

Red Moon Rising

Part 08 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 08 of 30

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“We’re just one step away.”

“That’s usually when the ground falls out from underneath your feet.”

“You may be more right than you know.”

– Indiana Jones and Walter Donovan, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

—Now—

“I think it’s real easy to look at knights and see vigilantes,” Everett said at his reflection.

The knight was staring out the window of Morgan’s car. He was looking at the passing fields and yards that alternated as they drove. The sun wasn’t up yet but the dawn had broken. It was getting brighter, almost by the minute. Dark purple clouds in the sky had razor edges of pink and the deep blue sea above was beginning to lighten. The fields were sharp contrasts of long and dense shadows against the otherwise vibrant light.

“I think any time you have a person who is committed to doing good, by way of physical force and presence,” he continued, “you run that risk. You run from...” He sighed as he tried to find the words. “You go from providing direct help without any intermediary, to taking the law into your own hands. And I think Armand was crossing that line.”

“Armand though,” he said more clearly, “he had found his battle. He thought he had found the force of...of evil that he was going to strike against.”

“Well, it’s an alluring idea,” Morgan agreed, speaking more sentimentally than Marilyn was used to hearing. “A giant corporation that turned out to be a front for a super-secret nefarious cult?” He looked over at Everett. “Come on, man; that’s every knight’s dream.”

Marilyn spoke up from the back. “I just don’t understand. How could Armand be so gung-ho about it and the rest of you guys – the knights – be indifferent to it? Or even opposed? I mean, you all swore to the same oath, right? The Oath of Chivalry. How can there be this much....this much...”

“Heterogeneity?” Everett suggested.

“Yes!” she eagerly accepted. “Heterogeneity. Diversity. Divergence. Doesn’t the Oath of Chivalry...I don’t know, dictate what you do and don’t do?”

“For starters, there isn’t one Oath of Chivalry,” Morgan answered academically. “The Oath itself dates back all the way to the tail end of the Roman Empire. A Roman general wrote a pamphlet on how the cavalry needed to conduct itself. The word ‘chivalry’ is the result of seven hundred years of the linguistic telephone game which started with caballarius which meant ‘horse rider’.”

“You ever heard the expression ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’?” asked Everett. Marilyn had. “It was written by the same guy, a philosopher-general named Flaavius.”

“A possible grandfather to King Arthur,” Morgan remarked indifferently. “But anyway. That actual pamphlet – and most iterations of The Oath shortly afterwards – really don’t have a lot of the stuff we associate with chivalry in it. It’s mostly about battlefield tactics and how to succeed in battle. There’s very little about ethics and manners. That wouldn’t be added in until much, much later, around the time of Le Morte de Arthur. That’s when romantic poets would wax about ‘the days of yore’ – days that never actually existed, I might add – and that’s when the ethics and

manners started to appear. So consulting the original versions of The Oath is akin to consulting Sun Tsu's the Art of War or Miyamoto Musashi's Book of Five Rings."

"The modern incarnations of The Oath have a lot more about ethics and manners," explained Everett, "but they are hardly uniform. Different countries and different eras have their own versions of The Oath. The American version of the Oath of Chivalry has undergone three major revisions in the past century alone."

"And again, there's no centralized, governing body of knights," Morgan reminded Marilyn. "Conceivably, anybody can write up a list of rules, slap 'chivalry' at the top, and run with it. A real knight'll kick his ass, but technically, it would be just as valid."

"What makes someone a real knight?" she asked.

"What makes someone a real...charity...person?" Morgan struggled to find the right term, which amused Everett. "Modern chivalry's versions of ethics tends to treat women and the innocent almost like the three Asmovian Laws from science fiction."

"He means Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics," Everett said as a means to clarify for Marilyn, an attempt that failed miserably.

Missing that Marilyn was lost, Morgan argued, "The dude who wrote them was named Asimov. They're his laws. That makes them Asimovian Laws."

"Anyway, Mar, going back to your question," said Everett, "the short answer is that a person becomes a knight by reading the Oath of Chivalry, swearing to abide by it, and living their life according to its ideals of being right, fair, just, and moral." Everett faced forward. "Knights not only can but are meant to interpret these vague concepts as they see them and as the situation permits."

"So there's no 'hold doors for women' clause?" asked Marilyn.

Everett snickered and shook his head. “The closest thing is ‘show respect to your peers’.”

“Huh,” pondered Marilyn. “And do all knights swear when they’re teenagers?”

Everett looked across the car at Morgan. “Not all of us.”

Marilyn sat forward and looked to the driver. “How young were you when you swore?”

Morgan answered bitterly, “Too young.”

“You’re going to have to forgive Morgan,” Everett told Marilyn. “He blames Chivalry for why he’s a miserable old sourpuss. It’s why he renounced it.”

“And yet, somehow, I keep getting drug into knightly matters,” Morgan remarked rhetorically.

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—7 Days Ago—

Jeanine Blaine opened the front door, letting in the Spring warmth along with Everett’s gloom. She took one look at him and cooed sympathetically. “Let me guess: girl troubles.”

Everett readied to deny it but paused. “Actually...sort of, yeah.” He accepted Jeanine’s offer into the house. Built into the side of a grassy hill overlooking a lake, the front of the house was one story while the rear was two stories, each half a flight up or down.

Jeanine, in a suit but without her jacket signaling she was just recently home from court, fixed herself a glass of water in the kitchen as she asked, “Is this the Marilyn I’ve been hearing so much about?”

Everett smirked and shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, she’s the girl in question but she’s not who I’m having trouble with. Or, I mean, I am having trouble with her. I mean, not trouble-trouble, but...” He sighed and laughed at himself.

“She sent me a friend’s request,” Jeanine prattled, enjoying Everett’s juvenile heartache. “At first, I thought it was spam. I didn’t know who she was.”

“Yeah, as soon as I friended her, she sent friends requests to everyone,” Everett said. “Sorry.”

“I don’t mind,” Jeanine shrugged. “She posts a lot.”

“She’s socially active,” said Everett.

“That might not be a bad thing for you,” Jeanine told him.

“We’re not dating!” Everett half-exclaimed with a laugh.

“Do you want to be?” Jeanine asked leadingly.

That caught Everett off-guard. “I...I guess. I mean, sort of. I mean, no. I mean...she’s got a boyfriend. And...” Something about the question shifted his focus. “I really need to talk to Edgar.”

Jeanine smiled enigmatically and pointed to the door to Everett’s left. “The boys are in the garage.” Through the door was a garage modified with egg-shell

crating and packing blankets. Exercise equipment lined the room, as did the implements of serious martial arts training. Sitting on a folding chair with a tablet computer in his lap, Morgan was playing with some melodies on a digital keyboard while Edgar consulted some hand-written notes. Papers meant to be graded were chaotically stacked on the ground, ignored and largely forgotten.

“What are you two doing?” Everett asked as he descended the two steps into the gym-turned-music room.

“Officially or unofficially?” asked Morgan, tweaking the melody he’d been playing.

“Officially, we’re grading midterms,” said Edgar. “Unofficially, we’re writing a number-one single.”

“Eeeeh,” Morgan corrected vaguely.

“We’re writing a hit single?”

“Eeeeeh,”

“We’re writing a regional favorite that will be forgotten in ten years?”

“That’s the one,” Morgan confirmed with certainty before going back to the digital keyboard.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Edgar, clearly more focused on trying to find a rhyme for ‘all night’.

Everett seemed less-than-impressed with the attention he was getting. He checked to make sure the door to the garage/gym/music room was closed and sighed. “I think Armand is going to go through with his plan to lead a bunch of civilians to raid a large corporation because he thinks they’re behind the sniper attacks of the last week.”

Edgar and Morgan both stopped what they were doing. They stared for a second. It was Morgan who broke the silence by asking, "Please tell me he's not actually that dumb."

Edgar set aside the lyrics he'd been working on and rolled over an exercise ball to use as a chair. "He'd come by my office to talk about something like that. I didn't think he'd follow-through without support."

"He's got support," Everett said. "Marilyn's supporting him." There was a tint of envy in the way he said that.

Edgar nodded and crossed his arms. He looked to Morgan for support. Morgan glared at him and went back to playing with the melody. "What are you planning to do?" he asked Everett.

Everett shrugged, with just a hint of desperation. "I don't know."

"Everett, Armand's an idiot," Morgan said. Edgar and Everett both glared at him. "I'm serious; he needs guidance. That's why he's here, living with you, right?"

"But at the same time, I have no legal authority," Everett said.

"To what? Keep him from breaking the law? This isn't some prank; it's an act of domestic terrorism!"

"Morgan's sensationalism aside," counseled Edgar with a side-long glance at the former knight, "he's not wrong. Armand's here with you, to keep him from doing precisely this kind of stuff."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure Armand's wrong," said Everett. "The evidence Marilyn's gathered...the evidence – circumstantial as it is – does point to something being up with Solaritec."

"You know another word for circumstantial evidence? Hearsay," said Morgan.

“Something needs to be done,” insisted Everett. “I just don’t think it’s this. Or, I’m not sure.”

“Have you told Armand this?” Edgar asked, getting a nod. “If he won’t defer to your judgment, then you need to do something more drastic.” Everett hesitated. “Everett, you also need to consider the collateral damage from this. If this comes down...WHEN this comes down on Armand, it could easily be shared with the rest of us. Me, Roland, Ledger. Sydney, when she gets here. Even this repugnant ass,” Edgar said, nodding at Morgan. “Armand says he’s a knight, or they just look for black and red ‘gang colors’, and they run a search and we will ALL come up.”

“And it’s not like we’re not all in the system,” Morgan remarked. “Have any of us gone more than twelve months without some kind of run-in with the police? We usually get out of it because we’re smart about it, the evidence is there, and Jeanine’s a great lawyer. But something like this and whatever brownie points we might have go right out the window in the face of association with a terrorist arrested for armed assault on a utility company. The cops in this city don’t like vigilantism and something like this will have them putting the screws to you quick.”

“You guys caught the sniper, right?” asked Edgar. “And then turned him over to the police?” Everett confirmed. “And did he have any conclusive information or evidence?”

“No, not more than an ID badge,” said Everett. “That’s the thing. We know very little but we suspect a lot. We’ve got a lot of pieces to a puzzle, but not many of them connect. But if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck...”

“It’s a gadwell, or a king eider,” said Morgan.

“I’m worried Armand’s being...persuaded, enabled, by Marilyn and the World Alliance,” said Everett.

Edgar developed a wry smile. “Now, correct me if I’m wrong,” he said like a well-meaning uncle. “But is this the Marilyn I’ve been hearing so much about?”

Everett groaned and covered his face in frustration. “Would you guys please stop being enamored with the prospect that I have a crush and focus on the problem at hand?”

“I think the problem at hand is that you haven’t asked her out yet,” said Morgan.

“What about Armand?” Everett asked.

Morgan shrugged. “I’m sure he won’t mind if you asked her out.”

Everett nearly lost it. “Guys, the knights cannot be aligned with some charity group-turned-vigilantes!”

“And that’s your call to make?” asked Morgan.

“I don’t know!” exclaimed Everett at him. He gestured to Edgar. “I came to you because you’re a senior knight.” He gestured to Morgan. “And you…well, you were just in the room.” Morgan seemed to accept that explanation and resumed tinkering with the melody.

“If you think Armand’s on to something and you want to help him slow down to give everyone a chance to gather concrete evidence, then tell him,” Edgar suggested.

“If we get involved in some kind of investigation, neutrality goes out the window,” Everett said.

Morgan looked up, incredulous. “When did neutrality become a trait to be admired?”

“Neutrality is what separates justice from vengeance,” Everett told him. “And it’s what separates right and moral from opinion.”

“Right and moral are opinion,” Morgan said directly. “And if it’s neutrality you want, Ev, this will undermine it. If you want the knights – which you’re apparently claiming leadership of – to remain unaffiliated, you can’t let this happen.”

“Then what do I do?” asked Everett.

Morgan succinctly answered, “Stop Armand.”

“You know, I’ve gone months at a time without reporting to the Triumvirate,” Phillip remarked as he rode the glass elevator with Jericho and Aaron. He and Jericho were facing the metal doors, while Aaron stood behind them, one hand in his pocket as he blew the steam off his coffee. “Now we’re talking every day.”

“Lot to report,” Aaron said.

“Lot happening,” Phillip countered. He looked at Jericho and mouthed ‘brownoser’. Jericho didn’t respond. The door chimed and parted and Jericho stepped out first, as though desperate to escape the other two clan heads. “I always wondered how they handle non-English-speaking clan heads,” Phillip asked as the three walked down the hall of the office.

“All business is conducted in English,” Aaron said. “My counterpart in China complains about it from time to time.” Jericho opened the door, revealing the small waiting room, the door on the other side standing ominously closed.

“You talk to the other heads?” Phillip remarked. “I only talk to the other Miracle Workers’ heads at official functions.”

Aaron just shrugged. He asked Jericho, “Do you ever speak with the other heads of the Hand?” Jericho shook his head curtly. The three fell silent, standing before the door, waiting for their summons.

“I posted online about Armand’s little crusade,” Roland shared as he stirred his hot tea. “These two guys in Denver are posting official odds.”

Sitting across from Roland, Ledger looked cautiously around the 24-hour pancake restaurant. In the late morning, it was pretty sparsely populated. Even still, he huddled down over the table of the booth, looking at Roland. “You really think that kid’s got the balls to do this?” Ledger asked, his voice halfway to a whisper.

“Don’t know,” Roland said, tearing open some sugar packets and pouring them into his tea. “Armand’s not a complete idiot.” Ledger snorted in disagreement. “He’s not,” Roland defended, almost unwittingly. “And with whatshername and the ‘World Alliance’,” he said with a roll of his eyes, “they might be able to pull it off.” He shook the collar of his red-topped scrubs. “Man, it’s been hot recently. Stupid rain.” He looked hatefully at the condensation on the windows.

“Hadn’t noticed,” Ledger remarked. He sighed and asked, “Think we should help him?”

“Who?”

“Armand.”

“No,” Roland answered clearly before trying the tea. More sugar. “His call. This is all on him. If it works, he’s a badass. If it doesn’t, he’s...” Roland didn’t finish the statement. “It’s not that I bear the kid any ill will or want to see him fail, but I, for one, have no intention of helping with this insanity. He’s an idiot for even trying it. For even considering it.”

“Don’t you think we should stop him then?” Ledger asked.

“Since when did you get so worried about him?” Roland asked. He tore open more packets. “Honestly, man, you’re usually the Darwinistic, ‘screw ’em’ one. Since when did you start caring what an idiot did with his life?”

“That idiot’s one of us,” said Ledger with a heavy sense of guilt.

The door to the mayor’s office opened and in he came, shutting the door before anybody outside might be able to glance in past him. Seated before his desk, Phillip and Raphael both turned from their seats. “Gentlemen,” said the mayor. He gave them both quick, sweaty handshakes. “I apologize for the wait, but it has been quite the interesting day.”

“Yes, that it has,” agreed Phillip.

As if recognizing for the first time that Raphael wasn’t Jericho, the mayor re-extended his hand, saying, “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Raphael,” he said. “I am Jericho’s right-hand man. I’m sorry to say that circumstances have necessitated I come in his place, but he wanted me to come in his place to express his apologies for not being able to come in person and also for the abrupt meeting yesterday.”

“I see,” said the clearly-miffed mayor. “Well, I know how pressing some matters can be.”

“First, I wanted to take an opportunity to thank you for meeting with us today, especially as Jericho Kingston already paid you a visit yesterday,” Phillip started out diplomatically. “But that was concerning a Solaritec security matter, whereas we’re here about the city and its well-being.” The mayor seemed intrigued by that overture. “As I’m sure a man of your stature can appreciate, Solaritec is committed

to helping to pursue a return to normalcy, a return to equilibrium. We think that, from such a calmer position, we can better rectify many of the problems that have been plaguing us of late.”

The mayor nodded. He sniffed a bit, as though thinking. “This sniper...bad for business, don’t you agree?” Phillip nodded, though Raphael sat quiet. “In the coming months, as tourism takes a hit, we are going to need to reassure people that our city is one of prosperity, opportunity, and...uh...recreation.” He looked between the two men. “As I told Mr. Kingston yesterday, we will be looking for Solaritec to help restabilize our tourism industry.”

“Easily done,” Phillip agreed without batting an eye or missing a beat.

“That means more than just trucks, food, and locations,” said the mayor. “We’re going to need security.” Phillip nodded while Raphael hid his hesitation. “We’re also going to need some success stories. Girls won’t come to model if they don’t have some famous model to follow in the footsteps of. We’re going to need some names. I want Solaritec to handle their career arcs.”

Again, Phillip nodded. “Won’t be a problem.”

The mayor smiled but cautiously so, like he was wary of how easily he was getting what he wanted. He looked to the quiet Raphael and asked “Anything you want to add?”

Raphael quietly said, “No sir.”

Again, the mayor seemed hesitant to accept at face value the ease of the discussion. But he conceded his own victory, saying “Alright then.” He rose and shook their hands across his desk. “It looks like Solaritec’s future with this city is secure.”

“Delighted to hear it,” Phillip said, smiling as well.

The two departed, heading out from the mayor's office through the loud and busy halls of downtown. "That went well," said Phillip. "I was honestly expecting him to ask for a lot more." Raphael seemed both astonished and disgusted. "What?" Raphael just shook his head in disapproval.

The two reached the main stairs down to the first level of the municipal building. A chance glance down the continuing hall, however, and Phillip spotted Orson ducking into a stairwell. "Hey, wasn't that—" he started to ask, only to discover Raphael was nowhere to be seen. Phillip turned around and around, realizing he was completely alone in the hall full of strangers.

Orson slipped through the door of the stairwell and descended half the flight to the mid-floor landing. He checked back up the steps to make sure no one was following, then turned and looked down at the next floor to see Raphael closing the door. Orson stiffened up, bracing for confrontation.

"Long way from the campus," said Raphael, slowly ascending the steps. Orson didn't back away, but they met eye-to-eye when Raphael was still a step lower. "Don't you Investigator Clan-types have files to be sorting through? Bottle caps to rinse and organize?"

"I needed to update my car registration," Orson told him.

"And you do that by hiding?" asked Raphael.

"I wasn't hiding," Orson countered simply. "It's a free country. Plus, I'm part of the Investigators' Clan. We need to be everywhere."

Raphael stepped up onto the landing and crowded Orson. "You don't need to be in my business." His point made, Raphael backed away and left Orson be, going back down the steps he'd just ascended. "I'll be seeing you back on campus," Raphael threatened cheerfully.

“So what changed your mind?” asked Armand as he rode with Ledger. “Why are you interested now?”

“Not really,” Ledger said, focusing intently on the drive towards the university campus. “I just figured if everybody told you no, then somebody should at least double-check the math. I don’t like it when everybody agrees. That worries me.”

“Makes sense,” Armand lied. He looked out the window, hoping the awkward silence would pass in time. It didn’t. “So…” he ventured with some desperation. “We’ve never really gotten the chance to hang out. I mean, you know, like, socially.”

Ledger looked at Armand. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Armand groaned and looked away, racking his brain for something to talk about. The two knights arrived at the university atrium and slowed before the windows-turned-mirrors by the daylight. “I still think these kids are crazy,” said Ledger.

“You’re really not any older than them,” said Armand.

“I’m clearly more mature,” Ledger said. He instinctively opened the door for two women passing by. Once he’d opened the door, he felt committed so inside went Armand. The two looked around awkwardly before Armand gestured to the far corner of the oddly-shaped atrium. Up one step and at their usual table, Marilyn, Victor, and Malcolm were waiting.

“Hey guys,” said Armand, like he was approaching friends in high school. “You guys know Ledger.” He flashed them the least enthusiastic wave ever. “He might be willing to help us.”

“Let’s not get carried away here,” Ledger mumbled to Armand.

“Glad to have you on board,” Malcolm told Ledger, shaking his hand, clearly unprepared for the strength of the knight’s grip. Victor, meanwhile, just nodded. The nod back was more static than any sort of confirmation.

Marilyn dove right in. “Well, we think we’ve found a connection between the city, the Australian Club’s owner Steven Sizemore, and Solaritec.” She handed Ledger a bunch of print-outs. “There’s heavy involvement by all three in these charities.” Ledger began to look through them. “The charities all have a placement program. It’s international. They place women from other countries here, and they place women here in other countries.”

Ledger shrugged and handed the list back to her. “Sounds like good opportunities.”

“Except we dug deeper,” said Victor, like he was relishing in correcting the knight. “Facebook and other social media sites are a-swarm with reports of girls signing up with these agencies and never being heard from again. Two of the charities based here were actually investigated by the UN and they closed up shop almost immediately. The UN also never published the reports of their investigation, which some think was the result of political pressure.”

“They’re fronts for human trafficking,” Marilyn announced too eagerly.

“So what’s this got to do with the sniper?” asked Ledger.

“That, we don’t know,” Malcolm said. “One possible theory – and it’s really a stretch – is that the sniper was killing anyone who may have known about Solaritec’s involvement in human trafficking. We don’t know that, it’s just a guess, but it fits. It may explain why the first victim was a Solaritec management type.”

Ledger wasn’t impressed but decided not to make an issue of it. “Have you taken is stuff to the police?” he asked.

“That’s the other thing,” Marilyn said. She looked frustrated. “Our police are not incompetent. Nor are they incapable. And yet, looking at public security feeds, looking at security camera locations...there’s simply no way they could have missed the sniper. Not when he was operating in dense urban locations.”

“They didn’t even know about your fight,” said Malcolm. “The fight you guys had in the middle of a city street, during the morning rush.”

“I know the fight, dude, I was there,” Ledger told Malcolm.

“We can monitor 9-1-1 call volume,” explained Victor. “It’s public domain and there was definitely a spike during and after the fight. But there doesn’t appear to be any police response.”

Armand let it all sink in for a moment, then he told Ledger, “Marilyn’s managed to get us a layout of Solaritec’s campus AND the buildings’ floor plans. We’ve got everything we need to get in and get out with a minimum of fuss.”

Ledger, stuffing his hands in the pouch pockets of his pullover jacket, asked “To do what?”

Armand shrugged like it was obvious. “We need to go to Solaritec and get answers.”

Ledger looked right at him and asked incredulously, “We?”

“Yeah, we?” agreed Malcolm. “WE need to turn this over to the FBI or something. If the local cops are corrupt, we go up a step.”

Victor looked between Malcolm and Ledger and chimed in, “No, we can do this.” He looked at Marilyn and took her hand protectively. Marilyn looked impressed; Malcolm looked exasperated.

Armand looked at Ledger eagerly and asked, “What do you say?”

Ledger looked at the four and said, “I remember the last knight who tilted at giants. They turned out to be windmills. And giants or windmills, it didn’t turn out so good for him.” He faced Armand. “I know you think you’re on the path of right but you’re on the path of blood. You need to get your head on straight and quit being a war monger.” Before Armand could retort – an explosive and angry retort, going by the look on his face – Ledger flashed him a formal knightly salute by holding his index and middle fingers up between his eyes like a fencer saluting with a foil. “Ma’am,” he added to Marilyn before he walked off, leaving them behind.

Aaron sat back from his desk computer, a contemplative look on his face. He looked up when the door to his office opened and in walked his team of four men. “You know, I was hesitant about coming here,” he said as they all took their seats. “But I have to admit, these offices are nice.” With a smile, he nodded to his door. “I may have to get an executive assistant.”

“The vetting process would be murder,” smirked Errol.

Aaron chuckled at that, but eventually shook his head. “Guys, this is...” He gestured at the computer screen none of them could see. “Jericho’s running his own biological experiments over there. I don’t know what he’s up to. He’s been smart about it. It’s buried deep. But the embezzlement, the misappropriation of funds, that alone is grounds for the Triumvirate to have him removed.”

“Rumor has it, his boys are on steroids,” shared Orson. “The Hand is known to be ferocious, but his guys are the toughest of the tough. They’re known throughout the Brotherhood of the Sun.”

“Chemical alterations of pretty much any kind are against the beliefs of the Brotherhood of the Sun,” remarked Ian. “We’ve opposed genetic engineering of food, stem-cell research—”

“We know, Ian,” Orson told him. “The Brotherhood believes in science, but the science of the world around us. We harness nature, not fiddle with it.”

Ian was undeterred. “My point is, would Jericho really jeopardize his position for a performance-enhancing drug?”

“Greater men have done a lot more for a lot less,” said Uriel.

“Could we order a randomized drug test?” Orson asked. “The Brotherhood may not have the means to order such a thing, but Solaritec certainly could.”

“He’s already ahead of us on that,” Aaron said. “Jericho randomly tests the Hand. And, I have to admit it, he’s thorough. Independent testing lab, genuinely random sampling. If he is using a steroid with his men, it’s something new, something not showing up on any of the tests.” He sighed, turning a little in his chair. “Where do we stand on the sniper?”

“Kid’s name is Eli Mitchell Franklin,” began Errol.

“EMF? I hope he gave his parents hell for that,” snickered Uriel.

“Becoming a killer is a good way to do it,” said Errol. “He was Army ROTC in high school but was recruited by the Brotherhood of the Sun in his junior year. He’s only twenty. He was established in the Hand right from the get-go.”

“Jericho’s doing?” asked Aaron.

Errol shook his head. “No, he didn’t seem to come to Jericho’s attention until about six months or so ago. Jericho was still in Ohio when Eli joined.”

“What was he doing in Ohio?” asked Ian.

“Trying and failing to get his doctorate,” said Aaron. “He completed the coursework for a bio-engineering doctorate but ended up not completing the final paper, leaving him ABD.”

Errol mouthed the letters in confusion, prompting Uriel to explain “All But Dissertation.”

“Do we have any evidence that Jericho put Eli to the task of these killings?” asked Aaron. Errol offered nothing but a shake of his head. “Do we even have any idea why these people were killed?”

“No, but it was clearly a ritual of some kind,” said Errol. “They were all Solaritec employees or former employees, and the locations of the killings coincide on a map of the city with the points on the Sircle of the Brotherhood.”

“Disgruntled member?” suggested Orson.

“Jericho’s men are too loyal. The Hand guys are notoriously dedicated fanatics. Zealots, even. It’s hard to believe that this one guy was the outlier,” said Errol. “Evidence is spotty but I think he was doing this under orders. The question is who came up with the ritual and to what end. And, of course, who actually put him up to it.”

Orson sighed cynically and said, “I think I may be able to help with that.” He took out his phone and texted a picture. As the others received it and checked the image on their devices, he explained “You should be looking at an image of a giant, red book. It came up at auction recently, only to be destroyed in a fire.” He sighed, bracing himself. “I have surveillance video of Jericho with that book. There’s no direct shot of Jericho with it, but I’ve got a few seconds on a camera looking down a hall that Jericho passed by. I think somebody just overlooked it when they were doctoring security footage.” Another breath, bracing himself. “I think it could be an Allan Ivers book.”

The look of sudden and abrupt worry on Aaron’s face brought all further discussion to a stop.

'Can't believe you won't help' read the text from Marilyn. Everett stared at the letters, the words, the message, all of it. Sitting at his computer desk, he called up Facebook and summoned her profile. He flipped through pictures of her, at car washes, at blood drives, at every manner of charity event, big and small. And he stopped a photo of her and Victor.

He closed the window immediately and stood up from his desk. He began to pace, then looked back at his phone. He picked it up and went sorting through the messages he had from her. Not one text he'd received had been deleted.

His phone rang, startling Everett a bit and he answered. "Hey, Roland."

"Hey, buddy," said Roland as he got into his car. "Rotation's over and I got my gym bag with me. Wanna meet me at the dojo?" Everett stared at his computer screen lamenting having closed the window. He called up Facebook again, retracing his steps. "Hey, Ev, you there? Let's get a class. When was the last time you rolled?"

"Sorry, I'm just worried about Armand," he said. He felt bad for lying that it was Armand he was thinking about.

"Yeah, I bet," Roland said, sitting in his car. "Why didn't you go with Ledger this morning to the meeting of Armand and the Night Guard?"

"Marilyn was going to be there," he admitted candidly.

"That's a bad thing?" Roland asked, confused. Everett shrugged. "You know, I'm starting to worry about you, man. Emo Ev is a mopey little wuss."

"Shut up," Everett groaned. He'd called up Marilyn's photos and was clicking through them. "I just..." He stopped on a photo over her in a ballroom gown at a

gala of some repute. She was turned away from the camera, visually engaged in a discussion with someone. It captured her profile and Everett was mesmerized.

“If you start listening to Linkin Park, we’re not hanging out anymore,” Roland warned.

“Shut up,” Everett muttered.

While it was clear to Orson that Aaron knew the name, the looks of confusion on the faces of his compatriots told him an explanation was needed. “The Allan Ivers books are rumored to hold the key to human existence. In much the same way that the Rosetta Stone was a game-changer for archeology, the Ivers books are considered to be the same for metaphysics.”

“How?” asked Ian. “I mean, what do they have in them?”

“Proof,” said Aaron.

“Allegedly, they are...magic textbooks. Step-by-step explanations for everything in the universe,” Orson said. “What came before the Big Bang. Are angels real. Are ghosts real. What’s a soul. What are dreams. There is no answer that isn’t supposedly held within these books.” Orson gestured blindly. “Allegedly, anyway. Reputedly.”

“The problem is no one’s ever seen inside one,” said Aaron, very intrigued in this development. “There’s seven of them. And they’re all apparently magically sealed or something.”

“Could it be a fake?” asked Uriel.

“Could,” said Orson. “But that’s the thing; a ritualistic killing like this sure sounds like someone who at least thinks he’s reading a magical tome.” He leaned towards Aaron. “I think Jericho got this book open and – real or fake – is trying to enact some ritual within.”

Aaron seemed to weigh that idea very heavily. He looked past Orson to Ian. “What skeletons have you found in Jericho’s closet?”

Ian shifted as he activated a tablet computer. “At most facilities run by the Brotherhood of the Sun, the Hand maintains a low profile. They’re pretty much security and that’s about it. Some facilities have training centers for forensics and other enforcement-related areas, but for the most part, the Hand acts in support to the Investigators’ Clan and the Miracle Workers’ Clan.” He waffled a little. “This place is different. Jericho runs the Hand like it’s a proactive organization. They have special projects and activities that—”

“I understand he runs it differently,” said Aaron. “Different is not bad. We need to know to what ends he is running it.”

“Everything seems geared towards chemical and material storage,” said Ian. The others were confused. “He’s arranged shipments of chemicals from various labs around the country, and the world. He’s arranged rare metal deliveries.”

“Maybe he’s trying to finish his dissertation,” quipped Errol.

“A few dozen of his agents, also, have dropped off active duty,” reported Ian. “This included Eli Franklin. He was part of almost thirty Hand agents assigned to a special project. They haven’t appeared on another duty or assignment since then.”

Aaron sighed and looked to Uriel. “What’s the situation in the city?”

“Are you referring to the government, population in general, underworld, or the knights?” Uriel asked. Aaron gestured ambivalence. “Well,” he began with a smile. “There are FIVE knights in this city.”

Aaron face palmed. “Because of course there are.”

“How many are there normally?” asked Errol.

“I think I’ve heard of five in Mexico City?” Uriel said. “Six or something in Tokyo? A city this size; I’m surprised there’s more than two.”

“As for the city itself,” Uriel went on, “Everything I’ve dug up is that it’s known for two things: arts and brothels. Illegal, but nobody does anything about it. They seem to be...” He trailed off when Aaron’s phone began to ring.

Aaron seemed surprised by the specific ringtone. He apologized as he picked it up. “Hello?” he said. He listened for just a moment and then stood up. “What?! When?” He listened for a moment more and then rushed for the door, shouting “Come on!” The others quickly grabbed up their things to follow.

Phillip entered the room through the pressurized access door. Waiting for him, sitting on the solitary table in the middle of the room, was the giant red book. It was closed, the red cover seeming to drink in the darkness of the room.

Phillip slapped on a pair of sterile gloves as he approached the book. He came and stood over it, switching on the single powerful lamp above the table and remotely turning off the overhead lights. Under the bright light, he opened the book with only a bit of effort, like the pages refused to be parted.

When he managed to set it open, the pages fell to precisely where he’d been reading before, two masterful images of esoteric symbols diagramed and explained in detail. Just as Phillip resumed his work, his cell phone rang. His reaction wasn’t annoyance but concern when he placed the specific tone. He answered, saying,

“Yes?” Terror struck him and he forgot about the book. “When do they land?” He rushed out of the room, leaving the book behind.

The elevator doors opened and the mayor was waiting. He smiled as police chief Dotson stepped inside, pressing the already-lit button for the ground floor. The doors shut but the instant the elevator began to move, the mayor leaned forward and tapped emergency stop button.

“Solaritec’s in chaos,” said the police chief, bobbing up and down on his feet, like he was waiting for a train to pull into the station. “I heard they want their boy back.”

“With what they’re offering, I’m prepared to give him back,” said the mayor. “We are in a position to bend that company over the barrel and all they’re going to do is say ‘thank you sir, may I please have another’.” He laughed with some delight. “We play our cards right, this city may become the leading name in entertainment tourism in the whole world.”

“Will the governor play ball?” asked the chief.

“Absolutely!” the mayor exclaimed. “He’s excited. He’s prepared to extend casino contracts, get more entertainment venues for cover. Hell, we may even be looking at getting our own major league franchise.” He laughed. “And all on Solaritec’s dime.”

The chief nodded sagely. “Sounds too good to be true.” The mayor looked curiously at him. “And what if it is?”

“We’ve got scramblers in my office, and in here,” the mayor said. He chuckled. “That’s part of why the phone reception’s always so bad.” He shook his head. “There is nothing directly connecting us to anything.”

“An indirect connection can be enough,” the chief warned. “And what if it’s not a trap, but Solaritec really is going south? What if that company implodes? More than our hookers-and-pimps industry goes with it. What if our power grid goes to hell too? Suddenly, the whole city doesn’t have lights.”

The mayor shook his head confidently. “I’ve got two other energy conglomerates on speed-dial. They can be in here tomorrow if Solaritec collapses. They can have the juice flowing again in a week.” He again shook his head, in awe of the fortuitous situation. “No, if Solaritec does go down, they will be lining up to take over this state-of-the-art power grid. And we still come out looking like heroes because we had contingency plans in place.” He laughed and hit the button. The elevator resumed motion. “There is no way this doesn’t work out for us.”

At the private landing strip, nighttime all around him, Aaron stood with his men. The small airport building, little more than a well-lit and insulated waiting area, was behind Aaron. The lights from the tiny terminal cast out over the wide landing strip that extended forward into wilderness, like the dense forest had been parted solely for the runway and had given not a foot more of space than was needed. Aaron shifted from one foot to another, shivering as though cold, despite the heat of the night. His phone rang, distracting him from the stillness. He picked up and said, “Hey, Raphael.”

“What’s going on?” he asked as he sat in the back of a small limousine with both Jericho and Phillip. “Where are you?”

“I’m at the airstrip,” Aaron reported, speaking over a gust of hot nighttime wind. “Where are you?”

“We’re on our way,” he said frantically. “Have they arrived?”

“I’m sorry, Raphael,” Aaron yelled, covering one ear. “You’re going to have to speak up.” He turned and faced to the far end of the runway where a private jet was touching down. As it taxied around, it proudly brandished the Sircle of the Brotherhood of the Sun on its tail. “The Agents of the Triumvirate just touched down. I’d head back to campus if I were you. We’ll be there promptly.” Aaron hung up and put away the phone as the plane taxied right to Aaron like a loyal dog coming to the feet of its master. Aaron looked cautiously to his four aides, each standing by a black car, each looking about as pensive as he.

The plane came to a stop and was still for a moment. The engines slowed and quieted, until the only noise on the isolated airstrip was the night wind, the chirp of distant insects, and the clinking of cooling metal. The door finally opened with a gasp of air and down the steps descended three men in matching suits. All had shaved heads, all carried no baggage of any kind, all looked identical save for their skin tone. Even their expressions were the same; one of haughty disinterest in terrestrial matters.

The first to disembark, a black man with deep ebony skin, came right to Aaron and stood just a little too close. “We are the Eyes and Voice of the Triumvirate.”

“Welcome to the United States,” Aaron said with a respectful bow of his head. He gestured for the three men to choose their chauffeur from amongst his men. “I hope you’ll forgive the sparse arrangements. Your arrival was a surprise. I’ve made arrangements for you to—”

“Arrangements are not necessary, Aaron,” the dark-skinned man said while his compatriots remained by his side. “We don’t expect to be here long. We will speak to the heads of the three clans immediately.”

Aaron buried his concern. “Jericho and Phillip aren’t here. Again, your arrival was a—”

“Then escort us to them,” was the only response. Aaron nodded and turned to the others, expressing subtle but absolute fear for what was to come.



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