

Red Moon Rising

Part 07 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 07 of 30

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“Now we must all fear evil men. But there is another kind of evil which we must fear most, and that is the indifference of good men.”

- Monsignor, Boondock Saints

In an orange jump suit and covered brown-and-blue bruises, Eli was sat down in the tiny square room. Two uniformed police officers began to undo his wrist cuffs and secure him to the table welded to the floor, ensuring he had only enough mobility to write his name. He looked up at the two officers, but they denied him eye contact as they finished the job. Leaving him behind like discarded litter, they exited through the security door that closed with a decisive slam.

Eli was left alone in the concrete room. No windows. No decorations. Just grey-painted cinder blocks and a grey door. He looked at the camera in the corner, staring down at him judgmentally and he sighed defeatedly. He set his hands on the tiny plastic table, the cuffs scrapping his wrists.

The door at his back opened and Eli strained to turn enough to see over his shoulder, both hopeful and scared. Both emotions magnified when Jericho walked in. Eli began to speak but Jericho stopped him. “Quiet,” he said with a steely gaze. He came around to the opposite side of the table and sat down adversarially across from Eli. “Bond has been denied, understandably,” Jericho informed him with tremendous disappointment. “Our lawyers are working on this, but you aren’t going anywhere right now.” Eli slumped deflated. He looked on the verge of tears. Jericho didn’t care.

“Why did you do this?” he demanded to know. Eli looked up at him and his chin quaked. “What POSSIBLY possessed you to murder these people?” Eli’s mouth

traitorously opened but he clamped it shut. He glanced to the camera in the corner and his resolve sealed his lips. He looked down at the table. His eyes welled up with tears but he said nothing.

Jericho leaned forward just a little, sympathy getting the better of him. “Who put you up to this?” he whispered, his words barely a breath.

Eli’s eyes rose again, locking accusatorially on Jericho. “No one, sir,” he lied with wet cheeks.

The mayor and Chief Dotson watched the black-and-white feed on the mayor’s computer. The Chief of Police remained stoic and silent but the mayor was smiling quietly. “Why is there no audio?” asked the mayor, leaning back in his desk chair towards the chief over his shoulder.

“Law says no recording of what is said,” the chief answered. “But a visual record of who meets with who is legal.” The mayor nodded, growing even more please.

Everett stood in front of his barbell, the last rep completed. In the early morning, he was watching the TV, the sound so low as to almost be muted. The one window of the apartment just behind the TV was dotted with dawn rain, making the room feel insulated.

As the news discussed the legal possibilities of the sniper’s capture and arrest, Everett’s phone rang. The caller ID made his heart skip a beat. “Hey,” he said as casually as he could, muting the TV.

“Are you watching the news?” asked Marilyn. She was sitting at her desk, watching a live stream on her computer.

“Yeah,” he said. He glanced around at his living room furniture that he’d pushed to the walls to make room for the barbell. He sat down on the couch practically pushed to his computer desk. “They’re talking about extraditing the shooter to another state, so he can get a fair trial.”

“Really?” Marilyn said, her eyes transfixed on the news ticker on her computer screen. “The news I’m watching is going on about the gun he used. It was serious military-type stuff but it’s apparently missing or parts of it are missing or something.” Everett didn’t say anything, causing a silence to fall over them. “They haven’t mentioned the Australian Club. Or Steven Sizemore.”

“I think you and I are about the only ones who know the sniper killed him,” said Everett.

“Yeah,” Marilyn said with a bit of a smile. “Our deadly little secret.” A tangible silence followed, filled with the desire for words. “So what are you doing?” Marilyn asked, looking away from the screen.

“Just got done working out,” Everett said. “I was going to fix breakfast but then I got distracted.”

“What’s for breakfast?” Marilyn asked with a bit of a giggle. “Egg whites and a protein shake?”

Everett smiled nervously. “Actually, yeah, something like that.” He tried not to imagine her current state so early in the morning, but found the willpower lacking. “What about you?” he asked, the captured sniper momentarily forgotten about. “What are you going to fix for breakfast?”

The conversation only drifted further.

Jericho stood in the darkness, staring at nothing. His long blonde hair was unbound for once, its heavy tips flared around his shoulders as he waited. His hair was just one of the many signs of the frazzled, frantic morning he was fighting his way through. His green eyes searched the darkness for any sign of life, but he knew there was none. His search was more a desperation for productivity in the face of the unending silence.

“Jericho,” came the first voice, taking him slightly by surprise. “We have just a few questions for you.”

“I am here to serve,” Jericho said, bowing his head slightly, his hands held casually behind his back.

“In the previous weeks, you have been increasing the intensity of your men’s training,” said the second voice. “This could be taken as a most disturbing sign. Is it because you expect any trouble?”

Jericho couldn’t help but wryly smile. “You aren’t going to ask about the sniper?”

There was hesitation in the silence that followed. Jericho wasn’t sure if they were astonished by his brazenness or what, and he was reaching the point where he didn’t care. “It’s my job to expect trouble,” he answered. “And no, I don’t know why Eli did what he did. I am certain, however, someone put him up to it.”

“I see,” said the first voice. “Then only one other question.”

Jericho sneered. “I am at your service.”

“Who do you suspect commissioned the sniper?” asked the second voice.

“I don’t know,” Jericho said sincerely. “The only element to this equation that’s different from a month ago, or six months ago, or a year ago, is Aaron. Granted, he ‘arrived’ after the shootings started but...” He left it alone.

In the small waiting room, little more than a vestibule with a few loveseats and small tables, waited Phillip and Aaron. Both men worked on tablets, their attention elsewhere, until the inner door opened. They looked up immediately as Jericho exited. He looked rattled and exhausted. “You’re up,” he told Phillip. The head of the Miracle Worker’s Clan rose and buttoned his suit jacket. He slipped past Jericho and headed into the darkness.

Aaron watched the door shut behind Phillip, then asked, “I imagine they’re on a warpath.”

“I’ve never been good at predicting the Triumvirate,” Jericho said. He sat unceremoniously where Phillip had been sitting and exhaled. “I was expecting them to rake me over the coals for Eli, if not just flat-out kill me.”

Aaron didn’t know what else to say, so he agreed. “Their wrath is legendary.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Jericho confided quietly. He looked at Aaron and told him, “I don’t like this one bit.” Something about the way he said it made Aaron think it was an accusation.

“We just have a few questions for you, Phillip,” the first voice said.

“Ask away,” the black-haired man said, looking around in the darkness, his impeccable suit matching the shining ring on his left pinky.

“An agent of the Hand of the Brotherhood has perpetrated a great sin: risking exposure,” said the third voice. “Why has he done this?” The question seemed less genuine and more like a teacher asking a student.

“I...have no idea,” Phillip said.

“We have commissioned a fortress to be designed,” said the second voice. “You were tasked with the matter and now we learn of a risk of exposure at your very facility not six months later.” Phillip remained quiet, not sure what the question was.

“What are the states of the plan for the fortress?” asked the first voice.

“Nearing completion,” Phillip answered, swallowing fearfully.

“What about the Hand of the Sun and the Investigation Clan?” asked the third voice. “Have you noticed any undo tension between them?”

“I don’t know about undo but there’s plenty of tension,” said Phillip to the blackness before and all around him. “The Investigation Clan has been watching Jericho and his men very closely. They’ve been trying to figure out a lot of things that that the Hand of the Sun keeps secret, especially what Jericho keeps hidden.”

“Such as?” asked the first voice.

Unlike Aaron, Jericho had no tablet to work on nor did he consult any phone. He sat opposite Aaron and seemed to zone out. The occasional glances Aaron stole of him, however, he noticed Jericho’s eyes darting about like he was working on a blackboard that only he could see. It became obvious that the Hand of the Brotherhood’s leader was hard at work, simply without needing any trappings.

“We’re going to review all of Eli’s contact logs,” Aaron said, putting away his tablet. “Cell phone, email.”

“You won’t find anything,” Jericho said, stilling entranced in whatever work he was pondering.

Aaron seemed intrigued by his certainty. “And why’s that?”

“Because whoever did this was too careful,” Jericho said, finally breaking from his work to gaze hard at Aaron. “I’ll wager they orchestrated it from afar.” Aaron wasn’t sure how to take that comment.

Before he could respond, the door opened and Phillip came out, looking like he’d been slapped around by the devil himself. He looked at Aaron and seemed to express his condolences before stepping aside. Aaron entered the darkness.

The door shut, Phillip told Jericho, “I’m going to get back to work.” He started for the exit back to the corporate offices but Jericho caught his arm.

“Did they ask about the fortress?” he whispered. Phillip only nodded, and only barely. “Do they know about the plutonium?”

“We are monitored,” Phillip warned Jericho.

“Not in here,” Jericho insisted.

“Maybe not before Aaron got here,” Phillip insisted. “Now?”

Jericho swallowed hard and risked asking, “Do they know about the book?”

“We have just a few questions for you, Aaron,” said the first voice.

“Yes sir,” Aaron nodded, his eyes having trouble staying open. He rubbed his face exhaustedly, and looked around in the darkness. Even in the absence of light, in the absence of presence, he felt watched. Even here, he felt unsafe, unprotected.

“We understand it that you have been investigating the Hand of the Sun with some great dedication?” asked the third voice. “An obvious fixation given the capture of the sniper, but your fixation began before his capture. Why?”

“Yes sir,” Aaron said, his head snapping back to what he thought was forward. “I believe that the Hand of the Sun has been actively working to try and undermine the efforts of both the Investigation and Miracle-Worker clans.”

Silence.

“That’s quite an accusation, Aaron,” said the second voice in a condescending paternal tone.

“I understand sir,” Aaron said, taking a deep breath. “Never the less, my evidence is beginning to become more concrete.”

“And what evidence is this?” Asked the third voice.

“Delays in the development of the fortress’ plans may be due to the Hand’s preoccupation with this facility, Solaritec,” Aaron explained. “My men have unearthed evidence of expansive facilities beneath the Hand’s own offices. We are still trying to gain further information on what is going on down there.”

“What other evidence have you garnered so far?” asked the first voice.

“I have reason to believe that Jericho was the one who caused this sniper to go on his rampage.” Aaron said.

“What is this reasoning that you have, Aaron?” the third voice asked. “What proof is it that you have found?”

Aaron began to sweat. “No proof, yet. Not of that. But between Jericho’s aggressive policies with regards to how he trains his men, and the city in which Solaritec operates, I am simply incapable of believing that the sniper’s rampage was the act of one man.”

“The sniper said he was targeting Solaritec employees,” Armand said as he stood in the very corner of the atrium, at the end of the World Alliance’s usual table. The atrium smelled of cheesy eggs, thin bacon, and other staples of cafeteria breakfast. “The thing is, it looks like he was a Solaritec employee. According to the ID he had on him, he was part of their security division. We confirmed that with his profile on the company website...before his profile was taken down, that is. But that may explain why he had such a high-end weapon.”

“Solaritec is a utility company and a science think-tank,” Victor argued. “They make solar panels and electric charging stations for cars. It doesn’t make sense that they’d have access to high-end weaponry.”

“Just because it doesn’t make sense doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” said Malcolm, sitting to Armand’s right, opposite Victor. The three were the only ones at the table. Beyond them, the morning rush was just starting to die down. Malcolm asked Armand, “So do you think this was some kind of revenge?”

“I don’t know,” Armand admitted. “All I know is that nobody in the press or the police have made any connections to Solaritec.”

“That you know of,” naysayed Victor. “The police have released very little, and there may be gag orders and stuff in place.”

Armand was growing visibly frustrated. “Listen, buddy, if you don’t want to help, you don’t have to.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help,” Victor backpedaled.

“It sure seems that way,” Malcolm interjected. Victor felt backed into a wall. He considered just getting up and leaving. Malcolm decided not to press it and instead asked Armand, “What is it you want to do?”

When pressed to answer, Armand didn’t say anything. He instead whispered to himself, “Right, fair, just...” His words trailed off as Victor and Malcolm awaited an answer. He thought for just a second. “There are huge, gaping holes in this whole thing,” he said, seemingly to himself. “But they all point to Solaritec.”

“But it looks like Solaritec was the victim here,” asserted Malcolm. “This dude was killing their people.”

“What has nobody done?” Armand seemed to ask himself, like he was mentally trying to remember steps out of a handbook. He seemed to have an epiphany. “Nobody’s straight-up asked them. Nobody’s just rolled up and been like ‘yo, what’s going on here’.”

“Sure they have,” Victor said.

“Who?” Armand asked. “When? If this guy was a Solaritec employee, how come they aren’t publicly distancing themselves from him? If he’s not an employee, how come they aren’t getting all the sweet publicity they could by denouncing this guy? Or if not for the publicly, how come they weren’t on the TV every day saying ‘we regret the loss of our brothers and sisters’? No, I’ll tell you what I think. I think we caught them red-handed. And they’re trying to ignore it, hoping it will go away. And they’re getting help with it too, which is what’s really scary. The cops and the city and the media seem to have a vested interest in keeping the name ‘Solaritec’ out of the public eye. Regardless, though, what we need to do is the same.”

Victor and Malcolm were at a loss. “And that is?” asked Victor.

“We need to roll up to Solaritec,” Armand said, “walk right in, and ask somebody in charge ‘what’s the deal with this guy’.”

“And you think they’ll talk to us?” Malcolm asked.

“I plan on asking questions,” said Armand. “I don’t plan on asking to be seen. I don’t plan on giving them a choice. We’re gonna walk right in, walk right up, and get the answers one way or another.”

“Uh....” Malcolm and Victor both looked stunned.

Noticing their hesitancy, Armand looked disinterested. “I’m going to do this. And I’m going to get some backup for when things get rough.” He stood and put on his black coat, the side hanging heavily from his sword. “You guys can decide if you want to be part of it.”

“That’s not fair,” Victor protested.

“No, but it is right,” Armand told them like a general talking to unmotivated privates. “Talk to Marilyn and anybody else who wants in. Ya’ll want in, you’re in. You want out, you get out now.” He turned and walked away without another word, leaving Victor and Malcolm speechless.

The door to the mayor’s office opened and Jericho turned around in his seat. “Sorry for the delay, Mr. Kingston,” said Mayor Herman, briskly shaking hands with Jericho. “It’s been a hectic day.” He walked around his deep red desk and sat down. Jericho readied to speak but the mayor hit his intercom and said, “Joyce, could you hold my calls?” He didn’t wait for a reply. He settled in and set his hands on the top of his desk and asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from Solaritec private security?”

“I want the shooter released,” Jericho said directly. To his surprise, the mayor didn’t laugh. He just waited patiently. “I know you’ve announced that you’ve

made an arrest in the case, but you've given no other details. Release him to me. He's part of my security force and I need to know how my man was compromised."

"Compromised?" repeated the mayor.

"He was operating under orders from someone outside of my organization," said Jericho. "I need to find out who gave him these orders, who forced him to comply, and why."

"And you expect me to let a criminal – a murderer – go free?" the mayor asked.

Before Jericho could say anything more, the office door opened. Jericho was irritated but the mayor seemed nonplussed by the intrusion. In came the police chief. "Gentlemen," said Chief Dotson, shutting the door behind him. "Quite a situation we have." He sat down next to Jericho. "No apple fritter this morning?" he asked the mayor. The mayor shook his head and patted his broadened stomach.

Jericho had just about had it. As if sensing Jericho's irritation, Mayor Herman asked, "You said somebody put your man up to it? Was this before or after he killed Steven Sizemore?"

Jericho blinked. "Who?"

The mayor shifted, seeming to grow irritated. "You know who."

"No, I really don't," Jericho insisted. He looked to the police chief who was eyeballing him. "Who is Steven Sizemore?"

"He was the owner of the Australian Club," said the police chief. "Emphasis on the 'was'. He's dead now. Dead, all evidence indicates, by the same guy who has been shooting up your own employees. Now ain't that a hell of a coincidence?"

Jericho looked between the two civic men for a moment and finally asked, "Who was he? To you, I mean."

The mayor was very enigmatic in saying “Tourism is very important to our city. We’ve got the nightlife; we’ve got the water parks and the theme park just down the interstate. We’ve got all sorts of art venues. Independent music and film. And then of course,” he added, “there’s the adult industry.” Jericho caught on. He sat back in his chair, growing disgusted. “Your man disrupted a very critical part of that industry, an industry this city relies on.” Now it was the mayor who sat back in his throne-like chair. “We expect Solaritec to assist in...re-stabilizing that industry.”

Jericho waited for only a moment before asking, “And just what is it you expect us to do?”

The mayor looked squarely at Jericho and said, “Double the endowments. And we want Solaritec to help fund a neighborhood gentrification project that will include a social and artistic component.”

“You want us to fund and manage sex trade,” Jericho accused.

“No,” corrected the mayor. “You’ve been doing that. You’re just going to start doing more of it.”

Ruwani didn’t live in the dorms but in a rented room of a house just off campus. An added room just over the garage of a suburban house, she had her own wooden steps to and from the house of her landlord. Like every other time Marilyn ascended those steps, she wondered about what it was like to have a mortgage, a job with monthly bills, a family. She thought about living in the nice house, and felt guilty just fantasizing about owning such a place when an apartment would do her just as well, and the rest of the money could go to—

Her thoughts were discarded by a strong gust of wind. It swept up from the south unexpectedly and blasted the trees. They swayed and the leaves rustled loudly. The stairwell creaked and shifted a little, causing Marilyn to shriek in a start and grab the banister. It was a subtle shifting but she was mindful of the stairwell swaying back and forth.

In that moment, clinging to the banister, there was no shooter and no knights. No World Alliance and no classes to pass or fail. No homework to catch up, no fundraisers to staff, and no work to call out from. There was just the melodious rustling of spring leaves, the wooden groan of the stairs, and the momentary vibrancy of the immediate now.

The stairs calmed and the wind passed, flown off to wherever the wind goes, Marilyn released the banister. She seemed transfixed by the grain of the old wood for a moment, then took a deep breath, somehow strangely renewed. She looked out over the yard of the house and felt like a princess looking out over a kingdom. She couldn't explain the flight of fancy, nor did she care to try. With a smile and a restored vigor, she hopped up to the small landing before the sliding glass door and knocked.

Alan opened the door into Ruwani's room and said, "Hey." Marilyn followed him in to find Ruwani on the floor with a large map of the city as well as numerous photos scattered all around. "So, we've been looking into this and I hate to say it but I think your knight-buddy is onto something."

"Everett and I are just friends," Marilyn protested quickly. "Why does everybody keep talking about us like there's a thing there? I have a boyfriend. Me and Victor are perfectly fine."

Ruwani and Alan both stared. "I was talking about the other guy, Armand." Marilyn blushed terribly it didn't move. "Freudian slips aside," Alan said as he looked down at the map. "We've managed to find a security layout of the city. And

Ru and me have been going through the different shootings, trying to figure out how this guy must have gotten set up.”

“And we can’t” said Ruwani, blowing her nose. “Sorry, allergies. But we can’t figure out how he did this.”

“There are security cameras here, here, and here,” said Alan, drawing circles on the map around the construction site where the sniper had been captured. “This is where Armand said the knights captured him. And it’s the same at the North Residency shooting.” He pulled out a separate map and showed Marilyn similar circles. “Adequate, even redundant, security coverage of where the shooter would have ascended to his shooting perch.”

“And the cameras didn’t catch anything?” Marilyn asked.

Alan shrugged and just gestured. “I mean, I don’t know.”

“It’s not like we can get access to municipal security footage,” Ruwani told Marilyn. “Only the police can see it. But it does seem a little suspect that this guy could hide from all these cameras, especially at all the different places.” Ruwani didn’t seem thrilled by what she was about to say. “So we’re faced with two options: either, one, this guy was just like super-good. Like, the best sniper ever, mixed with a super-ninja too.”

“Or, two,” said Alan, “somebody helped hide him. Either the police saw all this happening and looked the other way, or somebody knew how to turn off specific cameras at specific times to give him the window of opportunity he needed.”

“And, frankly, at this point, I’m not sure which I think is more likely,” Ruwani confessed.

Armand knocked even as he entered. Inside was a small townhouse apartment devoid of anything but the barest of furniture and appliances. To his left, in a modest living room space, Ledger and Roland were behind a large flat screen TV, coming up with new and inventive ways to screw up plugging it in. “What are you two doing?” Armand asked worriedly.

“Trying to set up Sydney’s TV,” said Ledger as he worked to screw something in by hand.

“Is she paying you?” Armand asked, apparently open to getting in on the idea.

“Not in money,” Roland said, watching Ledger work. “She’s going to introduce me to some of her friends and she’s going to...what was it?”

“NFL Network,” Ledger said.

“Get the NFL Network for Captain Off-The-Grid here,” said Roland. He looked at Ledger’s work and suggested, “I don’t think it goes in that way.”

“It goes in that way,” Ledger argued.

“Then why does it say ‘out’ and that’s the input?” Roland asked.

“Cause you’re stupid and you smell funny,” Ledger answered, unplugging what he’d just been working on.

Roland stood from the TV and paced to the far side of the small and empty living room, judging the placement. “How’s the war effort going?” Armand went pale. He stammered a bit. “You think we didn’t know?” Roland asked.

Armand said the last thing he wanted to. “I didn’t think you would stand by.” Ledger stopped what he was doing and looked at Armand angrily. “Th-that came out wrong,” he said. He took a deep breath, regathering himself, and asked, “I’m

going to lead a raid on the bad guys' compound and I'd kind of like some help. Either of you want to get in on this?"

Ledger looked back at Roland. Roland, his arms crossed, snorted derisively. He returned to the TV, asking, "Are there going to be snacks?"

Armand stared. "P-probably not."

"Sorry, I'm busy," Roland declared, going back to work.

"I'm not going to be busy, I just don't want to," Ledger told Armand sincerely. He likewise returned to work.

Armand was dumbfounded. "Really? Evil? Bad guys? Nothing?"

"Nope," Roland chimed casually.

"All on you, son," Ledger added.

Armand left, grumbling to himself.

"It just seems a little crazy to me," Ruwani said before she punched at Marilyn's chest. Marilyn parried the punch just before impact and countered with her own strike. Ruwani parried it and punched back, the two cycling back and forth in the drill as they talked quietly in the corner of the kung fu school. "So he wants to just...walk into the Solaritec campus and say 'we've got some questions, who wants to answer them'?"

"Well...yeah, pretty much, I think," Marilyn said. Ruwani ceased the drill and got some water, leaving Marilyn to look back at the room. A dozen other students in the noon class were doing the drill, the instructor walking between them. "I think

knights just don't like handing off stuff, you know? I think once they get involved, they seem like the type to see it through to the end."

"Yeah, but just because they want to do it doesn't mean we should," Ruwani said. She slowly resumed the drill with Marilyn, the two of them picking up speed. "I think we should turn over what we found. Give it to the police."

"The police may be part of the problem," said Marilyn.

"Then we give it to the news," Ruwani suggested.

"We did that with the human trafficking," said Marilyn. "The only thing that happened was a press conference." She stepped back from Ruwani, breaking the cycle of punch-counterpunch. Her hands on her hips, she shook her head. She looked at herself in the school mirror, in her workout clothes and her hair pulled back. She looked tired. "I really feel like this is something we need to see through. And if the knights are going to do it regardless of whether or not we help, then I think we should do it." Ruwani seemed less than enthused as the two resumed the drill.

"You look like crap, Ken," said Phillip from the comfort of his office.

"Yeah," said the man on the screen, brushing back his long blonde bangs. "I had to go to the warehouse to check on some of the girders and I had a panic attack."

"Same dream?" asked Phillip.

"Isn't it always?" Ken sighed. He slapped a wide-brimmed hat against his hand to knock dust from it. "How are things there with the Investigators' Clan? They disrupting everything?"

“They’re trying their best,” Phillip said like he found the trouble amusing. “The Triumvirate seems to think—” The door burst in and Jericho stormed into Phillip’s office. “Talk to you later, Ken,” Phillip said as he clicked off the screen. He looked to the furious Jericho and asked, “Yes? How can I—”

“How long have you been subsidizing slavery?” Jericho demanded, nearly shouting.

Phillip’s good demeanor soured. He inhaled with straining patience. “It is very easy for you to get on your high horse, isn’t it? Especially when you don’t do crap for this company.”

“This company doesn’t matter!” Jericho yelled. “We don’t belong to this company; we are part of the Brotherhood of the—”

“The Brotherhood of the Sun doesn’t exist without this company!” Phillip yelled back. He stood as tall as he could against Jericho, and still come half a foot short. “Not without this company and the hundreds of others, big and small, just like it.” He stormed around his desk. “Oh, it’s real easy for you to talk about the Brotherhood and it needing to come first. Well guess what? The front of a criminal organization needs maintenance too!”

“We’re not—” Jericho started to assert.

“Oh, bull!” Phillip exclaimed. “You think legitimate, upstanding organizations maintain a small army of heavily trained soldiers? You think they conduct illegal steroid research?” Jericho stiffened at that. “Yeah, Jericho, the Investigators’ Clan isn’t the only one that susses out secrets.” Phillip took another breath, this one calming. “The Brotherhood relies on their network of organizations and companies; for information, for influence, and quite simply, for money. We can talk about the Brotherhood’s ideals and our noble fight against the Illuminati all we want, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t mean squat if we don’t have the capital to turn on the damn lights.”

Phillip sat back, sitting on the edge of his desk. He crossed his arms and looked expectantly at Jericho. “And while you’ve been off, chasing down old books and playing with your chemistry set,” he said derisively, “somebody had to play nice with the municipality and you think it was going to be our president? Somebody had to actually run the company.” He looked passed Jericho as he turned on his video screen. He closed the discussion by saying, “Shut the door on your way out.”

Sitting in Edgar’s office, Armand felt like he was in trouble. Edgar had fallen silent and was staring at Armand in worry. “Armand, this is a very bad idea,” said the elder knight, speaking with none of the joviality or frivolity he was known for. He brushed down his black tie over his red suit shirt. “You can’t...you can’t just raid a corporate facility because you think they’re hiding something.”

“Because it’s against the law?” Armand asked. “We’re beyond the law.” Edgar looked astonished that he could say something like that. “I mean, what I meant to say is...we’re...knights...we worry about things other than just ‘is this legal or not’.”

“However true that might be,” Edgar allowed cautiously, “You are still talking about throwing away your future – and potentially your life – on a hunch for which you have very flimsy evidence. And what’s the best-case scenario? You demand answers and they give them to you. How will you know if they’re true or not? Who will believe you when you try to tell others?”

“We can’t stand by and wait for somebody to fix this,” the young knight insisted.

“But we don’t even know what it is we’re trying to fix,” Edgar counseled.

Armand shook his head, growing frustrated. “Tell me you don’t think something is up. Tell me you don’t think plans are a-foot.” Edgar wanted to say something and tried to but found no words. “That’s what I thought,” Armand said dismissively. He stormed out, leaving Edgar to look worried.

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—Now—

“He really was gung-ho to do this, wasn’t he?” Marilyn remarked to Everett. “I guess I didn’t realize you guys were all so opposed to it. I thought it was...well, it was just you.”

“No, believe it or not, Captain America here wasn’t the only one opposed to a suicide raid on a corporate fortress without any hard evidence,” said Morgan before Everett could respond. “Can’t imagine why.”

Marilyn seemed to take that comment as a slight. “You guys have a real hypocritical view of vigilantism, you know that?”

“Sticks and stones,” Morgan retorted in a bored tone. “I see you talking a lot of game.”

“Knights deal with absolutes,” Everett said, before Morgan and Marilyn could continue arguing. “We deal with hard, unassailable truths. Which usually means whether or not we witnessed something. We don’t get involved in a car theft unless we actually see the car get boosted. We don’t kick in some guy’s door for beating

his wife unless we actually see it. Not know it. Not suspect it. But actually, irrefutably see it.”

“So you’ll get involved if you witness it but not if someone else does and they tell you? Even if they’re trustworthy?” Marilyn asked.

“The telephone game is a dangerous way to convey justice,” said Everett. “And that’s part of why we, in some ways, reject the modern concept of court-based justice, because of that very same telephone game effect. Too much ‘I documented this person documenting this person doing this because that person said the other person did that’. I won’t deny there’s a time and a place for that sort of thing. Definitely works with white-collar crime and intellectual offenses and stuff. But when it comes to what we deal with – which is mostly violence-based street crime – direct witnessing should be enough. And is enough.”

“Yeah, but when all you have is a hammer, all your problems start to look like nails,” Marilyn quoted.

“All matters of justice ARE nails,” Morgan asserted. “There isn’t a damn thing the police can do that knights can’t do. All the police have is institutionalized support and numbers, but that’s it. At the end of the day, the entire justice system comes down to the cops being the ones with the guns. All civil and criminal sentences, all laws, ultimately boil down to ‘do what we say or we’ll shoot you’.”

“And in the criminal justice system, it’s more like ‘we’ll have Officer Jacobs shoot you’,” expounded Everett. “And we knights aren’t too keen on having, or even letting, others handle our business.”

“Besides,” quipped Morgan with a glance in the rear view mirror at Marilyn, “it sounds like we weren’t the only ones having a problem with vigilantism.”

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—8 Days Ago—

“I think everybody’s gotten off work or gotten their shifts covered,” Marilyn said as she sat at her computer desk. Victor was pacing in the limited space. When he turned his back, she quickly pulled up Facebook and scanned responses to her posts. She noted nothing from Everett and chewed on her cheek as she wondered what the silence might represent.

When Victor turned back around, Marilyn changed windows and brought back the spreadsheets of World Alliance activity. “I think we’ll have everybody. If we bring signs, then any publicity we—”

“Don’t do this, Mar,” Victor pled, standing in Marilyn’s dorm room. “Don’t follow this idiot.”

“This idiot is the only one willing to stand up for what’s right!” Marilyn told him harshly. Standing, she asked, “And when did you get so hesitant to take matters into your own hands?”

“Going to a night club and seeing what we can find is one thing,” Victor argued loudly. “This is breaking and entering, this is trespassing, this is...” He ran out of ideas. “This is crazy!”

“This is what we’re about!” Marilyn yelled at him. “Changing the world.”

“This isn’t changing the world,” he exclaimed. He stormed around what little room there was. “God, you are obsessed with...with playing Batman!”

Marilyn slapped him. "I'm not playing anything." He was stunned, holding his cheek. "This is the purpose of the World Alliance. To unite people into doing something, to not just make lasting change in the world but to get others to make lasting change as well."

"Yeah, well," he said softly, visibly hurt by her strike. "The others may not see it that, Mar. And they're the World Alliance too." He backed away from her. "You seem a little too eager to be like these knights." He opened the door. "Maybe you should join them." He stormed it and slammed her door behind him, leaving her fuming.

Morgan opened his front door, took one look at Armand and before the knight could speak, said "No," and shut the door.

Malcolm pushed open the glass doors of the county records office. Kim hopped up off the chair next to the door and asked, "Well?"

"No luck," Malcolm said. He started walking and Kim grabbed her stuffed animal backpack. "The corporate offices are listed as a private development community or something." He glanced back at the young woman working to keep up. "Basically, registering their floor plans is a violation of privacy or something."

"That doesn't seem fair," Kim bemoaned as they exited the municipal building.

"Well, it's like hiring 'performers who serve' instead of actual wait staff," he said as they headed across a dense parking lot for the bus stop by the road. "You

can fire them for a whole different and far more subjective set of reasons.” He sat down in the small hut of clear plastic walls. He looked up at the sky and said, “I bet it’ll rain again.”

Kim flopped down next to him and swung her feet back and forth under the bench. “I don’t want to get arrested,” she complained like she was griping about having to eat yucky vegetables.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what we need to be afraid of,” Malcolm said.

Kim looked curiously at him. “Then why are you going?”

He looked at her, taken back by the question. “Why are you?”

“I believe in Marilyn,” she said. “Plus, I got to keep Alan safe.” She flashed a wide grin.

Malcolm nodded and hugged Kim and said, “That’s about the same as me.”

“This is the place,” Armand said, as he sat in the passenger’s seat of the large, burgundy car. Outside, the rain pelted the car with soft drops of water from the sky. Inside, the stagnant air was still cool from the drive. “This entire site is all Solaritec,” Armand explained. “And I suspect it’s all one big front for the Brotherhood of the Sun.”

Before the car, a giant billboard sign stood on the hill, pronouncing vividly in giant letters, the current site of the Solaritec Corporation North America Headquarters. A giant sun with a huge grinning smile stared down at them, as if aware of their presence.

Beyond the sign, across a lush grassy field, a giant industrial complex extended out before them. The seven giant buildings stood proudly in the giant clearing surrounded by the thick forest far away from the eyes of the city. Meanwhile, the ground around the buildings seemed alive with the steel pipes and power stations that gave life to the buildings.

“That thing is so freaky,” Marilyn said, looking at the sign from the front seat of her car. The sign, designed to be seen over the trees that surrounded the car and filled the hillside that rose up near the Solaritec office park, still seemed placed there perfectly to scare off anyone who was in the area. The seven buildings, each one a different height and design even if the style of all the buildings was almost oppressively constant, stood silent, like giants fallen asleep by the droning rain. Around the buildings, however, was a kudzu-like maze of metal pipes that filled the ground and choked out the surface from view.

“You said it,” Armand agreed, sitting back into the passenger seat, looking out through the gate and past the sign. “I guess it makes sense. They’re a utility company and they’re all-green energy too.”

“How big’s the company?” Marilyn went on, leaning her hands on the steering wheel and looking down the hill at the seven buildings.

“World-wide, Solaritec constitutes one fiftieth of the world’s power,” Armand answered academically, as he checked through the some papers in the manila folder in his lap. “That may not seem like a lot, but it’s a big number when you stop and think about it.” He glanced over at Marilyn, seeing the look on her face. “Why?”

She turned to him, her blue eyes blinking quickly. “What? I’m sorry, what?”

“Why?” Armand repeated. “Why are you so interested in what this business does?” he asked, motioning with his head towards the large corporate park down the hill before them.

“Oh,” Marilyn said, turning back to the windshield and the buildings beyond the fencing. “Just thinking,” she mumbled. “I mean,” she said suddenly, some reservation in her voice. “I mean if we...if we do this, then the entire corporation might fall apart. I wonder what type of affect that might have. That’s all.” She just shrugged.

“I guess,” Armand thought aloud, more to himself. “I guess the entire corporation might go under, if the whole thing belongs to the Brotherhood.”

“How many people would that put out of work?” Marilyn asked.

“Two commas worth,” Armand said, glancing over at Marilyn. She went silent, her eyes getting large. He didn’t look at her. “Anyway,” he said after a moment. “There’re seven buildings on the site. Each one’s at least five stories tall. The three at the center, that’s the ‘main campus’. That’s where the research and development and administrative offices are. The other buildings are manufacturing and stuff.”

Marilyn studied the campus for a bit before she noticed, “There’s no parking.”

“Underground,” Armand said. He pointed. “See those doors? Those lead to the main parking center.” He looked to Marilyn, then back out to the site. “Anyway, what I’m thinking is that we park here, go around the fencing, and come in through that main gate.”

“How will we get through?” Marilyn started to ask.

“I’ll get to that in a second,” Armand said with a motion of his hand. “But after we get through, we go in through the east door. That will have a stairwell right next to it. We go up to the eighth floor and that’s where the head of the R and D group’s supposed to be.”

“Phillip Reynolds,” Marilyn said, saying his name apprehensively. She glanced over at Armand. “Have any of the other knights agreed to help us?” Armand began to answer and hedged a little. “Has Everett?” He struggled to say anything. “What has Everett said?”

“I haven’t asked him yet. Not directly,” Armand said.

“Why not?” Marilyn asked.

Armand lowered his binoculars and exhaled. “I don’t know, I...I feel like...I feel like this isn’t up to him.” He looked at Marilyn. “Everett’s not my boss. He’s not in charge of me, you know?”

“Yeah, but...” Marilyn wasn’t sure what to say. She sat back as well. The rain tapped on the roof and she enjoyed the sound of it for a moment.

“When Ev was really young, he used to love the Marines,” Armand recounted. “He told me he saw a few of their ads on television and fell in love with them. And so, for the longest time, he wanted to be a Marine. That’s how he met Ledger, I think. They went on some ‘pre-college-still-in-high-school’ boot camp thing for a weekend to Fort Brag. It was there that Everett learned more about the Marines.”

“Why didn’t he join?” Marilyn asked, as she rolled down the window on her side of the car, ignoring the few random drops of water that fell into the car. The air immediately seemed to freshen as the static heat the two had been sitting in almost instantly dissipated. “Why did he give it up and become a knight instead?”

“I don’t know,” Armand pondered. “My guess is that he learned that the Marines don’t use their swords and that did it for him. I think that’s also about when he met Morgan. They’ve known each other for a long, long time.”

“Why did you become a knight?” Marilyn asked, looking to Armand as she leaned against her car door.

“Me?” Armand asked, looking over at her. She nodded, looking back at him with an amused smile. “I-I got into it because I wanted to change the world. I wanted to, you know, do my part. But I just never found an avenue for it, you know. I wanted to have all that honor and all of that that the old stories used to have. Plus I really wanted to help people. And the knights seemed to be the best way.”

“You wanted to take a hands-on approach to it?” Marilyn asked. This time, Armand nodded. “Why don’t you join the World Alliance?” she asked.

“One thing at a time,” Armand said, laughing a bit. “Let’s get through this little assault first. After that...”

“Assault,” Marilyn said, turning back to the steering wheel and the windshield beyond it. “I don’t like calling it that.”

“Sorry,” Armand apologized but not sincerely. “That’s what this is, though. We’re breaking into this place, with the use of martial force, to confront someone we suspect of major crimes. Most people would call that an assault.”

“I know,” Marilyn said, nodding her head quickly, the relenting tone in her voice seeming a bit rushed, almost desperate. “But still. I wish it hadn’t had to come to this.”

“Well, that’s their fault,” Armand said. “They upped the ante when they sent one of their goons to kill you. I, for one, have few qualms about giving as good as I get.”

“Maybe,” Marilyn said, looking off, out over the hill. “Still, I just hope we can do this without anyone getting hurt.”

“Not likely,” Armand said, unbothered by the sentiment. However, his tone softened. “But I know what you mean. As little injury and confrontation as possible.”

“Yeah,” Marilyn said, her voice a concerned whisper as she looked down.

“Well, don’t worry,” Armand said, with some finality, closing up his folder. He looked to Marilyn as he put the folder into the backseat of her car, a confident smile on his face. “With the two of us, three of your people, a lot of know-how and a little luck, this should all work out fine.”

“You really think we’ll be able to pull this off?” Marilyn asked, looking out at the corporate site again. “Really?”

“Absolutely,” Armand said, confidently. “We’ll break in with no trouble. We’ll probably be half-way to the second target before anyone even notices what’s happening.”

“I hope it goes so well,” Marilyn said, hesitant.

“It will,” Armand said, his confidence still strong. “We’ll do just fine.”

“Move all test subjects out of the barracks,” Jericho was telling Raphael. Raphael leaned against Jericho’s desk, his arms crossed as he listened. Jericho, meanwhile, was pacing back and forth through his office. “Relocate the materials itself. I don’t care if we have to put the entire project on hold. Sequester the researchers and move—”

The knock on the office door preceded it open and in came Aaron. “I’m sorry to bother,” he said in a neighborly tone, “But I need a moment.”

“I do not have time for this right now,” said Jericho, still pacing. “In case you hadn’t noticed,” he said sarcastically, “My organization has been compromised.”

“That’s actually why I’m here,” Aaron ventured, shutting the door behind him. Jericho scoffed and resumed pacing.

Raphael remarked “Nice glasses. Contacts bothering you?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said in a surprisingly friendly tone. He took his glasses off, as though he’d forgotten them. “I think it’s the humidity. I haven’t been back to America in almost...” He had to think about it. “...wow, three years.” He looked at the pacing Jericho and said “I have to ask, formally, about the Hand operative currently in police custody, suspected in a series of mass shootings.”

Jericho just about lost it. Raphael stood, afraid Jericho was going to pull Aaron’s head off with his bare hands, but Jericho roughly grabbed Aaron’s arm and jerked him to the door. “I have no comment, not for you,” he barked as he forced Aaron out the door and shut it in his face. He turned to the stunned Raphael and said, “We have to move fast.”

Raphael looked very pensive, his arms still crossed. “If...when he alerts the Triumvirate, this is going to go south fast.” Jericho glared. “He’s probably on his way to the dark room right now, to tell them about you stonewalling him. Little stunts like that are going to come back and bite you. Bite you, bite us, bite all of us.”

“That’s why we have to move fast,” Jericho urged.

Marilyn didn’t daydream at work anymore. At least not like she used to. In the dull moments after the last of the customers had come by, as afternoon became twilight and twilight became dusk, her eyes drifted to the doors and windows at the front of the sandwich shop. She kept imagining ‘Jerry’ would show up again. In her mind, a thousand terrible and heroic events transpired, sometimes at the same time. He brought a knife. He brought a gun. He came to apologize. He came to hurt. Sometimes Marilyn survived. Sometimes she didn’t. In those small moments of the day, Marilyn waged a thousand battles.

And each time, she was awoken from her violent fantasies by some noise. Sometimes it was the kitchen crew, dropping a pan. Sometimes it was a car horn

from the street that passed out front. And sometimes it was her smart phone, letting her know she's received a message.

With her manager off-site once again, Marilyn made no effort to mask her taking out her phone from the pocket in her skirt, beneath the uniform-required apron that was purely for show. She summoned her email to find a message from her anonymous forum friend. "You rang?" read the message.

Marilyn messaged back, "So, I've got an odd question. Since you know so much about the Ivers Books, I was hoping you might know a lot about something else." She hit send and looked again at the windows. No sign of Jerry. She was almost disappointed and that unsettled her.

She got her response almost immediately. "What about?"

Marilyn took a deep breath and began to type with her thumbs. "Floor plans for a corporate facility," she wrote. She paused, worried about how he'd interpret that. "I'm working with a..." She deleted that. "My team and I..." she wrote with a smile. "Are looking into a corporate office we suspect for human trafficking." She hit send.

A man walked by the windows and Marilyn's heart jumped. He had brown skin like Everett's and was wearing a red shirt. She watched him walk past and felt empty. She checked her messages and found Victor had written her twice. Nothing of significance though. She checked online and found Everett had liked a status about social justice. She smiled, but wondered why he hadn't added a comment.

She focused back on her email. She wasn't sure what to expect from her forum contact. It occurred to her only now that she had no reason to assume this person had any such knowledge. The idea that a fan of occult books and mysterious of the old world would have any knowledge of modern—

Her worrying was interrupted by the receipt of another message. She looked curiously at her phone to find her forum contact had written, "Have you tried the

records office?” Marilyn messaged back, confirming the futility of that search. He wrote back almost immediately, saying, “You aren’t a cop, right? You’re required by federal law to reveal you’re one of asked directly. So, are you a cop, or affiliated with any law enforcement agency?”

Marilyn smiled. “No, but I am a glutton for justice. This is a civilian-led investigation. We will be turning over our findings to the police. But not necessarily how we got them. And certainly not any informants.”

The response she got back took longer than the previous messages, but it read, “I might know a thing or two. What company and where?”

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—Now—

“You know that cop thing is a lie, right?” said Morgan from the front seat. “Undercover cops don’t have to reveal themselves. That’s just a thing they made up in movies to make for tense moments.”

“That’s what you’re protesting?” Everett practically marveled.

“Undercover work wouldn’t work if cops were required to reveal themselves,” Morgan continued at Marilyn.

“The point is, I found the map of the Solaritec campus,” Marilyn said. “After the dead-end at the county records office, I was able to still make it happen.”

“No, you asked a complete stranger off the internet for help,” said Everett.
“You’re lucky he didn’t send you a virus or steal your identity or send snuff porn.”

“Maybe not everybody’s as bad as you think,” Marilyn suggested.

Neither Everett or Morgan had a response for that.



—8 Days Ago—

Everett was at his computer, his back to the door, when Armand came in. He didn’t stop typing or even turn from the screen. “How’d it go?” he asked like the question was a formality.

Armand threw his brand-laden trench coat into the nearer chair and then flopped down on the couch and fumed for a minute. He clicked his lips twice, which brought Everett’s typing to an irritated stop. “Back in Boston,” recounted Armand, deliberately letting his accent shine through his words, “I found out about this gang that was curbing stomping gays. You ever seen a curb stomping?” Everett turned and looked at Armand. “Splits the face,” the younger knight told him. “They put this gay guy teeth-first against the edge of the sidewalk and kick the back of his head. Did it in front of his husband and their daughter.”

Everett turned around in his chair but still didn’t speak. “I do the rounds,” Armand said with an attitude-laden sniff. “Check with people.” He shrugged. “Everybody knew who was doing it. But nobody would do anything about it.

Nobody could do anything about it. Cops didn't give a flip because, come on, when was the last time cops gave a damn about anyone, especially a gay guy." Deep breath. "I track one of these guys down and confront him at this convenience store. I didn't even really plan on there being a fight. But he started it. I finished it." Another breath. "Next thing I know, there are six guys on me."

Everett's lack of response seemed to irritate Armand. "How'd that work out for them?" he finally asked.

Armand smirked and held his hands out lazily. "I'm still here," he sat forward.

"And you somehow think stopping a gang of homophobes is comparable to raiding a corporate office in search of 'answers'," Everett said.

"I think a lot of people stand by and do nothing until it's too late," Armand said, his voice as saturated with his Boston accent as it was disdain. "Sniper killed how many people? And you think it's gonna stop there? Evil begets evil."

"That's about doing evil against evil only produces more evil," Everett argued.

"No, it's about standing by and letting evil get away with it and perpetrate and procreate like the damn virus it is!" Armand had stood now, standing like he was readying for a fight. "I need help on this, Ev," he implored. His plea surprised Everett. "Solaritec is behind this. And you tell me, you look me in the eye and you tell me, you think this is done. You tell me you honestly think this was one wacko out there, acting alone. What does your gut say?" Armand took a deep breath and stood up. He asked more calmly, his voice devoid of the accent he worked to hide, "What's the right thing to do?"

"No," Everett said flatly. "Not this. You go in there and you're going to start a war. That's a kind of trouble you don't want. None of us want that kind of trouble."

“I’m wearing red and black, same as you,” Armand pointed out. “Trouble is our good friend.” He shook his head, glaring disappointedly at Everett. “How can you do this, man? How can you sit by? These are the same guys that tried to kill Marilyn.” That stung and Everett turned away. “She’s helping me, you know.”

Everett’s jaw worked in frustration. “Then you’re going to get her killed.” He looked back at Armand. “Don’t do this.”

“I’m sorry, Ev,” he said. “I refuse to stand by.”

“Look,” Everett said, standing up. “You came here, wanting my advice and guidance and...” He looked Armand dead-on. “You do this and you won’t live the night. And even if you do, you’ll spend the rest of your life in prison, with the blood of those people – the World Alliance – on your hands.”

Armand stared for a moment until Everett realized he was growing more and more disgusted. “I refuse to stand by.” He left, leaving Everett alone.

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