

Red Moon Rising

Part 10 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 10 of 30

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“Tearing it back, unveiling me,
Taking a step back so I can breathe,
Hear the silence about to break,
Fear resistance when I’m awake.”

- Godsmack, Awake

—Now—

“There was something serene about the thought of breaking into the Solaritec campus, about the whole thing,” Marilyn said, her eyes as distant as her voice. “I mean, we weren’t going to war but it felt like it, you know? The whole morning and day before we headed to the Solaritec campus, everything was....was muted.” She played thoughtfully with her hands, her nail polish almost complete scrapped off her chipped and broken nails. “I remember doing an assignment in class – I don’t remember what it was – and just breezing through it because I thought how little it mattered. Not how little the assignment mattered but how little worrying about it mattered.” She shook her head. “I’m not explaining it right.”

“No, I know what you mean,” Everett commiserated from the front of the car. “It sounds cliché, but the whole ‘calm before the storm’ thing really is accurate. It’s like you have this spectrum of events and emotional responses to the events. And something comes along that so thoroughly challenges your...your emotional status quo or whatever, that everything gets realigned.”

“Does that mean stuff doesn’t matter?” Marilyn wondered.

“It’s about context,” empathized Morgan. He lowered his visor as he drove, blocking the sun that was just beginning to crack over the horizon. “Homework doesn’t matter when you aren’t sure you’re going to survive the night. One bad grade in one class in one semester pales compared to facing possible – and probable – death.”

“Death,” Marilyn whispered. She sighed, feeling troubled. “I don’t think any of us thought we might die. I mean, I guess Armand did, maybe. But the rest of us, the World Alliance...I think we just thought that the worst that would happen is we get arrested.” Marilyn shook her head uncomfortably. “For me, I kind of figured that was a rite of passage or something, you know? Political radicals always get arrested. There was part of me at thought I wasn’t truly committed to changing the world until I had a rap sheet.” She again grew distant, looking out the window at the dawn. “The idea that they would kill us, all of us, just didn’t quite register.”



—7 Days Earlier—

The burgundy car pulled up onto the forest topped hill. In the thick mist of the previous day’s relentless rain, the lights of the great machine turned the cloud into a glowing field of illumination. But only for a moment.

The lights blinked out instantly as the machine went silent. The two sides of the car opened up as the three stepped uncertainly into the unprotected night.

Marilyn stepped out of the passenger's seat, her shoulder-length brown hair pulled back in a ponytail as she looked over her friends. Ruwani got out of the back on Marilyn's side and Victor from behind the driver's seat.

A serious expression on his face, Victor stared into the woods that would lead to the giant corporate park. He looked over at Marilyn and conveyed his uncertainty without saying anything. Marilyn weathered his look and instead focused up at the giant Solaritec sign they had parked near. The happy sun seemed to beam ominously down on them in the dark.

The second car arrived. The trio turned as Alan's car pulled in behind them, Malcolm and Kim getting out with him. There was some awkward, stiff greetings and platitudes of preparation before an uncomfortable silence of waiting fell over them.

Almost half an hour later, Marilyn was leaning against the wheel well of Victor's car. Her arms were crossed as she stared at the soft, wet grass. It had been drizzling on and off all day. For some reason, she took that as a good sign, like the rain symbolized the World Alliance cleansing the world of one less affliction. She kept repeating that to herself, again and again, hoping it would set in eventually.

The others seemed even less certain as they milled about awkwardly on the small gravel side road. As the collection of teens stood around the pair of cars on the side of the forested spot, they said very little. The romantic trifecta of Alan, Kim, and Malcolm were off on their own, at the far end of the two parked cars. Their silence was punctuated by occasional bursts of awkward, nervous laughter. Ruwani, who had ridden with Marilyn and Victor, was pacing nervously in the road itself, her steps crunching on the wet gravel. Victor fidgeted as he paced in the grass, though he insisted it was because he was bored.

The sky was light, despite the night weighing heavily overhead. The nearby Solaritec campus was the reason. The giant corporate park and manufacturing center gave off almost as much light as the city itself. In some ways, it was a city unto

itself. But between them and the massive facility was almost a mile of woods that buffered the facility like a natural perimeter gate.

Marilyn looked into the dark woods, the leaves overhead glistening as if with dew. Cool, wet breezes drifted out of the forest like ghosts venturing into the hot evening air. It made Marilyn shiver, despite being in a long-sleeve t-shirt underneath a second t-shirt. A flash of light made her start until she saw it again. Looking into the darkness and ignoring the light, Marilyn realized the forest was full of fireflies. Dozens, seemingly hundreds, of tiny orange and yellow flashes burst out from the darkness, disappearing instantly.

The sweep of headlamps washed out the mysterious forest lights. The sound of an approaching car got everyone's nervous attention. Marilyn stood up and looked along with the others as Armand's tiny grocery getter pulled up behind Malcolm's car. The young knight got out, dressed in black cargo pants, a red button-up shirt, and a black trench coat. "Hey," he said as he got his brand out from the backseat. He began to affix the gigantic sword into a hidden pocket on the left side of his trench coat. "You guys ready?" he asked unceremoniously. All he got was a round of noncommittal shrugs and mumbles.

The sword's placement confirmed, it disappeared, looking for all the world like Armand just had too much pocket change in one pocket. He flexed fingers inside black MMA gloves and bobbed from foot to foot like he was getting ready to enter a fighting ring. Alan looked worriedly at Victor. "Once we enter these woods," Armand said as he did a few janda squats to get the blood flowing, "there's no turning back."

All eyes seemed to travel to Marilyn, as if hoping she'd be a voice of reason. Deciding she would be, Marilyn said "We're ready."

"Yes we are," Victor said right behind her, putting his arm supportively around her waist.

“Then let’s go,” said Armand. He turned and walked without hesitation right off the little side road, heading straight into the woods. The World Alliance hesitated until he had all but disappeared into the impermeable darkness. Marilyn was the first to follow Armand into the woods. Sneakers and jeans didn’t serve her quite as well as she would have liked against the dense underbrush but once she was subsumed by the darkness of the forest, it became a small matter.

Kim clutched onto Alan as Victor followed behind Marilyn. Malcolm went next, with Ruwani very hesitantly navigating the entry into the woods. Once it was just the two of them, Alan kissed Kim on the head and he began forward, holding her hand as she followed.

Waiting for them inside the forest was a wild, chaotic terrain. The space between gigantic, ancient trees was pierced by tiny shrubs and saplings. The ground was covered in a thick, mushy blanket of wet leaves. The footing was wildly inconsistent, with abrupt holes and mounds, and the very ground itself rolling up and down in steep hills and sudden crevices, with the differences on height dramatic and unavoidable.

Armand and Marilyn reached the crest of a steep hill and looked out through the trees at the Solaritec campus in the distance. “I didn’t realize it was so far,” she whispered as Victor joined them. She looked down at the descent and could make out nothing but darkness. “I’ve got a flashlight,” she said as she began to dig through her pockets. As she did, Armand drew out his brand. He held the big sword horizontally and angled the long, thick blade to catch some of the light coming from the campus. A wide swath of light almost as bright as a flashlight appeared against the trees. He tilted the sword blade a little and shone it down before them, revealing the surface of the hill. “Neat,” Marilyn said with a smile.

“Yeah, but you can’t carry that light with us,” Victor pointed out, descending first. Marilyn sighed at Victor’s comment and looked apologetically at Armand.

The seven walked in relative silence down through the forest, the only sounds the chirps of nighttime insects and their own steps on the soft, wet ground. Occasionally a branch snapped or somebody was taken momentarily by surprise but nothing deliberate was said.

After what seemed almost half an hour, they reached a metal fence made of hard iron with patches of link fencing between. Barbed wire ran along the top and hung over the inward-leaning rails. “This is the edge of their property,” Armand noted. He checked behind him and made sure everybody was still with him. The World Alliance was almost a line behind him but everyone was visible.

“I thought we were on their property as soon as we entered the forest?” asked Malcolm as he reached the fence.

“Yes and no,” said Marilyn. “There’s what they own versus what’s actively covered in their permits. We’ve been on their land but not their prop—it’s complicated.”

“How do you plan to get us through here?” asked Victor, just as Armand drew his brand. “You’re not—” Victor started to say, just before Armand swung his sword. A flash of movement and the fencing bowed inward. Another swing and a chunk of the fencing fell away.

“You were saying?” Armand asked Victor. He didn’t wait for a retort but ducked through the rough hole he’d cut and led the way in. The others followed through, Marilyn the last inside.

There was a roll of thunder and the light from the chandelier flickered. Ledger, who had bent over the pool table, paused and looked up at the lights. In Edgar’s den, three knights stood around the pool table. All were in black and red

and all held pool sticks not unlike they might hold swords. Ledger returned to his shot and hit the cue ball. It went spinning right past the target nine-ball.

“You are a sniper, right?” Roland asked with a smirk, the levity doing little to alleviate the tension.

“Shut up,” said Ledger as he surrendered the table to Edgar. “Have either of you heard from Ev?”

“He’ll be here in a bit,” Roland said a little blandly. “He’s got a boxing class, or Judo or something.” Roland tapped the soft carpet of the den with the bottom of his pool cue. “Big difference, I know.”

“Not tonight there isn’t,” Edgar said as he focused. He took a shot, sending the four-ball into the two and sending it skittering into the corner pocket. Ledger and Roland barely acknowledged the shot. Even Edgar didn’t really seem aware of it. “Jeanine’s upstairs preparing a legal brief,” he said. “That’s assuming Armand’s arrested.”

“Anybody else feeling guilty that we didn’t go?” Roland asked aloud. He looked at Ledger and Edgar, neither one of them answering, nor needing to.

Edgar moved to his next shot. “Inaction is not my strongest suit,” he said before hitting the ball. It went off-course. He stood, saying, “If we’re there, we’ll merely share Armand’s fate.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Roland asked, just before they all heard a knock at the front door. All three dropped their pool cues and practically ran from the den up the half-flight of stairs to the landing of the house. Jeanine was opening the door, letting in Morgan.

The three saw him and exhaled in disappointment. “Hi to you too,” he grumbled, taking off his rain-slicked black coat. He asked, “Any word?”

“No,” shared Edgar as Roland and Ledger returned to the den. Edgar ascended the steps. He about spoke and then glanced to make sure Jeanine was heading up the steps to the top floor and her office. “Do you have your sword with you?”

“I’m getting asked that question a lot this week,” Morgan answered.

“What would you think about, if this goes sideways, you and me – as unaffiliated – go and see if we can negotiate something?” Edgar looked rational but hid some desperation in his eyes.

“I think we’re passed shades of gray,” Morgan told him. “You either stay unaffiliated, or you go to war.”

Edgar recognized the wisdom of the statement but still nodded a little disappointedly. He asked, “And if we go to war?” looking expectantly at Morgan.

Morgan looked down at his blue shirt and said, “I’m not wearing red.” He walked by Edgar and headed into the den.

“Yeah, good,” said Phillip, staring both at and through his reflection in the window. “Everybody. Everybody, go home.” He listened and then said, “Good night.” He hung up his phone then turned the device completely off. He tossed it onto the long conference table around which the room seemed to have been built. He collapsed into a random chair and stared vacantly at the carpet.

“This is going to be a nightmare,” Aaron idly observed. He swiveled a bit in his chair and looked at the long room where, not long ago, the Agents of the Triumvirate had sat and passed judgment on Jericho, and everyone it seemed. Now,

it was just him and Phillip. The room felt strangely empty. Aaron smirked and only halfway joked, “The password change-over alone is daunting.”

“We must have allowances,” said Phillip, still staring at the floor, not looking at Aaron. He’d poured himself a drink, though he seemed more comforted by its existence than imbibing it. He kept turning the glass clockwise but never actually sipped from it. “What if somebody dies in a car accident?” He finally looked up.

“Still a nightmare,” said Aaron. He looked around at the office. “I guess I’m staying here. Although having the leadership of the entire North American branch of the Brotherhood in one location seems...questionable.” He looked two seats down, where Phillip was staring into space. “I’m not comfortable with this, just for the record.” Phillip turned towards him. “I’m not comfortable with you – with anyone – in control of two branches of the Brotherhood. I think our command is too centralized as it is.”

“Noted,” said Phillip. And that’s all he said. He didn’t seem to disagree or agree. He just observed the objection. “I don’t know if we should...” He didn’t finish the sentence. He seemed very humbled just considering the enormity of the task set before him. “The rumors flying must be...” Now, he took a sip. He seemed to note for the first time that the drink was alcoholic. He turned and looked to the far end of the room where the serving tray sat. “We discourage drinking; we do we even have this?”

“I’m worried about the rumors too,” Aaron told him. “I’m second-guessing whether we should have given everybody the night off. There’s less than fifty people on the whole campus. Speculations must be—”

There was a brief knock at the far door into the conference room. It opened before either could respond and in came Raphael. “Sir,” he said to Phillip with distinct emotional uncertainty. “We have a situation. Specifically we have trespassers.”

Neither Phillip nor Aaron seemed to grasp the significance of this. “So?” asked Phillip, on their mutual behalf. “Get rid of them.”

“Sir,” Raphael said awkwardly. He glanced warily at Aaron before explaining, “One of them is a knight.”

That registered and Phillip got to his feet. “Let’s see what this is about.”

There was a pronounced difference on the Solaritec side of the fence. The ground was flat and manicured, almost like natural grassland kept short by grazing. A quarter of a mile away, the facility proper rose in the distance over the approaching World Alliance. It practically glowed, like the Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.

The seven college students walked for several minutes before arriving at the perimeter wall that encircled the facility. Ten feet tall and solid cement, they approached the wall hesitantly. “This to keep out the Zombiepocalypse?” asked Alan, touching the wall as though its texture mattered to him.

“I think this area is technically a flood plain,” said Ruwani. “A ten feet wall might go a long way protecting the solar panel fields.” She added nervously, “I think they’re on the other side of the place.”

“It’s that way, right?” Marilyn asked Armand.

Before he could answer, though, two men in black military-style garb approached. “Hey!” the one on the left yelled. “Who are—” He didn’t get the chance to finish.

It wasn’t immediately clear what Armand did, if he ran or simply appeared. All the World Alliance knew is that one second, the two guards were approaching

with several dozen feet between them. And the next, Armand was upon them. He kicked the guard on his right, catching the man in the chest with enough force to take him off his feet. Seemingly without putting his foot down, he spun clockwise and slammed his heel into the other guard's face with the force of a baseball bat. Foot down, Armand unleashed a barrage of punches against them both, ending by literally slamming the two men into one another and throw them apart. He looked back at the World Alliance, most of whom hadn't taken a breath in the time it took him to disable the two guards.

"You may have just ruined everything," Victor chastised Armand. The knight seemed disinterested in Victor's opinion. "They probably radioed in our location. They're probably sending more guys now."

"All the more reason we need to move," said Armand. He began to jog for the gates into the facility, the others following.

Watching on the giant monitor of the Solaritec security center, Aaron was dumbfounded. "Are you going to do something about this?" In the giant room meant to man emergencies of a catastrophic nature, almost all of the stations were empty. Three techs manned the central computer consoles in stations not unlike mission control at NASA. Behind them, Phillip and Raphael stood with their necks craned to see the giant screen upon which the feed of security cameras, obvious and covert, played from seemingly every imaginable angle. The primary video showed multiple angles of Armand leading the motley crew that was the World Alliance along the perimeter wall towards the main entrance of the facility. "No, seriously," Aaron repeated at Phillip and Raphael. "Why exactly haven't we sent people to stop them yet? I know we gave just about everybody the night off but we've still got some people here, right?"

"Sir, one of them is a knight," Raphael told him.

Aaron stared blankly for a second. “So?” Raphael and Phillip both gawked at him and his apparent naivety. “I mean, I know knights are badass and stuff, capable of taking on ten guys at once; so send twenty! Okay, he probably has a sword; we’ve got guns! Oh my god, are you people serious?!”

“I want them to enter a building,” Phillip told him.

“Why?” Aaron exclaimed.

“Because right now, they’re trespassing,” Phillip explained. “It’s a misdemeanor, requiring we call the police. But if they enter the facility, especially one of the buildings, then it becomes breaking-and-entering in a secured location. It becomes a security matter.”

“Meaning we are legally authorized to handle it,” added Raphael, following the thinking he obvious wasn’t sure he supported.

Phillip nodded in agreement. “We do nothing until they force their way into a building.” He stood at the center of the security and crossed his arms authoritatively. “Then, the Hand will deal with them.” Both Raphael and Aaron were uncomfortable with his commanding tone regarding the Hand.

The grass wet from the rain, it squelched as Armand followed the wall. He kept glancing up at the wall that had grown more stylish, though no less functional. “We’re near the front,” he said back to the World Alliance. Marilyn and Victor were right behind him, Malcolm and Ruwani following close behind, Kate and Alan at the rear.

The wall began to curve around and, up ahead, they could see the wide road that drove past the second set of security gates. “We’re at the main entrance,” Armand whispered cautiously as he slowed down. “If we’re lucky, there’s only going to be a guard there.”

“And if we’re unlucky, there’s going to be a lot of guards?” Victor asked condescendingly.

Armand followed the curve of the building and stopped mid-step. Marilyn and the others all froze in fear. “No,” Armand said in a disappointed tone. “If we’re unlucky, there’s going to be a knight.”

Everett stood between Armand and the gate.

His black trench coat fluttering in the pre-storm breeze, Everett stood squarely with his katana held blade-down, almost like a cane. In black with a red shirt just like Armand, he made no move to intercept Armand or the World Alliance, merely to stand in their way.

Armand took a breath and asked, his voice shaking, “What are you doing here?”

Everett began the exchange by saluting Armand with two fingers held up between his eyes. That made Armand stiffen angrily. “I’m here to stop you,” said Everett. “I’m sorry, Armand, but I can’t allow a knight to get involved in this. And I can’t allow someone under my charge, under my protection, to throw their life away like this.”

“You had your chance to join us, Everett,” Armand said defiantly. “Get out of the way.”

Everett very simply shook his head. “I will not.”

Armand swallowed tightly and said, almost against his own will, “Then I’ll move you.”

Again, Everett shook his head. “You can try.”

“Again!” Aaron all but yelled as he, Phillip, and Raphael watched the two knights square off before the main gates. “Why do we not have fifty guys down there?!” But his protests fell on deaf ears as the rest of the security center sat transfixed on the fight.

Leaving the World Alliance behind, Armand walked out onto the pavement of the road and approached Everett directly, drawing his brand in the process. Almost a foot longer than Everett’s cheap katana, Armand made no word or motion before swinging the massive blade at Everett. Everett didn’t bother parrying; he just jerked his head back to let the blade pass about an inch short. Armand followed with a lunge and Everett parried that attack with a quick whip of his katana like it was a foil. There was a loud clang of metal-on-metal contact that resounded in the wet air. As Everett stepped past, he slashed at Armand, a warning more than anything else.

“Guys, stop it!” Ruwani yelled, then clamping her mouth shut when her voice echoed.

The two knights didn’t seem to notice her protest. They both held their swords ready, beginning to circle each other. Armand moved in again and swung at Everett, changing the angle of his attacks in a rapid flurry. The swords struck back and forth and the metal ringing of their impact ran out like a drum rhythm. Everett swung at Armand, the first committed offensive move he’d taken. The slices sang through the air like a bell and a breast pocket on Armand’s coat was cut open. The look on Everett’s face, and Armand’s, confirmed it was a warning, not a miss.

The near-hit seemed to anger Armand instead of dissuade him and he launched at Everett again. Another flurry of strikes, another round of steel tones like bells ringing in the night. Everett closed in as their swords met and jabbed Armand in the face with the butt of his katana. The pommel strike drew blood from Armand’s

nose as he stumbled away. “Everett, don’t!” yelled Marilyn as the World Alliance watched on, none of them moving to interfere.

Armand switched to a defensive stance, lowering his brand to hold it horizontally at waist-level. Everett lowered his own stance in response and the two seemed to settle. A burst of wind came up out of the south and blew their trench coats and the leaves alike. The air was hot and wet, with more rain imminent.

Armand swung his sword up high and Everett moved into intercept it. He didn’t expect Armand to kick him in the midsection and then bring the brand down with all its considerable might. Everett blocked the slash that would cleave a tree in two and it cost him his sword. The top third of the flea market katana went flying off into the night as the blade practically shattered.

Everett didn’t seem fazed. He dropped the broken sword without hesitation and entangled Armand, curling his right arm around the back of the younger knight’s neck in an attempt to lock in a guillotine choke. Armand countered the choke by grabbing Everett’s hands and keeping them from cementing their hold around his neck. He swung with the sword but couldn’t generate the leverage to cut Everett or strike with any force.

Everett released the choke unexpectedly and let Armand step away. He entangled Armand’s sword arm and stepped into him, his back to Armand’s chest. With a quick flip of the hips, Everett swept Armand off his feet and slammed him into the ground, still holding Armand’s sword hand. A hard strike with his knee and Everett forced Armand to relinquish his hold on the brand.

Everett backed away from Armand, holding the huge sword just as he’d held his katana. Armand rose to his feet, furious. Everett glanced over at the World Alliance, at Marilyn. In that brief instant, Armand kicked at Everett’s hand and knocked the sword free. The huge weapon went skittering away, clanging against the pavement.

The fight renewed with the two knights. Bereft of their swords, fists and feet came forth. Armand entered with a forward kick that he turned into a strike for Everett's head. Everett blocked it and closed the distance to get inside Armand's kicking range. He threw a rapid flurry of boxing strikes, most of which Armand managed to block and parry to varying degrees of success. Armand used the bombardment to backup into a spinning kicking that nearly took Everett's head off. He blocked with both arms and his body braced and was still taken off his feet.

Armand didn't give Everett the chance to rise. He flipped into the air, swinging both his feet wide to come crashing down. Everett had to roll out of the way to avoid having his head crushed. He came up just as Armand stepped into a powerful roundhouse kick. It landed squarely in Everett's side and the knight yelled in pain. He stumbled back and Armand skipped into a fast kick meant for the knockout.

Everett parried the kick in the air and rolled into it. He yanked Armand to the ground as he took Armand's back and tried to get a choke. Armand defended against the chokehold and wormed his way around so the two were chest to chest. Everett tried for an arm bar but Armand defended, nearly escaping the wrestling match. Everett flattened out atop him to keep Armand from getting away, allowing Armand to wrap his legs around Everett's waist. With Everett in his guard, Armand broke Everett's posture and nullified his offense.

The two paused in the middle of the road. Nearly motionless, they shifted subtly, testing theories and playing the chess game of the grappling match. Several of the World Alliance called out to and at them but the words were lost as they tried to out think each other. Thunder came and the rain followed. It started gently and quietly but began to gradually build.

Everett exploded up without warning and forcing himself free of Armand's guard. Armand kicked up at Everett and the senior knight caught his leg and kicked him in the thigh. Pain shot through Armand's body and Everett wrapped his legs

around Armand's, going for an ankle lock. Armand rolled with the attack and escaped but exposed his back again. Everett took it in an instant and tried again for a rear naked choke. Armand defended and elbowed Everett in the ribs, in the same spot he'd landed the kick. He forced himself free of Everett's grasp and rolled away.

The rain was pouring now as the two knights got to their feet simultaneously. Armand skipped into a head kick and Everett sidestepped it as he'd done Armand's opening slash. As the kick passed, Everett punched Armand in the body and followed to the head. Armand closed in on Everett, entangling him to stop the punches. He started trying to knee Everett in the side but Everett swept him off his feet. Armand was airborne for almost a full second before Everett slammed him into the wet pavement.

Armand struck the ground like he'd been hit with a car. His body went limp and his eyes glazed over. Everett rose exhaustedly and grabbed the handle of his broken katana. He jammed the broken and jagged edge of the sword right at Armand's throat. He pushed against Armand's skin, awakening him with a terrified start. "Yield," said Everett.

Through seething, furious teeth, Armand nodded and said, "I yield."

Everett removed the sword from Armand's throat and held out his hand to help him up. Armand, almost like a petulant child, grudgingly accepted it. Everett pulled Armand to his feet, wincing in pain as he did. He practically fell and Armand caught him. The two knights standing, Everett turned to the stunned World Alliance. Almost unwillingly, Everett's eyes fell directly on Marilyn. "Go home," he told them. "Nothing good was going to come from this." He turned to Armand and said over the worsening rain, "We're leaving."

As the World Alliance began to backtrack, Everett looked again at Marilyn. Betrayal and anger burned in her eyes, just as regret born of certainty filled Everett's. Seeing Everett looking at Marilyn, Victor put his arm across her, almost like he was shielding her from the knight's gaze.

.....

—Now—

The image of Victor putting his arm possessively across Marilyn's shoulder was burned into Everett's mind. He had to look away from everything and stared out the window. In the driver's seat, Morgan looked across at him. When Everett remained silent, Morgan glanced through the rear view mirror into the backseat to Marilyn. A conflicted awareness occupied her expression.

"I'm sorry," Everett said, seemingly out of nowhere. "I'm sorry I..." His words trailed off into an aching soul.

"Sorry for what?" asked Morgan. "For keeping them from going to jail? At the very least?" Marilyn glared at Morgan but she didn't speak. "Don't apologize if you've got nothing to apologize for."

"I'll apologize if I want," Everett said guardedly, whispering to hide the tears threatening to come out.

"Thank you," said Marilyn, also quietly. She sighed, though, heavily and weighed down. "But I think Morgan is right. If you hadn't stopped us, and we'd gone in there, we'd all be dead. God knows, after everything the Brotherhood of the Sun has done since then..." Like Everett, she shook her head and looked out the window. "Killing us is the least of what they're capable of."



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