

Red Moon Rising

Part 15 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 15 of 30

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“There be no shelter here,
The front line is everywhere.”

- Rage Against the Machine, No Shelter

—1 Day Ago—

It was shortly before dawn when Marilyn and Ruwani ascended the steps coming out of the women’s shelter. Both looked exhausted, physically and emotionally. The shelter was built in the basement of a large building, accessible only by the small, narrow stairwell on the sidewalk. There were no signs and no windows, no indication whatsoever as to what was inside the small metal door at the base of the unassuming cement stairwell.

At the top of the stairs waited the World Alliance. Kim was the only woman, standing between Victor and Alan, Malcolm on the other side. “We got her checked in and registered,” Marilyn reported to the others. “Her name is Anja. She came over here on a supposed cooking scholarship.” Marilyn stifled a tear and added, “She doesn’t know what’s happened to her daughter.”

“She says they said she was enrolled in an orphanage,” Ruwani told the others. “We said we’d look into it.”

Marilyn went on. “It’s the same MO we’ve seen. They took her passport, they told her...that she had to work or else she’d go to jail. And once she had her baby, she had to make twice as much money to afford her baby’s care.”

“My god,” whispered Malcolm. The others shared his horror.

“I hate to say it, but the trail’s gone cold,” Victor said. “Thanks to your knight-friends,” he said at Marilyn, “the club is burned down. The fire spread to the adjacent buildings too. At least no victims were found,” he said like it was the only good thing that had happened.

Marilyn looked personally affronted. “The trail may have gone cold but the case hasn’t.” It was aimed at Victor and they were both scowling at one another. “We’ve hit a nerve. Again,” she said as she crossed her arms and stood indignantly. “We need to stay on this.”

Around the lovers’ quarrel, the others were less than eager.

Phillip stood before the giant metal sphere, looking less than impressed. Wearing a hard hat that somehow accentuated his gray suit, he stood with one hand in his pocket, watching the work being done in the base of the Miracle Workers’ offices. There was a spray of sparks as several workmen busied themselves with the giant sphere’s main frame or the dozens of protruding connection ports.

A rumble in his pocket distracted Phillip and he left the work area. As he stepped out of the way of a passing forklift, he answered his phone. “Mr. Mayor, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Don’t know if you’ve seen the news today, Mr. Reynolds,” said the mayor. Even without seeing him, Phillip could hear the professionally-buried rage in the mayor’s voice. “There was a bit of a fire last night. Downtown. One of our popular clubs was burned to the ground.” He crested his anger saying, “It was quite the entertainment venue.”

Phillip, who had been walking for a quieter place to speak, slowed to a stop. Getting the mayor's hint, Phillip turned and faced the vending machine he found himself standing before. He addressed his reflection. "I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything Solaritec can do for the good of the city?"

"Why yes there is," said the mayor. Phillip couldn't help but smirk at how obviously furious the man was. "It would mean a great deal to us," the man said, speaking in the code of civility, "if Solaritec would help with the safety of the people by contributing some volunteer man hours. Ideally, from their security division."

Phillip laughed, silently he hoped. "I'll see what I can do," he smirked. Looking through his reflection at the snacks now, he decided he wanted a candy bar and began to fish for some coins in his pocket. "Just out of curiosity, what was the police response?"

Greater tension seeped from the mayor's voice. "They're doing their job. They just happened to be looking into this matter from another direction."

Marilyn refilled the mechanical pencil with the last fragment of lead from the container. Once she'd readied the pencil, she deposited the plastic container into the recycling bin next to her desk, the entire bottom of which was covered with such lead refill containers. Returning to the Ivers book on her desk, and the blank tracing paper she'd laid atop the open page, Marilyn began to very lightly shade the whole page, revealing the dense language and illustrations hidden invisibly within.

About halfway through the page, as the bizarre sigil under discussion truly became apparent to her, Marilyn's phone rang. Still carefully filling in the page, she felt around with her left hand, finding her phone. She struggled to unplug it from the charging cord and answered. "Hello?"

“Ms Johnston?” came a voice she recognized but didn’t know. The way the male voice had said ‘Ms’ in a condescending tone immediately put her off. “This is police chief Carl Dotson. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Every part of Marilyn panicked except her right hand, which continued systematically covering the tracing paper. “Not at all, Mr Dotson,” she said eagerly. She tried to pin the phone to her ear with her shoulder but it caused tones to spill out as the dial pad on the touch screen was touched.

“Ms Johnston, I was hoping we might get the chance to talk,” he said. “Your expose on the executives of Solaritec was very impressive. And your rescue of that little Asian girl this morning was, likewise, admirable.” Just like the way he said ‘Ms’, ‘little Asian girl’ came across wrong in every way. “Think you might be available to talk this afternoon, say two o’clock?”

Thoughts of Jerry filled Marilyn’s mind. Every instinct told her to delay the meeting, or refuse outright. “No problem, sounds good,” she said with a cheerful tone.

“That’s a girl,” the chief said. “I’ll see you at my office then.”

Orson dropped photos of a reactor housing onto Aaron’s desk. “They’re pretty much ready to go,” he told Aaron as he and the other investigators stood around Aaron’s desk. “Once they have the fuel for the reactor, Phillip will be able to get it active and running.”

Aaron wiped his face, clearly growing more and more fatigued. “Do we have any idea where the reactor is going?” He directed the question at Ian.

“No,” he said, shaking his head apologetically. “I’m still digging, but the destination of a lot of the materials we’re tracking remains a closely guarded secret, as is who is working at that site. We suspect Ken Jeffries, but we don’t have any evidence of that. Honestly, we just have conjecture on just about all of this.”

“We got a little more than conjecture,” Errol told him irritably.

“Do we have any idea when the reactor’s final components will arrive?” asked Aaron.

“Everything’s in place and ready to go,” reported Orson with some fatalism. “Phillip is no fool. He wouldn’t leave incriminating evidence just lying around. It’s got to be happening soon. And I mean days. Maybe even hours.”

“But we have no leads on when or where,” Aaron stated. He rose and collected the pictures. “Let’s hope that this is enough to get the Triumvirate’s attention.”

“What’s their response been us far?” asked Uriel.

“Silence,” said Aaron bitterly. “They either don’t care, or they don’t recognize the threat this represents.” He started out of the office, leaving the others behind.

Everett was typing at his computer when his phone chimed. He immediately checked the message, finding a selfie of Marilyn in a business suit and a comically unsure look on her face. Everett texted back “Too formal.” He almost immediately received the response, ‘Yeah, but with the police chief?’

Everett resumed working on the grant proposal, going back and forth between several printed pages and his computer when he received another

message. This picture was Marilyn in the same suit, only without the jacket. Everett smirked and wrote back, "Still too formal, only it now looks incomplete." Her response was 'You're impossible to please! :P'.

Everett started to respond 'I'm getting pictures of you, I'm very pleased' but stopped himself. He thought of Marilyn in the college gymnasium during the blood drive, kissing Victor. Everett's heart plummeted and he deleted his response. His smile, too, lost some luster. "Business casual is the goal," he wrote instead. He didn't just put the phone away, he put it out of his mind and tried very hard to focus.

"Aaron is snooping around," Raphael reported to Phillip. He waited for a response but found Phillip seemingly lost between a small mountain of matters that were pulling his direction in half a dozen directions at once. He waited a moment longer for a response then pushed Phillip's laptop closed. Phillip looked up, irritated, and Raphael said, "Aaron."

"Aaron is a necessary evil we have to put up with for a bit longer," Phillip said.

"He said he's been alerting the Triumvirate," Raphael warned. "Daily visits to the dark room."

"Of course he has," Phillip chuckled. "He wouldn't be doing his job if he wasn't. But they haven't responded. I would know." He rubbed his face exhaustedly. "Believe me, I would know. One Clan Head cannot get word from the Triumvirate without the other Heads knowing." He stood up and began to pace, as though just to stay awake.

"We need to do something about him," Raphael said.

“We will,” Phillip confirmed. He looked out at nothing, like he was taking in the whole of the situation. “We are,” he said more certainly.

Police chief Carl Dotson looked up as the door to his office was opened. “Chief, this is Marilyn Johnston,” said his assistant, showing her in. The office looked like a storage closet, with stacks of paper everywhere, from the floor to the shelves distributed haphazardly around the room. A single window was set into the wall behind the desk, set too high and too left of the center to be anything but distracting.

“Ms Johnston,” said the chief, standing and shaking her hand. “Thank you very much for coming in.” He gestured for Marilyn to sit and, before she could say anything, he said, “I want to begin by acknowledging your group’s fine work of late. The expose on Phillip Reynolds was excellent.”

“I look forward to seeing more come of that,” Marilyn said with a smile. “The World Alliance is hoping to get the chance to testify against him, and anyone within the city involved in human trafficking.” The chief’s head rose, as though he was surprised. “We want to take an active role in our city, and our world,” Marilyn said proudly.

“That’s exactly why I wanted to call you in,” the chief said with a proud smile. “So we can be clear that vigilantism will not be tolerated.” Marilyn’s smile faded, as did her confidence. “I don’t know what got up your skirt, little lady, but setting fire to that club was too far.” He stood, looking down at Marilyn. “Prostitution is a problem in this city, just like it is in every city. And it’s the police that handle it, not private citizens.” He leaned forward on the desk. “If there is one more incident involving police business, especially where prostitution is concerned, you will be arrested immediately.” He stood up and looked condescendingly down at her. “Any more fires, any more shootings, and you will be suspect number one.”

“Me?!” she exclaimed. Fear transitioned into fury. “You can’t arrest me for something I didn’t do; something I’ve never done.”

“We can, and we will,” the chief made clear.

“That’s illegal!” she yelled.

“We’re the police,” he told her. “We decide what’s legal.” Marilyn was shocked, too shocked for words. “I can arrest you and hold you for forty-eight hours without cause. And if I don’t release you after that forty-eight hours, I get a sternly written letter...assuming anyone even notices. I can charge you with obstruction of justice and delay the evidentiary hearing for six months. And I can see to it there’s no bail. That’s six months you’ll sit in a jail cell – not a prison cell, a jail cell – before we even determine if there’s enough evidence to go to court. And there will be. Because I decide if there is or not. And then we can set the court date for six months after that...and then delay it the night before.” He sat down and looked expectantly at Marilyn. “Little lady, you can die of old age in here without ever being convicted, without so much as seeing one day in court.” He picked up a pencil and began to shuffle papers around. “Thank you for coming by,” he said to close his threat.

“Gluten-free bread sucks,” grimaced Ledger as he dropped the sandwich into the red plastic tray. Sitting next to Sydney and across from Everett and Armand, he looked around the empty sandwich shop. “Why’d we come here again?”

“Cause Marilyn works here,” said Armand, less than impressed with his sandwich as well.

“I thought she did,” Everett said, perking up to check the register. “She said she’d be here this afternoon.”

“Talking to her daily, are we?” Sydney teased. “Getting serious, Ev.”

“Her boyfriend probably has other words for it,” Everett said. “Speaking of serious,” he said, transitioning. “Did you guys really burn down a brothel?” Armand nearly choked in response.

“No,” Sydney said casually as Ledger handed the youngest knight some napkins. “We burned down a white slavery front.” She smiled to the old woman eavesdropping at the next table. “And we didn’t actually burn it down. It was burned down as the result of our actions.”

Everett was rubbing his face, as though in intellectual pain. “...what?” he whimpered.

“This club was a front for white slavery,” Sydney started. She paused and leaned into Ledger. “That’s sex slavery, not what you’re thinking.”

“You’re a dame, so I can punch you,” he told her.

“Yeah, but I’ll punch you back,” she said with a girlish giggle as she stole one of his potato chips. “Anyway, your girlfriend and her crew were arguing and me and Roland got bored, so I sent Roland on inside. He rescued a slave and the club decided to be all ‘burning down the house’ rather than risk implication.”

“How is this not a brothel?” Armand asked while Everett continued to try in vain to sooth his pain away.

“A brothel is where prostitutes work,” Sydney told him. “They’re competent, skilled, and – most importantly – there of their own volition. They are, in every sense of the word, professionals. Sex slavery, on the other hand, involves force, coercion, blackmail, usually drugs, against-their-will...” She waved her hand at the list going on and on. “You get the idea.”

“Basic difference is pimps,” Ledger told Armand. “If there’re pimps, it’s usually slavery. If there aren’t pimps, then it’s usually respectable-ish.”

“Are you guys planning to follow up on this?” Everett asked.

“Yes,” Sydney said emphatically and decisively. “What part of ‘sex slavery’ did you miss?”

“The part where you just took somebody’s word for it,” Everett told her. Armand and Ledger both settled in, readying to enjoy a quality fight. “Knights can’t get involved in these kinds of operations.”

“No, you don’t want to get involved,” Sydney said. “You’re afraid liking Cutie McHotstuff will compromise your judgment and so you’re opting towards inaction, hoping that will keep you from making a mistake.” She leaned forward and told Everett, “Inaction is a mistake all on its own.” She settled in to enjoy her sandwich, leaving Everett speechless.

It was the longest darkness Phillip had ever known.

When he closed his eyes, his imagination superimposed the images of stars on the darkness. And in his mind’s eye, he could imagine the stars dripping by. But opening his eyes again revealed the darkness he had come to know. And now, had come to fear.

“We’ll get to the point,” came the third voice.

“What the hell have you been doing?” demanded the second voice. “How have the programs which Jericho is to be executed for still in operation?”

“To be executed for?” Phillip whispered to himself.

“And we hear rumors, Phillip, that the fortress we are looking to see built is already under construction,” said the first voice.

“You hear rumors from Aaron, and you take them on faith?” Phillip countered in a disappointed tone. “I will concede...admit...that some of the programs of the Brotherhood have gone unaddressed just yet but...” He played the exhausted and overwhelmed dog well. “I am doing the best I can. One man cannot be asked to run two clans, especially when the Brotherhood needs so much scrutiny and, and cleaning.” He gasped dryly. “Mistakes are certainly being made, but I will remedy them.”

“You have proven yourself in the past,” said the third voice coldly. “For that, we shall not see to the completion of the punishment befitting such treachery.” Phillip stiffened at those words. “But be warned.”

The darkness became emptiness and Phillip was alone.

Phillip exited into the small, comfortable vestibule and was alone. He checked to make sure both doors were shut and he nearly collapsed. He fell into the nearest set and succumbed to terror. “Holy...” he whispered, panting heavily, crumpled over himself.

Sydney moved around the desk, kicking the bottom drawer of her cheap metal desk closed. She reached across the narrow desk, turning off the light, encloaking the room nearly instantly in darkness. She grabbed up her backpack and headed for the door.

But when Sydney opened the door to her office, she found Marilyn standing in front of the door, her hand held up to knock on it. Sydney stopped with a start,

staring at Marilyn. As soon as she gave the girl a good, solid look, she could see the emptiness in the girl's eyes.

"Come on," the dame said without a second thought, shutting her door. She checked to make sure it was locked, then she motioned with her head. "Why don't you come over to my place for a while?"

"Would you mind?" Marilyn asked, both sad and surprised at the same time.

"No, come on," Sydney said, smiling genuinely.

The white room was strangely empty, smelling of sterile cleaning chemicals and disuse. The light from the afternoon sun rained in from the big window, while the dusty air seemed thick and heavy, like a warm blanket in winter.

Marilyn walked hesitantly into the room, moving past the small stack of boxes by the door. She turned around in the room, marveling at the dusty air as the long tails of her jacket swept around with her, smiling as if she was seeing fairies flying by her. "I really don't mean to intrude," she politely shouted down the steps in front of the bedroom door.

"It's no trouble," came Sydney's voice from downstairs. "You're a friend. I've always got time for a friend."

"A friend is what I could use," Marilyn said, sighing. She looked around the room, noting for the first time the sheets of paper that hung in opposing corners. She moved up to the sheet of paper by the bedroom door, staring at it. The words and numbers seemed to make no sense.

"Whatchya looking at?" Sydney asked, as she came up the stairs, two glasses of crystal water in her hands.

“What does this mean?” Marilyn asked, pointing at the sheet of paper that was tacked to the back of the door in Sydney’s still empty spare bedroom. “Push-up, 500. Squat, 500. CGPU, 100. Handstand, 100.” She looked over at the knight.

“That’s my morning exercise program,” Sydney said, handing Marilyn a glass of water. “It’s what I do every morning.” She pointed over to the opposite corner of the room. “Over there’s my evening program.”

“What does ‘push-up, 500’ mean?” Marilyn asked, still staring at the enigmatic page.

“Five hundred push-ups,” Sydney answered casually. Marilyn’s head turned slowly to the dame, her eyes wide. “What?” Sydney said, suddenly looking very uncomfortable.

“You do five hundred push-ups? Every morning?” Marilyn marveled.

“Yeah,” Sydney answered, hesitantly.

Marilyn’s jaw hung open. “How?!”

Sydney shrugged. “It’s easy.”

“Wait,” Marilyn said, shaking her hand. “You’re not talking about girl push-ups are you?” she asked.

“No,” said Sydney. “Feet and hands, back straight, elbows at forty-five degrees, all the way down until your nose touches the floor.” She glanced down at her chest and clarified, “Well, or until something does.”

“Five hundred?” Marilyn asked, amazed.

“Five hundred,” Sydney repeated.

“How?”

“It’s easy,” the dame further repeated.

“Easy?” Marilyn asked in disbelief.

“Okay, it’s not easy-easy and it wasn’t easy when I started,” Sydney explained. “See, I started exercising back in middle school,” she said, walking around the room. “I started by doing one exercise for every muscle group. Abs, legs, chest, back, shoulders, and forearms. So, I started doing crunches, squats, push-ups, pull-ups, handstand push-ups, and closing my hand into a fist every morning.”

“You did five hundred?” Marilyn asked, still shocked.

“Not at first. Good god no!” Sydney said, laughing. “No, I started with, like, five reps. Just five, every morning. Then, after a month or whatever, I added a few reps – one, two, five, whatever felt easy – and kept doing that every month. And then again the next month, and then the next month, until...” She shrugged, drinking some of her own water. “It took me a little while to get anywhere substantial, but once I did...” She looked at Marilyn and smiled. “I could keep up with anyone.” She indulged in a quiet moment before she asked, “So what’s bothering you?”

Marilyn took a breath and said, “The chief of police threatened me.” To Marilyn’s surprise and partial disappointment, Sydney didn’t react except to continue listening. “He said the police would tolerate no more vigilantism, that if there was another fire or a-a murder or something, I’d be arrested.”

“And he’d see to it that you never see trial?” Sydney asked. Marilyn was speechless. “Yeah, the police are a...a thing.” She stood up from the doorway she’d been leaning against and she paced about.

“Can he do that?” Marilyn asked.

Sydney just shrugged. “Can, will, and is-allowed are three very different things,” the dame told her. She pulled her hair back in a ponytail but then let it fall free again. She looked out the window, enjoying having a view. “People in power know how to stay in power.”

“But this isn’t about power; it’s about justice. Justice, a-and...” Marilyn couldn’t find the words. “He can’t just ‘make’ people disappear.”

“Why not?” Sydney asked. “He’s the chief of police. The police will do what he says, at least in theory. Depends on how loyal they are.” She stared off a little contemplatively. “Loyalty is a double-edged sword.”

“But, but the police are...are the good guys!” Marilyn exclaimed.

“The police are an institution,” Sydney corrected Marilyn. “And institutions are structures of order. Order is the status quo. By challenging the status quo, you jeopardize the stability of the institutions.”

“But we’re trying to stop crime,” Marilyn nearly pled with Sydney.

“Crime is an institution too,” Sydney told her sympathetically.

Phillip was alone.

Standing in the giant office, he stared out over the massive industrial complex that surrounded the Solaritec buildings. Beyond the industry, beyond the manufacturing plants and monstrous forms of construction, were simply trees.

The trees filled his mind. He watched them swaying in the wind, moving so casually and simply. He wondered what they thought of their dance, guided by the wind and moving in waves like some green-capped foamy sea.

There was a knock at his door and he turned when Raphael let himself in. "Yes sir?" said the Hand second-in-command.

"The plutonium's here," Phillip said without turning to Raphael. "I want you to retrieve it. You specifically," he made clear.

"Yes sir," Raphael nodded and he began to withdraw.

"It's about to happen, Raphael," Phillip told him as he looked through his own reflection in the window of his office. "All we've been working for."

Raphael responded curtly, saying, "I wonder what Jericho would think." Phillip turned back to him, astonished he'd ask such a question. Raphael gave him the benefit of a moment to respond, then he removed himself from Phillip's office.

Phillip stared at the back of the door for a moment, then turned back to his reflection. "Yeah," he finally admitted. "I wonder too."

"He can't do that," Marilyn said as she sat in the car with Victor. Her arms were crossed, her legs were crossed, and she was fuming. "The police can't just arrest someone and make them go away."

Victor looked across at her, disappointed. "Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri. They can straight-up murder somebody in broad daylight and get away with it."

Marilyn seemed only more annoyed at his counterpoint. "I should rig up a spy camera or something. Some way of recording this stuff, so I can expose this kind of corruption."

Victor groaned, "You don't have a clue how to do that."

“So I can figure it out!” she protested. “There’s YouTube and stuff. I can figure it out.” She settled into the seat, facing out her window. Victor, likewise was facing out his. Neither said anything for a while.

“Where’s the road out?” she asked, craning her head to see down the street they faced.

“Huh?” Victor struggled to follow.

“The road,” Marilyn told him. “This part of downtown’s one big tangle. There’s only one road that actually leads out of here. It leads to the bridge one way and back to the university the other.”

“Why are you worrying about that now?” Victor asked, his voice shaking, seemingly from the warm air.

“Because if we need to run, we need to know which direction,” she said. “If we try to run over the bridge, we’ll most likely get caught.”

“I won’t,” Victor said, his voice still shivering.

Marilyn didn’t respond.

A block away, Alan and Malcolm had flashlights in-hand as they walked down the alley. Malcolm kept his flashlight focused ahead at eye-level while Alan’s flashed all over the place like a tourist trying to take in the sights. “I’m still getting used to this,” Malcolm said as they walked between the tall, brick buildings. “I mean, technically this is breaking-and-entering.”

“Don’t think of it like that then,” Alan said pleasantly, keeping his voice low.

Malcolm paused as Alan walked ahead. “How should I think of it then?”

Alan turned, almost a dancer's pirouette. "We're playing Batman." He kept walking, shining his light up at the quiet and dark buildings. "Only I get to be Snake-Eyes."

"Snake-Eyes? He's GI Joe," Malcolm griped.

"Hey, we're playing; it doesn't have to be canon," said Alan.

Malcolm walked a bit more then finally slowed to a heavy stop. "I don't see any way in." He shone his light around the base of the building. Ahead of him, Alan focused overhead. "We'll have to go back to the front gates. If we can't, I don't know, pick the lock or something, we'll have to call it off."

"Fire escape," Alan said, shining his baton-sized flashlight up to the second-story level.

"Yeah, but how are we supposed to—" Malcolm asked as Alan got a running start and scurried a few steps up the brick wall to grab the bottom rung of the metal ladder. Hanging onto it, Alan's weight pulled the ladder down with a ruckus. Once his feet touched the pavement of the alley, he smiled at Malcolm. "Show off," Malcolm declared. Alan winked and kissed his cheek before the two began to climb up the fire escape.

"Do you think Marilyn and Victor are going to break up?" asked Kim. Ruwani was pouring some coffee from a silver thermos as the two sat on an apartment building stoop. "I mean...neither one of them seems happy."

Ruwani was dressed in simple attire for a cool night contrasted with Kim's brightly colored rainbow outfit. She considered the question for a moment and shrugged. "I don't know. I think...I think they just are growing apart. They've been dating since high school."

Kim nodded. She wanted to say more when light flashed over her face. Four SUVs came turning down the street and drove past them. “Uh, Mar,” Ruwani said into her cell phone. “I think Solaritec is here.”

Malcolm pulled the top off the wooden crate and found a metal box within with a yellow-and-black radiation symbol atop. “HOLY CRAP!” he shrieked, dropping the top of the box and leaping back. Alan ran over and promptly freaked out as well. They both grabbed up the top of the crate and put it back on and looked at each other, terrified.

In the silence of the gigantic warehouse, lit only by their flashlights, the two stood perfectly still and stared in horror. After a second, though, they both heard Malcolm’s pants vibrating. He fished out his cell phone and answered with, “Holy crap, Mar, this place—”

“Get out of there!” Marilyn practically screamed. In the front seat of Victor’s car, she and Victor tried to remain as perfectly still as they could, both slumped down as low as possible. Across the street and at the front of the warehouse, the four SUVs had come to a stop. Hand agents had piled out, all led by Raphael.

“Do you hear me?” Malcolm yelled. “There’re no slaves or women or anything,” he panicked at the phone. “It’s just like a bomb or something.”

“Get! Out! Of! There!” Marilyn repeated in a screaming whisper.

“But what about...” Malcolm demanded, just as the front doors of the warehouse opened, spreading nighttime light all over Malcolm and Alan.

Standing at the front of the Hand agents, Raphael looked at the two college students in the warehouse. He seemed more intrigued than troubled by their presence. “Gentlemen,” he said in a civil tone. “What brings you to this place?”

“Uh...we’re...looking for human trafficking?” Alan said in a terrified stupor. Malcolm clamped his eyes shut in mental anguish.

Raphael nodded, like he almost respected the honesty. He turned to one of the men with him and said, “Kill them somewhere less incriminating.”

Hearing that over Malcolm’s still-active phone, Marilyn got out of the car. “Mar!” Victor shouted after her but it was too late. She took from her pocket a can of mace and raced across the empty street. Several of the Hand agents spotted her approaching and turned. As they moved towards her, she held her mace offensively, her cell phone in the other hand.

“Police are on their way!” she yelled at the men, some of whom drew guns. “Let my friends go.”

Out from the warehouse came Raphael, looking increasingly amused with the direction the night was going. “Marilyn Johnston! What a pleasant surprise.” He approached directly but slowed as he neared range of the mace.

“Hi Jerry,” she said with an aggressive tone, glaring from behind her mace can. “Told any good lies today?”

“I actually only lied about my name,” he said. “Wouldn’t you know it, your two friends here have found the very plutonium I told you we wanted you to look for? We really were trying to hire you. You would have made a great addition to the Brotherhood.”

Marilyn hesitated but finally said with a shaky voice, “Let them go.” Raphael shook his head. Marilyn looked at the two dozen Hand agents and, at a loss for any other ideas, tried, “Please?”

That seemed to amuse Raphael as he stepped forward smoothly and covered the mace canister and lowered it. “Fight if you want,” he threatened her in a soothing tone, “but you won’t get out of this.” Marilyn looked fearfully around for a

weapon to use against the larger man. Finding nothing, she glanced back in fear at Victor. Her eyes trailed past him, though, to the three sets of heads lights coming down the street. Raphael saw them as well as the three cars came to a stop.

Out from the cars stepped five knights.



—Now—

“I’m still unclear how you knew where we were,” Marilyn said from the backseat of Morgan’s car as they drove into the morning.

“You aren’t hard to find, Mar,” Everett said. “Neither was that many Hand agents off-site.”

“So this is what caused that big-ass fight,” Morgan put together. “Now it’s all starting to make a lot more sense.”



—1 Day Ago—

Everett came to the lead, Armand and Ledger walking behind him on either side. Behind them, Sydney and Roland completed the wedge shape. Roland glanced over at Sydney and asked, "Why are the white people in the back?"

"Shut up," she growled at him.

Everett walked right up to Raphael and saluted him with two fingers between the eyes, asking, "How's Errol?" It was clear Raphael didn't process the reference for a second. "Let her go," Everett told him. "Let them go," he added with a nod to Alan and Malcolm who were just barely visible inside the warehouse. "Go about your business," Everett told Raphael.

"Or?" Raphael asked. Everett's stoic expression curled ever so slightly into the subtlest impression of a smile. "They were caught trespassing," Raphael told Everett. "We are apprehending them until the police arrive."

"Is this warehouse Solaritec property?" Everett asked. When Raphael didn't immediately answer, Everett nodded to Roland and Ledger. The two walked around Ledger's left and passed amongst the Hand agents without hesitation. They walked right up to Malcolm and Alan and looked to the men holding them.

"We're escorting them out of here," Everett told Raphael. "If the police are on their way, we will keep them within—" As Everett spoke, Roland removed the hand of the man holding Alan. The Hand agent shoved Roland, earning him a punch in the face from Ledger. All civility was gone at that point as the brawl began.

Roland stepped behind Ledger and kicked the man holding Malcolm. The two World Alliance members were practically frozen in place from the shock of the sudden violence.

The nearest thug swung at the knight with a left hook. Roland spun around the hook, changing his drawing sword to an ice pick grip while in mid-spin. As he

completed the spin, he jammed his sword back behind him, slicing into the thug's back with the tip of the straight blade.

Another agent swung at Roland with a blackjack, but Roland blocked the man's hand before it came down with any power. In the same motion, he reached up and grabbed a hold of the man's wrist. With a fast swing up under the man's arm, he twisted the agent's arm behind his back, ending it off with a fast shove to the man's back.

Ledger jumped up onto another agent's chest, yanking him forward to keep the man standing after the impact. The man, shaking from the imbalance, barely had time to breath before Ledger drove both his hands' fingers into his face, clawing straight out with both hands.

Armand kicked one man in the stomach with a fast sidekick, then jumped up to switch legs at the same time, slamming his shin into the man's head. The man blocked, moving in quickly for the kill. Armand let him get in close, then he grabbed the handle of his brand, jamming it forward, right into the man's sternum with a loud crack.

Sydney held her twin short swords in her hands, the two thugs standing to face either sword. The dame smiled at them, spinning the swords intimidatingly in her hands. "Which one of you shall be the first to taste my blade, gentlemen?"

As she spoke, a sound caught her attention. She turned her eyes just a bit, to see down a side street. For just a brief second, she saw the figure of a girl running off down the street, bolting for the fear of hell. And right behind her, half a dozen Hand agents followed.

"Everett!" Sydney yelled, still holding the two at bay. "Your girlfriend's under attack at four o'clock."

Everett stepped back from the whirlwind melee and saw the World Alliance all finally scattering, as though a sense of self-preservation had finally registered.

He looked in the direction Sydney had spoken, but saw nothing. “You sure?” he shouted. A roll of thunder overhead nearly drowned him out.

“Go!” Roland yelled. “There’s a lot of these guys. Go get her.”

“Who are these guys?” Ledger asked, as the Hand moved to surround the knights. “When did Corporate America start keeping a goon squad?”

“My guess would be Hand Special Forces, or the rough equivalent,” Sydney answered, her twin swords held ready.

“That’s probably bad news,” Roland said, chewing on the thought nonchalantly as he and Armand backed up to join Sydney and Ledger facing the crowd of Hand agents on the empty street.

“Probably,” Sydney agreed.

“Well then,” Ledger said, holding out his sawed off shotgun with a dramatic pose. “Let’s even things up.” He pulled the trigger before the Hand agents could respond, the front of his gun turning into lightning. For a brief second, it seemed like nothing had changed. For a brief second, it seemed the world had survived the horrible gesture of the black knight. Then the sound hit.

The rear-most transport leapt into the air with wings of flame coming out from underneath it as its left side went flying over the right. Spinning completely, the giant sports-utility vehicle slammed back down onto the ground, its wheels popping out from underneath it like the heads of four pimples popping simultaneously.

“Been watching the A-Team again?” Sydney asked, looking over Ledger.

The knight cocked his shotgun again, changing over the feed. “BA Baracus is my hero.” He leveled for another shot. As thunder flashed, he squeezed his trigger with the delicacy of a conductor bringing his baton down on the last notes of a

Beethoven symphony. The gun fired out. This time, the solid slug simply tore into the door of the car. The passenger had already rolled out.

Ledger turned his gun to aim at the man, but the lightning quick figure was up in an eye blink, rushing at Ledger. He kicked the knight's gun hand with his left leg, then dropped it down, to spin around, roundhousing at Ledger's head with his right.

Ledger let his gun fall from his hand, coming up underneath the spinning kick. He brought his right arm swinging up in a wide arc, palm up, coming within inches of the soldier's nose. That forced the man back just a step, giving Ledger the room to bring his left hand up in a textbook boxing upper cut. The blow was blocked at the elbow.

Ledger's eyes shot over to the other soldier who was next to him. All six had poured out of the SUV, with still more coming out like devil clowns from a circus car.

And they were all crowding around Ledger.

Sydney ran straight up the side of the building, flipping off the brick surface after her third step. Jamming down with both her short swords, she drove both the blades down in rapid-fire thrusts. The two blades shot down, stabbing into one of the thugs' neck, tearing through his flesh as if it was butter. The momentum of her jump however, curled her over him, jaggging through the wounds while at the same time carrying Sydney through the air so that she could land on the roof of the SUV.

Landing in her stance, Sydney held her swords ready.

The first agent rumbled up the hood of the car, grabbing at Sydney's legs before he was even on the roof. The dame got a running start, running right towards him. Before he could respond, Sydney stepped up onto his head, jumping off the vehicle. With the same motion, she kicked back at the man's neck, driving his face into the car's ceiling so hard, the windshield cracked with the impact.

Ledger threw a hard punch right at one man's neck, collapsing his windpipe in one punch. The man stumbled back, unable to breathe. In the same motion, Ledger threw his elbow back in the other direction, slamming into another man's face. The blow knocked him down onto the ground.

Ledger recovered instantly, readying himself. Another thug swung at him, this time with a knife, but the knight parried it easily, slamming the instep of his foot into the thug's armpit. A loud crack resounded through the rain as the man's shoulder bent up as his arm fell down.

But Ledger didn't even pause. He turned again, looking for the next fight.

With a great heave, Raphael dropped the heavy wooden crate into the back of the SUV. He slammed the rear hatch shut, yelling, "GO!" The black vehicles' wheels squealed as it took off before he'd even finished his shout.

Raphael turned and saw Armand, the nearest of the knights, his back to him. His brand was held up by his shoulder, running parallel to the ground, as three Hand agents circled around him. Beyond them, the other knights fought. There was no sign of the scattered World Alliance.

Armand caught sight of Raphael's reflection in the blade of his sword. He spared a glance back and smiled. "Didn't I already kick your ass once this week?"

Raphael smirked. He tugged his tie free and began to take off his suit jacket. The other Hand agents backed away and Armand lowered his sword. Raphael came to stand over him, almost a foot taller than the honey-skinned knight. "You really want to do this?" Armand offered, speaking over the sounds of Hand agents losing.

"More than you know," Raphael smiled, rolling up his sleeves.

The Hand agent who had moments ago held Malcolm tried to shoot Roland but the knight blocked the gun with a parry at the man's wrist. Roland slid in close, staying connected to the shooter's wrist, but also grabbing a hold of his extended elbow. Driving suddenly forward, Roland shot his right elbow into the agent's face, then slammed his right hand back down onto his neck.

Raphael doubled over, stumbling back so quickly; he fell down into the loading dock, splattering the rain as he fell. Around him, the other Hand agents rushed in at Armand but Raphael held up his hand, stopping them. Armand stood over Raphael, letting him get to his feet.

"You really wish you were a knight, don't you?" Armand asked, now speaking over the rain instead of the fighting.

"Not a knight," Raphael said, spitting out blood as he got to his feet. His sides hurt. "Better than a knight."

Armand smirked disdainfully. "You should know the number rule of fighting a knight."

"And that is?" Raphael asked, undaunted as he stood up.

"Don't."

Armand's arrogance enraged Raphael. He kicked suddenly at Armand and the knight let the blow hit his upper arm without batting an eye. As the kick recoiled, Armand moved in, punching Raphael right in the stomach with a hard cross. The blow doubled Raphael over, but rather than stand up from the attack, Armand remained bent over with Raphael, helping him to keep from falling. "Does it hurt?" he asked in disingenuous sympathy.

Raphael's head shook, too proud to respond with words. "It doesn't hurt as much as this." Armand swept his right foot forward to let his knee catch Raphael in the chest while the instep of his foot slammed into Raphael's groin.

Raphael fell to the ground, water splashing around him. Armand looked back at the other Hand agents, unsure if they were going to charge him or not. They didn't seem sure either.

"What are you doing?" called Roland from the loading deck. Armand looked passed Raphael and saw the knight crouching like a gargoyle.

"He wanted a duel," Armand said, like it was insane to even suggest not accommodating him.

"I'll kill you," Raphael gasped through blood-stained lips. "For interfering in our plans, I'll kill you."

"Doing a real bang-up job at that so far, sparky," Armand told him.

"You don't have to do this," Roland said over Raphael, even as the second-in-command of the Hand tried to stand. "Just admit defeat. Go to jail. Be somebody's bitch. It'd be a good career choice. Better than your job now."

"Better than being a knight," Raphael said, finally on his own two feet. He looked right at Armand with hate. "I know all about you."

"Sure you do," said Roland.

Raphael looked over his shoulder at Roland and warned, "Doubt me at your own peril, knight."

"Right," Roland said. He hopped off the loading deck, causing the semi-circle of Hand agents to ready to rush in, in what was sure to be a vain attempt to save their leader. "Are you ready for the next round of ass-whippin' or is there a reason for the hold up?"

“The reason is my escape,” Raphael said, turning the dial on his wristwatch. There was a high-pitched squeal that transcended the audible range. Armand and Roland both winced when they heard it. In the intervening instant of distraction, Raphael was gone.

Roland and Armand both stared for a moment, shocked. “Huh,” Roland marveled. A thought occurred to him and he looked at the younger knight. “Aren’t we forgetting some—” he asked, just before he was tackled by the Hand agents.

Marilyn’s lungs were fire.

She tried to breathe in, but all she got for the effort was pain. Pain that surged and radiated with every instant. Pain that filled her entire being. Pain that bit deep into her, tearing at her resolve. All over her body, her muscles burned with fury. Fury and fear. Somehow, though, she kept running.

She could feel the pain filling her as she ran. She could feel the rain pounding into her. She could feel the agony of her exhausted muscles as her speed gave way. She could feel herself slowing. She didn’t have anything more.

She collapsed.

Falling where she stood, she landed on her knees in the rain, the water kicked up mixing with the bloodstains on her mouth. She gasped for the moist air that was around her, but it burned as it filled her. The hot rain stained her will as she tried to gasp for life.

Wet footsteps filled her world.

She looked back the way that she had come. The lead that she had gained was fading instantly. She could see the shadowy shapes in the streetlight as they neared. In seconds, they would be on her. In seconds, they would be here.

She tried to stand, to get to her feet. Her body protested and screamed, but she tried. Her muscles ached as her body seemed to catch fire. But she tried to get to her feet.

It was no good.

She fell back to the ground, the water splashing up with the effort. She nearly collapsed in on herself, her eyes closed as she tried to breath. Her mouth was wide as she panted, blood still trickling from her cheek. She opened her eyes as she saw the first of them coming around the corner. They were running right for her.

The men filled the large, bowled parking lot in the downtown realm. With only one street entrance, they came rushing in, their weapons in their hands. Some had guns, some with knives. But they all rushed towards her, all intent on capturing her. Or worse.

She closed her eyes, trying to summon strength. She was determined not to go without a fight. Struggling to get to her feet, she once again braved falling. But this time, rather than hear the sound of the splash back into the water, or the laughter of the running steps that closed in on her, she heard a new sound. New footsteps. But rather than running from the entrance towards her, they were running from between the buildings.

The steps were running at the invading men.

Everett charged at the nearest man, closing the distance before the soldier could even turn his head. Swinging his steel katana, Everett chopped the sword deep into the man's neck, diving the cold blade directly through his neck, passing through skin and bone uncaringly. The head dropped from the body, landing behind him, stopping the other five men as they came running into the bowl. Everett, however, didn't pause for a moment.

The knight ran right for the first one, jamming his sword into the man's chest. The sword cut through his skin, puncturing the back of his shirt. Spinning and

tearing the sword free in the same motion, Everett swung around, swinging the sword as he went. When the sword missed its mark, Everett kept spinning, bringing his rear leg straight back behind him, slamming into the man's stomach. The back kick doubled him over, letting Everett come back around from his spin, slamming the pommel of his sword down on to the man's neck, using the gathered momentum to add to the devastating power.

The three men stopped before Everett as their faster comrades fell to the ground, two of them obviously dead. Everett held his sword in a line down his body, his raging eyes calmed and furious at the same time as he stared at the three men.

The first, in a suicidal scream, rushed at Everett. Everett let the man get in confidently close, then he stepped to the side and stabbed the man in the side of the body, puncturing down into his chest cavity.

There was a loud bang.

The second man, holding the smoking gun, looked onward in shock as his friend, whom Everett had just stabbed through the armpit, fell over, his chest now gone. He lowered his smoking gun, not even having time to gasp as Everett moved past him, using his sword like a painter draws a perfect line of the horizon, only he did it across the man's stomach rather than on a canvas.

The third and final man didn't even have to gasp. He held up both his hands protect his face, but Everett leapt into the air, using the jump to fuel his cut as he severed the man's fingers and scalp at the same time.

The man fell to the ground, his blood staining the water of the rain.

Everett stood up, holding his katana on his right hand as the rain came down. He took a quick second to catch his breath, his head held high in the rain. He turned to Marilyn, as she stood on shaking legs in the parking lot. In the shadows between the street lamps, he stayed motionless.

His eyes met hers.

The rain splattered uncaringly against the black pavement of the parking lot. Marilyn stood in the rain, her soaked hair frayed out over her shirt. Her head was low, as the rain pounded against her. Her breath came out roughly, mixing with the humid air around her.

Everett stepped into the light of the solitary street lamp. Blood dripped from his temple as the rain poured innocently over him. He stood tall despite the din of combat, his mind and presence calm. Marilyn closed her eyes, tears of relief mixing with the rain.

Everett stood before her, hesitant to move any closer to her. He looked down, seeing the blood as it mixed with the rainwater. Before him, Marilyn looked past him, to see the fallen bodies. “Don’t,” he cautioned, his words drawing her eyes back to his. “Don’t do it,” he said compassionately. “It will just make it worse.”

“But...” she started, swallowing hard. Already her eyes were darting to see past him.

Everett came within a few feet of Marilyn and he stopped. He looked at her, his strong eyes holding her gaze.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” he said adamantly.

Everett stepped before Marilyn. She looked up to him, her mind jumbled with words and emotions. Before she could say anything, he dropped his shoulders back in his usual fluid agility, dropping his trench coat from his shoulders. Marilyn moved to protest, but too quickly, Everett threw his right arm out to the side, sweeping the long black jacket into the rain, sending it flying around Marilyn.

He caught the other end with his left hand, laying the warm coat onto her shoulders. He pulled it up close to her, keeping it around her. She turned her head from him, her tears coming as if of their own accord. In the rain, she stood before

him, her head low. In the simple, single light of the street lamp at the corner of the university, the two stood together, inches apart.

Everett reached out to Marilyn. Taking her chin gently in his hand, he lifted her head up. She didn't fight him, letting his careful gesture guide her closed eyes up. Her breath came out in a ragged force as she tried to control her thoughts, her emotions.

Slowly, a warm feeling crept over her cheek. Smooth and soft, it slid delicately over her chin and up the side of her face, caressing her delicately. Softer than the rainfall, it warmed her soul. Everett carefully stroked her face, his hand soft against her tears.

Everett tried to smile, his exhaustion obvious. Marilyn stared into his eyes, as if trying to read a strange language. She closed her eyes again, unable to understand her own emotions.

Slowly, she felt the move. She looked up again, as Everett moved carefully closer. Marilyn's breath caught in her throat as her body froze. Everett wiped the tears and rain from her cheek with his thumb, but then he drew her in, his velvet touch irresistible.

Their lips didn't meet.

Less than an inch to go, Everett stopped. Marilyn remained still, not moving to meet him. In a moment, the rain that had grown around them turned into a din that drowned out their own emotions. Everett's eyes opened, as did Marilyn's, so they could see their distance widening.

"I..." he began to say but found no other words. Marilyn stared at him, her eyes quaking, from an overwhelming emotional tumult as well as growing fear. "Do you not want me to?" he whispered, his soft but strong voice barely audible over the rain.

Marilyn's lips parted, the beginnings of an answer, but then only silence followed. Uncertainty. Try and again, she almost spoke but nothing came of it, until finally she managed to ask, "What happens if I say no?"

She could see the hurt in Everett's eyes. She could see the pain, but also a quiet and determined discipline that she associated with his gaze. "Then I won't," he told her, trying to sound strong but unable to avoid the unmistakable twinge of heartbreak.

Marilyn struggled to believe him, a distrust he could see in her gaze. So there, in the rain of downtown, Everett dropped to one knee. Beneath the light of the streetlamp, he took one hand. "Marilyn," he told her, "On my honor, I will never betray your trust. I will never kiss you, even try to kiss you, until you ask me to."

In the rain, they remained, neither sure what the other meant.

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