

Red Moon Rising

Part 11 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 11 of 30

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“You act out of hate. Excellent! That’s an emotion I can trust.”

– Megatron II, Transformers Beast Wars

—Now—

It was dawn.

The nighttime that had seemed to last for ages was finally breaking. The darkness was retreating, leaving behind long shadows and deep patches of black but the horizon was clear now. Whether the view to the edge was clear or half-hidden behind small clusters of wild trees, the world and the sky weren’t one but distinct. Overhead, unencumbered by the terrestrial restraints, the vast purple fields of the sky were alit with pockets of pink clouds, edged with orange by the sun that remained off-stage. The giant puffs of morning clouds moved briskly in the wind, like roaming buffalo crossing a prairie.

Sitting in the passenger seat of Morgan’s Charger, Everett was staring up at the clouds like they were the notation of a nostalgic melody. “I guess I didn’t realize the plane crashed so far away,” he said, his voice a thoughtful whisper.

“Why do you think you were waiting at the truck stop for so long?” asked Morgan, giving Everett and specifically his red NASCAR shirt a quick appraisal. Morgan yawned and sprayed down his windshield. “So, you’d just averted a crisis between the knights and the Brotherhood of the Sun by bringing down Armand when he got a little war crazy.”

“I wanted to keep us neutral,” Everett said. “I felt like it was important that we remain off the battlefield.”

“If we weren’t the ones the Brotherhood were fighting, then who were they fighting?” asked Morgan.

“Us,” came Marilyn’s voice from the backseat. She shifted forward to wedge herself between the front seats, like she was physically inserting herself into the discussion. “The World Alliance had unmasked – or at least was in the process of unmasking – Solaritec for what it really was: a front for the Brotherhood of the Sun to conduct and perpetrate some of the most vile and heinous crimes imaginable.”

“It’s possible her actions may have gotten them to get rid of one of their head guys, Jericho Kingston,” Everett said, somewhere between support and a concession.

“Even if that’s true,” said Morgan, “that just means she helped replace a maniac with a psycho.”

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—5 Days Ago—

Aaron leaned against the elevator walls, his eyes closed. His watch showed half past eleven if he even bothered to look at the metal band at his wrist. As he leaned against the wall, he breathed deeply. The rumblings of the elevator, the

nearness of the walls, the whole situation momentarily soothed him. For just a moment, he found peace.

The bell chimed.

The door opened.

Aaron was standing in the very center of the door; his eyes hard and cast forward. He stepped out into the small office space, unbothered by the dim lights or the late hour. Alone, he turned to his right and started walking. His hands in his pockets, he seemed almost determined to keep his trench coat close to him, as if it was armor against the strange office-world he had entered.

He made his way through a seeming maze of cubicles and rows of workstations, finding his way back to the third section of offices. He stopped at the metal door and knocked.

There was no response.

He knocked again, and a third time. “What the...” he grumbled. He looked around, at the numbers on the doors next to him. Fifteen and seventeen were right where they needed to be. He held up his hand, a touch of hesitancy in his mind, but he knocked again.

There was no response.

“What’s going...” Aaron stopped. His hand threw to his face as he hit his head. “Of course,” he exclaimed with heavy annoyance. “Phillip’s the head of the Hand now. He probably moved his office over there.” He shook his head as he started back the way he’d come. “That didn’t take him long.”

Raphael’s shoes squeaked from the light rain as he came in through the main lobby doors of the Solaritec campus. Several guards stood off to the side and they

each nodded to him. Members of the Hand of the Brotherhood, he had personally assigned them to those positions. They knew him and knew he was in charge. Phillip may have been the head of the Hand for now, but Raphael was in charge.

The lobby was diamond-shaped, broadening with grand windows to let in the light, then narrowing again at the elevators. Raphael used his key to unlock one of the private elevators. A car was waiting. He stepped inside and hit the button for the 8th floor. It was a lovely ride up. Once past the lobby, the glass elevator looked out over the morning which spread over the Solaritec campus. Green grass and healthy trees as far as the eye could see. The parking lot was mostly empty at this early hour, from which Raphael drew a sense of serenity.

The elevator doors opened and he disembarked, heading off to the right, down a hall full of closed doors. At the end of the hall, he stepped into his office. It was small and unimpressive but perfectly sized for how little he needed it for. A modest and unremarkable desk with a powerful desktop computer took up most of the room. He had a set of bookshelves with texts on a wide range of topics, from gene coding to business. They were mostly for show though, much like the window behind his desk that looked out over the power plant behind the campus.

Raphael was just sitting down when his cell phone rang. He groaned and took it out. "Hello?" He sat forward suddenly. "I'll be right down."

Less than a minute later, those same elevator doors opened and Raphael walked quickly through them. He wasn't in the well-lit corporate halls of the above-ground facility but down in the sub-basement. The halls weren't well-lit and the ceilings were low, especially for a man of Raphael's height.

He entered a room with a medical bed and a host of machines, two scientists standing over an unconscious man. "What's happening?" Raphael asked immediately.

The two doctors glanced worriedly at one another and the nearer of the two excused himself. Raphael was left alone with the older man with a bit of a belly and looking more like a Woodstock burnout than a man of science. When he spoke, though, the misconception evaporated. “He’s rejecting the chemicals,” said Dr Hoffman. He handed Raphael a clipboard. “We tried giving him immunosuppressants, hoping it was just a phase of the program, and his entire immune system has shut down.”

“What does that mean?” asked Raphael. He looked over the clipboard but the dense science and medical jargon was Greek to him.

Hoffman seemed disappointed that Raphael wasn’t following. “It means that if we can’t jump-start his immune system, he’s going to die.” Raphael looked at the man on the bed. Even unconscious, the figure was a perfect example of peak human conditioning and health. “It also means,” the scientist said with patronizing clarity, “the others may have this problem.”

Raphael jerked up like he’d been woken up. “What?”

“We may have found a major flaw in Jericho’s program,” declared the older man.

“What about Eli?” asked Raphael. “He was the most promising test subject.”

“Yeah, and we don’t know anything about him since the Triumvirate took him and Jericho.” Dr Hoffman shook his head. “We have got to stop the program.”

That, Raphael understood. “No,” he said clearly and emphatically. He looked down at the man on the table, medically sedated and looking fine. “No, keep this man under close observation. Study the rejection but do not, under any circumstances, discontinue the program.”

“This may represent a threat to all the participants in the experiment,” Hoffman told Raphael. “How many of the Hand’s men are currently taking Jericho’s

program? Sixty-four? Sixty-three if we discount Eli? You're risking all those lives if we continue this," the scientist said.

Raphael looked down at the patient. He slowly nodded. "That's what the Hand does," he said with as much stoicism as he could manage. "We make the sacrifices."

"This isn't a battlefield," Hoffman challenged.

Raphael snorted cynically. "Guess again," he said before turning to leave.

For a moment, Marilyn pretended she could see a pattern in the roof tiles. Leaning back against the chair in the atrium, she stared upwards in a dazed state. The tiles were white with black hashes and dots, almost like some attempt to simulate marble. At a first glance, they seemed kind of ugly but closer study revealed they were in fact quite ugly.

Marilyn was aware of Malcolm and Victor arguing but she couldn't bring herself to get involved. She wondered if maybe Malcolm was attracted to Victor, if maybe his angst was the result of feeling torn away from Alan and wanting Victor. Malcolm certainly didn't seem dedicated, not like he used to. Certainly not since the Australian Club.

"You act like it was a communal decision, but it wasn't," Victor was accusing Malcolm while the rest of the World Alliance watched on. "YOU made the decision to walk away from fighting that knight, not all of us. Some of us were willing to fight him, to make our efforts worthwhile."

"Oh, that's a load of crap!" Malcolm exclaimed. "You're full of it, Victor!"

“We were trying to expose a real threat to this city,” Victor insisted, his tone growing louder.

“No, we were trying to break into a corporate office!” Malcolm yelled back.

“STOP IT!”

Malcolm and Victor both fell silent instantly and turned to the far end of the table. Kim was standing, her fists turned into white-knuckled balls of rage, her eyes full of tears. She was literally shaking from anger and sadness. “Stop arguing,” she demanded childishly. “My mom and dad, they argued all the time and I couldn’t stand it. So don’t you two start.” She looked at the others at the table. “Don’t any of you start.”

Malcolm looked down at the floor, embarrassed. Victor, too, looked away. “I’m sorry,” Malcolm apologized quickly and sincerely. Victor said nothing but he looked equally as apologetic.

Marilyn looked at the two men and a pang of anger filled her. Why was the outburst of a single friend enough to silence their anger? If they were mad enough to fight, why weren’t they mad enough to be yelled at?

Phillip considered the way he looked in the gray suit. He moved a bit, twisting back and forth in front of the three mirrors, heavily considering the reflections. The tailor had stepped back, giving him room to appreciate the charcoal gray suit. “You ever see that movie, Thank You For Smoking?” he asked, seemingly his reflection. When he didn’t get an answer, Phillip turned on the stool he stood atop.

Aaron was sitting at the head seat of the conference room, the chair swiveled around so he could watch Phillip get fitted. He had a clipboard, a folder, and a tablet computer, all in his lap and all inactive. “Aaron Eckhart, right?” recalled Aaron. “I read the book; I didn’t see the movie.” He sounded bored.

“That was a big one for me,” Phillip said, going back to his reflection. “Confidence, too. With Edward Burns and Dustin Hoffman. Whenever I need some inspiration or a pick-me-up, I watch one of those.”

“That one I saw, mostly because of Rachel Weisz.” Aaron activated his tablet and scrolled through a few different pages. “I really do hate to interrupt but we do have things we need to talk about. A lot of things.”

Phillip nodded and turned to the tailor who was waiting patiently. “Can you give us a few minutes, please?” he asked the older gentleman. “The security officer outside can take you to get some coffee.” The two heads of the Brotherhood of the Sun waited until the tailor exited. Once the door shut, Phillip continued to study the suit he wore. “I’d like you to share everything you uncovered the Hand to be up to under Jericho’s tenure. I want a project-by-project breakdown of everything they were doing, where every person was assigned, everything.”

“Are you planning to run just one big audit on the entire Hand?” asked Aaron.

Phillip took off his glasses and cleaned them on the edge of the suit jacket. “I can’t think of a better place to start. I knew Jericho was duplicitous but I had no idea how far his ambitions went. My guys are still trying to hack his passwords just to be able to get into his computer. The reallocation of the Hand resources is not going to happen quickly or easily it seems.”

“Reallocation?” Aaron asked.

“I’m not leaving things as Jericho left them,” Phillip all but pledged. “The Triumvirate has put their faith in me, to navigate this ship until they appoint a new head of the Hand of the Brotherhood. I’m going to do the best I can but part of that is

going to come from understanding just what Jericho was up to.” He put his glasses back on, swept his black hair to the side, and returned to the mirrors. “All evidence suggests he was up to a lot.”

Aaron didn’t say anything for a few moments, but typed in his tablet. When he’d finished, he asked, “What about a ceremony? The ascension of a new clan head – even an interim head – is a big deal. It might help reaffirm the Hand members here in Solaritec, and the city. And the country. When I left Toronto, everybody there was on pins and needles. A little pomp and circumstance, some spectacle; goes a long way to make people feel good about the organization they’ve pledged their lives to.”

“Over a dozen people are dead in under a week, thanks to Jericho,” Phillip said solemnly. He shook his head. “Now is not the time for a celebration.”

Rather than argue or make any counterpoints, Aaron instead asked, “So then why the suit?” Phillip looked guardedly at Aaron but the head of the Investigators’ Clan smiled disarmingly, assuring him it was a conversational inquiry.

Phillip faced the mirror again. “Growing up, my mom didn’t like using food to commemorate big successes. If I placed in the science fair or my sister’s soccer team won a game, she didn’t take us out to eat. She took us out to get new clothes. A shirt. Pants. A jacket. Whatever.” He sighed as he ran his fingers along the collar. “Clothes last longer, and are more useful. And the reminder lasts longer too. You won’t remember a meal six months down the road but you’ll still be wearing a shirt.” He smirked at Aaron. “Plus, clothes don’t make you fat.”

Aaron seemed to concur with the sentiment. He stood and said, “I’ll get you the report on Jericho’s projects, public and private, as soon as my men have finished it. Shouldn’t take long at all.”

“Thank you,” Phillip said as Aaron excused him. “Can you send the tailor in if you see him? Like you said, there’s a lot to do.”

Aaron nodded and saw himself out. He shut the door, only for the sound of it closing mixing with the sound of footsteps. Down the hall came Raphael. The two passed with nary a word. Aaron thought to say something but didn't know what. And the look on Raphael's face assured him he wasn't interested in platitudes.

Raphael entered the conference room without knocking, to which Phillip remarked, "Is it in the Hand handbook that you guys just refuse to knock?"

"The Hand is in chaos, sir," Raphael said, standing almost at attention. "Nobody knows what's happening or has happened, except that two days ago, Jericho was in charge and now they're answerable to the Head of the Miracle Workers' Clan."

"I'm sorry, was there a question in there?" asked Phillip, switching his tie from a Windsor knot to a Pratt knot.

"What are our orders, sir?" Raphael asked caustically. His tone softened a little as he further asked, "What are MY orders?"

Phillip faced the mirror and finished tying the knot. "I'm not sure," he said slowly as he stuffed the tie back down inside the jacket and brushed down the suit. He turned a little, studying himself, then looked at Raphael with a critical eye. "It's customary when a new manager takes over that they fire somebody to make clear their resolve."

Raphael surprised Phillip by saying, "That's possibly the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say." Phillip was surprised and it showed. "And it's also a poor excuse for a threat if that's what that was." Phillip smirked now, amused. Raphael wasn't. "I've been with the Hand longer than you've been with the Miracle Workers, and longer than there's been a Solaritec. I've also probably been shot more times than you are years old," he said. "I've fought knights. Twice. This week. So please, don't waste my time TRYING to threaten me."

Phillip no longer looked amused. "Fair enough," he said slowly. He defused some tension by sighing and going back to his reflection. "I need to know where your loyalties lie." He looked at Raphael and specified, "Were you loyal to the Brotherhood, the Hand, or to Jericho?" Raphael didn't respond right away. He shifted his weight and sighed, as though considering the question. "I know you and Jericho didn't always see eye-to-eye," Phillip ventured. "And, as the new Head of the Hand of the Brotherhood, I have the power to push forward any programs that are important to you." He looked longways at Raphael. "I'm not sure how things worked in the Hand, but in the Miracle Workers' Clan, loyalty is rewarded."

Phillip said slowly, "Then consider my loyalty absolute."

The door rattled as Everett stepped inside the dojang. The Tae Kwon Do school was empty except for Armand on the mat that took up the floor of most of the school. Armand was covered in sweat, his white dobok matted against his body. The heat in the school was intense, generated from the light that came in through the windows that made up the entire front wall. Everett began sweating almost immediately, prompting him to take off his black jacket. "Nice place," he said, looking at the sparsely decorated dive of a martial art school.

"No it's not," Armand said, getting a jump start on being confrontational. "It's not a glorified daycare like a lot of Tae Kwon Do schools. The only people who train here are those who are serious." Everett nodded, approaching the mat but not stepping onto it. "What do you want, Ev?"

"To talk," he said as he slipped off his shoes. He gave a respectful bow, then stepped onto the mat. "You're avoiding me."

Armand turned right at Everett. "Think maybe there's a reason for that?"

Everett looked disappointed, not in Armand but in himself. “Armand, you need...” He stopped and reconsidered his approach. “In the past, you’ve trusted me for advice. Please trust me now.”

“They’re killers,” Armand said, practically growling. “A dozen people, Ev! Including your girl, Marilyn. Or close to it.”

“Where’s your evidence?” Everett asked, standing his ground and staying calm in the face of Armand’s mounting rage and voice.

“That’s what we were there to get!” the younger knight yelled.

“You can’t suspect someone and look for evidence to support your theory,” Everett insisted.

“Why not?!” Armand yelled.

“Because you’ll always find it!” Everett yelled back, his voice startling Armand. “Always,” Everett emphasized, quieter now. “If you look for evidence to support your certainty of guilt, you will always find it. That’s why you have to find evidence and let that reveal the—”

“Don’t give me that due-process crap,” Armand said, storming away from Everett. “The police deal in facts. Allegedly. We deal in truth. And the truth is Solaritec knows more than they’re letting on. The truth is Solaritec might even have been behind the sniper.”

“Why?” Everett asked, he thought rhetorically.

“That’s why we were there!” Armand yelled. “And you shouldn’t have gotten in our way. Gotten in MY way!”

“You’re here to learn, not get killed,” Everett said. “Your dad wanted you—”

“Leave my dad out of this!” Armand yelled. “Stop hiding behind him, or some obligation you made up to ‘keep me out of harm’s way’ or whatever crap.” So enraged, Armand’s words were warping into his native Boston accent. “I’m a knight. And the right thing was to get answers for the victims who died. The fair thing was to stand up to the company killing people for god-knows what reason. The just thing was to make those responsible pay. And the moral thing?” He got right in Everett’s face. “It was to not get in my way, just because you don’t want to get your hands dirty.”

Everett fought to control his rage. He masked it well but could tell he was visibly fuming. “And we’ve tipped our hand,” Armand surrendered, backing away from Everett. “So I hope you’re happy.”

“You’re alive,” Everett countered. “I’m happy about that,”

“You’re not my guardian,” Armand all but spat.

“Then stop needing one,” said Everett.

A quick laugh was all the warning Everett got. Armand kicked him in the stomach, knocking Everett back and sending him stumbling towards the front of the school. Maintaining the distance, Armand kicked him again in the side of the leg and Everett dropped to his knees. Armand came back around from the other side with an axe kick, lifting his foot over his head to bring it crashing down on the kneeling Everett. The strike landed with shattering force but only on the mat. Everett moved laterally, slipping just out of harm’s way. He chopped Armand in the back of the knee as he did, slicing the ridge of his hand like he was drawing a sword. The strike dropped Armand as Everett got to his feet.

Armand leapt up and turned to face Everett as the senior knight circled into the middle of the mat. Armand kicked twice, threats rather than real attacks. Everett ignored the first and swatted away the second. Armand used a third kick to lead into

a barrage of punches. Everett took a single step back, letting the punches fall scant inches short of his face.

Frustrated, Armand backed away, rethinking his strategy. Everett gave him the time and the space. “There’s a time for violence,” Everett told him, almost as if narrating Armand’s thoughts. “Knights are a force of might for right. But violence must be tempered with justice and fairness.”

“What’s more just than making the guilty pay?” Armand kicked again at Everett, committing fully to the blow. Everett slipped to the side and shoved Armand, but Armand recovered too quickly. He elbowed back at Everett, catching him in the chest. He backkicked, hitting Everett’s leg. Everett let his weight be thrown back, making him fall forward, right into Armand’s back. He entangled Armand in a rear-naked choke and leapt on the younger knight, wrapping his legs around Armand’s. The knot of knights fell to the mat and Armand fought to keep Everett from cementing the choke hold.

The bell over the door rang. Everett and Armand stopped and looked as another of the assistant instructors walked in. The man had a puzzled and worried look on his face. “It’s cool; this is my roommate,” Armand called in a raspy, choked voice. “Everett, Gene. Gene, Everett.”

“Hey,” Everett said with a wave to Gene. He and Armand immediately went back to wrestling over the choke. Armand managed to slip out and rolled away, flipping up to his feet. Before he was even stabilized, he kicked at Everett, clocking him in the side of the head. Everett stumbled over, dazed from the impact as Armand moved in for the kill. He went for a headshot with a powerful side kick but Everett flattened rather than get up. Armand’s kick went right over him and Armand stumbled past.

Everett leapt up, his hands in a boxing stance. Armand came at him with another kick and Everett unleashed a flurry of punches. The rapid blows hit with stinging force and had Armand covering up. Everett relented, giving Armand the

opening to swing blindly. Everett rolled right into the punch and flipped Armand over his shoulder, planting the younger knight on the mat. Holding onto Armand's arm, Everett twisted his wrist as he knelt down into Armand's armpit, making him help and slap the mat repeatedly.

Everett released the hold and stood, panting. Armand got up as well, still furious. Everett could see Armand's rage. He glanced back and couldn't see Gene. "Where'd he go?"

"Into the office," Armand said, nodding to the small room at the back of the dojang.

Everett faced Armand and, seeing the fury, said "Get the swords."

Armand ran to the wall where a line of red bokken hung with care. Taking two, he tossed one of the wooden swords to Everett. He caught the sword, swung it to test the weight, and then held it ready. Armand, likewise, took up his stance. The two were still for a heat, readying themselves.

Armand jumped at Everett, swinging for his head. Everett ducked under the attack and slipped past the aerial Armand. Both turned and their swords clacked with the heavy impact. Armand kicked at Everett and he took the blow, wincing at the pain. Armand tried to follow up with another slash and Everett slashed Armand under the arm, connecting with the subtlety of a baseball bat.

Everett followed that hit with another to Armand's midsection, then turned the sword around to peg Armand right in the chin with the butt of the sword's handle. Armand stumbled back and Everett skipped into a kick, striking Armand in the chest. Armand fell back and rolled further away, but came up in an explosive swing. Ready for it, Everett parried the strike and sloped Armand on the hand with the wooden sword.

"Ow!" Armand exclaimed as he dropped the sword. He shook his throbbing fingers and stepped away. "Jesus, man, my fingers!" Everett lowered the sword

and sighed. When Armand took more than a second to shake off the pain, Everett collected the dropped sword and returned the two weapons to the wall. “This was my chance, Ev.”

Everett turned from the swords. Armand stood alone in the middle of the mat, his gaze distant. “This was my chance to do something great, to really make a difference.” He looked at Everett. “How many knights get to storm a fortress? How many knights get to face down real evil?” He shook his head, like he genuinely wanted an answer. “We concern ourselves with the symptoms of evil – crime and direct violence – but how often do we get confronted with an evil that is both manifest and direct?” He sighed and shook his head. He began untying his belt and removing his dobok. “This was my chance, man. And you took it from me.”

Everett followed Armand off the mat, both of them pausing to bow as they left the space. Everett said, “That’s one of the good things about evil. Evil always offers you another chance.” He sat down and began to put on his shoes while Armand stripped off the red t-shirt under his dobok and changed into a fresh shirt. Everett sighed and slumped back in the folding chair next to the door. “I stopped you from leading an ill-timed and poorly thought-through raid on an unknown entity,” he said. Armand didn’t take that description well, but Everett continued. “I didn’t stop your focus on Solaritec, nor your...paranoia for them.” He looked right at Armand and said, “I agree with you. Those guys are up to something. But we can’t get embroiled in some kind of long-term guerrilla war with a corporation. And we definitely can’t go off half-cocked. We have to know more, and we have to know for certain.”

Everett stood up. “You think Solaritec’s behind it all? Convince me. Convince the others. Get facts, hard data. But if the only person you convince is yourself, then maybe you don’t know, you just suspect.” He turned and started out.

Armand told Everett, “I convinced Marilyn.” Everett, halfway out the door, slowed to a stop. He looked back at Armand, wanting to say something, but not finding the words. He opted to just head on, leaving that observation hanging.

Phillip sat across from Ken, going over several sheets of paper, appraising the lists of numbers that seemed written in an unintelligible code. Surrounding Phillip were stacks and stacks of paper as well as takeout boxes and even a few bottles of wine.

“This makes no sense,” Phillip decided, looking past the paper. He glanced across his new office to the screen set into the wall and looked at Ken as if he was looking across a dinner table.

On the other side of the screen and the other side of the country, Ken sat unwrapping a cheap fast food breakfast he’d gotten to go. Dressed in a light gray suit without a tie, the blonde engineer stopped mid-bite. “What’s wrong?” he asked before taking the bite from his breakfast biscuit. “I mean, I know we’re behind schedule. That’s because of the workers and trying to keep everything off the Brotherhood’s radar, which is no small feat, believe me.”

“The Triumvirate is looking,” Phillip said, taking his wine glass, not sipping from it immediately.

“Phillip,” Ken warned. “I’m worried.” Phillip kept reading reports. Ken sighed and took another bite. He looked at the meals eaten at the desk. “Have you gotten any sleep?”

Phillip seemed to chew on that and grit his teeth. “I’ll sleep when this is over.”

Ken grew more worried. “Phillip, you have got to calm down, gotta pace yourself.”

“We are fourth and goal; it’s time to play through the pain,” Phillip disputed. He stared at Ken, his eyes harsh in the low light of the restaurant. “I am now having to deal with the bulk of the responsibilities in the Brotherhood. Not only must I oversee our most prized project ever, I must also now deal with the security of pretty much the entire North American portion of the Brotherhood.”

“I’m the field leader for the Miracle Workers, Phillip,” Ken reminded, leaning forward. “I’ll get everything under control down here but we’re dangerously close to...” He fell silent, as if saying it would make it true.

“Do your job and you have nothing to fear,” Phillip said, sipping his wine, once against not looking at Ken.

Ken sat back, an angry look on his face. “That was uncalled for,” he said, glaring at Phillip. “You don’t need to threaten me.”

“Then do your job, Ken,” as all Phillip could say before he switched off the screen.

Aaron didn’t so much seem to be sitting at his desk as sitting atop a mountain of concerns he was trying to keep contained. When his office door opened and his four investigators came in, they all could immediately sense his paranoia. “Boss?” said Errol, like he half-expected the brooding Aaron to not respond.

Instead, Aaron looked up at Errol and said, “Shut the door.” Once Errol had done so, Aaron explained to the others, “I want all departments in the Solaritec offices off the case. We five are the only ones investigating on-site. Everything, and I mean everything, from this point forward is done by you or is outsourced to another facility. So when I tell you I want a complete audit of the Hand and the Miracle Workers’ Clan, I don’t want anything done in-house unless it’s by one of us. Got it?” They all nodded in affirmation, though clearly confused and wary.

“I don’t know if Phillip’s power has gone to his head, or if this is...the fruits of hard labor,” Aaron told his team cautiously. “All I know is that this man now wields complete control over the vast majority of the Brotherhood from Canada to Panama. The Miracle Workers’ Clan makes up over 45% of the Brotherhood. The Hand, almost 30%. He controls three-fourths of the Brotherhood of the Sun for this entire continent. I cannot for a second fathom why the Triumvirate thought it a good idea to give that much power to one man, especially one man with Phillip’s...record,” he allowed as graciously as cautiously. “But right now, I am incapable of believing he is not exerting influence over the Investigators’ Clan at least in-house here at Solaritec.” He pointed at the door out of his office. “These people may be loyal, they may not, and we don’t have the time to vet them.”

“I know it sounds paranoia,” he conceded. “But Phillip is up to something. The only question in my mind is what and whether it started this morning or earlier.” He smirked with cynical certainty. “That look Jericho gave Phillip...” He laughed an unreasonable and pessimistic laugh. “He knew something. And we need to find out what it was. To that end, I want to know every activity that took place in is facility, from last night back to when Eli Franklin joined the Hand. Somewhere in there, something happened to Eli and we need to find out what. And I’m betting there’s a lot to find.”

None of the four seemed nearly as enthused. Sensing heir hesitancy, Aaron asked, “Is there a problem?”

The others hedged for a second before Uriel stood, saying, “No sir. No problem.”

“We’ll get started immediately,” Orson added, the others rising as well. They filed out, leaving Aaron to begin his own search.

The indoor track echoed with the footfalls of over twenty men. In a tightly packed group, they ran at a fast but easy clip, taking turn after turn in the eighth-of-a-mile loop. As they ran, three scientists in the middle of the track, amidst other exercise stations and diagnostic equipment. They tracked the men running; only noticing and barely acknowledging the straggler.

Raphael wasn't jogging briskly; he was running. His tank top was matted against the etched muscles of his torso as he gasped and heaved. His lungs gave out and he slowed to a stop. He caught himself against the wall, panting heavily. Sweat drained off his face as he tried to catch his breath. He glanced over at the doctors who seemed less worried about him and more confused.

Shadows passed over him, as did worried glances. Raphael looked up at the Hand agents running past him, none of them really even seeming to be breathing hard. They left him behind, a dense group running ahead as they all lapped him. Raphael dropped to one knee. He looked across at the researchers who seemed to have forgotten he existed. They were focusing on men who could still run.

Raphael pulled himself off the track and shuffled into a jog. He fixated at the men still running and forced himself to chase after them, knowing full well he wouldn't catch them.

"I call this meeting of the World Alliance to order," said Marilyn, having to speak over the dinner rush of the university atrium. Standing at the head of the table off in the corner of the spacious dining space, she was the only member without anything to eat in front of her. "I wanted to start this meeting by—"

"Actually, Mar, I wanted to talk about something," Ruwani said, her hand shooting up, even as she spoke. The looks of agreement on everybody else's faces worried Marilyn but she nodded and surrendered the floor to Ruwani. She stood

and, even with the support of the others, looked unsteady as she addressed Marilyn. “We were talking,” she began, swiveling a little to look at the others. “And...” She played with her hands, not sure what to say.

“We don’t want to do anymore army stuff,” Kate all but blurted out from the safety of the far side of Alan. The crux of their grievance voiced, the others spoke up.

“That was insane,” Malcolm said with a shake of his head, his heart racing just thinking about the interrupted raid on the Solaritec campus.

“Pretty sure our best case scenario was getting arrested,” Alan said. The others agreed and their complaints and worries flowed.

Marilyn listened to them all vent for a moment, her face a mask to hide her shattering hopes. She looked down at her notepad, full of plans and follow-ups in the wake of the raid. She quietly turned it over, all while the others kept talking, as much to her as they were commiserating with their own terror over the ordeal. Marilyn looked at Victor, the only one not speaking. He watched her with a ‘what did you expect’ look on his face.

“But yeah,” Ruwani said, the only one still standing. The table had fallen quiet now, unlike the rest of the atrium to Marilyn’s back. Ruwani looked at Marilyn and, even with an apologetic look in her eyes, said firmly, “We don’t want to do anything like that again. We can’t do anything like that again.”

Marilyn felt emotionally drawn and quartered. She nodded constructively and asked with a smile, “Seems like there’s a consensus.” She laughed and brushed her hair back. “Yeah, I...even I have to admit, that...that was...a bit much.” She smiled patiently and understandingly while she quietly died inside. “I do believe Solaritec is...is worth pursuing.”

“Yeah,” Malcolm agreed like he was placating a child. “But...”

“But it can wait,” Marilyn also agreed as she was forced to surrender by committee. “We’ve got plenty of other, more manageable matters that we can help with.” Everyone around the table looked relieved, except for Victor who was stone-faced. “Well then,” Marilyn said, her resolve to contain her anger and disappointment starting to crumble. “I think maybe we should take a step back and come at this fresh tomorrow.” Smiling and encouraging, Marilyn assigned a project review to everyone, as well as calling for plans on what their next assignment would be. Rudimentary stuff. Organizational stuff. Simple stuff. Safe stuff.

Mundane stuff.

Everyone departed early, united in their relief that the World Alliance was scaling back its ambitions, and already preparing their minds for simpler and more manageable tasks for the rest of the semester. Only Marilyn and Victor remained.

Neither one of them said anything for a long time. The white noise of the atrium cloaked them both, making them invisible to the passing night outside. In time, Victor put his hand on Marilyn’s and squeezed her wrist supportively. “We did something,” Marilyn whispered. “I mean, I guess, we were going to do something. But...but we actually did something.” She looked at Victor, her eyes wet with tears. “Why don’t they...why are they...”

Victor didn’t withdraw his hand. He just squeezed again and shook his head. He looked disappointed but Marilyn couldn’t tell if it was in the World Alliance or in her. “You can’t be surprised by this,” Victor said quietly. Marilyn looked down at his hand on hers and the sharp contrast in their skin tones. “Nobody...most people who align with you won’t be loyal when the going gets tough.” Marilyn wiped her face, feeling the tears streaking down her cheeks. “They won’t to say they helped change the world, but when the going truly gets tough...” He shook his head and reminded her, “I’m still here.”

There were no more words. In time, Marilyn and Victor gathered themselves and their belongings together and headed out. Victor held the door for her and as

she stepped through, he took her hand. She let him interlace his fingers with hers and she smiled sadly at him. Together, in the brisk nighttime air, they walked across the university campus together. For a few steps here and there, Marilyn managed to forget about the world and enjoyed walking in the soft light of the university street lamps, the quiet noise of the university world around them, and the wind in the trees as the breeze coursed between the buildings.

They arrived at Marilyn's dorm and Victor finally spoke. "Want me to come up?" There was innuendo in the words. Part of Marilyn wanted to accept the offer, to feel something other than the sense of loss and betrayal. Instead, she stood up and kissed his cheek. With the promise to call, she slid her ID card and headed inside. She took the elevator instead of the stairs, without the energy or ambition to tackle the obstacle.

She slipped into the corner of the aged elevator and sank against it. Keeping her head up felt like a burden and she leaned into the corner as the floor counter chimed with each passing level. Marilyn took whole floors to inhale and exhaled just as slowly. The doors finally parted and she sighed defeatedly. She couldn't currently even think of all the work and emails she had to tackle.

There was a lot of chatter on her floor tonight. More than the usual number of doors were open and other women were chatting across the halls, playing music, and generally being social. Happy. Marilyn felt envious of them. They seemed so carefree. She wondered how they'd managed to discover some secret of life where they didn't worry about homework, schoolwork, projects, fundraisers, a job, climate change, white slavery, and internal lifestyle standards.

Marilyn unlocked the door to her dorm and flipped on the light. She expected to see the giant mess of neglected projects and work, as well as thoughtlessly discarded clothes. She wasn't expecting to see, sitting plainly on her bed, was the giant red Ivers Book she'd stolen from the Australian Club.

It was close to midnight when Raphael got home.

He lived in a small one-bedroom in a complex not far from the Solaritec campus. His living room was a single couch with a TV on the floor. He locked the door, all four locks, and reset the alarm his entrance had begun to trigger. On the counter in the small alcove that passed for the kitchen, between a dismantled pistol and several organized rows of bullets, Raphael pulled forward the blender and began to load in ice and protein powder. He fixed a concoction and activated the preset flurry of blades. He checked his phone and found no messages or alerts.

The blender finished and Raphael poured the cement-like sludge into a tall glass, one similar to the collection of similarly-dirtied glasses in the neglected sink. He took the glass over to the couch and sat down. He settled in by removing a fixed-blade knife, two folding knives, a pistol and a holdout gun. He took up the remote from the arm of the couch. He glanced past the TV to the pictures on the wall. A photo of him in fatigues and a sniper's mesh was next to an autographed photo of him shaking hands with Ken Shamrock.

Raphael flipped on the TV and settled into the couch. He half-chewed the protein sludge he'd fixed as he flipped channels in a bored stupor.

"What are you doing still up?" asked Ken. On the screen in Phillip's office, Ken had a cup of coffee and a concerned look on his face. "It's midnight there, isn't?"

"No rest for the weary," said Phillip as he visibly multi-tasked. He put aside his phone and a tablet and focused solely on the screen. "Did you get the revised budget proposal?"

Ken nodded. His blonde hair was pulled back in a small ponytail, which he subconsciously kept reaching back for, like the bundle of hair was a bug crawling on his neck. “Yeah, got it. It’s, uh, it’s definitely going to help. But, Phillip, man...this timetable is completely unrealistic. Even with this funding, we cannot have this place ready in weeks. We’re looking at half a year before we—”

Phillip stopped him. “Ken, we don’t have that kind of time.” He rose from behind his desk and came around to stand before the screen. He yawned deeply and crossed his arms. “I will keep directing all available resources to you. But time is of the essence. We need this fortress ready literally as soon as possible.”

“Is the Illuminati finally moving?” Ken asked, growing worried.

Phillip shook his head and said in a weary voice, “Our list of enemies has only grown. And they’re all moving.”

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