

“Well fuck you too!”

That was the last thing Eric had said to her. That was the last thing Sonia had heard before he slammed the door. And now, 10 years later, both regretted almost every decision they had made since then.

“Do you think the blood will come out of this shirt?” Sonia asked as they drove out of the city.

“I do.” Eric said. “Do you think we’ll be ok?”

“I do.” Sonia said as she laid her head in Eric’s lap.

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### 20 years ago

The kids called it “The Snowman Graveyard.” [\[R1M4P1\]](#) It was a huge lot filled with all kinds of snowmen, each in some kind of disturbing pose. To 12 year old Sonia, it was a safe place. It was a place to get away from the monster she called her father. He couldn’t touch her here. He couldn’t leer at her here. He couldn’t do anything to her here.

To 13 year old Eric, it was an excuse. An excuse to be near the girl that he loved; to provide comfort and security. And here, today, the moment that would change both their lives was about to occur.

“Did he?” asked Eric as he held Sonia’s body close to his.

“You know I think about you when he’s doing it.” Sonia whispered as she nestled her head under his chin. “I wish there was something I could do.” Her tears froze to her face, creating a hauntingly beautiful mosaic of sadness in the midday sun.

Eric caressed her hair as he spoke. “I have an idea. I was walking home yesterday after I finished bagging groceries and I went right by this martial arts place in the Pinewood strip mall. They just opened and have a special for new people.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So what if you and I took lessons together? We could both learn to defend ourselves. Eventually you would get so good you could, well, stop your dad.”

Sonia lifted her head and looked into Eric’s eyes. “Do you really think it would work?”

“Of course it would,” Eric smilingly stated. “It’s either that or kill him.”

Eric chuckled softly as he said this but Sonia’s face held firm. The smile left Eric’s face.

“I was just kidding Sonia.”

“I know you were, Eric,” she said and then put her head back on his shoulder. “I think it’s a great idea. Let’s go tomorrow and sign up. I just need to be held right now.”

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13 years ago (morning)

“I can’t believe he died of a heart attack,” Sonia grunted as she hit the bag.

“You sound like you’re complaining,” breathed Eric as he tried to hold on to it.

For the last 7 years they had been coming to The Dragon’s Dojo every day to work out. At first it had been for two reasons; one, for Sonia to get out of her home for a while and, two, so she could learn to defend herself from her father’s advances. Eric was along for one reason; he loved Sonia.

“Oh I’m not complaining,” she continued as she practiced combo after combo; using moves designed to bring down any foe quickly and efficiently. “I’m saying I can’t believe the police think he died of a heart attack.”

Eric’s eyes widened as he stopped holding the bag. His voice, barely a whisper, hissed at her, “What are you saying? Did you have anything to do with it?”

“Maybe,” Sonia teased as she walked to the bench to grab a towel. “So what if I did? Is it really such a bad thing? Isn’t that why we’re here?” she asked as she motioned around the room.

“Sonia,” Eric said, “We came here so you could learn to defend yourself. We’re here so that you and I could spend time together.” Eric grabbed her by the arm and brought her close. “We’re *here* so that you would never again have to do things you would be ashamed of.”

Sonia laughed as he said this and shrugged her arm to remove his hand. “Ashamed, Eric? *Ashamed?* What the hell do I have to be ashamed of? I didn’t start anything but I damned sure finished it. Besides, who’s going to miss him?”

As she turned to walk away, Eric only said two words. “You’re mother.”

Sonia stopped and spun on her heel. “My mother? The alky? Mrs. ‘2 bottles by noon’? When she sees the size of the insurance check, I don’t think she’ll care much at all. One hundred thousand dollars buys a lot of booze.” Sonia smirked and turned around again, walking towards the locker room.

As Eric silently stared at her, wondering what the hell she had gotten herself into, he saw her turn around again. “Come inside when you drop me off. I want to show you my new art.”

“Damn it, girl,” Eric thought as she disappeared behind the “Women’s” sign, “This was *not* the reason we came here.”

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13 years ago (afternoon)

Eric put the car in park, pushed in the emergency brake with his foot and got out of the car. Sonia, holding her gym bag, slid out of the passenger side and started to walk to the side door.

“Try not to wake up alky,” she said sarcastically.

Eric entered the house right behind her. As usual, the television was on and Ms. Rodgers was passed out on the couch. Eric walked into the living room and turned off the TV.

“You’re too nice to her,” said Sonia as she walked to her room.

“Someone should be,” Eric grumbled under his breath as he followed.

When they got to her room, he shut the door and locked it. The lock was something Sonia had installed about 2 years ago after her father got drunk one night and decided to pay his daughter a visit. That was the night she almost beat him to death. He never touched her again. If anything, the lock was to prevent him from doing something stupid when he got drunk.

“So what did you want to show me?” Eric sighed as he sat on her bed.

“What’s the matter?” Sonia asked as she sat down next to him.

“Are you kidding? Were we not having that conversation in the dojo? Was I imagining the whole thing?” Eric was become exasperated. How could she be so nonchalant?!

“Eric, I just wanted to get your goat. Do you think I could honestly ever do something like that? I was just playing a practical joke. I’m sorry if I upset you so much.”

“Are you sure it was a joke? Are you being serious now?”

“Of course, lover boy. Now, let me show you my newest creation. You’re gonna love it.”

Sonia hopped up and moved to her bench. On it was a clear, plastic box. Inside the box was a small jar filled with green jello. Inside the jello were dozens of green marbles. Outside of the jar were two marbles, free of jello and placed side by side.

“What do you think?” Sonia asked.

“Um, I think it’s... Well, it’s... Um. I don’t get it.”

“I call it ‘Apart.’ The green marbles represent most people. Trapped in their ordinary lives, never able to escape no matter how hard they try. The jello represents their lives. They push and push and think they’ve made headway but they are never able to break free. The two marbles on the outside represent you and me. We made it Eric. We’re together, outside of that retched existence most people call ‘normal life.’ We’re free. And I love you for it.”

It was at that moment that Eric realized that he would do anything for Sonia. Anything. Even die for her.

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### 10 years ago

“You cheated!” Sonia yelled at Eric as soon as they sat in the car.

“What do you mean I cheated?!” Eric yelled back.

“You *know* I’ve always had a weakness blocking leg sweeps. How *dare* you use it to win!”

Eric and Sonia drove away from the National Kempo Karate tournament, Eric’s first place trophy in the back seat along with Sonia’s second place trophy.

“Look, I’m sorry. I saw an opening and I had to take it,” Eric explained. “You would have done the same thing.”

“Bullshit,” spat Sonia. “I would never exploit your weakness just to win a tournament.”

That was a lie and they both knew it. But Sonia couldn’t get over the fact that she had lost. Not only had she lost, she had lost to a *man*. For the first time ever the NKK, as it was known, decided to hold a mixed gender tournament. Men and women would now compete against each other in the same tournament to prove who was the best Kempo martial artist in the United States.

Both Sonia and Eric were considered the best in US as both had won multiple tournaments and both trained rigorously to keep up with the ever growing number of younger competitors. Sonia was used to winning at every tournament, as was Eric.

This tournament, however, saw Eric and Sonia face off against one another in the final bout. Both were fast, both were brutal and both were vicious. Blows fell everywhere but, eventually, Eric conferred the final strike. A powerful leg sweep, followed by a hard kick to the chest, had not only won him the tournament, but also the ire of his fiancé.

Since she first started training 10 years ago, Sonia’s goal was to be strong and self-sufficient. She didn’t want to need any man. She had a chip on her shoulder the size of Mt. Rushmore and she just waited for any man to try to knock it off. It had gotten to the point that Eric, whom she loved more than anything, was starting to annoy her. Any little thing he did set her off and today’s “thing” was not small. It was huge. It was monumental. It was 2 hours away from the last time they would see each other for 10 years.

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3 days ago

“Faster!” yelled Eric. “Your opponent will show you no mercy.”

The students cringed as they went through the motions, trying to live up to their teachers expectations. He was mean and he was quick tempered, but he was one of the best. Students from Eric’s dojo were known to be some of the best in the world. At one time Eric, himself, was the best Kempo martial artist in the world. And that ate at his gut like an unquenchable fire.

No longer a young man, Eric decided to hang up his tournament gloves after too many disappointments in the arena. He opened a dojo in Los Angeles for three reasons; to pass his knowledge on to future generations, to show people he still had what it took to be a Kempo artist and, most importantly, to take his mind off of Sonia.

At night, he would dream of her and of the snowmen. He would dream of her sweet face and of her prematurely aged nature. He would dream of all the good times. And he would dream of the last day in such vivid detail that he would wake up crying. The nights were not kind to him.

“You all did well today, students. But you must practice and become better. In life, no one will simply give you what you want. You must earn it. You must take it. You must strive for it. I will see you all tomorrow.”

Eric bowed back to his students in a sign of respect and made his way to his office. He noticed today’s mail sitting on his desk and, in particular, a large manila envelope.

“Who do I know in New York?” Eric thought to himself.

He opened the envelope and the pictures came sliding out. There were five in all. The first was of a woman threatening a man in an alley. The second was the same woman attacking the man. The third was her walking away from the man’s prone body. The fourth was her getting into the back of a Cadillac. And the fifth was her walking into some seedy looking place called “Fat Jack’s.”

By the time he got to the last picture, his hands were trembling so bad he dropped them.

“Sonia,” he kept whispering.

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2 days ago

Shock had started to sit in as soon as he got on the plane. By the time it landed, he was almost numb.

As he got in the cab, he laughed to himself out loud. The cabbie looked in the mirror as if this guy were nuts and asked where he wanted to go.

“15 Franklin Parkway,” said Eric as the smile vanished from his face. He had laughed because of the absurdity he had found on the Internet. Sonia Rodgers was no where to be found in New York. It was if she never existed. But Sonia Marcus was easy to find.

“Sonia Marcus,” laughed Eric when he had finished verifying the identity of the person who lived at 15 Franklin Parkway by using her social security number. “Well, if she’s going to use someone’s last name, it might as well be mine.”

The cab pulled in front of the apartment building and the cabbie turned to look at Eric.

“That’ll be twenty two forty. Hey, are you all right? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m cool,” Eric said, handing him a twenty and a ten. “Keep the change.”

Eric got out and started walking towards the building.

“Thanks man!” yelled the cabbie but Eric didn’t turn around. He knew if he did, he would never continue to go inside.

The mailbox in the lobby gave away her identity. “4B – Sonia Marcus” was all the little label said.

Eric bounded up the stairs two at a time. By the time he reached her door his hands were shaking again. He collected himself after a minute or two and knocked. There was no answer.

He knocked again. Again, there was no answer.

After waiting for five minutes, he decided to wait no longer. Pulling out a credit card, he was able to bypass the lock and swiftly move inside, closing the door before anyone could see him. The sight in front of him made him gasp.

The contents of the room were this: one bed, one sink, one stove, one light bulb, one wooden chair and one plastic box. It looked like whoever lived here did so for convenience and for no other reason.

But it was the plastic box that made him gasp. He moved towards the art project very slowly, waiting to wake up crying in his own bed. But this was no dream. Inside the box was a small jar filled with green jello. Inside the jello were dozens of green marbles. Outside of the jar was one marble, all alone and apart from the rest of the marbles. **[R1M4P3]** Looking closely, he noticed the tiny spot of glue where the other marble had once been. In the jello, he could see that a marble had been forced into the jar, putting it back with the others.

It was at that point that the “mean Kempo teacher,” the man whom every student feared because of his ferociousness and intensity, cried so hard that his lungs ached and his eyes stung. He collapsed onto the floor and was so paralyzed with grief that couldn’t move except to open his

mouth and wail. Eventually, the world spun away and was replaced by empty, inky blackness. His eyes closed, his heart pounded and he passed out.

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## Yesterday

The sun caressed Eric's face, urging him to join the new day. He grudgingly obliged and stood up. His body ached but he felt better emotionally. After all these years, he had finally released the feelings that had been killing him slowly. He was determined to find Sonia and help her solve her problems, just as he had done 20 years ago.

"Fat Jack's" was a bar in the seedy part of town where thugs and scum ran things. It was difficult to find and, once he did, 10 years of guilt came swelling back.

"Did I drive her to this?" Eric thought as he opened the door.

If the streets around the bar were sordid, the joint itself was ten times worse. It was remarkably large compared to what it looked like on the outside. At every table, someone was either making some kind of shady deal, exchanging money for drugs or just sitting watching the scum of society feed off of one another.

In the back of the place sat a large man in a pink hat and a scarf. [R1M4P4] Normally, Eric thought, this man would be killed in a place like this. But considering the number of women crawling over his fat mass and the number of large men around him, he thought that this must be "Fat Jack."

Eric walked over to the table. Two men tried to stop him but, true to form, they became his next victims. As they tried to put their arms back into their sockets and twist their fingers back into usability, the fat man yelled at them to get up. He smiled as Eric took a seat across the table.

"Is there something I can help you with, friend?" said Jack as he pushed the women off of him.

"I'm here to see Sonia," growled Eric. "Where is she?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" said Jack as he nodded towards someone behind Eric.

At that moment a hand grabbed Eric's shoulder and a familiar voice said "This guy giving you trouble, Jack?"

Eric looked up and stared into a face so cold, he almost didn't recognize her. There was no warmth, no love, nothing that he had ever known in that face. But it was her. It was Sonia.

"You know this guy, S?" Jack asked.

“Yeah, I know him. He’s the bastard that cheated me in that tournament years ago. You know, the one I was telling you about?” Sonia grasped Eric’s shoulder harder, causing him to grimace in pain and grab onto the table for support.

“Well, S, he just took out two of my best men. What should we do with him?” Jack waited for the answer he knew was coming. The answer she had always given.

“I can dump the body in the East River; make it look like an accident.”

Eric’s eyes widened.

“WAIT!” he shouted. “I’ve come to make a deal.”

Jack nodded at Sonia and she let go. Eric massaged his shoulder as he watched Sonia sit next to Jack.

“What kind of deal?” Jack asked.

“A deal for So.... A deal for ‘S’.” Eric looked at Sonia, hoping to see something there to tell him it wasn’t a waste of time to come here. There was nothing.

“A deal for S? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Are you trying to steal my best hitter?”

“No. I want her to come with me to leave this place. To leave this shithole you call a business.”

Jack smiled again and said, “And what do you propose?”

“A fight. A ‘rematch’ if you will. If I win, she comes with me.”

“And if you lose?”

“She gets to kill me.” Eric said this directly to Sonia, hoping to get some kind of reaction. Nothing.

“Sounds good to me. But not here; not today. This sounds like something I can make money off of and I’m not one to pass that up. I’ll tell you what, you come back tomorrow and we’ll let you two settle things once and for all. Now, get the fuck out of here before I change my mind.”

Eric stood up as Sonia stared at him. Hatred slammed into him so hard it almost knocked him over. On wobbly legs he made his way to the door, not looking back for fear her eyes might turn him to stone.

“Tomorrow,” Eric thought. “Tomorrow is the day I die for love.”

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## Today

The day kept replaying itself over and over in Eric's mind. In all honesty, he didn't remember much. The shock was just starting to wear off and he was able to form bits and pieces together to try to better see the puzzle that was today.

He remembered getting up, grabbing his gear and going to "Fat Jack's." He remembered being ushered into a waiting car, the same Cadillac from the pictures, and taken to a secluded area. He was told it used to be a monastery years ago and had been abandoned for some time. No one ever came up here so it was easy to hold "events" like this up here.

The next thing he remembered was the crowd of people and the amount of money he saw changing hands. He was not the odds on favorite but he didn't care. He just wanted to take Sonia and get out of here. At this point the crowd had formed in a circle with him in the middle. He was warming up when the crowd parted and "S," as people chanted, came walking into the makeshift ring.

What happened next was fast; very fast. So fast that most people didn't see the final blow. Up until the end, Eric felt like he was reliving the finals of the NKK tournament again. That's probably why he thought he could end it with the leg sweep.

Sonia, on the other hand, remembered everything. She remembered the opening punches and kicks. She remembered every take down and kip up. She remembered every single memory she had of that leg sweep and the replaying in her mind of how she would have blocked it and used it to her advantage. It was as if it were in slow motion when Eric went for the sweep. Sonia went low and blocked it, forcing it up and over her head. [R1M4P2] She saw the opening and took it; one punch to the openly exposed testicles was all it took. Eric vomited grotesquely on part of the crowd, blood mixing with stomach acid. He didn't get back up on his own.

Seconds later, he felt hands drag him to his feet and push him up stairs. He was forced, by Sonia, into what had to be an old monks office. Sitting behind a small desk was Jack. He had watched everything from up here. Eric was pushed into a chair and told not to move.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Marcus. I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but shit happens. Especially to people who come into my bar and try to fuck me like some common whore in front of my own people!" Jack spit out the last words with venom.

"S! Make sure this piece of shit doesn't come back." Jack reached into his drawer and pulled out a 9mm gun with a silencer. He threw it to her. "Goodbye, Eric; you stupid fuck."

Eric closed his eyes. He was picturing them in the Snowman Graveyard, crying and comforting each other. He was picturing a young girl sigh and hold his hand. He was not picturing the killer who had glared at him yesterday.

"It's all right, Eric. You can open your eyes."

Eric opened his eyes to the site of Fat Jack's blood soaked shirt and shocked expression.

"He won't bother us anymore, Eric," Sonia said as she held out her hand. Her shirt was spattered with Jack's blood. "Let's go."

Eric cautiously took her hand and stood. His head swooned and he had to steady himself on the chair. He caught Sonia's eyes and it was at this moment that the little girl came back. She kissed him violently and hugged him close, crushing him to her.

"I am so sorry, Eric," she bawled as she clung tighter.

"It's ok," whispered Eric. "Let's just get out of here."

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### Right now

As Sonia's head rested in his lap, Eric asked, "So who sent me the pictures?"

"I did, silly," said Sonia playfully.

"Why?"

"Because I needed rescuing. And you've always been very good at rescuing me." Sonia said this and closed her eyes.

Eric was, at first, shocked. But then he realized that everything was going to be whole again and he smiled.

"Eric?" said Sonia from his lap, not opening her eyes.

"Yes?"

"Can we go back to my apartment? I want to get my marbles."