

Red Moon Rising

Part 12 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 12 of 30

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“Our list of allies grows thin.”

- Elrond, Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring

—4 Days Ago—

“Well played,” Orson said, sitting up from the chessboard. He looked at Ian, but just laughed. “You’re getting better.”

“I should sure as hell hope so,” Ian defended.

“You’re just mad because we gave up on Monopoly,” Uriel said, from the corner of the office, reading a newspaper.

“Guys!” Aaron shouted to the room. Sitting at the desk, he waiting on the phone. He didn’t wait long. “Yes,” He said cordially. “This is Aaron, of the Investigator’s Clan. I need to make an appointment to see Phillip Reynolds, of the...” There was a bit of noise over the line. “Well, when is he available?” Aaron asked, his demeanor fading a bit.

“Here it comes,” Errol said humorlessly, watching Aaron talk.

“What do you mean he’s not available?” Aaron said, standing up with the phone in his hand. “I am the Head of...Tell him to make himself available real soon or he’s going to find himself—” Aaron’s eyes went wide. “Hello?” he said to the phone. “Hello?!”

“Kill it,” Errol said, gently taking the phone from Aaron’s hand. “Leave it be. He isn’t going to respond to threats.”

“Not from us, anyway,” Uriel said, setting up the chessboard between him and Orson. “He controls two-thirds of the Brotherhood now.”

“Be that as it may,” Aaron said bitterly. He shook his head, fuming with anger and annoyance. He looked down at the desk, his hand shaking against the smooth wooden surface he was so angry. “We’ll see what the Triumvirate has to say about all of this.” He turned and faced into space for a moment, but only a moment. A thought clearly registered with him and he sprang to his feet. He unceremoniously rushed out of the office, his men left wondering where he was going.

“What do you want me to tell you, Phillip,” Raphael was saying when Aaron slipped inside his office. “International shipping laws are complicated and circumventing...” His words trailed off when he finally noticed that he wasn’t alone. “Sorry, boss. I’m being rudely interrupted. I’ll have to call you back.” He didn’t wait for a response and hung up the phone. “Yes?” he said, almost like a threat.

“Nice office. Very functional,” Aaron said in a friendly tone. Raphael just stared, half a silhouette from the light coming in from the window behind him. Aaron looked around the sparse office and nodded slowly. “I was hoping we might have a chance to talk.”

Raphael looked exhausted and slightly angry at the mere suggestion. “I’m really busy.”

Aaron started to speak and hesitated. He instead opted to take a seat across the desk from Raphael. Doing so did little to improve Raphael’s demeanor. “I was sent here by the Triumvirate to get this office in order,” said Aaron. Raphael seemed disinterested. “Part of that is trying to repair the...the rift, I guess, between the Investigators’ Clan and the Hand, and the Miracle Workers’ Clan.” He leaned

back. “I want to try and, and bridge the divide.” He gestured a little comically with his hands, smirking as he did.

Raphael only stared, as serious as a corpse.

“Communication only works if we both talk,” Aaron joked.

“Jericho is gone because of you,” Raphael said plainly and without any inflection. “My boss is gone because of you. My friend is gone because of you. A great leader is gone because of you. A visionary is gone...” He paused for emphasis. “Because of you.” He sat back and exhaled, like he was trying to control an invisible rage. “You are the harbinger of Jericho’s downfall. And, as far as I can tell, you are the harbinger of the fall of the Hand of the Brotherhood. God only knows what that spells for the Brotherhood as a whole.”

Rather than placate Raphael, Aaron sat forward like a guidance counselor consoling a troubled teen. “This may be hard for you to accept, but Jericho was involved in a great many projects that are expressly forbidden by the Brotherhood. Human experimentation and augmentation, deliberate redirection of funds and resources, the ritualistic killing of over a dozen people? Does none of that concern you?”

“Shall we also blame Jericho for climate change?” Raphael asked. “He had about as much to do with that as he did those killings.”

“Eli was one of—” Aaron began but he didn’t get very far.

“Jericho’s work may have lacked the shine and luster that the Triumvirate – and their agents – seem to love so much, but doing something that has never been done before is hardly automatically ‘against’ anything,” Raphael said. “That Jericho asks forgiveness and not permission is not a sign of betrayal but of leadership.”

Aaron readied to speak but the first sound that filled the small office was a ringing phone. Raphael seemed quietly affronted by the interruption while Aaron

smiled an embarrassed smile. “Excuse me.” He took out his phone and asked curtly, “Hello?”

“Oy,” said Uriel on the other end. “I got something and I got something big. Drop whatever you’re doing and get back over here.”

“Roger,” Aaron said and put away the phone. He turned to Raphael, who was waiting expectantly. “Sorry. Duty calls.” Raphael didn’t react at all, except to glare as Aaron saw himself out.

At the dinette set just off Morgan’s kitchen, Everett sat across from Armand, Ledger and Edgar between them. “We still don’t know why the sniper-dude was even killing people,” Armand was saying over the din of the blender. The powerful machine shut off and he was able to continue more casually. “I’m telling you, there’s still a lot here with Solaritec that we need to look into.”

“I hate to sound paranoid,” Edgar told Everett, “but I think your protégé is right. We’ve looked into Solaritec’s public records.” He gestured at himself and Ledger. “They donate an awful lot of money for a for-profit company.”

“That’s too much chocolate!” Morgan yelled from the kitchen.

“Shut up; there’s no such thing,” Roland answered.

“And they couldn’t just be philanthropic?” Everett devilishly advocated.

“More like these are thinly-veiled bribes on a civic level,” suggested Ledger.

“So here’s the thing,” Armand said across the table at Everett, talking over Roland and Morgan in the kitchen. “So, you don’t want to raid Solaritec by force. Fine. Then how DO we proceed? Because you can’t say there isn’t something here.”

Everett readied to answer when Roland appeared over the table. "Taste this," he said, putting a wooden spoon covered in chocolate right at Everett's mouth. Everett begrudgingly tried it and shrugged. "See? He's fine," Roland told Morgan as he returned to the combat arena that was the kitchen.

Everett returned to the discussion of the four knights with a worried look. "I'd induce vomiting if I were you," Edgar advised him.

"There's still the issue that the sniper's trial is not on the public docket," Ledger added while Everett checked his pulse.

"That may potentially just be a security issue," Edgar disputed. "They may be keeping him off the schedule in fear of public retaliation." Ledger glared across the table at Edgar and the insipidness of that suggestion. "I'm just saying, it's possible."

"There's also the poor police response time when we brought down the sniper," Armand argued.

"Or that we figured it out when the police didn't," said Edgar. "Not impossible but it does fall in the unlikely category."

"Also, you and Armand didn't get arrested," Ledger reminded Everett. "You guys had a damn swordfight on Solaritec property, in front of their main gates. You gonna tell me they didn't get it on video? That they didn't send it to the cops?"

"It has been awfully quiet since it happened," Edgar summarized.

"You mean over the last couple of days?" Everett reminded him. "What do you think that means?" he asked like he was indulging their paranoia.

"I think we damn near caught them red-handed," said Armand. "And they know it, so they're keeping their heads down."

"Who are we for them to be afraid of?" Everett asked. "We're civilians."

“We’re knights,” Ledger countered, a little affronted by Everett’s trivialization.

Edgar summarized his support for Armand’s points with a sincere look, saying only, “Come on, Ev.”

Slowly, Everett nodded. In the silence, Roland and Morgan took from the oven three cake layers that they immediately began arguing over how to ice and stack. A little frustrated by the distraction of the noise, Everett turned to ask for some silence but gave up as the two semi-cooks bickered. He turned back to the table to find the other three knights waiting expectantly. He finally sighed and said, “I’m with you that...that something seems up.”

“And we still don’t know where the Australian Club’s owner fits into all of this,” Edgar added. “Why would the sniper kill him?”

“Wasn’t there a book too?” asked Armand. “Didn’t Marilyn have some...” He snapped his fingers trying to recall.

During this exchange, Ledger had taken out his phone and was fooling with it. As Armand snapped his fingers to recall the details, Ledger shared, “One of their bosses is gone.” The other three looked curiously to him. “Solaritec,” said Ledger. He turned his phone so they could see. “They had a VP in charge of security, a dude named Jericho Kingston. He’s gone.” On the screen was a profile picture of the executive in question. Everett took the phone and studied the picture of a blonde-haired man with a handsome face and an intense expression. “That’s an older page load,” Ledger told him. “They took the dude’s profile down.”

“Maybe he quit over the whole sniper thing,” Armand mused.

“No media coverage?” Edgar asked. “No ‘and we wish him well in future endeavors’?” He accepted the phone from Everett and studied the profile.

“How’d you find that?” Everett asked.

“Just accessed their webpage and looked for previous versions of the site,” Ledger said. “It’s a great way to see what companies don’t want you to see.”

“Phillip Reynolds is the new acting head of security,” Edgar read off the tiny screen. “Odd that they’d appoint a VP to another VP position.” He handed the phone back to Ledger. “Do we know if Solaritec is publicly traded or not? Since they’re a utility company, I would think they would be.”

“Phillip Reynolds is who we – me and the World Alliance – we’re going to go, uh, talk to,” Armand volunteered. “A lot of the charity donations and stuff went through him.”

“Strange that they’d give a guy wanted in connection to embezzlement and human trafficking what looks like a bit of a promotion,” remarked Ledger

Speculating blindly, Everett wondered, “I wonder if this was some kind of a power grab? Not the embezzlement and everything,” he clarified to the others around the table. “The sniper, I mean. I wonder if...I don’t know maybe, somehow, that was meant to frame Phillip Reynolds?”

“Or maybe frame Jericho Kingston,” Ledger counter-proposed.

“Yeah, but here’s the thing,” said Edgar. “Phillip Reynolds was already a VP. He was already plenty powerful. If it was a power grab, it doesn’t look like it was all that successful.”

“Maybe the power grab wasn’t in the company.” Everett, Edgar, Ledger, and Armand all turned around to Roland who was still applying frosting to one of the layers of cake, Morgan behind him mixing more frosting. “I mean, just because he was grabbing power from another Solaritec VP doesn’t automatically mean it was Solaritec power he was grabbing. Maybe Phil wants to control tee time at the local elks’ lodge or something.”

Edgar looked at Everett and said, “That’s more than a little plausible.”

“We just need to find out where else besides work Phillip and Jericho’s lives overlapped,” Ledger concluded, Everett nodding in agreement.



—Now—

“And it didn’t occur to you that both of these guys were in the Brotherhood of the Sun?” Marilyn asked from the backseat of Morgan’s car.

“About as much as I assumed they were both Freemasons,” Everett said.

“Knights deal with a lot of supposedly ‘secret societies’,” Morgan told her. “Most are about as secret as the gossip at your local high school. And they’re usually about as old.”

“It’s been my experience that there are no secret evils in the world,” Everett added. “There are no gigantic, malevolent conspiracies. There’s little more corrupt than companies and corporations. And most ‘evil companies’ are younger than you and me.” He looked back at her and was struck by the morning light in her eyes. He had to look away and face forward again. “I just couldn’t imagine a giant, international cult bigger and more powerful than most corporations and governments.”

“Of course, that proved to be just a lack of imagination on your part,” Morgan reminded him.

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—4 Days Ago—

“So here’s the thing,” said Uriel as he presented to Aaron and the other three investigators. He gestured to the screen set into the wall of Aaron’s office. On it showed a bar chart. “Here is the allocation of funds from six months ago.” He hit a control and the labeling on the chart changed but the bars did not. “Here’s two weeks ago.” Another control press and another identical chart. “And here’s the proposed budget for the rest of the month.” He turned to the others. “Now you might have noticed how these fancy little budgets are all totally identical, except for the amounts.” He flipped back between the three charts. “Six months ago, the company listed an annual income of \$62 billion. Two weeks ago, that number was \$61 billion. The proposed budget is based off an income of only \$60 billion.”

He deactivated the screen and faced the others. “Someone is syphoning off money and a lot of it. Now, granted this is all gross income, not net. But that means going forward, unless literally millions of people decided to start living off the grid and thus stopped buying electricity, somebody is funneling literally billions of dollars out of the company.”

“Any idea where?” asked Aaron from behind his desk.

“Not precisely,” Uriel told him. “In the wake of Jericho’s, uh, reassignment, people are getting shuffled all over the place. Solaritec’s whole R&D department is

getting dismantled and moved to other facilities across the continent. Whatever Jericho was attempting to do, Phillip is doing a good job of dismantling.”

“Or hiding the evidence,” Errol said cynically.

Orson turned around to Aaron and said, “I been looking at the roster of the engineering department here at Solaritec; both the official offices and the Miracle Workers’ offices. Lot of people in engineering are getting shipped out. They’re leaving this facility without a lot of star power.”

“This isn’t the NBA,” said Aaron, as devil’s advocate. “Our major engineers get shuffled around all the time. And, in the wake of a scandal like Jericho’s actions, it’s understandable to want to move people out from the possible splash zone of the potential fallback.”

Orson didn’t relent. “I don’t know. That many engineers? And – correct me if I’m wrong, Uriel,” Orson asked his compatriot at the front of the room, “But this is Phillip doing the reassigning, right? These aren’t orders from the Triumvirate.” Uriel shrugged. “Are they?” Orson asked Aaron.

“I don’t believe so,” Aaron said. “I would be informed if the Triumvirate gave Phillip orders, but not necessarily what they were. And since I haven’t heard anything from them since coming down here, I assume not.”

“Right, so assume this is Phillip doing this,” Orson argued. “Why? Why is he doing this? Why is he gutting his own department, his own company and everything?” He looked at the room as a whole. “Any of you think it’s out of the good of the company or anything?” He faced Aaron. “If you found an inhuman amount of responsibility thrust upon you, would you immediately get rid of all you’re A-list support staff? Or would you assemble the dream team?” He faced back to the deactivated screen. “He should be moving guys here, not shipping them off to parts unknown.”

Aaron took a deep breath as he considered that idea. “Do we know where they’re heading?” he asked Uriel. His agent was clearly not following. “Look up the Miracle Workers’ Clan database,” Aaron said. He stood, buttoning his suit. “Look for an engineer named Ken Jeffries.” Uriel seemed even more confused by the request. In his hesitation, Errol took up his computer and began the search.

“Who is Ken Jeffries?” asked Ian.

Aaron paced a little, thinking. “Just a project manager. People liken him to Tim Ferriss. He flies under most people’s radar but I’ve learned he’s been adjacent to a lot of the big moves in the Brotherhood in the past decade.”

“I’m not finding him,” said Errol. “Doesn’t mean that much. This is just a cursory search and all.”

Aaron looked like a shark smelling blood. “Look wider.”

“What’s Phillip doing right now?” asked Orson.

“What’s he not doing,” said Uriel. “The man’s busier than the US President.”

“And yet, no one elected him,” Errol said just before cracking a sadistic-looking smile. “Found him.”

“Philip?” asked Uriel.

“Jeffries, Kenneth Horatio,” Errol said. “He’s currently overseeing one of our Project Esteban sites.”

Aaron stopped pacing. He looked at Errol and smirked like they’d struck gold. “He’s overseeing a mud dig in Peru? Bull. That’s a cover if I ever saw one.” He came around the table to study the project overview. Reading it just made Aaron laugh. “Geez, they usually do a better job of hiding stuff like this.”

“Okay,” said Aaron, returning to his seat behind his desk. “Ken’s a project manager with a background in facilities management. I’m betting that means that whatever this project is, it’s a facility. So we need to confirm that. We also need to know where it is, what kind of facility is – meaning for what purpose – and most importantly, we need to know how far off they are from completion.”

“Not far,” suggested Uriel. He gestured at the computer. “All the money that’s getting redirected – assuming we’re right – and all the personnel getting relocated? This isn’t the kind of thing you can hide for long. This is a hail-Mary and you only hail-Mary at the end of the game.”

“That’s not true,” said Orson. “We’ve seen no evidence of the wiring and materials needed to set up a power grid.”

“That kind of thing can be easily procured locally,” Errol argued.

“Not panels,” Orson insisted. “Solaritec is the only place that makes the solar panels that the entire Brotherhood of the Sun uses. We use and a lot of other companies use. And we’ve seen a lot of embezzlement and stuff but we’ve seen no evidence of panels.” He sat back. “So either this isn’t a facility ready to be turned on tomorrow or they’re going to run it off a hamster wheel.”

“Maybe they’ll connect it to the national power grid,” Ian interjected.

Errol glared at him hateful. “Nobody would go to this much trouble to set up a seek facility and then just plug it into the wall.”

“Which means they’re going nuclear,” Aaron said, suddenly very worried.

Silence fell over the room as they began to think over all they’d seen and the likelihood of that scenario presented itself.

“Freeze all other investigations,” said Aaron with fear in his voice. “Comb through every database, manifest, whatever we can find. Find out when and where

this reactor is happening.” He rushed behind his desk for his phone, saying, “I need to report this.”

Ian spoke up. “We don’t know that that’s necessarily what’s—”

“Then prove me wrong!” Aaron yelled at him. The volume and ferocity of his voice startled all four of his men. “All evidence points to this – whatever THIS is – as being imminent. We’ll double-check the figures once we have more info, but for right now, we have to follow our gut. And my gut says this lunatic is setting up a nuclear reactor. Now go find out how or find out he’s not, but go find out.” He turned to his phone and began dialing, letting the others see themselves out.

“Well hello.”

Hello. Forgive me for being rude, but who is this?

“You don’t recognize my number, Everett? I’m hurt. ☹ It’s me, Marilyn.”

Ah! Sorry. ^__^* I just...won’t you get into trouble for talking to me?

“This is a text. We’re technically not talking, now are we?”

I see.

“What are you guys up to?”

What guys? The knights? Me and Armand?

“Any of the above.”

I’m working and Armand is in class.

“What do you do?”

I write grants for government agencies.

“Does that pay well?”

Pretty well. I get a flat consulting rate if the grant is declined, and a small percentage if it's approved. Beats working at McDonalds.

“How'd you get into that?”

Edgar.

“Figures. He seems like a useful guy to know.”

Yes he is. How'd you find my screen name?

“I have my ways. ;-)”

Right.

“You don't believe me?”

No, I'm just surprised you're talking to be, after everything. I'm still really sorry about that.

“What are you up to today? What are the knights up to today?”

I have no idea.

“I thought you were their leader.”

That's news to me. Besides, if I was the leader, all that would mean is I get blamed when things go wrong.

“At least you get credit when they go right.”

You'd think that, but...

“That's terrible.”

Like we get that much credit either way.

“I try to give you credit.”

Thanks. I think.

“What do you mean ‘I think’?”

Why did you ask about our plans?

“Me and the World Alliance are helping to man a blood drive on campus. I thought maybe you’d like to swing by and donate.”

Maybe. I’ll ask the guys.

“☺”

A blood drive, huh? How do you jump from raiding clubs and corporate offices to blood drives?

“The World Alliance is involved in everything. Next month, we’re going to protest at a big, nation-wide KKK rally. They’re rallying at the same time in over forty cities. Want to come and provide us with some muscle?”

The last thing you want is the knights to be at a KKK rally.

“Why’s that?”

The knights HATE the Klan.

“Because they’re racists?”

That’s one reason. But it actually has to do with their name.

“What about it?”

They call themselves the ‘Knights’ of the Ku Klux Klan. They call themselves knights, but they didn’t swear to the Oath of Chivalry.

“Neither do the Knights Templar.”

And guess who’s going to be next up against the wall?

“But the Knights Templar is a religious organization! You can’t hate them.”

Watch me.

“Now you sound like Morgan.”

Oh, god. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.

“It’s okay. Does Morgan hate the KKK as much as the rest of you?”

Morgan hates everybody.

“Why is he so mean?”

I wish I knew. I have my theories, but none of them have been fully verified.

Yet.

“Want me to try and find out?”

That’d be amusing to see.

“I can get information, Mr. Knight.”

I know you can. I just had the image of you trying to interrogate Morgan.

“Trust me, Morgan has his weak spot.”

I know. It’s called cinnamon. He can’t walk by Cinnibon without stopping.

“No, I mean, to himself.”

He might. I hope he does. But if anyone didn’t, it’d be him.

“So you exercise a lot. ;-) You write grants. You patrol the dark streets, looking for trouble. What else do you do with your time?”

Try to keep the other knights out of trouble.

“I can imagine Edgar’s so hard to keep track of.”

You’d be surprised. He can be, and has been, a serious hellion at times.

“Edgar?! But he’s so sweet.”

Yeah, and he’s a serious trouble-maker. Remind me to tell you about the time myself, he, and Ledger decided to go out one night and ‘raise some hell’.

“Raise some hell?”

And it was his idea no less.

“I’ll bet.”

Lunch is here, Marilyn. Got to go.

“☹”

You’ll get over it.

“I’ll be on for awhile if you want to talk later.

I’d love that. But right now, I’ve got to go.

“Bye.”

“Here we are,” Errol said, lifting up violently on the metal shard that was wedged into the door jam. The door popped open with a metal creak. Errol and

Uriel both looked around cautiously in the dark hallway of the building, neither sight nor sound around them changing.

“Alright,” Errol said, pushing the door slightly. “You’re sure the alarms won’t go off?” he asked, almost rhetorically.

“If they do,” Uriel said, “we’ll probably be dead before we can really regret it.”

“That brings me no comfort,” Errol said, closing his eyes. He took a deep breath and held it for a moment. He pushed gently on the door, letting it swing open. The metal door swung completely open, revealing to the two of them a giant laboratory larger than many factories.

“Well well well,” Uriel said, entering first, leaving Errol behind to close the door properly. “It would appear that our Mr. Reynolds has been a busy little dictator.”

“Why?” Errol asked as he joined his counterpart. As he did, he saw the giant, three-dimensional map that was the centerpiece of the laboratory. The two agents looked at each other, then moved towards the laboratory.

It was an elaborate map, one that clearly depicted a mountain fortress building deep into stone mountains. “It’s Norad,” Errol quipped.

“It’s shaped like the Sircle,” Uriel said, lowering down to the level of the table, to get a better gauge of the thing’s orientation. “If these little trees are to scale...”

“Then this thing’s huge,” Errol finished, looking up. The ceiling was the usual metal chrome, one that showed no mark, only the casual reflection from the largely lightless room. “I’d say this is the fortress the Triumvirate are looking to build.”

“Obviously,” Uriel agreed condescendingly. “But I didn’t think it was this big.”

“Me neither,” Errol said, still staring up at the ceiling.

Now Uriel looked up from his crouching position. He stared at the ceiling, then looked to Errol. “Something bothering you?”

“The ceiling,” Errol said, staring at the chrome. He looked to Uriel, sighing sadly. “I think we just walked into a trap.”

“Very good,” Phillip said, staring at Errol and Uriel as they stood next to the table. Standing on the industrial glass ceiling, he looked down through the one-way mirror, looking directly at the two infiltrators who stared back up at him. “Oh, Errol. You are truly astute.”

“Shall we send in our team?” asked Raphael, standing just off the glass.

“No,” Phillip said. “They’re scared. They’re going to make a mistake and that’s all I need to start this little ‘chain reaction’. Don’t do anything, so long as they run away. If they prove to be Aaron’s undoing, so much the better.” Raphael sighed uneasily but kept his reservations to himself.

The World Alliance had organized the blood drive into stages. Arriving applicants were met outside where volunteers with the blood clinic could help them with the paperwork. Once completed, they were sent into the university gym where numbers were given and seats were provided. Digital tickers on the TV showing a college sports network let them know what numbers would be called next.

Once an applicant was called, they were taken to the middle of the area where they were further screened by employees of the blood clinic, and then they were taken in to have their blood drawn. After that was completed, the donators were led to a line of folding tables where food was provided. It was here that the World Alliance had stationed themselves. And it was here that Ruwani and Kate were threatening to win the grand world all-universe championship of paper football from Alan and Malcolm.

Kate had the tiny, folded paper football positioned by her finger. Her lips were curled to the side, a sign of her heavy concentration. Across the table, Malcolm was holding his fingers up like goal posts, waiting for her to flick the football. Behind Kate, Ruwani had her hands clinched as she held her breath. With a fast flick, Kate knocked the little triangle through Malcolm's fingers and rebounding off his shirt.

"Yeah!" Kate shouted, jumping out of her seat and onto it in one single bound. She started dancing, then jumped down into Ruwani's arms. Malcolm looked back at Alan and they both sighed, as much at their loss as at Kate's over-enthusiastic celebration. All of this, Marilyn saw as she and Victor approached from the front of the blood drive. She slowed and watched the group of four. Victor noticed and stopped with her.

"Is something wrong with me?" Marilyn asked. She looked to Victor. He didn't say anything; he just gave her room to talk. Taking that chance, she looked around the crowded but well-organized gymnasium. "Every donation saves three lives. We're on schedule to help save thousands." She looked forward again. "So why aren't I proud of this?"

Victor readied to say something but Marilyn kept talking. "I mean, this is important. Blood is important, right? And saving lives, anyway and every way, is important." She looked Ruwani and the others as they set up for another round of

paper football. "So why do I feel like it doesn't matter?" She looked down. "Like I don't matter?"

Again Victor started to say something and again, Marilyn rolled right through. "I mean, I used to love this stuff!" she complained. "I used to love when we'd stay up every night and plan the next event. I used to love the fundraisers and the charity auctions." She sighed sadly. "What changed?"

"You got a taste of real action," Victor told her. "Once we took matters into our own hands, once we broke into the Australian Club and tried to make a real, direct difference..." He shrugged. "It's hard to go back to preparing for a disaster, once you've seen what directly fighting one can be like." He put his hand on Marilyn's shoulder, then rubbed her back. "This has been a big change," he told her. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "It's hard to adapt."

It was the kiss that destroyed Everett.

On the far side of the gymnasium, Everett had been watching. Just approved to donate blood, he'd been called to the middle section for the preparation. He'd spotted Marilyn and his heart had soared. An eternal smile that he wore whenever he even thought about her came forward. But then he saw Victor kiss her. And his heart was like glass shattered on pavement. He didn't say anything. He just put on his coat, turned, and left.

"You've got two options," Victor was telling Marilyn. "You can either try to return to that life," he said, nodding to the others. "Or we can do this together." Marilyn looked up at Victor, confused. "That's contentment," he said of their friends and peers in the World Alliance. "That's friends and laughs. And good times. And we'll help save a lot of lives. But we won't affect real change."

He took Marilyn's hands and turned her towards him. "But this, you and me, is happiness. Not so many friends, but a few. Maybe not as many good times. But

love.” He kissed her on the lips, in front of anyone watching. “And we’ll risk our lives. But we’ll save lives too.”

“Whichever one you want, I’ll be with you, always,” he pledged. Marilyn embraced him, holding him tight.



—Now—

Morgan’s car was absolutely silent. The engine hummed as they drove down the empty back street but there was no other sound. The sun’s rays were heating up the interior quickly, but it wasn’t the heat that made the three uncomfortable.

In the back, Marilyn looked towards Everett. In the passenger’s seat, he hadn’t turned around. He was facing out the window, his eyes averted from even Morgan.

The silence endured.



—4 Days Ago—

The door to the mayor's office opened. Aaron rose from his seat before the desk as the mayor entered. "Hi," said the mayor with a friendly smile and a shake of the hand. "Sorry for the delay, but thank you for your patience." Hands dropped and the mayor asked, "What can I do for Solaritec today?" Something in the way he spoke set Aaron on edge, like he'd walked into a trap.

"Well," Aaron said slowly, trying to buy some time as he and the mayor both sat down on their respective sides of the desk. "As I am sure you are aware, Solaritec has undergone some...staffing reassignments."

The mayor chuckled and nodded. "Yeah, I heard. Shame what happened to Mr. Kingston."

"Yeah, Jericho'll be missed," said Aaron. He wasn't sure if he was lying. "The point is, the company continues to be in a position of flux, where it's very unclear just what direction we may be going in the immediate future." The mayor nodded, tapping his fingertips very lightly on his wooden desk as he leaned back in his chair, like he was weighing the gravity of the situation. "I am hoping," Aaron ventured, "Solaritec can continue to rely on the city as we try to get our house in order and to re-establish our routine."

The mayor nodded reasonably. "Will this be before or after you and Phillip kill each other?" Aaron's only response was to swallow hard. "Let me lay it out for you," said the mayor as he sat forward. "This city has sat by and let Solaritec do its thing. For the most part, that's been mutually beneficial. You guys get to push your uber-green agenda, we get cheap power." The mayor shrugged. "It works. Or, it did work. But then, something happened. Then, all of a sudden, Solaritec started doing some crazy stuff. And we've looked the other way, AS WE HAVE BEEN ASKED," the mayor said directly. "And no more." He sat back. "I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Phillip when I talked to him earlier today. Right now, our friendship is over. This city does not need Solaritec; Solaritec needs this city. And

you boys get out of line, and I will have the cops come down on you so hard..." He paused, then laughed. "Well, you're a smart man. I'm sure you can imagine it."

The mayor rose and brushed down his suit. "It was nice talking to you, Mr. Aaron..." He waited for a last name.

Aaron rose as well and shook his hand. "Thank you, sir." He turned and exited. In the vestibule beyond the mayor's office, the mayor's assistant waited opposite Uriel. Aaron didn't even break stride as he exited into the open halls of the municipal building,

"I take it no good news?" Uriel asked as they made for the stairs.

"What, with our luck?" Aaron retorted with a cynical snort. "Hell no. We're on our own."

Marilyn was the last one of the World Alliance still at the closed blood drive. The phlebotomists and other specialists had all gone. The last of the materials had been taken away and the crowds were absent, the gymnasium seemed like a ghost town. There were fragments of trash to be swept up and a few banners to take down but for right now, Marilyn was folding up the steel chairs and stacking them in rows over by the wall.

She'd just set two more chairs against the row and was walking away when she heard the horrid sound of metal sliding. She turned fearfully back around. For a second, she saw nothing but the monolithic rows of chairs, but then she saw it; a few chairs slipping low. "No..." Marilyn whispered, just before she shrieked and stuck her fingers in her ears.

The rows of chairs came cascading down like a metal waterfall. Chair after chair slid down from its resting place and spilled chaotically into the open floor of the gymnasium, causing the one behind it to fall as well. A cacophony of clanging metal echoed off the walls as the folding seats spilled out over the floor.

When the calamity was done and there was no more sound, Marilyn drew her fingers out from her ears and looked at the newest project before her. She sighed, blowing a brunette bang out of her eyes. She set about picking up the nearest chairs and starting the stacking process all over again.

A beep from her pocket got her attention. "Because of course," she grumbled as she set up the two chairs and retrieved her phone. "Why wouldn't somebody message me right now?" She opened her email and was surprised to find it from her forum contact.

"Did you get the book?"

Paranoia ran through Marilyn and she looked around the gymnasium. She seemed alone but the huge space seemed suddenly isolating and intimidating. She went back to the email and messaged, "Yes." She considered asking if he'd delivered it personally but decided against it.

"Is it safe? Any luck opening it?"

Marilyn wrote back, "Yes, it's safe." She added a smiley face emoticon. "No, I haven't tried opening it." Trying to be casual, she wrote, "I thought they were supposed to be booby-trapped." She got her response almost as soon as she sent her message.

"Open it with only one light on, in an otherwise dark room. That may work. Make sure it's one of Ivers' books."

She wrote back, "I will." There was no response.

Again, paranoia filled her. And it followed her home. Every doorway she passed on campus became a threat; every window was a vantage from which she could be watched. The walk illuminated her to just how many cameras she passed, how many people she rarely ever seemed to notice. The university was a small town unto itself. Any one of them could be her informant. And she knew nothing about him.

Arriving home at dusk, she decided to go ahead and get it over with. She closed the blinds, locked the door, and turned off all the lights except a bedside reading light she'd turned on once since she bought it. She laid the heavy book down on her bed and opened it without any trouble. She seemed somewhat disappointed.

The first page was blank, so she turns it, only to discover the next page was blank as well. Fear gripped her and she began to turn the pages, one after another. Blank. All blank. She shut the book, mortified. "It's just a book," she whispered in shocked disappointment.

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