

# Red Moon Rising

## Part 06 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 06 of 30

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“People sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

- Richard Grenier, *Perils of Passive Sex* (misattributed to George Orwell)

—9 Days Ago—

Rain droplets were glowing on the windshield, lit by the lights of passing cars. It had rained heavily during the night, but now it had momentarily calmed and was mostly drizzling. The perpetual tap on the windows and roof was like a drum beat.

Sitting in the passenger’s seat of Morgan’s car, Everett thought about a drum beating into war. He looked up into the dark, pre-morning skies. A distant roll of lightning crossed through the sky, illuminating tremendous depth and texture in the deep clouds, turning the blackness into purple and blue for an instant only. Thunder followed immediately thereafter.

Everett took out his phone and texted Roland, asking where he was. He responded just an instant later, saying, “Right behind you.”

Everett looked ahead as cars drove by, like they were escaping from where the knights were heading. He instinctively wrung his hands around the handle of his cheap katana that rested against his leg. He looked over at Morgan who drank from his coffee cup, driving in silence. “Do you have your sword with you?” Everett asked.

Morgan nodded. "It's in the trunk."



—Now—

"Why were you driving?" asked Marilyn. Morgan glanced back at her from the driver's seat. "Why were you even there? You're not a knight anymore."

"Yeah," he agreed, a little cynically. "I wonder myself sometimes how I get tangled up in their little misadventures."

"Well, it's worth noting that we did want a civilian present," Everett said. "And somebody who knows how to keep their head down is always useful." Morgan couldn't tell if Everett was speaking honestly or belittling him. Marilyn couldn't tell either.

"Anyway," said the former knight, settling forward. "I do have the best car – despite what Roland says – so if there ended up being a high-speed chase or something, we'd have a, they'd have a contingency plan."

"A contingency plan," said Marilyn. "I'm still not clear what Plan A is."

"What's always Plan A for knights?" Everett asked rhetorically. "Walk up to our foe, explain the situation, and go from there. Though punching usually follows in short order."

Morgan looked through the rear view mirror at Marilyn. "Starting to see why you shouldn't be taking notes from these guys?"

"What?" Everett protested. "Is it really so crazy to NOT attack from behind? Is it really so crazy to give your foe the chance to ready themselves?"

"If your enemy drops his gun, you don't give him the chance to pick it back up," Morgan argued. Marilyn realized she had ring-side seats for yet another battle in an unending war between the two.

"Muster everything you've got," Everett told Morgan. "We'll beat it. Once you start trying to exploit the shortcomings of an enemy instead of fighting him at his best, it's a slippery slope to knifing guys in the back, poisoning them, and strangling them in their sleep."

"Exploiting weaknesses is the very basis of intelligent fighting!" Morgan exclaimed. He gestured at Everett and summed up his entire point with "Judo!"

"We have to meet on equal footing," Everett maintained. "Once they've mustered their best, then they know they've been truly defeated, not merely tricked." He settled into the passenger's seat. "They know the fight's coming. They know the numbers. They can have the chance to choose the place and the weapon. They get to set the stakes. Anything less would be unfair. Unfair, unjust, and simply not right." Morgan shook his head, staying quiet. He wasn't conceding the point so much as losing interest in this most recent round of the long-standing fight.

"Anyway," Everett said, facing forward into the morning. "Plan A was show up at the site where we expected the shooter to be, find him, and confront him before he could kill anyone else. From there, we'd already worked out the contingencies. That's something I think we excel at," he said with some pride. "I can't recall a time we were ever truly caught off-guard or without some kind of option or plan."

"What contingencies are you guys prepared for?" asked Marilyn.

Everett answered simply, “All of them.”

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—9 Days Ago—

A black Charger and a red Camaro pulled into diagonal parking spaces on opposite sides of the street. Everett and Morgan got out of the Charger; Roland, Ledger, and Armand getting out of the Camaro. They were all looking up into the rain-soaked pre-dawn sky. The clouds still rumbled from time to time and the drizzling rain fell in tiny slashes like imperfections in an old movie reel.

The buildings were much taller than other parts of the city. Veritable skyscrapers, some disappeared into the low and dark rain clouds. The only sense of openness came from the large construction site the size of a city block. Red earth and construction vehicles sat idle in the rain. The half-completed skeleton of a building already stood a dozen stories tall. “Gee, I wonder where he might be,” Roland said sarcastically, looking up at the structure of girders and concrete.

The four knights and Morgan converged on the entrance to the construction site, a handful of cars passing them in early morning. “I think this is it,” Everett said with cynical confidence, looking up at the skyscraper-to-be. He pushed on the chain link gate, finding it easy to pry open enough to slip inside.

“Not a bad vantage,” Ledger was saying as he adjusted his baggy pullover jacket. “Weather aside, you can probably get a headshot on any of these

buildings.” He pointed at the metropolitan area around them. “Plenty of escape routes too.”

“Yeah, but can he find eight victims?” speculated Roland, pointing at the office floors whose windows were more dark than light. Ledger only shrugged.

Checking behind them, Morgan noticed, “No cops that I see.”

“Think he’s already here?” asked Armand, at the rear.

“He’s either already here, or he’s at another site,” said Everett. “This place wasn’t chosen at random but it was chosen from several options.” He sighed, getting into business mode as he turned around to the others. Except for Morgan, they all wore red shirts against otherwise black apparel. “Ledger, I want you and Roland staying at the base here. Try to keep an eye on the entire site, but focus on this entrance. Armand,” he said to the youngest knight. “Sorry, buddy, but you get perimeter again.” Armand looked ready to protest. “Circumnavigate this block, on both sides of the street. Clockwise, counterclockwise, change it up. But if Roland and Ledger miss something, it’s up to you.” Everett looked at Morgan. “Stay awake.”

“I make no promises,” he yawned.

“And you?” asked Roland, speaking up over a car driving by.

Everett looked up at the half-constructed building and said, “I’m going up there.”

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—Now—

“Okay, so, hold on,” Marilyn interrupted. She sat forward between the seats so she could look right at Everett. “Explain to me why it’s okay for you to go charging into danger and not me.”

Everett said without hesitation, “Because I have black belts in Judo and Iaido. I’ve had sixteen amateur boxing matches and one pro fight; all wins with eleven KOs. I passed a Marine mini-boot camp when I was sixteen, which is also when I swore to the Oath of Chivalry. I’m technically a certified bounty hunter in this state...although I think my license has lapsed...point is, I’ve contributed to the subduing and arrest of over twenty violent criminals. Plus,” he added like it was both an afterthought and a supreme qualification, “I carry a sword.”

“Those twenty-dollar wall hangars you buy at the flea market are barely swords,” Morgan quipped.

“They’re long pieces of metal with a handle and a sharp blade,” said Everett.

“They’re stainless steel trash meant to impress people who know nothing about swords,” Morgan grumbled.

“And I know a lot about swords, which makes it plausibly deniable that I’d have crap like that,” he said. “Plus, they’re twenty bucks, if that. They’re cheap, plentiful, and easy to replace. So if I have to use one, it’s no sweat off my brow if I toss it.”

“Touché,” Morgan conceded.

Marilyn got the conversation back on track. “So because you’re a super combat badass, you can—”

“Go into combat, yes,” Everett said with finality. “I’m all for ambition to change the world,” he told her. “But ambition without preparation is nothing but a recipe for disaster.”

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—9 Days Ago—

“I feel like a sitting duck,” Roland said, standing in the middle of the construction site. The light rain was pouring gently over the muddy area while he and Ledger stood around, quickly scanning the area around the wide-open space of the site.

“I think that’s the idea,” Ledger muttered to himself, watching the giant construction instruments as they sat ominously in the rain. “We’re supposed to be decoys or whatever for the sniper.” He looked up to the sky, to gravel clouds ominously close above. “Which is fine with me,” he added, his shotgun held calmly in his hand as he paced around the bulldozer. “I just want one good crack at this guy.”

“You may get it,” Roland said cryptically, looking around in the rain.

“He’s only really got two viable targets,” said Ledger, pointing out away from the construction site. “That café, which I might add, is damn-near empty.” He turned and pointed to the north. “And that bank in the skyscraper, which is pretty busy, for a Thursday morning, but it’s well-protected.”

“Yeah, but this is downtown. Things’ll pick up and if he handles things like usual, he shouldn’t shoot for another hour or something,” Roland said, checking his watch as he spoke. He nervously itched the handle of his katana. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Morgan standing in the very center of the construction site, his eyes scanning the building tops. Dressed in black, with a dark green shirt, he stood out harshly against the crimson ground.

Armand returned to the construction site and ducked under the fence to get inside. He spared Morgan a disdainful look, one which Morgan either ignored or was oblivious to. Being ignored by the former knight seemed to irritate Armand even more. “What’s his problem?” he asked of the two older knights.

“He thinks we’re antiquated and unnecessary,” Roland said dismissively. “He thinks we’re too dangerous.”

“He’s right about that,” Ledger said, cocking his shotgun with distaste. He looked back at Armand. “Never mind him, kid. Just keep your eyes open.”

“He just gets under my skin,” the youngest knight said, standing up fully now, his raincoat forming tightly around his long sword at his side.

Sometime around the fourth floor straight up the metal ladder, rattling in the heavy wind, Everett began to worry less about the sniper and more about the lightning. The skies had remained featureless and dark, had there hadn’t been any flashes of light that didn’t come from passing cars. All the same, he heard the clouds rumbling overhead like angry gods. He kept looking up as he climbed, past the inevitable end of the building and into the heavens themselves. A sense of vertigo, as physical as it was existential, set into Everett and his climbing slowed.

He paused there for a moment, on the ladder inside the circular cage-like tube that surrounded him. It was more a guard rail than anything truly encompassing. It did little against the wind that had been trivial on the ground but

up here felt like it would blow the world away. Everett breathed deliberately and slowly, systematically removing sounds and stimuli from his consciousness until he was aware of only the ladder and the climb. A simple act, now that he ignored the wind and the storm, he resumed his ascent.

Everett reached the top of the ladder and the top of the functional construction. A floor of cement awaited, a patchwork of openings that dropped all the way through the incomplete building down to the muddy ground below. Some girders were set up, like some tribute or imitation of a temple of the ancient world. And it was in one of those spaces, that pseudo-indoor section of the apex of the building, that Everett saw Eli.

The young sniper had his back to Everett. He was dressed in the black suits that had become familiar to Everett and the others. He was sitting alone, his legs crossed. He was looking through a pair of binoculars, a black brief case to his right, the familiar sawed-off rifle to his left. Everett reached into his trench coat when he heard Eli speak.

“I’ve got two targets, sir, nothing more,” said Eli. Everett realized he was speaking into a cell phone. “There are no groups, sir. None nearing the size required by the ritual.” Everett could hear fear in Eli’s voice. Desperation. Part of Everett felt bad for him. Not a large enough part to keep him from drawing his sword.

Eli’s head whirled around when he heard Everett’s sword leave its scabbard. Fear became terror and he was still. Everett readied the stainless steel katana and said, “Step away from the weapons.”

Eli stared over his shoulder at Everett for just a second. “You’re the guy from the other night,” Eli called over the wind. “The one with the girl.”

“Put your hands in the air and step away from the weapons,” Everett called, approaching slowly, broadening and narrowing his stance with each step as he would approach a foe on a sparring mat. “If you do not do so, I will—”

Eli flicked his hand at the black case on his right, sending it sliding across the cement. Everett reacted defensively, giving Eli the time he needed to grab up his rifle and stand. He spun around at Everett and fired a shot but the knight had closed the distance. Everett slashed at the gun with his katana, knocking it off aim and sending the shot into the wind-swept air.

“What the hell was that?” Armand exclaimed, looking around.

“That was a rifle,” Ledger shouted, rushing over the muddy ground towards the building. Roland was right behind him.

As they ran, however, Morgan was already halfway towards the building and walking slowly. “You guys don’t need to hurry,” he said, looking over at the running knights. “Everett’s got everything pretty well under control.”

Everett punched Eli in the face again, drawing out more blood. But Eli rebounded quickly, kicking Everett in the legs before hopping up and kicking with the force of a mule with both legs. Hitting Everett square in the chest, he sent the knight flying back.

Everett slammed hard into a steel girder. He landed towards the edge, out in the drizzling rain. He glanced back over his shoulder, at the distant ground that seemed hundreds of feet below.

Eli fired again with his rifle and Everett dodged with a quick roll. Up to his feet, Everett backed defensively behind a girder as Eli tried and failed to get a bead

on him. Everett waited for the next shot, only to be surprised when Eli came around the girder with a wild swing. Everett ducked and slipped away and Eli followed with a kick.

Everett dodged back from the kick and jabbed his sword at Eli's chest but Eli narrowly dodged, letting the sword blade pass between his arm and his torso. He clamped his arm down on Everett's sword blade and came around from the other side, elbowing at Everett's head. Everett absorbed the blow with his right arm curled up against his head, then wrapped his arm around Eli's neck. His other hand holding his sword handle, he couldn't lock in the one-armed choke hold. Instead, he pivoted on his toes and turned the incomplete choke into a throw. Eli was taken off his feet and slammed onto the cement. The rifle went sliding across the rooftop in the opposite direction as the case.

Despite the ferocity of the landing, Eli kicked at Everett the instant he hit the ground. Everett caught his foot and stabbed down at him with the katana. Eli dodged and the blade of the katana chipped, the tip breaking off. Eli kicked again and Everett threw the katana over the side of the building and grabbed Eli's other leg in the same motion. With both feet in hand, Everett stomped Eli in the stomach.

At the base of the building, Roland and Ledger watched as Everett's katana came swinging out of the rainy darkness. The sword stabbed into the wet mud with heavy finality, not far from Roland. "Ev found the sniper," he announced casually.

The stomp hurt Eli but not enough to keep him from countering. He wrapped his legs around Everett's leg, entangling it completely. He rolled onto his stomach, which forced Everett to fall onto his. Eli came up to his feet first and ran, leaping over a square hole in the cement. He jumped at his case and threw it open, revealing a large sniper rifle broken down into pieces. Taking out the principle piece and leaving the other attachments behind, he slammed in the magazine. He cocked the gun and turned to fire on Everett, only to be hit across the face with a punch that felt like it would rend steel.

Eli crumpled against the blow, the gun falling from his hand. Everett kicked the gun away and turned back around to Eli. The weather was worsening, the drizzle turning into full rain, pelting them both. Everett knelt down onto Eli, pinning his chest to the ground with his knee. "Surrender!" Everett yelled over the wind and rain. "Or so help me, I will throw you off this thing."

Eli muscled himself out from under Everett's knee and got to his feet, his hands up defensively. Everett rose as well, standing neutral but ready. Eli jabbed at Everett and the knight swatted the punch away, rebounding with a jab of his own to Eli's jaw. He followed with a body blow to the sniper's stomach, and finished with an elbow across his chin.

Eli was knocked off his feet and scrambled away from Everett. He got back up to his feet, his hands up again. Like his clothes, his face and hair were both soaking wet from the rain. His eyes shone with fear but he seemed determined to not run from Everett. He swung wide at Everett and the knight simply slid back just enough for the punch to miss him by an inch. He caught Eli in the chest with a jab and followed with a fierce punch to the same spot. The strike connected but Eli managed to catch Everett's hand on the recoil and pinned his arm in an arm bar. Everett quickly leaned forward so he could bend his elbow into the hold. He grabbed Eli's hand and torqued it into a wrist lock that forced Eli to stumble forward a step. Everett used that to sweep Eli off his feet. Eli fell but managed to drop kick Everett's legs in the process, both of them hitting the wet cement at the same time.

Rather than stand, Eli scrambled on all fours for his rifle on the far side of the top of the construction. Everett got up and chased after him. As Eli picked up the gun, he threw his feet around ahead of him, sliding across the wet cement right into a nearby hole. He slipped down through the hole and his momentum carried him past the hole on the next level and onto solid ground. Everett slowed on his approach over the hole, only for Eli to fire up at him. Everett backed away and Eli ran for the very ladder Everett had used to climb up. He swung out onto the ladder, the wind

sending his suit jacket whipping around him. He began to descend the ladder frantically, leaving Everett at the top of the building looking down.

“I guess that’s the sniper,” said Roland as he and Ledger looked up to the top of the building.

“Whoever he is, he’s hauling ass,” Ledger said.

Roland considered their options and asked, “You got solid slugs in there?” He looked down at Ledger’s shotgun.

“Solid slugs? Aren’t those illegal?” Armand balked. Morgan rolled his eyes.

“Can you take down a section of the ladder?” Roland asked Ledger. Ledger looked at him, a little confused, then realized the idea. He took out his modified shotgun and changed the dual-feed to solid slugs. He cocked the gun and readied it.

“Put a slug right there, at that fixture,” Morgan advised, pointing halfway up the ladder.

“You wanna shoot? Quit backseat sniping,” Ledger argued.

“It’s called spotting,” the former knight said.

“It’s called being annoying,” Ledger growled. He stepped back a few steps from the group, holding out his shotgun. He closed one eye, lining up the sights, and then pulled the trigger. The gun recoiled powerfully, bucking in Ledger’s hand and gun up into the air.

Nothing.

“Try again, Tex,” Roland said, watching as the sniper climbed down the ladder, getting closer and closer to the ground.

Ledger fired again and the top of the ladder sparked violently. The junction at the second floor squealed like a wounded animal and an entire section of the ladder

ripped away from the building. Just a floor above, Eli slowed his climbing, startled. He swung out onto the third floor and looked down at Roland and Ledger who stood out in the red mud at the mouth of the cup obstruction site. Ledger lowered his shotgun with a proud sneer while Roland pointed right at the sniper.

Sheer terror overtook Eli and he frantically looked around the floor of the building. As unfinished as the height of the construction, all he saw was a three-story drop onto uneven wet mud. A quick glance to the side of the construction site and he saw trailers and other temporary buildings. "Well crap," Roland exclaimed as he and Eli realized the same thing at the same time.

Eli broke into a sprint, running across the cement of the building and leapt off the edge. Two stories down, he slammed into the flimsy rooftop of the trailer and it gave way. The cheap materials broke under the force of his landing and Eli fell unceremoniously into the office of the construction site.

Eli tried to roll with the fall but the crash was too fierce and the stop too abrupt. He slammed hard onto the carpet of the office, ceiling particles and rain following him down. He pulled himself up to his hands, panting and gasping in pain. He managed to get up to one knee, his vision blurred. He looked around at the desk he'd narrowly missed and the stacks of papers and pages on the tables lining the flimsy paneling of the trailer walls.

Eli got to his feet, relieved he still clutched his rifle. The elation of that discovery was short-lived when he heard the office door forced open. Eli spun around and fired at the door, Roland narrowly ducking away. "Stay back!" Eli yelled frantically.

Roland's fist knocked Eli back into the trailer with the force of a hurricane. The sniper fell back and collapsed onto the ground, blood splattering over the roofing as he fell.

“Found him,” Roland shouted unenthusiastically as he walked into the trailer. He pushed the greeting desk to the side and reached into his jacket. With a ceremonial gesture, he drew out the ornate katana that he carried. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, fellow,” Roland said, holding the sword ready.

“Thanks for the options,” Eli groaned.

He heard a noise behind him that he didn’t recognize at first as another door opening. He whirled around as Armand ran at him. Screaming a war cry, Armand held his massive war brand over his head, like he expected to chop Eli in two. Eli side-stepped the charging knight and kicked him in the stomach. He slammed the butt off his rifle at Armand’s head, driving him to the ground.

Roland was on Eli. He slashed at the sniper with a katana. Unlike Everett’s cheap trinket of a sword, Roland’s weapon was a work of art and it showed. He cut at Eli with a whip to the air like he might part the world in two. Roland didn’t go for a stab but swung his sword in wide sweeps. The blade flashed through the air like a ribbon as Eli backed away from him. Roland didn’t give him enough time to counter or parry; only retreat defensively.

Eli backed into the far wall and Roland slashed again. The blade of his sword cut through the very wall of the trailer office but didn’t catch Eli. The sniper ducked under the slash and threw himself frantically out through the door Armand had left open.

Roland looked astonished out the door, then turned when Everett dropped down through the hole Eli had made. “Where is he?” Everett yelled. He spotted Armand and went to him.

“Out the door,” Roland said, joining Everett as they checked Armand. “Who the hell is this guy?!” Armand groaned and started to sit up. Everett looked to the door and Roland said, “Ledger’s out there. I got Armand. Go!” Everett hesitated for only a second before he leapt to his feet and went running after Eli.

Eli pushed through the deep mud and gravel, holding his side as he ran. He knew the blood trail he left was thick and harsh, but he could only hope the rain would wash it to incoherence. Once he was clear of the cloister of trailers off to the side of the building, he could see the exit of the construction site. He glanced back to make sure no one was immediately behind him and wiped rainwater from his face. He broke into a full sprint, pushing harder, running for the steel-grated gates of the construction site. He almost made it.

“Freeze!”

Eli skidded to a halt as Ledger stepped out from in front of the grating, his shotgun held steady as he aimed it right at Eli’s chest. Eli stared at the knight, but Ledger didn’t waiver for a moment. “You move and, on my honor, you will not live long enough to regret it.”

“Honor?” Eli said in a raspy voice. “You protect those who would dominate all? Who would control all the world?”

“Shut up,” Ledger said, totally uninterested in the sniper’s words.

Eli looked into the infinite darkness of the barrel, then down the length of the gun that Ledger held with one hand like a pistol. Eyes met and Eli knocked the shotgun away with his rifle. He punched at Ledger and the knight slipped around it and curled his arm up, trapping Eli’s arm in the crook of his elbow. Ledger punched Eli in the face with his left hand. When he tried for Eli’s chest, Eli swatted his hand with his rifle and shoved Ledger away.

With space between the two, the gunmen brought their respective weapons to bear. Eli was faster but Ledger’s gun pushed the rifle off the mark before the trigger could be pulled. In the distance, the shot ricocheted. Ledger stepped in and smashed Eli in the chest with his left palm, then brought his right elbow down in a tight angle to catch Eli in the side of the neck. Extending his hand as Eli recoiled,

Ledger struck him in the other side of the neck with the ridge of his hand. He turned into a sharp kick but Eli kicked his leg out of the air.

Eli kicked Ledger in the side and knocked him back. He swung his rifle like a club and tried to take Ledger's head off. Ledger parried the swing and jabbed his fist into Eli's arm, striking the very meat of his muscle with the tip of his thumb that extended past his knuckles. Eli didn't process any pain but when he withdrew his arm, his rifle fell free of his grip. His fingers tingled and stung, like his hand had fallen asleep. Terrified, Eli panicked and swung at Ledger with his left hand. Ledger parried the swing and struck the left arm just as he'd done the right. He followed one strike with a second on the upper arm and then slapped Eli in the side of the body with his fingertips instead of his palm.

Eli fell to his knees, unable to breathe. He looked up through the rain at Ledger. The knight cocked his shotgun and pointed it again at Eli's face. "Give up," he threatened.

Eli screamed at Ledger and rammed him. The abrupt attack surprised Ledger and they both fell into the mud. Eli began to pound on Ledger with flailing limbs like a child in a schoolyard, unable to do anything with his hands and arms but fling them wildly. Ledger covered up defensively against the furious unorthodox attack. Before he could do anything more, Eli leapt to his feet and ran. His arms dangled uselessly from his sides, burning in pain as his muscles awoke. He could all but hear Everett charging after him, slowing just to make sure the mud-covered Ledger was alive.

Eli fixated on the gates of the construction site. He ran through the mud and the puddles, his lungs burning like the rest of his body. He felt like each breath was gasping toxic, heated fumes, but he didn't slow. Not until he finally slammed into the gates and muscled his way through them. Once out into the city street, he gasped with relief. The rain seemed to wash some of his fear away as he rejoiced in the immediate escape.

The street was still empty, and no one was on the sidewalk. Eli looked down at his hands, the pain finally subsiding. He flexed his fingers, feeling the strength and control returning. He turned around as Everett and Ledger both approached. "Come on!" Eli roared at them, emboldened by his returned faculties. Ledger broke ahead of Everett and ducked through the gate. He came out and Eli punched him across the face and followed with a knee to the stomach. He entangled Ledger's arm and threw him in a spin, tossing him into the street, disarming the knight as he did. He turned back around and fired Ledger's gun at Everett who ducked behind the gate for cover.

The kick of the shotgun knocked Eli back a step and he cocked the gun. Light distracted him, though, and he turned towards it, not quite processing the headlamps of Morgan's Charger. The tires squealed as the car slowed, but it still hit Eli with enough force to send him flying. Out came Morgan, joining Everett and the standing Ledger. Ahead of them, Eli was getting slowly to his feet.

"He's got Ledger's gun," Everett warned, his sword in hand.

"So I heard," Morgan said. Eli stood and turned the gun towards the three. Ledger and Everett dove away, but Morgan dropped down and tore a manhole cover out from the street. Eli fired and Morgan was pushed back a step as the rusted metal sparked at the impact, the bullet ricocheting with a tone like a bell. Morgan lowered the manhole cover with rage in his eyes. Eli barely had enough time to process his own fear when Ledger and Everett both jumped on him, disarming and subduing him simultaneously.



—Now—

“Oh my god, you ran him over?!” Marilyn exclaimed.

“No I didn’t,” Morgan groaned in an irritated tone. “I just sort of clipped him, with the front. I wasn’t even on the gas.” He looked down the front of the car. “Still dented my fender,” he grumbled.

“You’re going to have to forgive me if I don’t feel too bad for you,” said Everett.

“Look, you guys wanted a civilian along,” Morgan insisted.

“I’m a civilian; I could have come,” Marilyn chimed in.

“I don’t fight like a knight anymore, which I would point out ended up as a good thing,” Morgan continued at Everett.

Everett chuckled. “That’s not what I was referring to, Moneybags.”

“Oh,” Morgan realized. He rolled his eyes and focused on driving.

“What do you do?” asked Marilyn. “I mean, aside from being an adjunct professor at the university.”

“Music,” Morgan said, like he was embarrassed. “I write and produce music.”

“He’s got a recording studio in his house,” Everett told her with a grin.

“Really?!” she giggled.

“God, everybody loves the studio,” he muttered. “Is it really so hard to believe that a rough-and-tumble guy like me is into the arts?”

“‘Imma Git Some Col’cuts’ that tore up the rap charts last year is hardly a sterling example of high art,” Everett argued.

“Everybody’s a critic,” Morgan said, hiding his face in shame.

“And what was that country song you wrote?” Everett further teased.

Morgan silenced the discussion with “Shut up.” Everett snickered.

Marilyn didn’t know which story she wanted to hear about more, but she focused. “So you ran over the sniper. What happened after that?”

“We waited for a bit for the cops, but we started to get antsy and paranoid around the five-minute mark,” Everett told her.

“Ain’t no way you’ll have multiple shots fired downtown during a sniper crisis and have a response time that long,” Morgan said. “Something was up. So we booked it.”

“We threw the sniper into Roland’s car and got out of there,” said Everett.

“And then what happened?” Marilyn asked.



—9 Days Ago—

Phillip sat down two heavy glasses on his desk and laid down a large decanter. On the other side of his desk, Aaron watched and said nothing. "How's your investigation going?" Phillip asked cordially.

"Lot of loose ends," Aaron said candidly. "You guys..." He shook his head. Phillip just smiled, as though agreeing. "What do you think the whole deal is with this sniper?" he asked a simple question but Phillip paused, trusting it was more than that.

"Honestly?" Phillip readied. "I think it's Jericho. It seems to just smack of him."

"Why?" asked Aaron, perking up. "Why would he do this?"

"To tell the truth, the only thing I can think of is that maybe it's some order from the Triumvirate," said Phillip a little cautiously. He quickly studied Aaron's reaction. "But I just can't see them doing that. It's just, well, it's just not their style."

"Do you think maybe it's a new three?" Aaron asked, accepting the glass Phillip had poured for him. He was about to take a sip then stopped. "Soda?" he asked, amused.

"Well, the Brotherhood frowns on alcohol," Phillip smirked, filling his own glass. Aaron was even more amused. "As for it being a new three, I don't think there's a chance." He started to laugh. "I doubt the three have changed since the dawn of time." Aaron laughed as well. "I don't know though. I just don't know."

"Eleven are dead," Aaron said. "A shooting every other day."

Phillip nodded, sipping his own glass of soda. He sat down behind his desk. "The news should break any minute now."

Aaron nodded morbidly. "I've sent my men off on some missions."

“Snooping around me and Jericho’s business?” Phillip asked. Aaron didn’t say anything but didn’t deny it either. “I’d watch your back, Aaron,” he warned, looking across the desk. “I know you’re no stranger to dealing with the Hand, but Jericho’s something else. And if he sends one of his dogs after you...”

“I know.” Aaron said, nodding. He sipped from the glass and looked through Phillip. “I know that all too well.”

“I think we need to figure out why the police didn’t show up.” Ledger said, speaking in the darkness of the underground cistern, his whisper echoing. “I think that’s the bigger problem. This dude’s got to have connections.”

“Connections, maybe,” Roland countered. “You’re talking about turning away the entire police force of the city. Come on, man. That’s not connections. That’s the type of thing they do in bad actions movies.”

“He might have a point,” Morgan said, the noise of runoff and the rain aboveground practically drowning him out. “This guy was shooting in connection – some connection – with a symbol associated with a secret society, the Brotherhood of the Sun.”

“Are you saying the Brotherhood is real?” Roland asked, unsettled by Morgan’s apparent belief.

“Somebody with enough clout to pull this off thinks so,” Morgan said.

“Look, we’re going to talk to this guy,” Everett said decisively to the others.

“You’re making a mistake,” Morgan said firmly.

“Excuse me?” Everett asked with a stern voice, over at Morgan.

The former knight took his time looking up at Everett, an annoyed look on his face. “What the hell do you plan to do, Ev?” Morgan asked aggressively. “Go in there and slap him around? Play ‘good cop, bad cop’? Come on.”

“We can’t trust the police,” Armand stated firmly, glaring at Morgan. “They didn’t even respond to the damn shooting at the construction site.”

“He’s right,” Ledger said, his voice holding back volatile emotion. “It was a big disturbance, in front of a huge, populated section of down-town and the police didn’t even drive by. We can’t turn him over to them. We can’t trust them. We can’t really trust anyone.”

Morgan tried to speak as civilly as possible when he asked Everett, “Can I talk to you in private for a minute?” He didn’t wait for a response but paced away. Everett glanced at the other three knights, then followed.

Morgan led Everett a few dozen paces away and stood just past a beam of light coming in from a sewer drain. He waited until Everett neared before saying, “This is why I left, Ev. This kind of vigilante crap. You overstep your boundaries and you’re no better than the people we’re trying to stop.”

“Morgan, what choice do we have?” Everett asked calmly.

“Leave it to the police,” Morgan said clearly. “This is their job. This is what they’re there for. The knights are not an enforcement group, not any more. They haven’t been for centuries.”

“Morgan, you heard Roland and Ledger,” Everett said clearly. “The police didn’t respond. If this guy is a part of the Brotherhood, or somebody who thinks they’re the Brotherhood, then we have to be willing to accept that they’ve got their hands in the police. And more, if what you say is true.”

“Then go to the FBI, go to somebody else,” Morgan said. “Take him to another city, I don’t know!” Everett let Morgan reason out the infeasibility of those

options. “We-you do this,” Morgan said, correcting himself, even with his voice low and serious. “We interrogate this guy, we take the law arbitrarily into our hands, and we become the villains.”

Everett looked down, his hands up at his temples as he tried to think. “Let’s do this logically,” he whispered to himself. He looked up, staring Morgan in the eye. “Will you admit that we need the information that the sniper has?”

“We, no.” Morgan said professionally. “Someone, yes.”

“In the absence of someone, that’s us. Yes?” Everett asked.

“For argument’s sake,” Morgan grudgingly admitted.

“Alright,” Everett said, closing his eyes, breathing out hard. “What conditions would it take for you, as a non-knight, to feel that the interrogation is unbiased and just?”

“We would need a non-knight there,” Morgan said after a moment. Everett just smiled and shrugged, at a loss for any other ideas. Morgan slammed his eyes shut and privately screamed.

“The design was everything we had hoped for,” Phillip said, to the darkness. He glanced over his shoulder, but darkness was everywhere. It spread out around him in a giant field, while it crept close to him, filling the space around him.

“But without a working reactor, the design is moot,” came the second voice. “Worse, it’s destructive.”

“Without a reactor, the fortress cannot even be completed,” came the third voice. “As you well should know, we cannot begin construction until all the resources are confirmed.”

“I agree,” Phillip said, with no remorse. “But I am struggling to get the facilities and materials ready while I have Aaron breathing down my neck.”

“We shall worry about the Investigation Clan and their review of your policies and actions,” reprimanded the third voice. “What we must worry about now is whether the design delivered to us is still worth the paper it’s printed on.”

“The design is solid,” Phillip said certainly.

There was a silence.

Standing in the darkness, Phillip looked around the solid blackness, as if trying to get some grasp on what was happening around him. But there was nothing, not even texture to the darkness.

“How closely have you been associating with Aaron?” asked the first voice.

“I’ve tried to be as forthcoming and professional as possible,” Phillip answered, running his fingers nervously through his short black hair. “Since Jericho’s started becoming more aggressive with every passing week, it seemed only appropriate that I should be the liaison to my Investigator brethren.” He smirked in the darkness. “Besides, Investigators and Miracle Workers speak similar languages.”

“Jericho’s...ambition shall be address shortly,” said the first voice, concerning Phillip.

“What about you and Aaron?” asked the third voice. “Have you seen any evidence of dissention or behavior unbecoming of his position?”

“No,” Phillip said, feeling concern reach into his soul. “Why? You don’t think and the sniper are--”

The third voice silenced him. “We shall ask the questions.”

“Have you seen anything that would indicate that Aaron is involved in any dealings outside the Brotherhood?” asked the first voice.

Phillip’s voice grew dry. “Like what?” he asked fearfully.

Off came the blindfold and Eli could see once again. Four knights stood in front of him in a large cement tunnel. He could hear runoff and the echo of pouring rain pounding on concrete in the far distance. He looked past the knights, down a long tunnel that was quickly lost into total darkness. Just past said darkness, Morgan waited and listened. “Where am I?” Eli yelled over the veritable waterfall behind him.

“The city aqueduct,” Everett called. His voice echoed up and down the pipe, merging with Eli’s echo. He kicked the leg of the metal chair Eli was cuffed to. “That thing is secured,” Everett told him. He pushed the chair and Eli could feel where it was anchored to the ground. He looked down and could see interlocked handcuffs going down to a metal ring set into the cement itself. “No one will hear you. No one will find you. And if the water level rises enough, nobody will even know your body was ever here.”

Everett came over to Eli and spoke a little more easily now. “We want to know who you are.” Eli said nothing, only glared at Everett. “Why were you doing this? I heard you say a ritual needed something. What ritual?” Everett could see anger in Eli’s eyes but also fear. “Tell us what we need to know and we’ll turn you over to the police.”

“And if I don’t?” Eli asked, his voice as dry as his mouth. “Will you not turn me over to the police?”

“Pretty much,” said Ledger. He held up the primary component of the sniper rifle Eli had been carrying in the case. “This thing is serious high-end. You didn’t buy this at the local gun store. Somebody supplied you with it,” he said with emphasis on ‘supplied’.

“Maybe they did,” Eli said, trying to sound calm. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Put a sword to their throat and make sure they don’t do it again,” Ledger said.

Eli looked at Roland and Armand a few steps back, both with their swords drawn, held before them like dapper gentlemen holding stylish canes. He looked at Everett. “I’m not saying anything more.”

Everett chuckled and said simply and confidently, “Oh yes you are.” Eli’s chin quaked.

“Who scouted these locations for you?” asked Ledger.

“No one, the locations were random,” Eli maintained.

“Or determined by the Sircle of the Brotherhood of the Sun,” Everett said. Eli did a poor job hiding his shock. Everett noticed and said, “They were ritualistic sacrifices.” Again, Eli tried to hide his panic. “So what did they all have in common? Not age. Not race. Not gender. Not employment status.” A quick turn of Eli’s head and Everett smirked. “Employment.” Eli’s head snapped up. “One of them worked for a major company.” Everett pieced it together. “They all worked for that same company, didn’t they? Or had some connection to it?”

“Solaritec,” said Armand from the back. “You were killing Solaritec employees.” He stormed at Eli, being caught by Everett just before he could hit Eli. “What do you have against Solaritec?!”

“Nothing,” concluded Everett as he calmed Armand down. “He works for them.” Again, Eli betrayed his shock. “That’s how you had all that information on them. That’s how you knew where they lived, knew when they’d be getting up in the morning.” Everett nodded.

“One question,” said Roland.

“Just one?” remarked Ledger.

“Why is a knight a professional killer?” Roland asked. The other knights’ looks varied from confused to disgusted. Eli just looked surprised. “When was the last time any of you can remember fighting anybody like this?” Roland asked the others, maintaining eye contact with Eli. “Who, except another knight, is that fast? Or that strong? Or that...that good?”

Everett looked guardedly at Eli. The sniper hesitated from speaking. “You’re not a knight,” he whispered, both certain of it and unable to believe it.

“Knights are pawns of the Illu—” Eli shut up.

“Pawns of the what?” Armand asked.

“Illuminati,” Ledger answered. He looked at Everett. “This punk thinks we work for a secret society.”

“Knights don’t work for secret societies,” Everett told Eli.

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—Now—

“Is that true?” Marilyn asked, excited. “That the Illuminati is real and stuff?”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s true; what matters is whether or not he believed it,” said Everett.

Marilyn sat back but didn’t seem entirely satisfied with that answer. “Well, it’s a reasonable enough assumption, I suppose. I mean, knights are a secret society.”

“No we’re not,” Everett protested. Morgan waffled on supporting either assertion. Noticing, Everett stared and shook his head disapprovingly at him. “There is no centralized organization of knights,” Everett told Marilyn. “There’s no organization at all.”

“Templars,” Morgan chimed in.

Everett rolled his eyes and grumbled under his breath, “Everybody brings up those lunatics.”

“If there’s no organization, then how does one become a knight?” asked Marilyn.

“You swear to the Oath of Chivalry,” Everett said.

Marilyn seemed wary. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Everett confirmed. “Knights aren’t superhuman. We’re not mutants from the X-Men or anything. We just...we believe in something.”

“In a lot of ways, it’s kind of like being punk or straight-edge,” said Morgan. “There is a core set of beliefs that adherents follow in their own way. But there are similarities in people who become knights. While knights are hardly homogenous, there are commonalities. Knights are typically assertive yet introverted. They’re usually into martial arts and physical fitness. They more often than not have a bit of an anti-authority complex. And they’re usually doers rather than sayers.”

“But you guys seem superhuman,” Marilyn said, regretting that admission as soon as she said it.

Amused, Everett smirked before saying, “Remember that kid in school who was just great at every sport? He could just pick up a bat and could swing great. Could make a basket the first time he picked up the basketball? Just naturally had good running mechanics and picked up physical skills without much trouble? Most knights are like that. We’re not superhuman; we’re just gifted. And we work at it, believe me. I don’t lift weights five days a week for nothing. We’re just smart about it, we enjoy it, and we take to it kind of naturally.”

“But still, anybody can become a knight!” Marilyn said, like this was a mind-blowing revelation.

“Technically, yes,” Everett confirmed.

“Why one would want to is another matter,” muttered Morgan.

“Why haven’t the knights organized?” asked Marilyn. “It seems like you could do a lot more if you, you know, got together.” The silence that followed told Marilyn she’d struck a nerve somehow.

“There have been...attempts,” was all Everett was willing to say. Morgan was willing to say much more.

“In the 1950s was the last attempt to organize the knights,” said the former knight as he drove. “In response to the Korean War and the development of the

Underwater Demolition Teams that would eventually evolve into the Navy SEALs, a knight named Winston Thorpe came up with possibly the stupidest idea ever. With the government recognizing the need for small, elite units, Thorpe decided to demonstrate the applicability of the knights by – and I kid you not – raiding the FBI building in Washington DC. His crazy-ass idea was to show that knights could take and hold a government building without bloodshed or a shot fired.”

Marilyn was stunned. “What?! I’ve never heard of this. What happened?”

“A bunch of guys with swords stormed one of the most heavily-armed fortresses in the US,” Everett said. “What do you think happened? Thorpe and the twenty or thirty knights he’d brought with him were massacred.”

“It’s part of why knights today wear black and red,” Morgan continued. “Everywhere else in the world, and prior to Thorpe’s rebellion, knights wore blue and silver. American knights started wearing black and red afterwards. The red supposedly, allegedly, whatever, signifies the bloodshed and the black signifies the...I don’t know. Nobody cares.”

“That’s not true,” Everett argued.

“What’s the black signify?” Morgan asked. When Everett didn’t answer, Morgan asserted, “You care, just not enough to ask around.”

Everett’s response was, “I’ll ask Edgar.”

Morgan just shook his head. “Winston Thorpe was a terrorist who got what he deserved. And since then, knights have deliberately avoided any large congregations. There’s no annual picnic, no big convention. And, god willing, there never will be.” The two in the front settled into passive-aggressive silence.

Marilyn looked between the two of them for a moment, then asked hesitantly, “So was this guy a knight?”

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—9 Days Ago—

“This dude is not a knight,” insisted Armand.

“Sure kicked your ass like a knight,” said Roland.

“You didn’t exactly do so well against him yourself,” Armand retorted.

“My point exactly,” Roland said. He addressed Everett and Ledger who stood in a circle with the other two half a dozen meters down the large pipe from the secured Eli. Secluded in shadow of the underground pipe, their words were likewise hidden by the downpour beyond. “Dude looks like a knight, moves like a knight, but doesn’t seem to know anything about being a knight.”

“So he’s Armand,” Morgan quipped. Armand sneered at him for it.

Roland asked, “Is it possible he’s, I don’t know, a lost knight or something? Somebody who should have sworn but never did?”

Everett shook his head, his arms crossed. “I don’t know.” He looked at Roland. “But I agree with you; if he’s not a knight, he sure fights like one.”

“Question now is what do we do with him,” asked Ledger, looking back at the prisoner cuffed to the chair.

“We’ve got to confirm that he works for Solaritec,” suggested Armand. “Let’s go deliver him to them. Make them answer for what they’ve done.”

“We don’t know what they’ve done,” Everett reminded him, a little appalled by his bloodlust. “All we know is that a whack job is killing people connected to Solaritec. That may not be the connection.” He shook his head. “We don’t know nearly enough to start dealing out judgments.”

“What do you want to do then? Turn him over to the cops?” asked Roland. Everett didn’t say so but was clearly leaning in that direction. “Ev, looked at what’s happening. Look at how easily we figured this out. You don’t think the professionals haven’t already?”

“What do you mean?” asked Everett.

“How quickly did we figure out the whole Sircle thing?” asked Ledger. “And identify the next likely target? You don’t think the cops would have figured it out by now? They probably knew.”

“And did nothing?” he asked.

“Yes!” Armand insisted emphatically. “Man, we’re dealing with a conspiracy here.”

“To do what?!” Everett yelled back.

“We’ll figure it out when we confront Solaritec,” said Armand. “And this Brotherhood of the Sun-thing.”

Everett glanced at Morgan, who gave him a cautious look. “Let’s say you’re right,” Everett conceded, going back to Armand. “That still leaves us with the issue of what to do about him.” He turned and looked at Eli. “We have three options: set him free, hand him over to the police, or kill him.”

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—Now—

“Wait, what?! You guys were really considering killing him?!” Marilyn marveled disapprovingly.

“I hate to sound like the Boondocks Saints, but what exactly do you think was going to be accomplished by turning him over to the police? A trial by his peers?” Everett looked back at her.

“He was clearly mentally ill,” she protested.

“Quite the opposite,” joined Morgan. “And even if he was, so what?”

“So what?!” Marilyn exclaimed.

“Yeah, so what?” Morgan said again. “If a person is a real and legitimate danger to others, especially through deliberate and careful effort like what it takes to be a sniper, why is their ability to distinguish right and wrong really that relevant? If anything, that makes them more dangerous, not less. Rehabilitation is even less likely. The insanity plea is...” Morgan chose his word carefully. “Dubious.”

“If they can’t distinguish between right and wrong, then they should be put in a place where they can’t do anything to hurt anybody,” Marilyn argued.

“So put them away in a tiny box that society must care for them, until they wither away into nothing and die?” Morgan asked her. “Do the humane thing and end them.”

“Killing is never the humane thing,” Marilyn argued.

“The preservation of all life at any costs is a myth that poisons people against reality,” Morgan argued. “Society, life itself, is a thing that must be cared for. And part of that is done by grinding up and digesting the bad parts.” He faced forward, into the drive. “A guiding principle of the knights is the belief of might for right; being the strength to do. And that ‘to do’ is almost always the might to kill when it is necessary.”

Everett looked across at Morgan and remarked, “Achtung, mein fuehrer?” He shifted and looked back at Marilyn who seemed furious at Morgan’s interpretation of things. “The Oath of Chivalry, the modern one, is based around four principles: what is right, what is fair, what is just, and what is moral. They are all vague and they almost never align. That isn’t unintentional. A code that clearly defines everything and codifies every tiny variable becomes rigid and inadaptable to reality. Because in reality, the situation is always fluid and things are never that clear-cut.” Marilyn seemed no less angry at the mere suggestion that killing was justified.

“What were you up to?” Morgan asked through the rear view mirror, looking back at her.

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—9 Days Ago—

Marilyn was sitting in class, ignoring the professor at the front of the room. In a gigantic stadium almost two stories tall, the teacher was writing on a chalk board at

the bottom of the room, while close to two hundred people paid attention to varying degrees of sincerity and success.

Like more than a few in the class, Marilyn was on her laptop. But rather than searching the web, she was reading a message from a familiar forum. “Ivers supposedly wrote seven books. Towards the end of the Frontier Wars in Australia, the books were taken forcibly from whoever Ivers had given the books to after his death. They were split up and left the continent. The books crop up from time to time in auction houses and private collections, but imitations have been rare.”

Typing quietly while she pretended to be taking notes on pre-1990s tax laws for non-profits, Marilyn asked, “Is there any way to know for certain if it was or wasn’t an Ivers book?” She looked cautiously around her as several students snuck out while the professor had his back turned.

“The Ivers books are supposedly protected from opening,” the response read. “Rumor has it that some of them are magically booby trapped.” The smiley face emoticon made Marilyn smirk. “Only a ‘real’ wizard can open them, that sort of thing. Could you open the book you found?”

Marilyn responded disappointedly, “I didn’t get the chance.”

There was a long delay in responding, but finally the poster said, “Maybe you’ll get another chance.” Marilyn couldn’t decide if the response was a platitude or genuinely hopeful.

Jericho bent over, practically sticking his face in the sink. He rinsed his face vigorously and stood to look at himself in the mirror of the tiny half-bathroom just off his office. “This is absurd.” He towed off his hands and his face and returned to

his modest office where Raphael half-sat on the desk. “Does the Triumvirate really expect me to answer to this pencil-neck little punk?”

“For somebody who just showed up on the scene, he knows a lot,” Raphael remarked, his arms crossed as he stared at the situation rather than anything in particular. “The Investigators’ Clan offices here at Solaritec have generally just been support to the Miracle Workers’ Clan. That he’s put all of this together so soon shows...competence.”

“The Investigators’ Clan have their spies everywhere,” Jericho said as he sat down behind his desk. He sighed, turning a little. He readied to speak when his phone chimed. Raphael turned around, surprised. Jericho was equally astonished. “That’s Eli’s tone,” Jericho remarked as he picked up. “Yes, Eli, what’s up?”

Jericho’s jaw dropped. “You’re what?” He snapped his fingers at Raphael, getting his attention. “You were supposed to be recovering from your concussion. When did you get arrested?” Rage and shock filled his voice. “You were dropped off by who?!”

“It looks like a team of knights captured him,” reported Orson, sitting in the chair to Aaron’s right in his makeshift, temporary office. Four chairs, each with a different agent, were positioned before Aaron’s desk where he scribbled in a notepad. “We don’t know how many. We don’t even know for certain that they were actually knights; that’s merely conjecture.”

“All we know right now is that a trained assassin in the Hand was arrested in connection with the shootings,” said Ian.

“Did he work alone?” asked Aaron.

“Does anyone in the Hand ever work alone?” Ian asked rhetorically. “He had military-grade equipment and was shooting from locations that simply had to be scouted out in advance.” Ian shook his head. “The more we dig, the more we’re going to find Jericho behind this.”

“Almost certainly,” Aaron agreed with a nod as he read over his notes. “Have we ascertained what’s going on in the lower levels of the Hand’s offices?” He looked at his four-man team. “I know they’re designated as training facilities but it’s secured.” He looked to his men. “Anything?” Just heads shaking.

“What about the death of Steven Sizemore?” Aaron asked. None of the others offered anything. “Guys!” he yelled explosively, like an angry teacher trying to wake up an unresponsive class. “This city is first in the nation in illegal sex and a major player in that scene is killed hours before a sniper begins his rampage, a sniper we now know is part of the Hand! We’ve got shipments from all over the world coming through here. We’ve got black-out locations onsite that nobody but the Hand knows about. We have GOT to get on this!” He slammed his notepad closed as he stood. “Let’s see if we can get at least a few answers on this sniper.”

Marilyn turned the page on the giant book in the university library. She immediately turned back, then forward, then back again. Looking puzzled, she scratched her hair with the capped end of her pen and consulted the two pages in question again.

Giving up, she closed the large book labeled ‘Occult Lore, I through M’ and pushed it away. It joined a large collection of books that she’d deemed useless to her cause. In fact, all that remained was a paperback rag from the 1970s titled ‘Mystics of the Modern Age’. Marilyn’s bookmark stuck out from the two-page write-

up on Allan Ivers, though it had contained no information she didn't already have. Which was to say little.

She sighed and checked the time on her phone. She grimaced when she was confronted with the reality that she was running late to get to class. She sighed defeatedly and began to put the books in a presentable order when her phone rang.

She looked down at it very ominously. The number on the ID was one she didn't recognize. She picked up the phone and finally answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?" she asked. She expected a throaty mystery voice to speak cryptically to her. She was let down.

"Hey, is this Marilyn Johnston?" asked Armand. "Hey, this Armand Gessetti. I'm friends with Everett. Me and Ledger helped you out the other night."

Marilyn sighed. "Yeah, hey, Armand." She began to pack up her book bag. "I can't really talk. I'm on my way to class." A thought crossed her mind. "How'd you get my number?" Part of her hoped to learn of knightly telepathy.

"From Ledger's kung fu school," he said casually. Again, Marilyn felt disappointed. "Listen, I was calling about something I thought you might be interested in."

She slung her book bag onto her back and said, "What have you knights done?"

"Actually, it's not knights," Armand confessed. "Ev and the guys all think we should stay out of it."

"Figures," Marilyn griped condescendingly.

"Yeah, I'm doing this on my own," Armand said. "And I really could use the World Alliance's help."

Marilyn's heart soared. "We're in," she pledged immediately with a huge grin. "What is it?"

Armand said without any hint of sarcasm or irony, "I want to storm a fortress."



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