

Red Moon Rising

Part 13 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 13 of 30

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“It is so weird being my own role model.”

Mindy Lahiri, *The Mindy Project*

—3 Days Ago—

“I’ve been reviewing the stuff Victor got off the discs,” Marilyn said, looking across the table in the Atrium at Malcolm. “I think I’ve got a solid lead on another one of Sizemore’s outlets.” Malcolm perked up from his cereal. The silence of his response reminded Marilyn that they were alone at the table. None of the other World Alliance members had opted to dine together. “Anyway,” she said, trying not to let it bother her. “I was thinking maybe we could check it out.”

Malcolm nodded. He ate for a moment more, his enthusiasm – or lack thereof – bothering Marilyn. “What’s Victor got to say about this?”

“I don’t know if Victor’s coming,” Marilyn said, a bit bothered by her own answer. “He says that he’s got to go with his parents to some recital for his brother.”

“His brother’s like, fifteen,” Malcolm said. “Are they going to be out that late?”

“I don’t know,” Marilyn said, deliberately giving it little consideration. “He says he’s going to try and get out of it, but if he can’t…”

“That sucks,” Malcolm grumbled. More cereal. “So, what’s the plan? Do it like last time? And if that is the plan, can I vote no?”

“I...I don’t know,” Marilyn said, thinking. The food in front of her was untouched. “To be honest, I’m not sure how to do this.” Her voice drifted a little as she thought aloud, “I really don’t want to get shot at again.”

Malcolm nodded, like that was a reasonable thing to not want. “Have you been to this club?” he asked, his mouth half-full.

“Yeah,” Marilyn sighed, propping her head on her left hand. “I drove by yesterday, but I couldn’t get much of a read on the place to be honest.”

“Really?” Malcolm said, chewing. He apprised the founder of the World Alliance for a moment. “Marilyn, have you even been sleeping?”

“Huh?” she asked, surprised by the question. She half-laughed. “Why in the world would you ask a question like that?”

“You look tired, that’s all,” Malcolm said, shrugging. “I didn’t know if you’d been, you know, sleeping. And you haven’t eaten at all.”

“I’m just not hungry,” she said softly. She sighed and looked down. “I just want this to work,” she said, her eyes closed in thought.

“Checking out this club?” Malcolm asked.

“All of it,” she whispered to herself.

What had been a misty morning had turned picturesque. The sky was a crystal blue. Not a single cloud lingered in the sky, as though the birds migrating north for the spring had free reign to sing and fly across the heavens. A warm breeze blew across the trees, the music of the rustling leaves accompanying the singing of the birds.

Roland and Ledger were leaning against the trunk of Roland's car, looking up at the sky and admiring the beauty. "I wish I had a snowball," Roland shared with Ledger. The non-sequitur shattered Ledger's enjoyment of the moment and he looked, dumbfounded, at Roland. "You have any idea how surprising it would be to get pegged with a snowball this late into spring?" the knight expounded.

Ledger shook his head and declared, "You weird-ass motherf—" He was interrupted by Roland's phone ringing.

"Hello?" asked Roland into the phone. He listened for a moment. "No, I'm in the records office," he lied as casually as breathing. He listened for a bit more. "Yeah, I'll finish up here and I'll be by in just a minute." He hung up and laid back down on his car.

Ledger, again, looked amazed and at the same time, comfortable that this behavior was in no way unexpected. "You didn't take time off from the hospital for this, did you?"

"Thought about it," said Roland as he shifted to get more comfortable. "But then they wouldn't pay me. Plus, there's all this paperwork you have to fill out and it has to get approved and...." He just shrugged and went back to admiring the sky. Deciding who was he to argue, Ledger resumed enjoying the sky as well.

A few car spaces away in the quiet apartment complex, Everett and Armand stood with Edgar. Everett held a home-made sign that proclaimed 'welcome home' in sparkly, sarcastically girly letters. He wasn't listening to Edgar and Armand talk, instead texting on his phone. "It's hard to accept being part of something," he wrote to Marilyn. "And not be the whole thing, or not be at the front. Drummers and bassists get jealous of the front man all the time." He had an emoticon for friendly measure.

"Who are you texting? Is it Sydney?" asked Edgar. Like the others, he was dressed in red and black, only more stylishly.

“Do you need to ask?” Armand retorted.

“I’m texting Marilyn,” said Everett as he continued to wax about contributing to the cause versus executing the cause.

“See?” Armand told Edgar.

“She’s feeling....wait, what?” Everett suddenly looked up from his phone, glancing back and forth between Edgar and Armand. “Hush.” He resumed texting. “She’s feeling bad that she isn’t doing more and that the World Alliance people aren’t more gung ho about putting their lives on the line as a world-changing special ops team. I’m trying to help her understand that’s not a bad thing and systemic change is more lasting and meaningful than immediate change.”

“Says the guy who carries a sword with him,” Edgar said.

“I’m not under arms,” Everett corrected as he continued texting.

“You’re the only one then,” Edgar said, almost chastising him.

Everett looked up and glanced around at the other knights. With a sword the size of some barbells, it was easy to tell Armand had his brand with him. Edgar, too, obviously had his saber tucked away inside his overcoat, although it was much harder to notice. The way Roland’s trench coat draped over the side of his car, his katana’s presence was obvious. Ledger was the only one that didn’t seem to be carrying his weapon, and yet Everett knew his modified shotgun was almost certainly under his pullover jacket. “Huh,” Everett muttered.

“Are you sure it’s my beard that’s graying and not yours?” Edgar asked.

“Hush,” Everett sighed.

His text to Marilyn was interrupted by another text, reading “Pulling in!”

“Guys!” Everett called. Roland and Ledger both hopped off the car and came over to the others. Everett texted Marilyn, saying “Got to run. We can talk some more later if you want.”

Her response was almost immediate. “Talk to you then.” Two smiley face emoticons followed.

As Everett put his phone away, a beat-up jalopy pulled into the cul de sac of the apartment complex, pulling an enclosed trailer almost bigger than the two-door car. The car backfired as it pulled into the space in front of the five knights. When the car turned off, it sounded like it died, based off the abrupt and eerie silence.

The driver’s door opened and out stepped a blonde bombshell. Leaning on the car, she smiled exhaustedly at the knights and said, “Hello boys.”

“Welcome home!” the five knights said in pseudo-unison.

Sydney grinned gigantically and came over to them. Dressed in tight black jeans, a red blouse, and a black bolero jacket, she hugged Edgar first. “Hey,” she said with relief, like she was at the end of a long race.

“Jeanine wanted to be here but she had work,” Edgar told her. “One of us has to be a responsible adult.”

Sydney and Everett embraced like siblings, Sydney giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Dame Sydney Pointer,” Everett said with some formality. “Allow me to introduce Sir Armand Gessetti, formerly of Boston.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Sydney said as she shook hands with young knight who was clearly doing his absolute best to not stare at Sydney’s breasts. Sydney turned and faced the last two and sighed. “Aren’t you two dead yet?”

“Through no fault of our own,” Ledger smirked. He hugged Sydney and moved aside for Roland to hug her. “Glad to have you back, Sydney.”

“I’m glad to be back,” she said. She turned and looked at the five as a group. She sighed expectantly and then suddenly laughed explosively. The calm demeanor she’d had since exiting her car shattered as tears appeared in her eyes and emotions threatened to overwhelm her. “I’m home!” She practically rushed the five as a group, hugging them all, giggling joyously as she did.

“Well, don’t start crying yet,” Edgar said. He turned and pointed to the townhouse on the end of the row of five. The light green house, narrow but comfortable looking, had the door open. “That’s yours.”

Sydney squealed, making Roland and Armand both clamp their hands over their ears. She went running up the steps of the house and looked through the door and her jaw dropped. “It’s huge!”

“Boy your standards are low,” Roland said as the five funneled in after her. The townhouse had a simple layout with stairs on the immediate right of the front door. On the left was a modest sitting room that led into the partially enclosed kitchen in the middle, with a dining room at the rear. A sliding glass door looked out on the edge of the complex’s property line signified by a wall of trees.

The sitting room had a flat screen TV and two video game systems already set up. A dinette set waited in the dining room and a simple dining set of plates, cutlery, and glasses sat on the counter of the kitchen. Sydney looked over her home and began to cry. She covered her mouth and sobbed and laughed at the same time.

Everett came over to her and half-hugged her. “Your trials are over.” She turned into him and hugged him.

“Until you go for your doctorate,” Roland said. Ledger smacked him.

“Oh my god,” Sydney sighed, still crying. She wiped her cheeks and laughed. “You guys are ruining my makeup.”

“Well,” Everett said, tearing up a little himself. “Our sister’s come home.”
Sydney hugged him again, he others drawing around her.



—Now—

“Wow, that’s so sweet,” Marilyn practically swooned from the backseat of Morgan’s car. She sounded envious.

“I’ve known Sydney for forever, going back to middle school,” said Everett. “She’s a black sash in Silat, two-time state powerlifting champion, and three-time Ms. Sexiest Halloween’.” He and Morgan snickered like there was a private joke there. “She’s also a masters of sport science, for which her thesis won some award. Rhodes’ Scholarship? Anyway, and as of last week, she’s the new volleyball coach for your university.”

Marilyn shook her head, somehow amazed. “So you guys just bought her a house?”

“God no,” Everett said with a chuckle, wiping away fond tears from remembering the moment. “It’s a rental. We just got it leased, set up, and set up all the utilities.”

“And paid the first month on everything, including rent,” said Morgan.

“Why weren’t you there?” Marilyn asked.

“Because I’m not a knight,” he said a little sourly. “Besides, as big a deal as Sydney coming home was, there were other things going on that day.”



—3 Days Ago—

The front doors parted and Orson and Uriel walked into the no man’s land that was the Hand’s main building in the center of the Solaritec campus. The halls were wide and well-lit with dark tile flooring and white walls. There were few doors off the halls and fewer offices. At the central hub, behind a diamond-shaped desk, sat an attractive woman wearing a business suit and a headset. She smiled professionally at the two men as they approached, asking, “Can I help you gentlemen find your way?”

“Yeah, actually,” said Orson with a smile. He leaned one arm on the counter. “I’d like to speak to Raphael.”

“Raphael...” the woman prompted with a patient smile.

Orson was suddenly caught. He looked at Uriel. “What is his last name? Never mind,” he said, turning back to the woman. “The second-in-command of the Hand.”

“The Hand?” she said, insulting both of them by blatantly playing dumb. “What are you referring to?”

“Oh come off it,” Uriel griped. He reached down to her desk and picked up a McDonalds’ happy meal toy from her small collection and began fiddling with it. “You know as well as we that you’re Hand. And you know who we are. Protocols and formalities went out the window when one of your boys started shooting up the city.” Orson face-palmed.

The receptionist snatched the toy out of Uriel’s hand. “That was a tragedy and I don’t know what you’re referring to,” she said in an agitated tone.

“Fine,” Uriel told her. “Then why don’t you call somebody who does know what we’re referring to.” He warped his last few words to mimic her American accent.

The woman took off her headset and rose from her seat. Over six feet tall, and with a scowl on her otherwise gorgeous face, she looked down on both men. “I want you to leave.”

Uriel, without breaking eye contact, picked up another one of her toys and flicked it onto the floor behind her. “And if we don’t?” Again, Orson sighed, practically holding himself up by the counter of the desk.

When the woman didn’t respond immediately, Uriel picked up a third toy and flicked it like the last one. The receptionist’s hand shot out like a bullet and caught the toy right out of the air, all while she glared at Uriel. She placed the small toy gently back where it belonged as her scowl shifted from irritation to anger. She leaned forward, ready to speak.

“Okay, we’re leaving,” Orson pre-empted, through with the display. He grabbed Uriel by the arm, spun him around, and rushed him back through the front door. While he was being jostled, Uriel smiled nicely back at the receptionist.

They exited the main Hand building. They walked briskly away along the roundabout, Orson stealing irritated looks at Uriel, while Uriel glanced angrily back at the way they’d come. But once they reached the central campus, Orson suddenly

smiled as Uriel exhaled with relief. “Oh my sweet goodness, I thought she was going to vault the desk then and there.” He rubbed his hair back and looked to Orson. “Did you get it?”

Orson held up the flash drive and said, “We’ll find out.”

As the laughter died down around the table, Roland resumed his story. “Okay, so, Ledger finally comes over. And I’m still congested as a dog. I mean, I literally can’t breathe. I can’t even really stand up, I’m so stopped up at this point. My poor mom is making me those dishes of hot water for me to inhale. I mean, she’s breaking out every homeopathic, old wives’ tale she can think of. And it’s not making a dent. And I’m so messed up from all the anti-allergy meds I’ve been cramming down my pie hole.”

“So Ledger shows up, takes on look at me, and says ‘take off your clothes’.” Roland paused to laugh. “I’m like ‘what’. And he says ‘this is gonna clean everything out. And I mean everything’.”

“That’s not a bad impression,” Edgar laughed.

“I don’t sound like that,” Ledger protested, sounding exactly like that.

“So, I go into the bathroom, get set up on the throne, and drape a towel over me,” Roland continued to recount, indifferent to the nearby patrons of the upscale dining establishment. “Ledger comes in, does some weird voodoo evaluation on me using his nails and needles. And then he proceeds to start poking and prodding me with his fingertips.”

“It’s acupuncture, dunce,” Ledger smirked. He comically dropped his head in frustration. Chuckling, Everett patted his shoulder supportively.

“And so, like, five minutes of this,” Roland continued. “And he stops and he says ‘ready?’ like a husband about to make his move on his wife on their anniversary.” More laughs. “And so he does this weird three-point punch-thing to the side of my neck,” Roland mimicked. “And man, I’m telling you, it was no joke. Everything came out. EVERY thing. E-ver-ee thing! My nostrils were like tubes of toothpaste, gunk was coming out of my ears, I had to flush, like, ten times.”

That did it. “Okay, enough!” Armand protested before throwing his napkin at Roland. The others concurred, though without the projectiles. In time, the laughter subdued, refills of the drinks were provided, and the table settled a bit. “So you’re really going to be the volleyball coach?” he asked Sydney.

“Yep,” she said, enjoying the final sip of her wine. “The university is trying to expand their athletic dominance, and the assistant coach of the fencing team put in a good word for me.” She appreciatively nudged Edgar. “It usually takes years to get a head coaching position, but between my own volleyball scholarship and my grades, plus my thesis being so highly regarded, they decided to take a chance.”

“Very cool,” said Ledger, the others agreeing.

“Yeah, pretty soon, I’ll actually be able to pay for my own dinners,” she said with a chuckle. She turned and looked at Everett, asking leadingly, “So why did you want to go to that sandwich shop so bad?” Everett groaned and looked away.

“This girl he likes works there,” Roland teased before Everett could offer a difference perspective.

Sydney’s eyes lit up. “Oh my god!” She practically squealed. “Have you fallen from our noble bachelor and bachelorette ranks?”

“Hey!” Edgar protested.

“Hardly,” Everett said with some effort. Accepting he wasn’t getting out of his unscathed, he sighed and let it happen. “She’s got a boyfriend. And, and I don’t know if she’s that into me.”

“Oh my god, you’re back in frickin’ middle school,” Roland laughed sadly.

“Have you learned nothing from the patron saint of knights, Cyrano de Bergerac?” asked Edgar. Armand turned to Ledger, about to ask for clarification on that point and Ledger just shook his head, refusing to even field the ridiculousness of the question. “If the young lady is to be wooed, then woo her you must.”

“Shut up, you sexist old coot,” Sydney told Edgar. She faced Everett completely. “You don’t win a woman. She’s not a prize you—”

“I know, I know,” Everett told her, stopping the discussion. “And that’s part of it. Part of the frustration. I want to be the one who makes her smile.” Sydney ‘awwed’ very sincerely. Roland and Ledger did as well, though not nearly as sincerely. “But she...” Everett realized the crowd he was talking to. He looked around the nice restaurant full of upper class patrons, then looked back at the table. “How did this become about Marilyn?”

“It’s not about Marilyn; it’s about you,” said Roland.

“Yeah, none of us really like her that much,” Ledger added.

Everett rolled his eyes. Sydney patted his hand sympathetically as the conversation lulled.

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—Now—

“Do they really not like me?” Marilyn asked, looking genuinely hurt.

Everett hesitated to answer. “They...they’ve never met anyone like you. And as such, they—”

“Correction: they have met people like you,” Morgan said, in a rare display of supportiveness. “But those people always turned out to be posers, people pretending at genuine compassion for the world. They didn’t yet realize they were dealing with the genuine article.”

That seemed to comfort Marilyn some, but not considerably. She sat quietly in the back, her concern obvious. “What does it matter if they like you?” Everett asked her.

“I just...I always feel like I’m an intruder or something,” she said. “Like you knights have this, this fraternity or something. I feel like an outsider.”

“It’s not something you want to be a part of, trust me,” said Morgan.

“That’s easy to say, coming from the guy with the freedom to reject membership in the club,” said Marilyn. “It’s not like I HAVE to be liked by them. I just...I just don’t like being disliked. Is that so bad?”

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—3 Days Ago—

“What the hell is a cationic liposomal...” said Errol, staring at the screen.

“Jesus,” groaned Orson, as he sat with Errol at the computers, Ian and Uriel looking over their shoulders as they worked. “This is the steroid,” he suddenly shouted.

“You understand this stuff?” asked Uriel.

Orson nodded. “I mean, a little.” He held up his phone and showed the multiple search engines he had open, searching for explanations on various terms. “But this is the steroid that the Voice of the Hand was talking about...” He sat back, then swiveled a bit to look at the others. “What are the chances this was planted for us to find?” He gestured at the computer. “What are the chances this isn’t real?”

“All the access to the Hand’s database came from the data you stole off the receptionist’s computer,” Ian told him. “That part’s good. The hack is good. This data...” He gestured at the screens. “This is the Hand’s system and database. And deep into it, too.”

“Yeah, but for a receptionist to have passwords to their R&D division?” Orson asked. “They’re not supposed to even have an R&D division!”

“She didn’t have passwords, she had...you guys don’t get how hacking works, do you?” Ian complained.

“Sure I do,” Orson argued with a growing smile born of self-consciousness. “Uriel comes up with a stupid idea, I help him execute it, we give it to you, you do...computer stuff...and then...results?” Even Errol was laughing at that.

“We got stuff off her computer,” Ian told Orson. “That stuff led to access to their systems, and from there, we found more stuff getting us deeper access. Think of it like Chutes & Ladders, and getting stuff off her computer was just the first dice

role.” He feigned worry. “Do you guys really think my job’s that easy?” They all offered indistinct versions of yes. Ian sighed in irritation, causing Uriel to pat his shoulder in mock comfort.

“Okay, so…” Errol turned back to the computers. “So what we have is proof that the Hand was using steroids. In-house developed steroids.”

“Not just used; expanded the use,” Orson said, pointing at his screen. “Since Phillip took over the Hand, he’s expanded the program.” He looked at the others. “He knew about this, possibly before Jericho was taken.”

Alone in her room, the blinds down and only the bedside lamp turned on, Marilyn sat at the desk with the book open. The giant tome smelled of ancient paper and air of the old world. Marilyn ran her fingers along the spine of the book, feeling the deep texture of craftsmanship largely forgotten to the modern age.

Getting down to work, Marilyn laid a thin sheet of paper on a random page in the center of the book. Taking a cheap mechanical pencil, Marilyn began to very lightly shade the page. In no time, her smile grew as she saw letters and designs appear. What they were, however, she didn’t understand.

The paper covered, Marilyn held it up to better read it, only to confirm the text seemed beyond her. Not written in an alien script or another language – it was written in English and using familiar letters. But the terminology was so densely foreign to her, it might as well have been another language.

There was a knock at her dorm room door. Before she could ask, Ruwani opened the door. “Hey,” she said as she slipped inside. “Why’s it so dark?”

“I was...” Marilyn began to explain when she looked at the giant Ivers book to find it shut. She stared at the closed book worriedly.

Writing off Marilyn stopping mid-sentence as not the weirdest thing she'd ever done, Ruwani commented, “I went by your work but they said you called out.”

“Yeah,” said Marilyn. She turned to her friend. “I needed to do this.”

“What IS this?” Ruwani asked, her arms crossed.

Marilyn slid by her chair and looked proudly at the book. “This is the book I stole from...” She stopped, stood, and shut the door. “This is the book I got from the Australian Club, that the psycho sniper-guy tried to kill me for.”

Ruwani came around Marilyn and sat down at the desk. She tried to open the book but couldn't. Marilyn opened it for her, which bothered Ruwani and amused Marilyn. Ruwani stared at the blank pages, not seeing the significance. “I thought you said you lost it.”

“I did,” she said with pride. “I got it back,” she said coyly.

“How?” asked Ruwani. Marilyn didn't answer, only smiled. Ruwani sighed and, her hands in her lap, turned towards Marilyn. “Mar, I'm worried about you. This?” She gestured at the book with a weak hand. “Going on a, a raid?” She looked scared. “What's going on?”

Marilyn cocked her hip and her jaw clinched as she crossed her arms. Ruwani, though, didn't flinch. She just sat, waiting to hear what Marilyn had to say. Marilyn sighed and let go of her defensiveness. She turned and sat down on the edge of the bed. “I don't understand why everybody's having such a problem with this.” She looked at Ruwani and revealed her sense of hurt. “The world...I want to change it. I want to help change it. And I need help changing it.” She shrugged. “I thought you guys were with me.”

“We are,” Ruwani said. She reached into Marilyn’s lap and took her hand. “We’re your friends. We’re, we’re with you!” She laughed, almost desperately. “But we’re not commandos. And we’re not terrorists.” That word cut Marilyn deep and she couldn’t hide her offense. Ruwani didn’t give up, though. “We’re committed,” Ruwani reiterated. “But like we used to be. Like...”

“Like before we met the knights,” Marilyn concluded. Ruwani didn’t look pleased with so succinct a summation but she couldn’t deny it either. “So what if we stop with...with...” She swallowed a sob. “What if we stopped with the Solaritec...case?”

“We could go back to looking into the human trafficking,” Ruwani said. She smiled. “Sadly, the Australian Club wasn’t our only lead.”

Marilyn nodded. Still holding Ruwani’s hand, she smiled at her friend and died a little inside.

It was the ugliest chocolate cake Sydney had ever seen, but also the sweetest one ever. A touched tear in her eye, she looked up at Roland and Morgan who sat it down on the dinette table. “You guys...” She wiped her eyes.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Morgan told her. He cut the cake, removing a healthy slice so Sydney could see the inter layers. “Yes,” he told her with a smile. “That’s a strawberry cake with chocolate frosting.”

Sydney snatched the piece off the knife and shoved it messily into her mouth, all too raucous laughter. Sydney accepted a paper towel and began to clean herself off. “Oh my god, it’s actually good.” More laughter. “When you told me these two idiots baked it, I was worried!” she confessed.

“Is it really strawberry with chocolate icing?” asked Jeanine as she opened another bottle of wine. She came in and sampled a piece as Morgan continued cutting for everyone. “Wow, that’s interesting.” She shared her bite with Edgar.

“Yeah, I experimented with cooking ages ago,” Sydney said. “I figured, I like chocolate-covered strawberries, why not see if it works.”

“It’s definitely interesting,” Everett said, having to will himself to eat the cake.

“Does everybody have a slice?” she asked. Confirming everyone had a sliver, Sydney just took the rest of the cake and began to devour it like it was a steak.

“One of these days, we’re going to have an eating contest,” Roland said, enjoying the cake.

“One of these days, you’re going to lose an eating contest,” Sydney assured him as she put the cake away with startling delight.

“Honey, honey,” Jeanine said, tapping Sydney on the shoulder with a glass of wine. Sydney said something as appreciative as incomprehensible and accepted the glass, sipping the wine.

The cake cut and clearly fully spoken for, Morgan headed into the kitchen and began to rinse off the knife. He cleaned all the fragments of cake from it, only to discover Sydney at the entrance of the kitchen. “Glad you liked the cake,” he told her.

“Thank you for making it,” she told him. She kissed his cheek as chastely and fraternally as possible. She rubbed his arm, an emotional exchange transpiring between them solely through silent expressions.

“I’m glad you liked it,” he told her. He sighed, emotionally ragged. “I think I need to head out.”

She didn't argue or ask, she just say, "Thanks for coming." Unsure what else to do, he squeezed her hand and departed without another word.

"Captain Sourpuss leaving?" asked Ledger, coming into the kitchen and rinsing off his plate. "Did he profess his love for you again?"

"Not in so many words," Sydney said, now looking concerned. She turned around to Ledger and shook his head. "I was hoping he'd moved on."

"That boy can hold a grudge longer than anyone," Ledger said sagely. "And a grudge against his own unrequited emotions is still a grudge." Sydney didn't disagree. Shifting gears, he said, "Roland and me are gonna head out too."

As he spoke, Jeanine and Edgar passed by the bar portion of the kitchen. "We're heading out, honey."

"Welcome home, Sydney," Edgar added, reaching through the opening and shaking Sydney's hand. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you guys, so much," Sydney repeated, after so many times.

Roland hugged Sydney goodbye and Armand gave her a handshake, followed by a hug. The youngest knight headed out with Ledger and Roland. The three were slow walking to Roland's car, waving to Edgar and Jeanine as they drove out. Once their break lights were in the distance, Armand asked, "Okay, so why am I getting a ride with you rather than my roommate?"

"So we can talk," Roland said. He and Ledger looked serious. "We want you to walk us through the rationale on your raid on Solaritec."

"Guys, Ev already gave me the riot act, and the related asskicking, over it," Armand groaned.

"No, that's not it," Ledger said. "We're...we're interested."

“Why?!” Armand exclaimed. “Why now? Why not, you know, when I needed the help?”

“Because we didn’t think you were serious,” Roland told him.
“And...and...yeah.” He looked Armand squarely in the eyes and said, “So what’s you got?”

Everett was rinsing off the dishes in the sink, trying to make do with the limited tools and utensils in the mostly empty kitchen. Sydney stood at the sliding door that looked out on the grassy plot that served as an informal, communal backyard for the townhouses in the unit. A glass of wine in her hand, she just stared in disbelief.

“You like it?” asked Everett after running the disposal. Sydney turned around, like she’d heard him speak but hadn’t processed what he said. “The apartment.”

“God...” Sydney sighed. “I love it. Though, I do have to admit, my standards are pretty low. After living in that trailer for the past two years.” She approached the bar-like counter of the kitchen. “I mean, not all the time, but you get what I mean.”

“Oh yeah,” Everett concurred. Sydney sipped her wine and looked inquisitively at Everett. Noticing, he smiled a little awkwardly, then laughed, then asked, “What?”

“So tell me about Marilyn,” Sydney asked. She squinted her eyes in faux-scrutiny. “Brunette. Not on a sports team, but...um...Zumba?”

“Ledger’s kung fu school,” Everett told her, knowing better than to resist the inquiry.

Sydney looked impressed. “Journalist?”

“Nonprofit organizer with aspirations towards crime fighter,” he said.

“Hmmm,” Sydney considered, having some more wine. “Have you slept with her yet?”

“What?!” Everett laughed. “No!” He couldn’t keep from blushing.

“There’s nothing in the Oath about chastity,” Sydney teased him in an academic tone. “Only a few versions is there anything about purity, and a pure slut’s not a bad thing.”

“Oh my god,” Everett groaned, covering his face in mortified amusement and frustration.

“Are you planning on tapping that?” asked Sydney, being deliberately vulgar.

“It’s not up to me,” Everett asserted.

“So you have thought about,” Sydney part accused, part confirmed.

“No more than any other guy would. In fact, probably less than you might think,” he defended, trying to find something to clean in the kitchen. “When I think about Marilyn, I don’t really think about that...much.” He rinsed off an already rinsed plate.

Sydney asked, “What do you think about?”

“Her smile,” Everett said quickly. More of the list followed without effort. “Her eyes. Her, her unbridled optimism. The way she sort of opens her mouth for just half a second before she actually starts speaking. Her scent. The way her hair...” He trailed off, lost in the wonderland of thoughts of Marilyn.

When he remembered the here and now, he found Sydney looking delighted at him from behind her wine glass. She declared, “You’ve got it bad.”

“I want to be the one who makes her smile,” Everett said, so smitten, he was sad.

Sydney’s delight dampened just a little. “Does she want you to be the one who makes her smile?”

Everett’s smile faded as well. “That remains to be seen.”

Aaron was on the phone in his office when the four came in. None of them even took a seat, they just stood as a group as Errol laid down a folder full of papers. Aaron took one look at the seriousness on their faces and said I to the phone, “I’m going to have to call you back.” He hung up the landline and asked, “Yes?”

“Jericho was developing a steroid,” Orson confirmed. He leaned over to open the folder, flipping through page after page. “He set up a whole operation in the lower levels of the Hand’s facilities to develop and test the steroid on selected Hand agents.”

“And Phillip has expanded the program,” added Errol. “Originally, Jericho had sixty or something guys on the program – including the sniper, Eli – but now there are over a hundred names selected to be attached to the program. And that’s not all.” Orson turned some more pages. “We’ve identified incoming shipments of copper wire, tungsten alloy—”

“Materials for a nuclear reactor,” Aaron concluded. He scanned the page. “The Triumvirate is still fielding proposals and design ideas and Phillip’s going ahead with the project.”

“He’s not going ahead with it; he’s GONE ahead with it,” said Orson.
“Construction’s already begun.”

Aaron grew more worried by the minute. “Is any of this plutonium or uranium?”

“We don’t know,” said Ian. “We suspect not.”

“Which means Phillip hasn’t secured it yet, or it’s coming through another channel.” Aaron shut the folder and the four stood ready for orders. The head of the Investigators’ Clan sat and thought for a moment, turned away from his team.

“Any word from the Triumvirate?” asked Errol in the lull.

Aaron shook his head, his mind clearly in a thousand other places. “I’ve kept them abreast of our investigation. I’ve given them regular updates. But I haven’t gotten a response.” He added absently, “That’s not like them.”

“You’ve seen them?” Ian exclaimed. The other three aides looked at him like he was an idiot.

“Nobody’s seen them, you moron,” Orson chastised him.

“Do we know when the materials will be arriving?” Aaron asked, determined to get back on track.

“They already have,” said Uriel. “Most of what’s on that list was already shipped out.”

“The last shipments leave next week,” said Ian. “And that’s moved up from the previous timetables, which had them trickling out over the next five months.”

Aaron nodded, grasping this all and fitting it into a picture that was very disturbing. “The reactor’s likely the last piece,” he presumed. “That means it may

be our last chance to get ahead of whatever it is Phillip's planning." He looked at his team and said, "Sounds like we've got less than a week."



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