

# Red Moon Rising

## Part 14 of 30

Series #2 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

by Robert V Aldrich

Red Moon Rising, Part 14 of 30

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“Sometimes, we make the process more complicated than we need to.”

Joseph Wirthlin, One Step After Another

—2 Days Ago—

When the elevator doors parted, Raphael was greeted to the sound of rolling carts. He waited as two large metal carts were wheeled past him, heading down the long windowless hallway of the Hand’s subterranean levels. He finally exited the elevator and, adjusting his tie as he walked, he headed down the main thoroughfare to the first medical bay. He walked in to find Dr Hoffman administering a shot. The hippie-looking doctor opened the eye of his patient, a muscular man who looked to be nearing death.

“What’s happening?” Raphael asked. He picked up the agent’s charts as he’d seen Jericho do a hundred times before. What he read, however, made no sense to him in the slightest.

“His system’s shutting down,” said the doctor. He turned and looked down his nose at Raphael. “I told you this would happen.” He began to get fired up. “I told you if we expanded the program—”

“Doctor, Phillip is the head of the Hand now,” Raphael said firmly. “If he wants the program expanded, the program is expanded.”

“Jericho was ambitious,” Hoffman warned. “But even he yielded to scientific fact. We spent months confirming the viability of the test subjects. You can’t just

throw somebody's name on a list and expect it to work. Or that they'll even survive!"

"Phillip's orders come from the Triumvirate," Raphael said directly.

The doctor looked insulted at so transparent a lie. "Do they now? Funny that they're so different from when Jericho was in charge."

Raphael said flatly, "I'm glad you find that funny." He turned and exited, saying as he left, "We need soldiers, doctor. Keep them alive." He backtracked to the elevator, certain the researcher was staring a hole in the back of his head. He stepped onto elevator car and hit the button for his floor. As soon as the doors shut, he slumped against the wall. He wiped his face and succumbed to fear. He had to exhale forcibly and deliberately to regain control. He was so focused on recapturing his composure that he barely had time to stand up again with the elevator stopped prematurely.

Three office workers got on, only one of whom Raphael recognized. The sole Hand operative nodded to him while the others ignored him. They rode up only a single floor before the doors opened again.

Aaron stepped on. He shifted his way to the rear of the car, putting his back to the window looking out over the gorgeous Solaritec campus and the sun in the morning sky. He smiled cheerfully at the others, especially when the elevator chimed and the three departed. The one Hand agent was slower than her peers as she glanced at Raphael. He nodded subtly for her to head on, that Aaron was within his capacity to handle. She did as she was told.

The instant the doors shut, Aaron lunged forward at the control panel. He turned his key to stop the car. "You and me need to talk," he said to Raphael.

Raphael looked up. "We're a floor away from my office. You couldn't have waited?"

“I know about the steroid,” he told Raphael.

The Hand second-in-command looked amused. “You know about the steroid,” he repeated, like it was the accusation that amused him.

“I also know about the fortress, which the Triumvirate thinks is still some designer’s dream and Phillip is making a reality,” Aaron told him. “And I know about the reactor.” For those accusations, Raphael had no glib response. “Raphael, I don’t know what Phillip has planned – yet – but I will find out.” He stepped a little closer, not uncomfortably so, just close enough to be honest. “The Triumvirate knows everything. I have kept no secrets from them and I have updated them daily. Their wrath is coming. Now, do you want to end up like Jericho and Eli? Led out of here like a dog to be put to sleep?”

“I truly don’t believe you mean ill will to the Brotherhood,” Aaron told him. He conceded cynically, “Maybe that’s just gullibility on my part. But work with me. Help me prove what Phillip has been up to, what he’s trying to accomplish. Help me to see the end game to his psychotic little plan, whatever it is. Help me,” he pled. He removed his key from the control board, allowing the elevator to resume. “And when the axe man comes,” he said, stepping back as the elevator slowed and opened, “I can save you from the block.”

Raphael didn’t move for a moment. He thought of the patient on the exam room table, just a dozen or so floors below them. He thought of the way Jericho and Eli had been led away. He lingered so long, the elevator doors started to close. He stopped them and walked out. On the other side of the threshold, he paused. Over his shoulder he said, “We’re not friends.” He faced forward and said morosely, almost desperately, “But maybe we can not be enemies.” He walked on, unable and unwilling to bother hiding the weighing burden. Aaron watched him depart until the doors shut, separating them.

“So how’d you become a knight?” asked Roland as he pulled into the parking space on campus. Armand got out on the other side of the car and looked wary. “What? It’s not a weird question,” Roland asserted defensively. “We’ve been frien...acquaintances for years now.”

“Six months,” clarified Armand.

“Yeah, but with knights, it’s like dog years,” Roland waved off. “You and me have never gotten the chance to really get to know each other.”

“Because every time we hang out, you’re really mean, or racist, or both,” Armand told him as they walked along the sidewalk.

“I’m that way with everyone,” Roland asserted as he cleaned a gaudy pair of sunglasses.

“That doesn’t make it better. In fact, that’s the opposite of better.”

“I’m a great guy once you get to know me,” Roland maintained.

“That’s the same thing as saying ‘you’re an ass but I’ll get used to it’,” Armand lamented.

“See? You’re already getting it,” Roland said cheerfully with a slap on Armand’s shoulder. “But, like, no, how’d you become a knight? Did they have lots of books on knights where you’re from?”

“Where I’m from?” Armand exclaimed indignantly. “I’m from Boston, you racist honkey! My parents met at a Pats’ game!” He stormed on from Roland, grumbling violent things. He led the way to the university atrium and stormed inside. He turned right at the door, up the step, and flopped down unceremoniously in a seat at the World Alliance’s usual table. Marilyn, at the head of the table with

her back to the door, was taken by surprise. Opposite Armand and on Marilyn's left, Victor was likewise a little speechless.

"Hey, what's up?" asked Roland, only a few steps behind. He sat down next to Armand, expertly ignoring the glare the knight gave him. He produced a large thermos from his trench coat and poured some coffee. He smiled overly cheerfully at Marilyn and Victor.

Victor endured the two knights for a moment and looked to Marilyn. "You sure you want to ask them?" he had no compunction asking in front of them.

"Ask us what?" Armand asked, perking up. "You said you wanted to talk."

Marilyn exhaled, feeling let down and feeling utility for letting herself down. "We're, the World Alliance, we're stepping back from the Solaritec case. We're going to follow up some of the other leads we had from the Australian Club. Leads concerning human trafficking in this city."

"Huh," Roland nodded. "How very...wise." Marilyn couldn't decide if he was being genuine or not. The intervening silence was punctuated by the sounds of silverware and serving trays from the food court of the atrium.

After an awkward moment, Victor spoke up. "I've been going through some of the discs that we got from our raid on the Australian Club." Roland mouthed the word 'raid' in great amusement. "I've found some receipts to a few companies that own competing, smaller clubs. It's nothing really out of the ordinary but they're clubs Sizemore and his company Urbane Entertainment don't have a direct connection to. Maybe he was doing a favor for a friend, but it's still a little odd."

"We want to go check out one of the clubs," said Marilyn. She sat forward on the table a little, looking anxious. "As I told Armand, I was kind of hoping to do it tonight." She braced herself for some form of ridicule from one or both of the knights.

To her surprise, Roland suggested to Armand, “We should grab Sydney. She’s jonesing to get back into it.” Armand nodded, ambivalent.

“Who’s Sydney?” asked Marilyn. “Is he another knight?”

“She,” corrected Roland. Marilyn’s jaw dropped. Roland turned to Armand and lamented, “I’ve opened a flood gate, haven’t I?”

“It looks that way,” agreed Armand.

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—Now—

“Why were you so crazy to meet a dame?” asked Everett.

“That still sounds like an awfully sexist thing to say,” Marilyn said. “When I hear it, I think about, like, gangsters and old black-and-white movies, you know?”

“They appropriated the term from the knights, whether directly or indirectly, I don’t know,” said Morgan. “But a dame is a female knight. Sir Everett,” he said gesturing. “Dame Sydney.”

“Anyway, it’s because Sydney like a blonde Wonder Woman,” said Marilyn. “How many, like, action hero women are there, outside of comics and video games?”

“And even then,” agreed Morgan.

“I mean, I still get looks when people learn I do kung fu,” Marilyn said. “When people see that I own MMA gloves, they think they’re for cardio kickboxing or something. The idea that there was someone as hardcore as a knight, but is a woman? Just the chance to meet somebody like that was too good to let pass me by.”

“Yeah, Sydney has that effect on people,” Morgan said with a melancholy smirk. He shook it off and looked to Everett. “So we were moving in a friend and she was going back to the relative safety of investigating human traffickers. Do we know what the Legion of Doom was up to?”



—2 Days Ago—

Phillip raised the pistol and fired twice. He lowered the gun and squinted, trying to see how well he’d grouped his shots. Certain he was going to be disappointed, he hit the recall button on the range track, bringing his paper target back towards him.

The mayor leaned into his cubicle and studying the shots that were all over the target, half of them not even on the human shaped outline. “You know, for someone who doesn’t do this regularly, you aren’t too bad.”

“Thanks,” Phillip said, changing out the magazine on the gun. “I built a gun once. For an engineering class. I mean, it was basically just a Glock but I designed and built it from scratch.” He looked at the pistol he’d loaded. “I’ve always been

better with building stuff than using it. Been better at it and preferred it.” He glanced to the corner of the silent firing range and stared at the security camera for a moment. “Why did you want to meet here again?”

“Oh, it’s a great place to meet,” the mayor casually remarked as he loaded replacement rounds into Phillip’s spare magazine. “It’s plausible. It’s nearby, plus you don’t have to deal with the weather. The security feed doesn’t have sound so there’s no risk in being overheard. And on the off chance of being bugged, it’s all inadmissible because of the possible interference and damage from the discharge noise.” He returned to his own firing line and selected a revolver from the array of pistols he’d brought in to try. “Plus, golf has a stigma attached to it. Most voters don’t like to see elected officials on the golf course. But a huge segment of voters like to see us holding guns. So, really, this is win-win.” He fired six shots, his grouping impeccable.

Phillip watched the paper target return and felt a twinge of fear. “Some people in my organization are snooping around.” The mayor didn’t hesitate at all as he flipped open the cylinder and loaded more rounds. “I’m worried about complications they could cause. I think if we—”

“If you,” the mayor corrected. Phillip seemed a little taken back. “This city’s not getting involved in a power struggle in Solaritec’s ranks. Or I guess I should say, anymore. Or how about not again?” He put the gun down and turned to Phillip. “You did an impressive job, Phillip. I’ll grant you that. You greased the right palms. Hacked the right accounts. You did a great job making your strategic little openings for your sniper.” Phillip looked furious. The mayor turned away from him and picked up his gun and took aim. “This city isn’t your playground.”

“No, apparently, it’s yours,” Phillip said spitefully, unable to stay silent.

The mayor whirled around to Phillip. For the briefest of seconds, the revolver was aimed right at him. “That’s right,” the mayor made clear. He put the gun down and stared directly at Phillip. “I don’t know why you were killing your own people.

I don't really care. And in the grand scheme of things, nobody else does either. What I care about is this city's reputation, this city's tourism, this city's recreation. And Solaritec is going to hold up its end of the bargain." Phillip didn't protest. He just glared. "But there is going to be no more trouble out of that campus. No more problems at all. So help me, my officers hear so much as a car backfire from that office park and we will arrest every man, woman, and child, we find there."

The mayor picked up his gun. "Solaritec is gonna be on its best behavior. Or Solaritec will be no more." He punctuated his point with six head shots to the paper target.

Night had fallen in the city. There were no stars. The sky was blotted out by the ambient light of the buildings and businesses. The sound of traffic and travel echoed as cars drove and people walked. There was laughter, chatter, and noise.

The absence of silence weighed on Marilyn. As she was driven through the city, she crossed a street that looked familiar. It held the mouth of the alleyway where she and Everett had escaped Eli's murderous rampage. Thoughts of silence during Eli chasing her turned into thoughts of withheld words as she stood in that alley across from Everett. She couldn't help but remember every detail of the way the nighttime light fell on his skin, his clothes, how his red shirt had almost seemed to glow.

She looked into the driver's seat as Victor drove. It dawned on her that he'd been talking the whole time. "I just think it's a bad idea," he summarized.

"I know," Marilyn acknowledged without knowing what he'd been referring to. She thought about the alley again, about being across from Everett after he'd saved her life. She reached out and took Victor's hand, squeezing it. He looked at her a smiled, but focused on the drive.

They passed through downtown and arrived at an empty parking lot which time had demolished. Marilyn got out and looked up at the sky. A stiff breeze blew off the city, bringing with it the hot scent of the urban world. Again, Marilyn was lost in thoughts of the windless world when Eli had chased her, and again when Raphael had tried to kill her.

Her dreaming was broken when Roland's Camaro rode up. He hopped out with Armand. Both men held their doors to give Sydney the option. She slipped out on Armand's side and looked around with a big smile. "Been a while," she said as she flapped her black trench coat against her red t-shirt. She saw Victor and Marilyn and introduced herself. "I'm Sydney." When they shook hands, Marilyn felt like she was shaking hands with a goddess of war.

"You're a knight?" asked Victor.

"I am," she said with a confident nod. She began to put her shoulder-length blonde hair up in a notch top. "Dame Sydney Pointer," she said, a black hairband in her teeth. "Returned defender of the city."

Victor seemed deliberately unimpressed. He glanced at Marilyn and, mistaking her awe-struck gaze for staring at Sydney's breasts, he jabbed her in the arm to wake her up. "Right," Marilyn said, shaking it off and getting down to business. She unfolded a map and laid it down on Roland's trunk. "The place in question is a club called Dance Macabre. It's about four blocks that way. It's supposed to be, like, this smoking club or something. You buy high-end cigars and brandy and stuff and get your own little room."

"And your own little cubicle comes with your own little hottie?" asked Roland.

"Roland," Sydney chastised. "These women are sex slaves."

"Yeah," Marilyn agreed a little too enthusiastically, surprised she didn't have to be the one to make that point. "So, what I was thinking is, Victor and me will go in first and get a drink or something."

“Okay, yeah, let me stop you right there,” said Roland. “Do you know how much this place costs?”

“No, do you?” Victor all but accused.

“I know it’s very possible you’re looking at three digits for a single drink,” Roland told him. “You guys ready to drop that kind of money?” Victor hedged.

“Yeah, and I don’t know what kind of establishment this is, but if they have that kind of price list, are you dressed nice enough for it?” Armand added. Taking the reins of the discussion, he said, “I was thinking we’d position Roland and Syd here and—”

“Sydney,” she corrected him.

“Sydney, here and here,” he said, placing rocks on the map.

“Man, why am I a rock?” Roland groaned childishly. He picked up the rock and replaced it with a piece of glass. Having done so, Sydney stared at him for a second before shaking her head in both disappointment and delight at how she’d missed being disappointed by him.

“You and Victor will be here,” Armand went on, having grown extremely skilled at ignoring Roland. “I’ll be here. That will give us maximum vantage points to see who comes and goes.”

“To what end?” asked Sydney. “Do you think they’ll be moving the women tonight?” Armand shrugged. “Why are we just watching the establishment from the outside?”

“Well...” Armand paused, trying to come up with a reason. “That way we can...we can follow a customer. We can follow him and, and find out what he knows.”

“Can we please go a week without mugging somebody?” Roland asked, the only one of the four not around the map.

“Attacking a departing customer just because we suspect them of having evidence is illegal,” Victor told Armand, almost like it was a threat.

“Everything we’re doing is illegal,” Sydney countered.

“Yeah, we’re loitering the crap out of this parking lot right now,” Roland added.

“Somebody needs to go inside,” Marilyn insisted, fighting to take charge of the discussion. “It doesn’t have to be me or Victor,” she said like it was a concession. “But we can’t just scope the place out from the outside.”

“I thought that was the plan?” argued Victor.

“It was, but with five of us, we can be proactive,” Armand supported. The three of them devolved into a debate over the procedure for the night. Sydney just sighed and stepped back from the discussion. She gave them a minute to get somewhere and, upon giving up on that, she looked at Roland and just gestured with her head. He nodded and walked off.

Four blocks over, Roland approached Dance Macabre. It was in the middle of a building that was actually recessed into the ground. A story drop encircled the building like some kind of moat. The metal grating that encircled the rest of the building was absent here and in its place was a metal bridge that approached a single, narrow door with a red light.

Roland opened the door and found two guards inside. He nodded casually to them both and didn’t even break stride. He just walked through the vestibule like he owned the place. Through the heavy drapes on the other side, he was greeted to a luxurious red and leather club of impossible style. Women in vaguely flapper-like lingerie strutted about, serving drinks in short, heavy glasses. Booths filled the main

floor that faced a jazz quartet while a bar sat to the left. To the right were two spiral staircases that led to several floors worth of densely-packed doors.

Roland approached the bar and picked up a menu from a small stack. He perused the options until the bartender approached. “Hey,” he said before the bartender in the tuxedo vest could speak. “Can I get a Courvoirsier?” He handed the menu over to the man. “I don’t know much about cigars,” he admitted, looking around the club with a less-than-impressed look. “The last time I was in a club like this was in New Orleans. It was cognac and hookahs. Can you make a recommendation?”

“I generally recommend those new to cigars to start with the Stradivarius,” said the bartender as he poured Roland’s drink in a bulbous glass. He passed it across the deeply lacquered bartop. “Care for one?”

Roland didn’t answer immediately. He sniffed the cognac and took a sip, both deliberating and savoring the flavor. Once he’s decided it was adequate, he nodded to the doors. “Sure. Can I have it delivered? I hate to smoke alone.” As he spoke, a door opened and out came an older man, just lighting his cigar. Through the door, Roland could see a young woman still dressing.

“Sure,” the bartender confirmed. “Any preferences?”

“Japanese if it’s available,” he said, sniffing the drink again. “A kimono would be lovely, too.”

The bartender smiled. “I’m not sure that we can arrange that on such short notice but I’ll see what we can do.”

“Great,” Roland said with a smile. He wrapped his knuckles lightly on the bar top as he stood. “Room eleven good?” he asked, gesturing with the glass.

“Uh, yeah, I think so,” the barman hurried to make sure.

Roland didn't wait for any further confirmation. He strolled across the luxurious club, smiling to a few of the women. He headed up the spiral stairs to the second floor and knocked lightly on the door with two silver ones. With no answer, he opened it. Inside was a climate-controlled little space. The whole room was upholstered with deep red, burgundy, and brown. A single lamp sat on a table by the extremely comfortable high-back chair. A bench was set into the wall, just as cushioned.

Roland sat in the chair and, after a sip of his drink, he took out his phone. No service, but he tried to send a text anyway. To Sydney, he wrote, "Inside, be out in just a second. Probably running."

There was a knock and the door opened. In stepped an Asian woman in a mandarin dress. Roland looked her up and down as she presented him with a cigar. "<Do you speak Japanese?>" he asked in Japanese, already knowing the answer. "<How about Korean?>" he tried. "<Mandarin?>" Cycling through the languages got him nowhere. He accepted the cigar and further scrutinized her dress. "Not exactly a kimono. And I think mistaking it for a kimono is racist, but whatever." The woman was clearly confused.

Roland took her hand and started to sit her down on the bench, but she lowered to her knees. "No, no, none of that." He set her on the bench and knelt before her. She instinctively opened her legs. "No, God, stop," he protested, closing her knees. Now she was really confused. "Do you speak English?"

She shook her head and said "No," with a heavy accent.

He sighed. "Of course not." He looked at his phone and sighed. "There's no downloading an app now," he remarked with regards to the lack of signal. He looked the woman right in the eyes and asked, "Do you want to leave?"

Fear crept into her gaze. She shook her head. "I cannot."

“You can; I’ll help you,” he told her. “I can get you out of here, right now. And I can get you somewhere safe, to people who will help you.”

For a second, she looked almost angry. She looked mad at Roland for daring to raise her hopes. But in a blind leap of faith born of desperation, she nodded and whispered, “Please.”

“Will do,” Roland said. “I need you to stay calm. There’s about to be some blood.” He stood and took another sip of the drink. He looked down at her and smiled, pledging, “On my honor, you’re getting out of here tonight.” He took her hand and opened the door.

The moment he left the room with the Asian woman, several men moved to the base of the stairs. Roland descended without hesitation while the woman he escorted began to panic. She grabbed his hand, trying to force herself free out of terror of the men waiting on the bottom floor. Roland’s grip held firm and they made it to the base of the stairs.

“Sir, you can’t leave the rooms in the presence of—” said the closest of three men. His sentence was cut short by Roland chopping him in the throat with the web of his hand. As the guy fell away, coughing and unable to breath, Roland kicked he shin of the man on his left, then with the same leg kicked the stomach of the man on his right. He released the woman’s wrist long enough to turn into a flurry of punches and strikes against both men. In a flash, they went down and Roland grabbed the woman’s wrist and kept pulling her to the door.

Through the curtain came the two front guards, both drawing pistols. Roland grabbed both guns and hit the slide releases, pulling the top off both guns. He threw them into the faces of the guards. The left guard went down an instant later with a tumult of punches. Just as the right guard turned on Roland, he kicked up and back, slamming his heel into the bigger man’s jaw. The front of his mandible seemed to cave in and he stumbled back. Roland skipped into a second kick at the man’s head and hit with enough force to take the completely off his feet.

Roland grabbed the woman's wrist and led her through the curtains. He picked up one of the seats the guards had with them and kicked open the door. On the bridge were two more armed guards, neither of them ready for Roland to throw furniture. He threw the chair at the first guard and pushed the guard's extended gun-hand up high. He punched the man twice in the stomach and flipped him onto his back. The final guard tried to shoot at Roland but he parried the gun like he was parrying a knife. A quick and subtle takedown and he threw the guard over the railing of the bridge. He reached across the first guard, grabbed the woman's wrist, and pulled her onto the sidewalk.

They began to walk briskly away, the woman trembling in the night heat. Roland glanced back, waiting for more guards to show up. To his surprise, he heard the sounds of police sirens. "This way," he said, ducking down an adjacent street. He took off his trench coat and swung it over the woman. The sword hidden inside the coat tugged the coat practically off her but Roland held it in place as two police cruisers went shooting by. "Keep going," Roland told her, guiding her.

By the time he arrived back at the empty parking lot, the others were wondering aloud what all the police were doing. "Hey guys," Roland called as he escorted/guided the woman to the waiting cars. "Look what I found. Can I keep her? Also, we should REALLY get the hell out of here. Like, right now."

"Did you just..." Armand exclaimed, mostly out of jealousy.

"What part of 'gotta go' didn't you get?" Roland exclaimed, unlocking his Camaro.

"Why are there police?" Marilyn exclaimed along with the incredulous Victor.

"Cause there was a fight, duh!" Roland exclaimed back.

"And a fire, apparently," said Sydney. Everyone stopped and turned and saw the black smoke rising out of the distance. Even blocks away, they could already feel the building heat.

“Oh hell, that’s bad,” Roland whispered in fear.

Sydney took the woman’s hand and asked Marilyn, “Can you get her out of here?”

“I know a friend at a women’s shelter not far away,” Marilyn said. The liberated woman seemed in shock but went with Marilyn without protest. The three got in Victor’s car and drove off. Marilyn watched behind them as downtown began to pass them by. Once it was behind them, Marilyn sat forward and said, “That was amazing.”

“That was stupid,” Victor grumbled violently. “She could have been killed. We all could have been killed. What kind of an idiot just walks into a place like that?”

Marilyn said, “A knight, apparently.”



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