

Red Moon Rising

Part 05 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 05 of 30

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“I’m a kind person. I’m kind to everyone. But if you are unkind to me, then kindness is not what you’ll remember me for.”

- Al Capone

—10 Days Ago—

Everybody hated when it was Frank’s turn at the carpool. The only one in the whole department with a two-door car, the coup always felt like a can of sardines in the mornings. The five morning riders had employed a ‘women in the back’ policy just to try and help alleviate some of the discomfort, but it had only done so much. Daphne and Elizabeth alternated who was in the middle, but they still had to share with either Darren or Jeffrey. And whoever was fortunate enough to get the front still had to pull his seat all the way up, to the point that his knees were practically touching his throat.

Frank sat in relative comfort, except for the knowledge that his coworkers were going to kick him out of the carpool any day now. That, or kill him. The drives were always tense and in relative silence. They could never agree on a radio station and while on other mornings somebody would be willing to settle for music they didn’t like, nobody was in the mood to compromise further. So silence and tension was always the result.

Frank tried to drive quickly, but also calmly. He feared the car shifting too much and his passengers being jostled into one another. Traffic was impossible to predict. Some mornings, the roads seemed clear. Others, they seemed paved with

other cars and the gridlock was unbelievable. And so he tried to drive as safe as he could, even though he knew his passengers hated every second of the seemingly endless ride.

He'd contemplated getting a new car. He'd considered it heavily, but some part of him grew indignant when he confronted the reality that he was considering a new car solely for the comfort of this one morning each week, and the comfort of others. And while he liked his coworkers, they really weren't his friends. They never did anything together outside of work. And really, even their connection at work was mostly that they all worked in the same cubicle farm. So a new car fast became something he'd look into 'in a few weeks'.

This morning, in tense silence, the drive had been fairly uneventful. There'd been a few slowdowns as Frank picked up the last of the passengers, plus there'd been a stretch of hitting every light, but overall nothing major. As Frank was going up the onramp to the belt line, he smirked, strangely cheerful as he saw the sun peeking out behind the clouds. "At least we don't have to worry about the sniper," he quipped dryly, just before being shot through the windshield.

Even though the elevator held only Jericho and Phillip, it felt crowded. Both men dressed in suits, the two faced the doors as the upward moving numbers overhead counted slowly. Phillip inhaled his stress and exhaled his frustration. "Jesus..." he sighed suddenly. "This is..." He shook his head. "I never thought this would happen. I mean, I thought it might happen, and I guess I knew it could happen but I never knew it would happen, you know?" He looked at Jericho. The taller man was staring at the floor counter, as though trying to will it to go faster.

"I mean, I guess, this is a big deal, you know?" he said with a nervous laugh to Jericho. "The three heads of the North American branch of the Brotherhood of the

Sun, all working in one place? I mean, that...that never happens.” He checked with Jericho again, then sighed and faced forward. “I just...”

Phillip checked his phone and found it strangely absent of any messages or alerts. “Have you ever met him?” he asked. Jericho glanced towards Phillip without actually looking at him. “Aaron?” Phillip specified. “The Head of the Investigators’ Clan?” Jericho nodded and resumed facing forward, staying silent. “I met him in Milan last year,” Phillip shared with some strange sense of pride. “At that big meeting.” He faced forward like Jericho. “Seemed like a nice guy. At the time.”

The door chimed. Just before they began to part, Jericho said, “It’ll be okay.” He strode out first, Phillip walking quickly to keep up. The two found themselves in halls of the Solaritec campus they rarely visited. Unofficially the Investigators’ Clan’s section, the heads of the Miracle Workers’ Clan and the Hand had little reason to visit these offices. The occasional workers starting their day early spared them strange glances, wondering who they were.

Jericho and Phillip turned a corner, arriving at a lonely hall with a single door on the left hand side. Raphael, bruised and battered, stood next to the door. His state shocked Phillip and he turned to Jericho. “Don’t ask,” was all the Hand leader said, heading off the question. Opposite Raphael were the four head investigators working for Aaron. They nodded respectfully to Jericho and Phillip but none of them said anything.

Jericho gave Raphael a consoling look as he passed by him, going through the door into the boardroom. Inside, a long black table waited. In the middle of the far side of the table, directly before the door, sat Aaron. As soon as Jericho and Phillip entered, he stood and smiled professionally. “Good morning, gentlemen.” He reached across the table to shake their hands. Jericho’s height made the act easy but at the same height as Phillip, the two had to stretch a little. “Thank you for coming. Sorry for the early hour, but we’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

“No doubt,” said Phillip diplomatically while Jericho said nothing. As the three took their seats in the long room meant for whole teams, Phillip went on to say, “I was surprised at how unceremoniously you arrived. If we’d had more advanced notice that the third head of the North American branch of the Brotherhood of the Sun would be joining us, I could have arranged more of a to-do.”

Aaron smiled, more patiently than genuinely. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I have to be honest with you: I am not here under good terms.” Phillip’s friendly smile wavered while Jericho seemed to crack a smile. “The Triumvirate has instructed me – directly,” he emphasized, “to bring this branch’s house back into order.”

Phillip chuckled. “Well, I appreciate that we Americans run things a little fast and loose here, but the place is hardly in disarray.” As Phillip talked, Aaron looked in Jericho’s direction. Jericho looked him directly and confrontationally in the eye. Aaron made note of that, then stopped Phillip’s jabbering.

“You have a shooter on the rampage,” Aaron said, looking to Phillip.

Phillip was confused. “That’s not in any way part of our—”

“The Brotherhood of the Sun exists to safeguard humanity,” Aaron said directly. “We guide. We give. We guard. Did you think our obligations did not extend to the public in general?”

Phillip visibly balked at the castigation. “We deal with affecting world change and world improvement on a national and global scale,” he told Aaron. “Every day, we touch the lives of thousands and millions of people. The shootings are a tragedy, but they are, statistically speaking, insignificant. On a per-minute basis, we save more lives than this killer harms. So no, I didn’t really think our obligation extended to street crime.”

“This is hardly street crime,” Aaron argued. He sat back and adjusted his tie. “And it’s hardly the sole evidence that this location – Solaritec and the satellite

agencies under the control and influence of the Brotherhood of the Sun – need realignment.” He put his hands on the table, drawing attention to the several stacks of files situated around him on the otherwise empty table. “That’s what we’re here to do today.” He glanced at Jericho, offering him the chance to speak. Jericho maintained predatory eye contact but said nothing. “Okay then,” Aaron said. He selected a folder and opened it, saying, “Let’s get started.”

In the hallway outside the closed door, Raphael grimaced as he chewed on a piece of gum. Doing so caused his ears to pop and he gasped in relief. When he opened his eyes, he saw Aaron’s four men all watching him. He returned the favor to each one of them individually. “What happened last night, pal?” asked Uriel, the farthest of the four and the only one with black hair. “Get into some trouble?”

Raphael looked exclusively at him. “Yeah, Crocodile Dundee, I got rolled by a gator.”

“He’s South African, not Australian,” corrected Errol, the closest of the four. Of the four, he wasn’t the biggest or the leanest but the look in his eyes left no doubt that he was the most dangerous.

“Sorry, guvnah, did I hit a nerve?” Raphael told him, mocking his English accent. “What the hell, people? Is it the United frickin’ Nations in here?”

“You got a problem with foreigners?” asked Orson, his American accent sounding out-of-place coming from between Errol and Uriel.

“Only ones who are rude,” Raphael told him. “But then, I’ve got the same problem with natives.”

“Why so caustic?” asked Ian, the smallest of the group. Raphael wasn’t the only one surprised by the question. “I mean, I know we’re not here under the happiest of circumstances, but still. We’re all loyal to the Brotherhood, right?”

Raphael smirked at his naïveté. “Who are the bad guys in cop movies? Aside from the crooks, of course.” Ian gave the question far too much thought. “Internal Affairs,” Raphael told him, irritated the smallest of the four Investigators couldn’t figure it out sooner. He looked directly at all Errol. “The asses who think they have the right to question every little action and decision of the real police, all from the safety of their desks.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Uriel. “Cause Internal Affairs never does anything useful. And they’re not real cops, like the street cops who never do anything wrong.”

Raphael considered different responses, from continuing the lively and pleasant debate to hauling off and just laying out Uriel. As he whittled down his options, though, his pocket vibrated. His irritation turned into aggressive frustration. He read the text and said “Sorry, boys. Can’t play no more.” Without giving the four time to protest, Raphael turned and stepped inside the conference room.

“Hey!” Aaron exclaimed, looking up from his files as Phillip and Jericho both turned around.

“Sorry sir,” Raphael told Aaron with disingenuous but passable respect. He told Jericho, “There’s been another shooting.”

Jericho was leaving his seat before Raphael had finished his sentence. Before either could make for the door, Aaron spoke up. “This conclave isn’t at an end.”

Jericho stopped in his tracks and spun around to Aaron. “There’s a killer out there. You were the one who just said we had an obligation to the civilians beyond our walls.”

“Are you going to be engaging in the investigation yourself?” asked Aaron. Jericho was stunned by the sheer audacity of the question. “Are your people so incompetent that they require your direct and immediate supervision in all things at all times?” Phillip looked between Aaron and Jericho, sure he was going to see a massacre.

Jericho put both his fists on the table and leaned forward. “You will not tell me how to run the Hand.”

In an act of assertion that Phillip was sure would lead to Aaron’s immediate death, Aaron rose from his seat and got eye-to-eye with Jericho. “The Investigators’ Clan is now in charge of this matter, so that it may actually be resolved. MY men will look into this, with no interference from either of your agencies. Understood? So under the direct authority of the Triumvirate of the Brotherhood of the Sun,” he said slowly and clearly, “sit your ass down.”

Jericho’s smirk returned, though it was clearly tainted with bloodlust. He stood and stared at Aaron for a moment. He turned to Raphael and said with considerable and palpable disgust, “I’ll be a while.” Raphael nodded and backed out, sincerely curious if Aaron would live to see the end of the day.

Raphael shut the door, a little curious to find only Orson and Uriel still in the hall. He glanced at where their absent members had been and wanted to say something. No quip presented itself, so he instead hurried off, not liking the direction the day was taking.

Marilyn was slowly awoken by the light streaming in through her dorm room window. It was propped open just a tiny bit, letting in the sound of the morning. It was a sound made up of birds chirping and the wind blowing. There was very little traffic to be heard these days, and even fewer voices. The university, like much of the city, was under a lockdown every morning because of the sniper.

It was thinking of the sniper that made Marilyn shift from dozing thoughts to fully awakening. She moved Victor’s arm that had lain across her most of the night and slipped out from under the comforter. In a t-shirt and shorts, she stepped onto

the cold floor of her room. She began to shift through her clothes strewn across her dorm room, trying to find some combination to wear.

As she stripped down to change clothes, Victor sleepily remarked “Your butt’s really bruised.” Marilyn didn’t say anything. She slipped into some jeans and turned from him to change her top. “Oh come on, are you still mad at me?”

“Yes, Victor, I am!” she snapped at him, surprising him and herself. She went to the mirror hanging in the corner of her room and began to apply makeup. “You were supposed to meet me at the restaurant. You were supposed to walk me home.” She focused on the task of making herself presentable. “You didn’t even call to let me know you were running late.

“Exactly,” he said, sitting up in her bed. “I ran late. Why didn’t you wait for me? Why didn’t you call me?” He slipped out of bed, bare from the night before. “I’m sorry I was late. I’m sorry...” Every word he knew failed him. “I’m sorry. If I had any idea who this guy was, I’d...” Marilyn turned around to him and glared at him, practically daring him to finish his sentence. “I stayed the night,” he said with a smile. He moved in to kiss her. “That made you feel safer. And other things.”

“Yeah, tired,” she told him, turning so that he only managed to kiss her cheek. “You know what made me feel safe? Someone helping me.” Victor drew back from her. “I needed you, Victor,” she spelled out for him. “And where were you?”

“On the way to your work,” he whispered, genuinely hurt.

Marilyn genuinely felt guilty for the hurt in his eyes, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I’m just lucky the knights were there to help me.” That hit him hard. “Frankly, you are too.” She turned around to glare hatefully at herself in the mirror. The makeup she put on was a mask for her to hide from herself.

Victor contemplated a few responses, ranging from the apologetic to the spiteful. Thinking better of it, he opted instead to turn away. He gathered up his clothes, dressed in silence, and saw himself out without a word. Marilyn didn’t turn

to him until the door shut. She stared at the door for a long time before she turned back to her reflection to finish her makeup.

She gave up in a huff from the tears in her eyes. She stormed over to the desk and sat down at the computer, awakening it. She saw her reflection in the screen and grew mad at herself. She distracted herself by summoning the internet and a dozen different websites she'd been following. She hovered her mouse over a news site but she paused. A chilling sensation told her there'd been another shooting. She just knew it. And she couldn't deal with that right now. She grew spiteful and angry at herself for not having the strength to confront reality.

She called up her email instead and found it full of new messages. Two different blood banks wanted help with a blood drive. There was going to be a car wash, the money benefitting research into...some cancer, Marilyn had forgotten which. The World Alliance was supposed to help staff a fundraiser for something. They were going to help hand out brochures. Manning booths as festivals. Heading up teams for charity walks.

Mundane work.

Marilyn stared at the emails, numb to them. She felt detached from their efforts. How did walking around in a circle raise money for cancer? How had that method of fundraising even gotten started? What good did it do? One group in particular, an anti-runaway program, was holding a rally to raise money to fight against exploitation of children. The word 'fight' hovered in Marilyn's mind. How were they fighting? Who were they fighting?

Fighting conjured up thoughts of the knights, of Everett and Armand and Ledger. And she knew there were more in the city, too. She stared at the word 'fight' in the email, and could practically see it written in black and red. She thought about calling Everett, to see what he and his knights were doing about the sniper.

She had to turn away from those emails. She felt angry at herself for even considering blowing off such important work, and for considering such work important. Fortunately she had plenty more emails. Academic warnings that her grades were slipping. Reminders from study groups that she'd joined and blown off almost the same day. Credit card offers. And notices of her student loans quiet but quick expansion. Money, and the lack of it, ruled her inbox.

A notice from a forum caught her eye, standing out from all the rest of her messages. She called up the email, wondering how she could possibly owe money to an internet forum. She was surprised to learn it was a response to a post she'd written on an antiques website. To her description of the book she'd stolen from the back office of the Australia Club, she received a single anonymous response of, "Maybe it was one of the Alan Ivers books."



—Now—

"Who is Alan Ivers?" asked Everett from the front seat.

"Shooting Guard for the 76ers?" Morgan guessed.

"He was an Australian...wizard," Marilyn said, finally giving up on any other possible term. "I googled him after I got the forum post. There's really not a lot of information on him. Or, there's not a lot of hard information. Not a lot of facts. There's plenty of conjecture. He lived during the 1800s, mostly in England and then he moved to Australia." The light from the morning outside their car made her face

seem to glow against her dark hair. “A lot of people talk about Alan Ivers the same way they talk about Nikola Tesla. There are all these conspiracy theory websites devoted to him and stuff. In fact, some people think his work inspired Tesla.”

“Except Tesla was a scientist and wizards aren’t real,” said Everett. He looked at Morgan. “Sorry, no Hogwarts for you.”

“My letter’s coming any day, man,” Morgan joked, straight-faced.

“So, anyway, shortly before his death, Alan Ivers supposedly wrote these books on magic,” said Marilyn. “Some people think they inspired the idea of the Necronomicon, the spiritualist movement of the late 19th Century, and maybe even Aleister Crowley.”

“So the dude wrote a bunch of magic books,” Everett said. “Historically valuable, maybe, but not worth killing over.”

“I don’t know,” Morgan said. “Depends on who believes in the magic.”

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—10 Days Ago—

The small, two-door coup had driven off the elevating onramp, smashed through the cement divider, and practically shattered after the two-story fall onto the street below. The entire front of the car had crumpled until the engine block had smashed through the dashboard of the car. Four of the five passengers had died on

impact. Only the driver had been spared the horror of the fall by being dead before the car had even veered, the result of a precision gunshot right through the skull.

“My mom asked me what I was going to do this morning,” Roland said as he watched the bodies being removed from the car that looked less like a vehicle and more like a smashed soda can. “I told her ‘go look at dead bodies’.” He drank some of his coffee. “Man, I wish I didn’t say that to her so friggin’ much.” He looked at Everett who was standing with him, the two just behind the crowd of onlookers. “What’d you tell your mom?”

“Hi,” Everett said with emphasis on the civil singularity of the word. “We talked about work and how I have plenty of socks and, no; Armand and I are not lovers, no matter how much she’s okay with it.” He was fiddling with this phone, which Roland called him on.

“Is investigating a multiple murder boring?”

Everett put his phone away. “I want to make sure Marilyn’s okay. Ledger and Armand...” He sighed forcibly, trying to focus on the matter at hand and unable to. “I mean, what if that guy comes back for her? And they didn’t take her to the hospital. What if she—” He finally shook his mind free of the thoughts and tried to look past last night and at the crowd of onlookers they stood behind. “Murders really draw a crowd.”

Roland made no effort to stifle his laughter. He did, after a moment, remark, “Okay, so what’s the deal here? One victim, two victims, three victims, and now five? Maybe our sniper assumed nobody in their right mind would cram five people into a car that small?”

“Fibonacci,” said Everett.

“Gesundheit.”

Everett rolled his eyes. “The Fibonacci Sequence,” he said.

“Saying the same thing over again doesn’t make it any clearer,” Roland said. “Stop talking statistics and speak English.”

“You are a doctor, right?” Everett exclaimed. Roland shrugged noncommittally. Everett spent a moment wondering what he’d done in a past life to deserve this. He concluded it must have been really bad. “The Fibonacci Sequence is the next number in a sequence is the sum of the previous two.” He waited a beat. “Sum means ‘add them together’.” He waited another beat. “Add means ‘put them—’”

“Alright, alright, I got it, I should have paid more attention in math class, ya nerd,” Roland groaned, sipping more coffee. “So that’s one, two...yeah, that fits. But doesn’t the ol’ Fib-Seq as they call it on the street start with two ones?”

Everett nodded and quietly proposed “Maybe the club owner, from the Australian Club? Or the guy at the gas station that Marilyn’s pursuer shot?” Roland nodded, concurring with the possibility. Everett looked down the street. This part of downtown was more densely packed than others. The buildings were taller, topping out over seven stories high. The roads, likewise, were wider, with parking spaces in front of the businesses that predominated the first-floors of the buildings. Everett looked to the cloudy sky, threatening rain before the end of the week. His eyes drifted to a single figure standing on a rooftop, looking down on the crash. “Roland.”

“I see him,” said Roland, deliberately looking in a different direction and only glancing out the corner of his eye at the onlooker. “You want intercept or perimeter?”

“Intercept. I want to see if this is the guy Armand and me saw.”

“Armand and I,” Roland corrected as he tossed his coffee into the trash. “And what if it’s the dude that Ledger and Armand said attacked Marilyn last night?”

“Then I’m going to break him in two,” Everett said with no hint of sarcasm.

Everett and Roland disengaged from the crowd of onlookers and moved across the street, heading indirectly towards the figure on the rooftop. Roland spared a glance towards the police at the crime scene, looked at the rooftop, then back at the cops curiously. “This dude’s pretty obvious; why haven’t they noticed?” Everett didn’t bother to speculate.

As the two knights approached the building, the figure on the rooftop disappeared. “We got a runner,” Everett said. He picked up speed without breaking into a run, rushing towards the front of the four-story building, stopping at the entrance of restaurant. He waited quietly, listening through the urban noises until he heard a sound like a yelp of pain.

Everett came around the side of the building, heading through a trash-packed alley to the back, only to find Roland standing nonchalantly with a man in a black suit. The suited man’s face was bloody and he was holding his nose. “Ev, meet Errol. Sadly, not Errol Flynn,” Roland clarified as he read through the guy’s wallet. “Errol is this dude’s actual name.” As Everett approached, Roland slapped the wallet back to Errol’s chest, the white shirt of the suit stained with blood from his mouth.

Everett gestured at the blood and asked, “Did he resist?”

“I’m sure he would have,” Roland shrugged.

Rather than waste time reflecting on what he might have done to deserve Roland, Everett looked to Errol and asked, “Why are you here?”

“I live here!” he yelled, checking to confirm he was still bleeding from the mouth.

“Then why aren’t you watching through a window?” asked Everett.

“And why haven’t you called for the police yet?” Roland added.

“You’re either with the shooter,” Everett said as he took a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Errol, “Or you’re just as curious about him as we are.”

Errol accepted the handkerchief and dotted at his mouth and nose. “And who are you?”

“Neighborhood watch,” Everett and Roland said in tandem.

Errol considered Everett and Roland for a second, seemingly fixated on their red shirts against their otherwise black attire. He dabbed at his mouth, the corner clearly the source of pain. “You two both knights?” Roland seemed surprised, though Everett showed no reaction. “I’m investigating the shootings,” Errol said, his accent warping the words subtly. “My client – I’m a private investigator – wants to ID the sniper before the police do.”

“Why?” asked Roland.

“That’s his business; not mine and not yours,” Errol said. Content that the bleeding was subsiding, he handed the bloodied handkerchief back to Everett, saying, “Seeing as you boys are both knights, I’ll do you the, uh, professional courtesy of not pressing charges for assault.”

“Tell us what you know about the sniper,” Everett said firmly.

Errol readied to say something pithy when the sound of an approaching vehicle got his attention. Everett turned as a familiar-looking SUV pulled into the alley between the buildings, blocking them in. “Best watch this then,” said Errol, backing up from the two knights.

“Friends of yours?” asked Roland, adjusting his trench coat which hung low on the left side.

“I know them but they aren’t friends,” said Errol, quickly surveying the blocked-off rear of the alley, leaving them in a dead end. He faced the stopping SUVs and cautioned, “En grade, knights.”

Out from the SUV stepped Raphael. With him disembarked four large, powerfully built men, all in black suits like his. The five men came to walk shoulder-and-shoulder like defensive lineman approaching a line of scrimmage, spanning practically across the entire back alley. Noting Raphael’s wounds, Roland nudged Everett and pointed to his own nose, saying “Doesn’t he look like he got kicked in the face recently?” Realizing the point Roland was making, Everett went from assertive to predatory.

“You two hassling my buddy?” Raphael said as the five came to a stop, the two knights equidistance from them and the back-pedaling Errol.

“No, we’re just settling a game of craps,” Roland said, stepping ahead of Everett.

“I don’t see any dice,” said Raphael.

“That’s what we’re settling,” said Roland. He looked at the five men, each easily fifty pounds heavier than him or Everett. “You guys want something? Buy-in is twenty bucks.”

Raphael stared at Roland but spoke past him. “Errol, you alright? Looks like somebody punched you.”

“Stepped on a rake, pal,” he said sarcastically.

“He needs to come with us,” Raphael told Everett and Roland.

“And you are?” Everett asked.

“And you are?” Raphael asked back.

“Exactly,” Everett said. “We’re nobody. But we’re not telling somebody what to do.” Everett stepped around Roland, coming within arm’s reach of Raphael. “Is there going to be trouble? Please tell me there’s going to be trouble. A guy who looked an awful lot like you tried to jump my friend last night.”

“Oh, is that so?” Raphael asked with an amused chuckle at the seemingly diminutive Everett. “And what happens if you meet this supposed attacker? What are you going to do?” Everett barely moved, but shifted his weight so that his jacket opened up, revealing the katana he wore at his waist. Raphael stepped into Everett’s face. “You want to start something? Because those cops ain’t gonna hear anything.”

“Which means nobody is gonna come to save you,” Everett informed him.

Clearly having had enough, Raphael grabbed Everett’s collar and tried to punch him. Everett grabbed Raphael’s hand and twisted his wrist. He smacked Raphael on the back of the head with his palm. Changing hands holding Raphael’s hand, Everett punched him in the face. The broken nose ruptured blood and Raphael fell back, clutching his nose.

The four men in suits descended on the two knights, trusting in size and numbers. But when Everett punched the closest of the four right in the chest and the alley filled with the telltale crunch of a sternum cracking, the others hesitated.

The driver of the SUV drew a gun from inside his suit jacket but the gun was knocked from his hand by a smack from Roland. Roland followed the strike to the hand with a similar punch to the guy’s jaw, dazing him long enough for Roland to turn into a blow to the solar plexus that knocked the wind completely out of the driver.

The two men that had gotten out of Raphael’s side of the SUV were drawing guns as well. From inside his trench coat, Everett drew his sword. He slashed at the nearer of the two goons, slicing through his hand between the middle and ring

fingers. The blade in a lowered position, Everett followed with a stab at the other man, piercing him through the meat of the forearm, the sharp point of the katana slipping between the bones.

The one remaining man, the one with the broken sternum, took aim at Everett and fired. “Ev!” Roland yelled. He drew his own katana in a flash, slicing through the arm of the gunman. The shot still went off and the bullet ricocheted off the brick wall.

Blood drawn and men down, Roland told Everett, “We gotta go.”

Everett looked back to Errol, only to find him gone. “Where the hell’d he go?” he exclaimed, looking at the empty dead end alley. “He didn’t run by us.”

“He’s where we need to be: not here,” Roland said, already skipping into his retreat. He raced for the alley Everett had used to get behind the building, only to find three police already at the mouth of the alley, their guns drawn.

Roland backed away, him and Everett turning to see the five men gathering themselves into the SUV. It pulled into reverse, its tires squealing as it shot backwards out onto the street. Everett and Roland both chased after the SUV, only to be stopped as a police cruiser swerved off the street to block their escape. Roland slowed and held up his hands, smiling cynically at his fortune. Just half a step behind, Everett joined him. They looked at each other and sighed, surrendering to the situation and the police.

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—Now—

“You guys got shot at?!” Marilyn exclaimed in awe. She was smiling.

“Not really shot at, more like shot towards,” Everett played down with self-conscious humility. “The guys only got off one shot and it went stray.”

“You guys brought swords to a gunfight,” Marilyn marveled with disappointment. “That’s amazing.”

“It happens more than you might think,” Everett remarked a little sullenly. “And it definitely started happening a lot more after that.”

“Any idea how the guy Roland randomly assaulted got out?” Morgan asked curiously.

“No, that I’m still a little unclear on,” said Everett.



—10 Days Ago—

Errol opened the door to the grease spoon restaurant, a copper bell jingling as he walked right past the hostess without a word. The dive was made of up of four-person tables and wood paneled booths. Windows were closed with department store blinds. Errol practically stormed to a semi-private room in the back where Aaron sat over a plate of ribs, his aides also dining. As Errol drew near, Aaron said,

“Back so soon? We were still discussing where we left off with the initial interviews with Phillip and Jericho. What did you find?”

Errol sat down unceremoniously and shared, “I just had a pleasant little chat with a pair of knights before Raphael decided to try and abscond with me.” He looked at Uriel who sat next to him. “Fortunately, knights are quick to the sword.”

Aaron looked up from his ribs, curious. “Oh?” he asked, wiping his hands and then his mouth.

“Turns out, we’re not the only ones investigating the shooter,” Errol said.

“Did you think we were?” asked Orson, setting an undrunken plastic cup of water before him. Errol accepted it appreciatively and drained it, seemingly in one gulp. He began to remove one of the wrist devices from his left hand. “How’d it work?” Orson asked about the device. Errol shrugged ambivalently.

“What do you mean by knights?” asked Uriel. He looked to Aaron. “I didn’t think there were any in the city.” Aaron nodded, focusing mostly between his ribs and Errol. “Two of them?”

“Yeah, a white guy and a black fella,” said Errol like a high school gossip. “White guy called the other guy Ev.”

Aaron snapped his fingers and pointed at Ian. “You just became the knight expert.” Ian looked like a deer in headlights. “I want you to find out who these two are and if—”

“Actually, why don’t I take that?” offered Uriel. “I know about knights. I studied them for my thesis on American subcultures.”

“So they’re like, real,” Ian said. He looked around the table.

“You guys have until I finish these ribs to talk,” Aaron let the others know, like a parent indulging children.

“They’re real,” Uriel said. “There’re an informal militia. Or vigilante group, depending. Similar to a street gang, only with no economic component. They literally think that they are inheritors of the Oath of Chivalry – or rather, a highly idealized version of the Oath of Chivalry – and seek to live life according to it.” He laughed and went on. “It’s actually a really fascinating group because there’s no central organization – there’s no organization of any kind – and yet their beliefs are largely uniform between members. There’s surprisingly little variation between interpretations of what it means to be a knight, despite their being little to no communication between members.”

“There was an organization, once,” Aaron remarked academically.

Ian looked confused. “Camelot?” he guessed.

Aaron shook his head, closing his eyes in the process. “Sometime, look up Winston Thorpe. He’s a case-study in quixotic ideals.” Aaron dropped the last bone on the plate and asked of Errol, “What did you find? About the shooting. Knights don’t interest me at the moment.”

“Not much. The knights saw me about as soon as I was in position,” Errol said. “This was the most expert shot yet. He got the driver as he was going up an onramp. The passengers all died when the car went over the side of the interstate.”

“So only one gunshot victim,” Orson noted. “That may be important,” he suggested to the table as a whole.

“You couldn’t find anything else?” Aaron asked. “And don’t tell me the knights interfered.”

“Not the knights; the Hand,” Errol corrected across the table. “Jericho’s little lapdog, Raphael, showed up with some goons to, uh, escort me back to the Solaritec campus, I imagine. Using one of their little toys was about the only way I got out of there without getting collared.” He dangled the wrist device demonstratively.

“Hmmm,” Aaron said, the least unsettled of those sitting around the table. “Bold. Doesn’t surprise me, though. Jericho’s not big on subtlety, and he’s running the Hand like they’re his own personal army.” He wiped his mouth. “The sniper?”

“Like I said, I didn’t get much before the knights and the Hand showed up,” Errol admitted. Ian looked stunned, like he expected Aaron to reprimand him but Aaron seemed nonplussed. “What will Jericho’s excuse for Raphael be?”

“Oh, the Hand’s responsibility to the safety of the Brotherhood members, of course,” Aaron said sardonically. “I’d say this confirms our suspicions that the Hand is tracking us. What do we know about the Hand’s projects right now?”

“We know most of their operations have been kept under lock and key,” Orson said. “Stuff’s been kept away from our division – the Investigators’ Clan – and also developed independent of the Miracle Workers’ Clan as well.” Orson shook his head. “At most Brotherhood installations, the three clans work closely together. Investigators look into stuff, Miracle Workers make stuff, and the Hand provides security and intelligence. At Solaritec, though, the Investigators have largely been ignored. Ignored and woefully understaffed. The majority of all Investigators work at Solaritec has been outsourced work from other regions. It’s really been almost solely the Miracle Workers and the Hand’s show here for quite some time. And they both really seem to be doing their own thing.”

“You said developed?” asked Errol, curious about the word choice. “That the Hand had developed stuff independent of the Miracle Workers’ Clan?”

“There’s R&D at play, yeah,” Orson said surely. “Half of Jericho’s budget seems to go to staffing and support equipment for the Hand. In and of itself, that’s not unreasonable, given the Hand’s role in defending and protecting the Brotherhood. But they don’t just have trauma surgeons in case of injury; they’ve also got researchers on staff.”

Ian looked at Aaron and asked, “What about the Miracle Workers’ Clan? Do they have any secrets?”

Errol said for Aaron, “Everyone has secrets.”

“Do you think the sniper is one of them?” Aaron probed. Errol gave his new boss a guarded look. “Do you think the sniper is one of Jericho’s men?” Aaron asked directly.

Errol seemed to weigh his options before he finally said, “Yeah. I mean, it sure looks that way. Who else would have this kind of military training?”

Aaron said nothing. He looked across the table at the others who shared the private dining room with him. “Orson, Uriel, what about you guys?”

They both shrugged, neither venturing much of a guess either way.”

“What about the plutonium?” he asked. They both were taken aback by the question. Aaron looked between them for a moment and was not impressed. “I cannot be the only person who knows about this stuff, seeing as how I’ve been operating out of a different country.”

Errol braved the question. “What plutonium?”

Rather than answer, Aaron made a bit of a show of wiping his hands and his mouth and throwing his paper napkin on his plate. “Guys,” Aaron said, looking harshly at the four. “By all evidence, by a sniper trained by the Brotherhood and using Brotherhood equipment is on a murderous rampage through this city. And this seems to be happening at the single poorest facility, when it comes to Investigators’ Clan initiative, in the whole damn country.” He said that like a personal indictment on the men working with him. “That’s deliberate.”

“What do you want us to do?” Errol asked to Aaron. “If we make any overt move towards Jericho or his men, then there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I am aware,” Aaron said. He sighed and gave it some thought before he suggested, “Maybe I should take this to the Triumvirate.”

“You sure?” Orson asked. He looked at Errol, then to Ian and Uriel. “The Triumvirate doesn’t take lightly to being called. They do the calling.” Several moments of thought passed.

“Errol, I want you to talk to some of Jericho’s men,” Aaron said. “I want to know how he’s training them that they’re so badass. If this comes to blows, and I hope it doesn’t, then we’re going to need muscle to rival theirs.” Aaron turned in his chair to face Orson. “I want you to hit the financials. Visiting the Solaritec offices, the local tax offices, whatever. I need to know where the money is coming from and where it’s going.” He looked to Ian. “You two, I want an audit of what the Investigators’ Clan has been working on, both in-house and outsourced. I want to know what the local offices may have seen and what Phillip and Jericho have been working to hide.” Finally, it was Uriel’s turn. “I want schematics. I want to know the layout of Solaritec, down to the type of bolts they use on the solar panel fields. More than money is being hidden and I want to know where it’s hiding.”

The four stood up, nodding their heads. They turned to leave. “Errol,” Aaron called. The tallest of the four stayed back until the door closed. He turned to Aaron. “The Hands of the Brotherhood don’t take kindly to snooping,” Aaron said cautiously. “Be careful.”

“I will be,” Errol said sincerely.

Everett was sitting with his arms crossed over his red shirt, dozing slightly. His head was leaning back against the cement wall of the holding cell which he shared with a dozen other men, most of whom were nervously keeping to themselves, occasionally mumbling about how it was just this one time or everyone

makes mistakes. He shifted a little, unconsciously scratching his back against the wall.

“Hey, Ev,” came Roland’s voice around the edge of the wall from the next holding cell. Everett awoke and immediately checked the corner of his mouth to see if he’d been drooling. “When was the last time you got arrested?”

“I don’t remember,” Everett said with some thought, trying to shake the haze from his mind. “Not since Armand moved in.”

“Yeah, been a while for me too,” said Roland, belying a little nervousness. “You’d think the butterflies would go away.”

Everett chuckled. “If getting arrested ever stops making you nervous, you need to be afraid. It’s happening too damn much then.”

“Once is too damn much,” Roland said with uncharacteristic seriousness. Everett just nodded. “You think that was the guy who messed with your girl?”

“Marilyn’s not my girlfriend,” Everett corrected. He looked sourly away at the room full of drunks. “I don’t know. He matched the description Ledger and Armand told us. Of course ‘smacked around white guy’ was about all Ledger said.”

“Injuries seemed right,” Roland pondered. He thought for a moment. “I wonder who that Errol guy was.”

“I told you about Armand and I spotting some dude, right? I got a picture of him,” said Everett. “I wonder if they’re connected.”

Roland shook his head, worried. “A lot of loose ends here, buddy. Lot of divergent elements. There’s a big picture and we’re not seeing it.” He thought for a moment longer, then asked as an aside, “Did you call Edgar to come bail us out?”

As Roland asked, they both heard the distant sound of the main door opening. Everett sat up and smiled. “Better,” he said.

Down the walk came Jeanine Blaine, in a suit that radiated more power than most tyrannical dictators. She strode past the other cells and looked into the pair of cells that held Roland and Everett. “These two,” she said to the officer who escorted her.

—Now—

“It’s useful being friends with a lawyer,” Morgan remarked with a chuckle.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Everett agreed.

“So Edgar’s wife just got you guys off, just like that?” Marilyn exclaimed, in shock, amazement, and more than a little bit of envy

“No, she just got us released without bail,” Everett said over the seat to Marilyn. “The charges are still pending, but she’s confident she can get them dropped or reduced or something. Last time I was arrested, she got the sentence reduced to so many hours of community service, which I was able to do by writing a grant for the city health department.”

“And she doesn’t charge you?” Marilyn asked, further amazed.

“Well...” Everett tried to figure out how best to answer that. “While she finds Edgar’s knightly activities really charming and all, she is pretty adamant that he not get too involved, especially on account of his beard graying.” Sensing the need to

clarify, Everett shifted towards the backseat. “According to the oath of Chivalry,” he began.

“For which there’s no singular version of,” Morgan heckled.

“When a knight’s beard begins to grey, his obligations shift away the battlefield,” Everett explained. “He or she becomes a teacher or an advisor or...basically, the knight retires and becomes a consultant. Edgar Blaine is in the twilight of his prime but he’s still very much in his prime. In addition to being a history professor at the university, he’s the assistant fencing coach because...well, basically because he’s too flighty to go for the head coaching position.”

“After all, modern knights are known for their love of bureaucracy and authority,” Morgan smirked sarcastically.

“And I’d be remiss if I didn’t point out that the university has produced quite a few national and Olympic contenders,” Everett added as an aside. “Anyway, Edgar’s also got probably more black belts and martial arts certifications than the rest of us combined.” Everett faced forward as the car continued on into the morning. “Yeah, anyway, the point is, Jeanine prefers the fantasy of a knight to the reality. As such, she expects us to not only NOT invite him along when we have...” At a loss for words, he looked to Morgan.

“Red-and-black affairs?” Morgan proposed.

“I like that,” Everett praised. “Yeah, when we have red-and-black affairs, we not only tend to not invite him, but actually talk him out of getting too gung-ho. Plus, she has to fill a certain number of pro-bono, charity hours and we keep her supplied with options.”

“What a charming way of saying you all are a bunch of hell raisers,” Morgan chuckled, mostly to himself.

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—10 Days Ago—

“This emergency meeting of the World Alliance is now in order,” Malcolm said, standing at the head of their favorite table in the university atrium. Marilyn sat to his left, Victor next to her, looking bored. On his right sat Alan, with Kim next, leaving Ruwani sitting towards the end of the table.

“Okay.” Malcolm said, wringing his hands nervously. “Okay...alright.” He looked to Marilyn, then back to the others. “I think it goes without saying that this meeting is in response to the shootings that have been going on.”

“Yeah,” Alan said, nodding glumly.

“Logical guess,” Victor tossed sarcastically, getting a look from Marilyn. Her makeup was on heavier than usual to hide the bruises.

“The point is,” Malcolm continued, his hands raised to try and keep the table composed. “The point is, we have to do something about this. We have to try and stop this sniper.”

“And how, exactly, do you plan on doing that?” asked Victor.

“And why?” Alan joined. “I mean, we do have police for a reason.”

“The police haven’t done anything yet,” Marilyn said firmly. “We can’t just sit around and wait for them. They need to do their jobs, yeah, but if we can lend them a hand, we should.”

“Guys,” Malcolm said, silencing the group. “The point is not to try and go all vigilante and all that. It’s to try and help out in any way we can.” He bent down and took from his backpack two rolls of paper. He rolled out the first, revealing a large map of the city. He turned back to the other roll, throwing out the near-clear roll of plastic that superimposed the shootings onto the map. “This is where we stand,” Malcolm said, motioning to the map.

“Eleven shootings?” Alan exclaimed, Kim leaning over his shoulder to look at the map.

“Four shootings,” Victor corrected professionally. “Eleven victims.”

“Five shootings,” Marilyn corrected. “Twelve victims.” Everyone looked at her. “Steven Sizemore, the club owner,” she said.

“We don’t know if that’s related,” Malcolm said, looking at the map.

“What we do know is that the body count is growing,” Victor said. He looked at Marilyn and asked, “And what do you propose we do to stop it?”

She found herself at a loss for ideas.

Jeanine pulled up in front of the music building on the university campus and set her flashers. However, as Roland and Everett prepared to disembark, Jeanine hit the auto-lock on the doors, keeping them in for a second. “Boys, I’m worried,” she told them as she faced forward, wringing her hands on the steering wheel. “Edgar’s quite keen on being part of all this, this whole stop-the-sniper thing.”

It was unsettling to Everett to see worry on Jeanine’s face. Normally the very picture of powerful and in control, Jeanine had the presence of a silver screen diva. And yet, it was rare for her to seem anything but pleasantly amused by the charmed

life she led. To see her worried as she was now, Everett found to be a source of guilt.

“You’re worried he’s going to get killed?” Roland asked obtusely from the backseat of her luxurious car.

After a moment of thought, she unlocked the car and turned it off. Disembarking with the two knights, she left the sedan in the fire lane in front of the music building. She walked like a queen for the main door, only tipping her head to Roland as he held the door for her. Everett went on behind her, sharing confused looks with Roland as to what was about to happen.

Jeanine walked down the ramp rather than take the short flight of stairs following the wall, her heels clacking with each step. The music building was cool, thanks in part to the cement floors and concrete walls. Everett and Roland followed her down the hall, towards the only one of many doors that was open and from which came music.

Jeanine stepped into the doorway of a music room with a staged floor, semi-circular levels descending from the edge of the room down to the middle where a grand piano sat, Morgan at the keys. Armand and Ledger were sitting behind the piano, while Edgar looked over Morgan’s playing of the sheet music. The four turned to her simultaneously and both Morgan and Ledger’s jaws dropped. “Gentlemen,” she said to the others before she all but strutted down the carpeted steps to Edgar. “Promise me you’re not going to be out too late, playing with the boys,” she asked Edgar. He answered with a sultry stare as he kissed her hand and then a shake of his head. “Good,” she said, kissing his hand back. She turned and left, walking between Everett and Roland as she did.

The room was silent long after Jeanine left, until Ledger told Edgar, “When I die, I want to come back as you.”

“Oh my god, you are the luckiest man in the world,” Roland practically accused.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Edgar said with a long, deep breath. He shook it off and said, “Okay, music time’s over, kids.” He turned back around to the piano and demonstratively shut the lid on the keys, making Morgan jerk his fingers out of the way or risk losing them. “We’ve got a killer to catch. Or you have a killer to catch and I have her to go home to.”

“Do we have a plan?” asked Ledger. “About the killer, I mean. I know Edgar has a plan for her.”

“Yes I do,” Edgar concurred, looking back at the door and the memory of his wife, with an expression like a lion looking at a gazelle on the Serengeti.

“We think we’ve got something,” Morgan said. He looked at Edgar and waited for a second. The older knight with salt-and-pepper beard looked at Morgan, not following. “Vanna, you want to turn a letter?” Suddenly remembering the plan, Edgar went over to the desk against the wall and retrieved a rolled up map of the city. He threw it out over the top of the piano. “These Xs mark the shootings, including today,” explained Morgan. “The little numbers represent how many victims were killed.”

“A circle,” Roland said. “That’s...unoriginal.”

“Oh, it gets better,” Morgan said.

“What’s at the center of the circle?” Armand asked, putting his finger at just the spot.

Morgan glared at him. “A Dunkin’ Donuts.”

Armand’s eyes went wide. “Then what does that mean?”

“Nothing,” Ledger, Roland, and Edgar all told him. “It’s not the circle; it’s the points,” Edgar further explained.

Ledger looked over the map. “I was kind of hoping that they traveled sequentially or something but the guy seems to be jumping around.”

“We thought that too at first,” said Edgar. “However, thanks to Morgan and mine’s combined talents, we’ve figured out the pattern.” He took a highlighter and drew a line connecting the first shooting to the second, and then to the third, then this mornings.

“It’s a star,” Roland realized, staring at the map atop the piano.

“But not a usual star,” said Edgar.

“It’s a seven-pointed star,” Morgan clarified. “It belongs to an emblem called...” He dug through the pocket of his jeans to produce a print-out and laid it down for the others to look over. “The Sircle of the Brotherhood of the Sun. Sircle with an S, because I guess it’s cooler when stuff is misspelled.”

Everett grabbed the print out before the others could and turned it towards himself. The design was a seven-pointed star encased inside a circle, the odd point aimed up. “Is it pagan?”

“The Brotherhood of the Sun is an old conspiracy theorist’s fantasy,” said Morgan. “They’re supposedly the anti-Illuminati or something. They’ve been at war with the Illuminati, allegedly,” he added with generous disbelief, “since their mutual creation.”

“Depending on which version of the Illuminati you believe,” Edgar added. Morgan gestured in concurrence but also indifference. “Well, it’s an important distinction,” the oldest knight asserted. “The Brotherhood of the Sun has been part of my ‘Mysteries of the World’ class I offer during the summer. The Illuminati too, but so is the Yeti and Shangri-La.”

“Who are they?” asked Everett.

“The Brotherhood?” Edgar asked. He shrugged. “They’re nobody. They’re a myth.”

Everett grew impatient. “Then what’s the myth?”

Edgar surrendered. “The Illuminati, well, their oldest incarnation, goes back to Babylon. Samaria. The oldest of civilizations. The Brotherhood of the Sun claims to as well. But whereas the Illuminati were about knowledge, the Brotherhood claimed to concern itself with safeguarding humanity. Or something. Again, there are a dozen different variations on the tale that ultimately come back to this being some old world version of the Hatfields and the McCoys.”

The discussion at a momentary standstill, Roland added in an intelligent tone, “Well, clearly the killer is killing victims according to the Fibonacci Sequence.” Everyone nodded in agreement. Realizing everyone else had come to that deduction, Roland fell into a sulking quiet.

“So we’ve got some nut job out there killing people in accordance with some kind of...ritual?” Everett asked. “A secret society religious observance?”

“Maybe,” Morgan said. “Who knows why people do this stuff? And who cares? Point is, we have a starting point,” he said, pointing to the star on the map representing the first victim. “And we have a progression.” He traced his finger all the way to this morning’s shooting. And he kept going, following the pattern of the seven-pointed star they suspected. “And now we know where he’ll strike next.”



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