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Victim Rights

Josh Reen knew that he shouldn't be so anxious, but he couldn't help himself. He swallowed, wiped his sweaty hands on his uniform, took a deep breath and walked through the Evil Administration Special Services doors.

"Officer Joshua Reen, reporting for duty, sir!" he exclaimed, trying to sound official. He caught several expectant glances, and one of the men in the room rose from his chair to meet him.

"At ease, young man, at ease," the officer said, whom Josh identified as a lieutenant. "I'm Steve, and this is Adrian, Chris and Matt. That one in the corner is Randall, and the one at the computer terminal is Lance," the one identified as Lance half-turned in their direction and gave him a light-hearted wave, without removing his headphones. The lieutenant accepted Reen's papers, and Chris immediately pushed a coffee cup into his now-freed hand.

"Fresh from the Academy, are you?" the lieutenant inquired, skimming through the Reen's papers. "Well, don't worry, you'll fit in just fine. We're adequately friendly, aren't we, Rand?" The one called Randall waved non-committally and returned to the book he was reading. "You've got a good record here," the lieutenant continued. "Your psych is fine too, that's always a good asset..." Adrian and Matt returned to the video game they were playing on a big screen in the corner. Unsure what to do, Josh took a sip from his cup.

"Right! Everything seems to be in order," the lieutenant said finally, tucking Reen's papers under the pile on the desk. "Matt, go show Josh his locker and uniform," he ordered. Matt rolled his eyes in a melodramatic gesture, tossed down his controller down and got up.

The uniform fit well, and the locker was secured with a personalized programmable key ("We all respect your privacy, but I wouldn't keep anything scandalous in there," Matt hinted. Josh nodded, indicating that he took the warning to heart). Upon returning to the Ready Room he found Adrian waiting for him.

"Here's your stun gun and sticky cuffs," Adrian explained, handing Josh the equipment. Josh nodded, attached the cuffs to his belt, then proceeded to perform a check-up routine on the gun. When he finished and holstered it, he caught the lieutenant nodding approvingly.

"I can already see you'll be doing alright," the lieutenant remarked. He was about to elaborate on that, when Chris stepped closer.

"Boss, it's time to move out," he said. The lieutenant glanced at his watch.

"Right you are," he mused and raised his voice: "Adrian, Randall, get ready! Lance, beam the data to the dash terminal." He turned to Josh and continued: "You seem to

be lucky. Normally, we'd have you do the 'stay home, watch the base' routine for a week or so to help you get adjusted, but, frankly, we're a bit understaffed right now. Don't worry, it's going to be an easy one." He tapped Reen's shoulder reassuringly.

"I'll do my best, sir," Josh promised.

"I have no doubt about it," the lieutenant replied and raised his voice again: "Team, move out!"

They marched to a black van parked in the garage. Chris jumped behind the wheel, the rest of the team settled in the back, and they rolled out into the streets.

Chris drove the van quickly, avoiding major streets, but otherwise making no effort to conceal their movements. The checkpoints at the district edges had a line of cars, waiting to be examined and cleared, as usual, but the black van drove right through them without ever stopping, and barely slowing down, to allow the access codes to be exchanged and the lift gates to swing open. Josh chewed on his lip, then tried:

"Excuse me, sir, if I may ask, what is my role in this mission?"

"Mostly backup," the lieutenant replied nonchalantly. "It's more of a precaution than anything else, but you can never know."

"And the mission itself?" Josh inquired.

"An acquisition," the lieutenant seemed somewhat absent-minded.

"Approaching the target," Chris called from the driver's seat. The lieutenant nodded.

"Slow down, watch the sidewalks," he instructed. A few minutes later, Chris sounded his voice again.

"There's our target," he pointed, slowing the van's movement to a crawl.

"Alright, let's do it quick and clean," the lieutenant ordered. "Josh, watch the street. In three, two, one..."

On the count of zero, Adrian and Randall threw the van's doors open and jumped off into the dusk. Unsure what to expect, Josh did as he was told, keeping his hand on the stun gun. A few seconds later, they returned, pushing a girl in her late teens inside before them.

The van sprung into motion as soon as the doors closed. The girl was pushed to the seat rather unceremoniously, with Adrian and Randall dropping on both her sides, opposite of Josh and the lieutenant. The lieutenant snapped open a file (Josh could have sworn that the lieutenant's hands were empty just a moment ago) and rustled with the pages, as the van sped through the streets. Still uncertain as to what his role might be, Josh resorted to watching the girl, still keeping his hand near his gun.

"Samantha Vane Connor," the lieutenant began. "Hmm. You are younger than you look," he gave her a long, appraising look, then shrugged. "But within acceptable limits."

Medical report, check. Psychological evaluation, check. The three required social worker meetings... Check." While he was talking, Adrian was busy rummaging through the girl's plush bag. Simultaneously, Randall was performing a body search on Samantha herself. He stopped momentarily to remove her earrings and hand them to his companion, who put them into a zip-lock, which he then threw into the bag. Finally, Randall waved a sniffer over Samantha's body, waited until it blinked green, then put it away. She kept silent the whole time, her face frozen and her eyes glittering — with fear? Or was there a hint of excitement as well? Josh couldn't tell for sure.

"All clear, boss," Adrian said finally. The lieutenant nodded.

"Everything seems to be in order," he remarked, then added, without a trace of emotion in his voice: "You are a fine young lady. You will make your parents proud."

The van made a few sharp turns, then stopped. Randall threw the doors open and jumped off. Adrian guided Samantha out and they took their places at her sides.

"Josh, take the rear," the lieutenant ordered, and jumped off to lead the group into the back door of an imposing, dark marble building. Josh hurried to take his position in the escort. They led the girl through a maze of corridors, took an elevator up and, finally, to a heavy wooden door at the end of an empty reception hall.

"I am under obligation to remind you, that your chance to voice your concerns or objections expires once the doors close," the lieutenant informed Samantha. She bit her lips, but said nothing.

"End of line," the lieutenant said nonchalantly, opened the door and pushed Samantha inside by the shoulder. The door closed, and the electronic lock clicked.

"Alright, now we have some time off," the lieutenant said. Adrian and Randall took it as an order and slumped into the couches by the walls. After a momentary hesitation, Josh joined them.

The lieutenant took a chair by the coffee table and opened the file, writing quickly with his pen.

"Sir, if I may ask," Josh began, uncertainly. "What just happened? What is going on?"

The lieutenant glanced up. "Well, any self-respecting dragon requires a virgin sacrifice now and then," he finally said with a shrug.

"You don't mean..." Josh swallowed.

"Yup," Randall sounded his voice matter-of-factly. "Admittedly, the whole 'can request young women delivered to him' was always thought to be a privilege of the Head of Administration, but once Derek Drago took office, he turned it almost into a weekly obligation."

"I heard about it on TV, but I didn't really believe..." Josh's voice shook. "And you talk about it... So easily, so — casually, how can you... How can you — take part in it?..."

"It's all voluntary, you know. Anyone can apply" Randall pointed out.

"No way," Josh shook his head.

Adrian looked up from his game console, but said nothing. Randall smiled and pulled out his comm.

"Hey, Chris, how long is that 'virgin sacrifice' waiting list?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd say, about fifteen hundred," Chris replied, stayed silent for a few seconds, apparently checking, then continued: "Hmm. Was a bit off. The real number is 1,548 names."

"Thanks, Chris," Randall said and shut off the comm. "See?" he told Josh.

Josh's vision swam. He forced himself to focus, to accept the reality of what was happening around him, and try to understand the reasons, the underlying pattern.

"Why... Would anyone sign up for something like that?" he said finally.

"Eh, the reasons are many," Randall shrugged again. "Some do it for the excitement. Some, for the prestige. Some yet, out of spite. There's a certain economical justification as well."

"Economical? For having your life ruined?"

"Hardly," Randall was speaking patiently, as if explaining the obvious. "You heard it yourself: mandatory psychological evaluation, plus three social worker meetings, where they try to talk them out of it. Then, the waiting time, usually several months. There is plenty of time to change your mind. No, Josh, I'm afraid no one walks through those doors, who doesn't *really* want to be there."

Josh just sat there, saying nothing, for a while. The Lieutenant finished his report, closed the file and pushed it away.

"How about some light-hearted entertainment, then?" he said, turning on the TV, hanging from the ceiling in the corner. There was some sort of talk show going on, with both sides trying to one-up the other in their ruthless criticism of the Administration's policies and Derek's personality.

"They are exaggerating a little, aren't they?" Randall remarked with a smirk.

"No, it's probably a fairly accurate depiction of the actual policies," the lieutenant said. "Most of the things you hear in the media on the Administration are true."

"I wonder... What's going on in there," Josh spoke, in a stifled voice.

"Oh?" the lieutenant glanced at the heavy doors, then shrugged. "You can watch it all on TV, if you like," he said. "Channel 29 transmits the full footage at 23:00."

Josh swallowed.

"Are you... Going to watch it?" he asked.

"Nah," the lieutenant answered with a strange smirk. "I have a daughter about that age, you see. It would be... Awkward."

The magnetic lock clicked. In the blink of an eye, Adrian snapped his handheld shut and jumped to his feet. Randall followed, switching the TV off as he went.

The heavy doors opened, and Samantha stumbled out, slightly swaying, as if dizzy. She was pale, her hair was a mess, her dress was torn at the shoulder, but otherwise she looked unharmed. The lieutenant walked towards her, grabbed her chin with his fingers and looked into her eyes, examining.

"Everything is alright, I presume?" he asserted. Samantha made no response, but the lieutenant nodded to himself, apparently satisfied. "Come on, miss, we will take you home, now."

They marched back to the van, Adrian and Randall on the girl's sides, half holding, half supporting, with Josh in the back.

The van sped back into the streets, turning several times, as it approached the southern residential district, presumably where Samantha lived. She kept silent the whole time, eyes slightly glazed from the evening's experience.

"Approaching the drop-off area," Chris called from the wheel.

"We are almost done, miss Connor," the lieutenant spoke softly, while still making sure Samantha hears every word. "You will find an information booklet in your bag," At the mention of the bag, Adrian pushed Samantha's bag into her hands. "Please take the time to consult it as you make your recovery. It contains a detailed account of your full rights, including a list of covered medical and psychological treatments. Please don't hesitate to speak to a healthcare professional if you have any lasting symptoms following this evening. If you wish to apply for a victim pension, you will need to fill the attached form and submit it according to the enclosed instructions."

The van screeched to a halt. Randal swung the doors open and jumped off. Adrian took Samantha by the shoulder, pulling her to her feet and guided her off the van, helping her keep her balance.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," the lieutenant said and waved his hand in dismissal, as Adrian and Randall took their places inside the van again. The van's doors slammed shut and the van immediately sprung into motion, quickly gaining speed.

Josh slowly took his hand off his stunner.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," the lieutenant mused, flexing his shoulders. Randall and Adrian high-fived. Chris drove the van quickly, avoiding major streets. As before, any checkpoints and blockades they encountered quickly opened a clear path on their approach.

"You look a bit shaken, Josh," the lieutenant said, giving Josh a piercing gaze. Josh shifted uneasily.

"I'm not sure I can do it," he uttered, uncertainly. "I mean, the job is not too taxing, at least not physically... But the mental, uh, the moral strain, well, I'm not sure I can take it for long."

"Really? That's a real shame," the lieutenant seemed strangely cheerful. "We've only recently lost a teammate, you know. You're a capable young man, with a great record. We hoped you'd take the task."

"He's right, you know," Adrian chimed in. "The job may be emotionally draining at times, but someone has to do it. It would be better if it was someone with a conscience, like you, instead of a Special Units drone with no sense of right and wrong."

"I'd like to, I really would... But..." Josh shook his head.

"You have your principles, I'll give you that," the lieutenant continued. "That's a good quality. The only challenge is aligning those with the benefit of society."

"I'm not sure if those two can be reconciled," Josh spoke helplessly.

"Come on, Josh," Randall said somewhat impatiently. "This is Citizenship class, third year material. You must still remember most of it."

"Any functional society depends on everyone doing their part," Adrian quoted. "In other words, each contribution counts. Each of us is but a tiny cog in the great machine, pitifully small, laughably fragile, often seemingly insignificant and replaceable. But in order for the society to function, it must perform its duty, and in order to perform its duty faithfully and effectively, it must believe it is absolutely vital. It must think itself the center of the Universe, to think that without it, the entire civilization would screech to a halt."

"We aren't monsters or anything," Randall shrugged. "And the world we live in isn't so bad. Everyone gets a chance to show their worth. Those, who wish to live in the safety of their condos, can. Those, who crave the excitement of breaking societal norms, those who wish to test the limits of the government's power, those who need to live a life of trouble, those can find their places in the natural order of things too."

"In a healthy society, even dissent has its role," the lieutenant spoke quietly, and Josh couldn't help but feel drawn by his words.

"One important thing to remember," Adrian chimed in. "Is that Victim Rights cover not only the immediate rights of someone who has become a victim," he explained, patiently, as if repeating the obvious. "They also regulate and secure the natural right of any citizen to become a victim, if they so please."

"That is correct," the lieutenant gave off a tired sigh and shrugged again. "In the end, you will be the one, who will make the choice. Become a victim or an person of action; Let the world sweep you off your feet and carry you, or ride the wave yourself; Take

any side, or take none. The choice is, and always was, yours.”

Josh sat in silence, lost in thought. His emotions swirled and crashed like ocean waves, threatening to drown him. Suddenly, he remembered something important, a question that poked at the back of his head, demanding answers. He felt that the answer to this question would change everything, make everything clear, remove all his doubts and set him straight.

“Sir?” he began. “Before I give my answer, could you answer one question?” The lieutenant nodded, and waited for him to continue. Josh licked his lips. “You said you have recently lost a teammate. My predecessor. The one I was supposed to replace. What happened to him?”

“Oh? He joined the Resistance.” the lieutenant smiled warmly and shrugged again. “Last I heard, he was making a name for himself, quickly ascending in the ranking ladder. Someday, you might even need to face him in the field. To join him... Or to kill him.”

The Universe stopped, as everything in Josh's mind clicked into place. He felt a tremendous weight falling from his shoulders. His doubts vanished, leaving nothing but a sense of resolution.

“I'll do my best... Boss.” Josh said and immediately received an enthusiastic clap on the shoulder from Randall. Adrian emitted a loud “Woot!”. The lieutenant smiled a warm, friendly smile.

“Welcome to the team,” he said, and shook Josh's hand, as the van rolled into the garage and screeched to a halt.

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