael, just before kicking the downed Marilyn in the stomach. She howled in pain and was knocked into a sapling that shook at the impact. “The best submission hold in the world just doesn’t work against someone that much stronger than you.” He kicked her again, making her scream again. “Sorry to burst your little bubble but a hundred-year-old master is NOT beating a three-hundred-pound linebacker who knows his stuff.” Instead of kicking her, Raphael pulled up his foot and stomped her into the ground. “A hundred-pound yellow belt little girl against me?” He just laughed. “I almost feel bad for this.”

Marilyn managed to lunge at him, punching him in the leg. Missing the knee she was aiming for, she hit him in the middle of his thigh. She scrambled unevenly to her feet as he stumbled back half a step. “Got some fight still in you, huh?” he asked, amused. He began to bob his hands in a pseudo-defensive stance. “Okay.” He spun so quickly, Marilyn didn’t realize he’d thrown a kick until it connected just above her navel. She felt like she’d been hit with a car. She slammed into the tree and collapsed like dead weight onto the grass. “Accept it, little girl,” Raphael told her, approaching.

Tears of frustration and pain welling up in her eyes, Marilyn saw her own blood on the grass. Hating herself for fear and blaming herself for her own uselessness, she jumped to her feet and ran away. “Oh come on!” Raphael yelled after her. “Have the courage to die with some damn dignity!” he yelled, running after her.

Marilyn ran to the first building she could find and cut around the edge of it. She rushed for the first door she saw, only to find it locked. She didn’t waste time trying to force it and instead ran. She contemplated calling for help but couldn’t

bring herself to. She didn't know if it was due to fear, certainty of futility, or shame. So she ran, looking for any sign of life.

The campus was dark and still, with only the wind the reminder that she was anywhere but a bad dream. Street lamps dotted the night, halfway between her and the stars. Windows in the buildings were occasionally lit but without any sign of life to accompany the light. The streets that crisscrossed through the campus were untraveled. The sidewalks were devoid of even one single pedestrian. The whole of the campus was dead silent and perfectly still, like a stage set without end, the cast absent.

Marilyn stopped, mid-run. She looked around and saw nothing she could use as a weapon, so she turned around and waited as Raphael closed. As he drew near, he slowed. He instinctively glanced around, seeing no help for her coming from any direction. "What's this?" he asked her.

Marilyn took up an offensive stance, her hands held up and ready. He laughed at her, amused like he was looking at a kitten trying to take down a Rottweiler. He strolled right to her and punched her in the face. Her nose was bloodied badly and she screamed, stumbling back. "This really can go so much easier." He punched again and she managed to parry it. She punched him but the blow had little effect. He elbowed her in the side of the head and she stumbled further back. He swung with a huge, overhead strike and Marilyn ducked out of the way. She kicked Raphael in the side of the leg and used that to get close, entangling his arm. "Not a bad plan," he told her before grabbing her hair and tearing her off his arm by the scalp. He threw her away when something registered. Something was different. He looked down at Marilyn just in time to hear a loud metal crack. Panting through a bloodied nose, Marilyn held up his watch that she'd just broken it against the pavement.

Raphael went from impressed to annoyed. "Bad move, little girl. That wasn't wise."

“If I had a nickel...” she gasped before she scrambled to her feet to run.

There was a difference in the air now. Little ambient sounds were carried on the wind, like cars in the distance, radios, TVs, conversations. Life. Marilyn began screaming again. “Help!” she cried at the top of her burning lungs as she ran. “Help me!” She turned a corner and stumbled into several guys smelling of cheap beer. “Help!” she yelled, pushing through them. The college men all turned as Raphael caught up with her. “He’s trying to kill me!” Marilyn yelled.

“Police business,” he told them without even breaking stride.

Marilyn’s heart sank as she already began to back away. She turned and kept running, Raphael closing in, the chase leaving the group of confused guys behind.

Marilyn made it to one of the major streets that crossed through campus and saw a blue light half a block away. The emergency phone sang to her and she ran as fast as she could for it. She almost made it but a few steps shy, Raphael grabbed her trailing hair and snapped her down. Her feet continued forward while the rest of her came to an abrupt and sudden stop. Practically thrown supine in the air, she was slammed into the sidewalk. She hit hard and everything came to a standstill. The stars overhead were swirling and she couldn’t breathe.

Raphael appeared over her. He smirked and shook his head. “You know,” he told her, just slightly out of breath as she tried in vain to catch hers. “It’s a shame. It’s a shame that you—”

Armand tackled Raphael.

With the size difference, it was like a Porsche slamming into a pickup truck. Armand had been at full sprint, though, and he managed to knock Raphael entirely across Marilyn and into the grass. Marilyn tried to cry out, or even just cry with relief, but all she could do was choke on her own breathlessness.

Raphael got to his feet first but Armand flipped up into a crouch like he was in an action movie. Raphael punched at him but Armand parried the punch and kicked Raphael in the shin, then spun around to kick him again so hard, it took Raphael completely off his feet.

Just as Marilyn finally managed to take a shallow, painful breath, Ledger appeared over her. He grabbed the waistband of her uniform skirt. Marilyn tried to scream but Ledger lifted up, picking Marilyn up entirely off the ground, her feet and head dangling below her waist. She suddenly inhaled painfully and began to cough.

Ledger dropped Marilyn a little unceremoniously and turned as Armand squared off with Raphael. Standing in ankle-high grass against a subtle sloping hill, Raphael swung for Armand. The young knight blocked the punch, punched Raphael in the stomach, then turned into him and kicked up between Raphael's legs. The bigger man stumbled back and Armand skipped into a hard kick right to the bigger man's face, knocking him out. "Whoo!" Armand yelled like he'd just won the world championship. "Did you see that? Did you see THAT?!?!" He did a series of celebratory flexes.

"Shut up, dufus," Ledger said, sparing a second to check on Marilyn. "Marilyn, you alright?" He knelt down and felt her breath, then checked her pulse. "You with me?" She began to sit up and he helped her. She looked over at Raphael who was beginning to stir. "Do you need an ambulance?" Ledger asked.

"He tried to kill me," she breathed.

Raphael awoke with a start, surprised and confused for a moment. Armand bounced on his toes, ready for round two. Raphael looked at Marilyn and Ledger on the sidewalk and started to back away. "Uh-uh, son," Ledger told Raphael, just before drawing out a sawed-off shotgun. He didn't cock it or aim it at Raphael, simply held it ready. "You're either gonna talk to the cops or you're gonna take a round of buckshot to the face." Armand confirmed that point by walking around Raphael, trying to cut off his route of escape.

Raphael seemed to consider his options, apparently leaning a little eagerly towards round two as much as Armand. Armand had a thought and took out his phone. “What’s your name?” he asked as he snapped a picture of Raphael. Ledger looked at Armand like he was crazy. “I’m Armand,” he said as he checked the picture. “We’ve got a time-stamped picture of you at the scene of a...” When he looked up, Raphael was running away. “Maaaaan....”

Armand looked back at Marilyn and Ledger, both of whom were staring dumbfounded at him. “The hell is your problem, dumbass?” Ledger exclaimed, standing up like Marilyn wasn’t even there.

“Everett did it,” Armand griped, looking through his phone. “When we checked out that shooting at the gas station.”

As Ledger and Armand bickered, Marilyn worked to catch her breath. She ended up spitting out a mouthful of blood. She waved pleasantly to a car that drove by, the driver clearly unconcerned with a woman lying bleeding on the pavement. She stood up with some pain and dusted off her torn and ripped uniform. She tapped her lip, seeing the blood draining down her chin. Ledger and Armand noticed her standing and their fighting was forgotten. “Hey, you okay?” Ledger asked.

“No!” Marilyn sobbed at him. She took a heavy breath to keep from breaking down entirely. Her whole body ached as she approached the emergency phone she’d been heading towards. She looked in the reflective casing, mortified by her reflection. Despite the blue tint, it gave her a clear view of a young woman who had been physically ruined. Her chestnut-brown hair was stained with blood and she was bleeding from her nose and split lip. She had bad scrapes on just about every corner of exposed skin, of which there was a lot more thanks to the numerous tears and rips in her uniform. Every time she swallowed, she tasted blood and her stomach was in full revolt.

In a strange daze, Marilyn began to brush her hair with her fingers. Armand and Ledger looked at each other, neither sure what to do. “Do you need us to call the police?” Armand asked.

Marilyn stared at her bloodied and beaten reflection, unsure who it was she was looking at. “I thought...” She looked like one big scraped-up bruise. “I don’t remember Scarlett Johansson or Ming-Na getting beaten up this bad.” She nearly sobbed when she spoke. She fought to swallow her emotions as well as more blood.

“Yeah, movies make getting a beating look sexy,” said Ledger. He took out a pen light as he approached. Marilyn recoiled from him but he shone the light in Marilyn’s eyes. “Ain’t nothing sexy about getting an ass-whipping.” Off went the light. “I don’t see any signs of a concussion. I think you’re okay. Relatively speaking, of course.” He smirked as he stepped back. “Spend less time on forms and more time sparring, huh?”

“Now that I know a knight teaches some of the classes, I’ll do that,” she said. She yawned, the veil of fear beginning to fade, making way for near-crippling exhaustion that hit like a tidal wave. But with it came paranoia at every sound and light. In every patch of shadow, she knew Raphael was lurking. “I don’t know how I’m this tired and this awake at the same time.”

“We need to get you home,” Armand said. “Or to the cops, so you can file a report.”

“I’m right over there,” Marilyn said sleepily, her voice shaking. She pointed at a nearby dorm with a finger whose nail had broken vertically all the way to the cuticle. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep for a week.”

“Go to bed,” Ledger urged her. The three made way as some others came down the sidewalk, ignoring or oblivious to Marilyn’s obvious state. “Your body will know what to do,” Ledger encouraged her. “And we can hang out for a bit if you like.”

“No,” she rejected almost unwillingly as they began walking to the dorm. “My boyfriend wouldn’t like that. He was supposed to walk me home.” Both Ledger and Armand wanted to say something but they both kept quiet. They reached the dorm and Marilyn, very painfully, ascended the short set of steps to the door. She slid her ID card and opened the door inside. “Thanks again,” she told them before disappearing into the dorm.

.....

—Now—

Marilyn was looking out the window of Morgan’s car. “Victor called me before I could even get into bed,” she recalled. “He found my bookbag and brought it to the dorm.”

“Why was he late, meeting you at your work?” asked Everett.

Marilyn shook her head. “He didn’t really have a reason. Just running late.” She looked down at her hands. “He didn’t call because he was trying to catch up with me.” She smirked. “Kind of romantic, I guess.”

Morgan glanced between Everett and Marilyn, unhappy with the tension in the car. “Was that the first time you got beat up?”

“Since first grade, yeah,” Marilyn recalled. “I thought taking kung fu would help.”

“To be honest, it sounds like it did,” Morgan told her.

“Not enough,” Marilyn lamented.



—11 Days Ago—

With a roar of powerful engines and a rush of hot metallic air, the private jet touched down on the small, private runway. Its wheels skipped and skidded with high-pitched squeals as it quickly powered down and began to taxi towards the single-building terminal. Before the tiny building, a limousine waited with four men standing before it. The thick night was full of the call of insects in the woods beyond the airport.

Before the small jet had come to a complete stop, the door on the side popped open and began to lower, forming stairs to descend to the ground. Out stepped a young man in a black suit, two large suitcases in his hands. His feet touched the tarmac about the time the jet’s forward momentum truly came to a stop. “Good evening gentlemen,” he said over the quieting engines, putting down the suitcases. “I’m called Aaron.” He began shaking hands with each of the four men, getting their names in the process; Errol, Ian, Orson, and Uriel.

“Gentlemen,” Aaron warned loudly, “as you know, I am the head of the Brotherhood of the Sun’s Investigators’ Clan. I have been called down here from Toronto to get things in order. You are helping me. And we will be digging deep into the goings-on of powerful and ambitious people. We will not be liked. We will

not be welcome. And by digging into the past and the present, we will not make friends. Any of you want out, now's the time. Believe me, I understand, no hard feelings. I've seen friendships and marriages end over this work."

He waited a beat and looked at the four individually, then collectively. When they remained standing there, waiting for orders, Aaron nodded and said, "Alright, let's get to it."



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