

October 15, 1739
New Orleans

The La'Providence came to port just after midnight on October 15, 1739. When Elira and Meka disembarked, they were dressed more like the Stranger who accompanied them—appropriate for a well-to-do couple in New Orleans of that time.

They were greeted by a Native American Architect named White Wind, an ancient wandering Architect who, like the Stranger, served no single House but moved among them in service to all. Having no families of their own, wanderers often lived for centuries—sometimes millennia. White Wind had known the Stranger for nearly a thousand years, but Elira and Meka he had never met; his lifetime had been spent entirely in the Americas.

“My brother,” White Wind said, looking first at the Stranger. “I welcome you to your home in the West. Lady Elira, Lord Meka—it is an honor to meet you at last. Sophie has made all the arrangements. Would you like to see the home prepared for you, or shall we proceed directly to the theater and open the chamber?”

“Are they far apart?” Elira asked.

“Not far at all,” White Wind replied. “The house sits four city blocks from the nearly completed theater. It’s staffed by people who have been in the Architect’s service for centuries.”

Money would smooth their arrival. Elira and Meka would be accepted as investors in New Orleans’ cultural life, though expected to maintain the appearance of owning slaves or

indentured servants. Those who served the Architects were neither—but they knew how to keep up appearances.

“This will be an adjustment for you, my Queen,” said the Stranger.

“It will.” Elira replied. “Our perceptions at least are always here to support us through changing times.”

“I will remain here in New Orleans for as long as you both need,” White Wind said, looking at Elira and Meka.

He pulled forth his parallax device, identical to the one Elira had used on the voyage, all Architects carried one. Looking to the stranger “The stone in Mexico calls for your attention, my brother,”

“Yes,” the Stranger replied. “My father came from that house. We explored much of the Americas together in my youth. It has been a long time, after so many centuries in Europe and Asia, I imagine the stones have need of my memories .”

“I look forward to knowing you, White Wind,” said Elira. “We are like you—descended, on our human side, from cultures now under siege. That the Oasis stone comes here now is a measure of hope for where this continent is headed.”

Then she turned to the Stranger. “But you, my friend—I still have need of you this night. A stone to move... and I would like to see my daughter.”

“Of course, my Queen,” the Stranger replied.

Elira smiled gently. “The Europeans here may accept my status, but I think it’s time you let that title go.”

Meka laughed. “She’s been telling me that for fifty years. She may be my wife, and I may be her Paladin—but I’ll be damned if I ever stop calling her my Queen, or Talira my princess.”

White Wind bowed slightly. “The legend of Keshtara, its Oasis, and your people’s healing arts is revered all over the world. I am glad to know the chamber in Africa will remain open for centuries to come, not closed as others have been when a stone’s moved.”

“As are we all,” Elira replied.

They boarded the waiting carriage and began the short journey to the Théâtre LaCroix.

Inside, White Wind handed Elira two letters. “These came through the arches in the House in New York. I was asked to give them to you.”

Elira opened the first, read it, then opened the second—much shorter—and laughed aloud.

“The first is from Lord Crane,” she said. “Welcoming us to the Americas—and cautioning “House LaCroix” against using our wardstone family name for the theater. The second is from Sophie. It says: ‘Tell Crane to fuck off.’ Clea has signed it as well.”

She handed the letters to Meka, then looked to the Stranger. “So what’s this about? House LaCroix?”

White Wind glanced at the Stranger.

The Stranger looked at the letters. Not just Sophie—Clea too he thought.

"I know Crane," White Wind said. "He is... very concerned with his House's prominence, especially after so much of his Seneca heritage was lost. But what exactly what does 'Sophie mean to say, "fuck off"

Elira smiled politely. "Look to the words in the future."

White Wind's eyes flashed white for a brief instant. "Ah. Yes. Fuck off." He allowed himself a small chuckle. "Yes... I might say the same. He is, how do you say it... a bit of an ass."

"I like Sophie," Meka said. "She's not much older than our daughter. She spent a summer with us in her wandering days, we have been close ever since."

"That Wardstone family nonsense," the Stranger said. "House Wren, House Rao— little more than the extended families of an Architect in charge, mostly human, with no knowledge of the stones or what it means to guard one. An entirely hollow institution."

"We are meant to have human lives of our own," Elira said. "Lives that preserve the cultures we were born into."

"Yes, my Queen. If not for your line ancient Keshtara would be all but forgotten. It's just... Crane is looking forward, not backward. The Paris stone recently chose Sophie—a wildborn—over the De Valcourt heir. That's why the De Valcourt heir married the last living heir in Peru. Calling yourselves House LaCroix won't preserve your line of succession—or anyone's."

White Wind nodded slowly. "Yes... I understand this fully now, and I agree. Tell him to fuck off."

Wandering Architects like White Wind and the stranger were often looked upon as meddlesome as potential usurpers because of their long lifespans and mixed heritage. A Wildborn one with no traceable ancestry to other Architects or Emissary genes could be treated with outright resentment at times, but by charter had to be both expected and accepted. Sophie's recent succession to the wardstone title in Paris was not foreseen, becoming a source of speculation that served no purpose.

The carriage arrived at the theater. White Wind introduced them to two men guarding the site. The building looked grand for 1739 New Orleans, though entirely dark at this hour. That, however, was not why they had come.

White Wind led them to a hidden stair behind the staging area that descended below.

At its base stood a stone door, as ancient in appearance as the architecture of the Oasis. Elira retrieved her parallax device and placed it into a matching indentation in the door. The door opened inward with a creak older than memory.

The air inside was stale. Elira raised her palms forward, and released a subtle force. Fresh air rushed past her into the chamber, and gas lamps ignited along the passage within.

The stone was not yet present yet so the light of the Via was absent.

There was no sign the chamber had ever been entered—but that was expected. Chambers were said to be placed when the stones themselves were first set, 6000 years ago, How many chambers existed in the world was not known. One was created for each of

the 12 stones, including locations they would occupy in the future. When a stone moved some of the chambers were sealed for eternity, others released a shard for the chamber to remain operational as long as was necessary. This chamber was nearly identical to all of the others with only subtle cosmetic changes.

It bore a distinct Art Deco design—though that style would not exist for another 150 years. The domed ceiling formed an octagon. At the center stood a pedestal for the stone. A crafted bench faced it. Opposite, an eight-foot mirror in a brass frame. Beside it, a stone archway that led nowhere but into solid rock. Next to the arches a round clock and a painting hung side by side—the painting unmistakably a Georgia O’Keeffe flower, an artist that would not be born for centuries.

Elira placed her parallax device on the pedestal.

White Wind and the Stranger stepped forward, placing their hands around it, while Meka stood aside. The light of the Via poured down through the dome, into the device igniting the chamber far beyond the glow of gaslight.

As soon as the Via touched it, the three Architects withdrew.

The mirror briefly flickered and the archway came alive.

A blue light filled its frame, followed by a shifting static—like a distant, future signal searching for form. Then it cleared.

On the other side of the arches the Oasis chamber was now visible.

Talira waited there, arms crossed.

“You’re late,” she said.

Elira crossed through the arch immediately, embracing her daughter. Meka followed. The Stranger and White Wind remained behind, giving the family some space.

Once they parted, Elira motioned the stranger forward asking for his Parlux which he placed on top of the Keshtaran Continuum Stone.

The device vanished into the stone’s surface.

The stone responded with a deep resonance. Then— a cracking sound as it lifted from its pedestal.

On the New Orleans side, White Wind opened his arms as the Via’s white light now shifted from Elira’s device directly into him.

The stone began to move slowly through the arches, its internal light swirling rapidly. As it passed through, a shard could be seen left behind—blue diamond, sapphire and granite—still lit by the Via on the Oasis side.

The greater mass of the stone drifted forward and settled onto the New Orleans pedestal, silent as a breath. Elira’s device appeared on top of it.

“It is done,” the Stranger said.

The others nodded in agreement.

Meka remained with Talira on the Oasis side while Elira returned through the arch to the New Orleans side.

“From the look on your face” she said to the Stranger, taking his arm, “I would guess you are already planning to leave.”

“Mexico is calling” he said. “But I think I will walk. Take some time to remember this side of the world properly.”

“Then let me walk you out. The sun is rising. Let us see this new city together.”

“I would enjoy that very much my Queen”

They climbed the stairs in silence and emerged into the theater’s main room, now lit by early morning.

“Oh My,” the Stranger said softly. “This will be far more lively than what you’re used to. Theatrics generate powerful emotion. The continuance energy here will be... emerald. Bright. Alive.”

Elira smiled. “A good color for our kind.”

They stepped outside into a waking New Orleans.

“I am glad you are here, my Queen,” he said. “I think I will remain in the Americas for some time. Perhaps this theater will become more than a House—perhaps it’s the model others will follow.”

“It will serve,” Elira said quietly, releasing his arm. “You will be here. When Meka and I walk the Via... you will be here. For Talira. For her children.”

She paused.

“For Cyrus. For April.”

The Stranger accepted those names bore significance

*“Cyrus. He is the one who builds what comes next,” she said.
“The gathering place all others will follow.”*

“And the stone?” he asked.

She exhaled slowly and breathed in before speaking.

“In roughly 250 years, it will move again. To Los Angeles—the creative capital of the world. A time when the Via burns brighter in all of humanity than it does now.”

She looked past him, seeing something distant.

“I have not seen a world fully awake to its light...no one has. But I have seen a world that comes a step closer. Beyond the major wars, creative talents unbounded by superstition. Time and imagination moving together. Some new optimism emerging in both the arts and sciences. I see Camelot’s reflection fulfilled in many places.”

Her gaze returned to him.

“And in that time—you will not be alone.”

He said nothing.

“You will stand with my blood again,” she said. “My great-granddaughter. Together, you will have need of each other... in our house: the Atlas.”

He repeated it softly. “The Atlas.”

“The name of the Titan that carried the weight of the world on his back,” she said.

“I see more, many latent fires gathered together not fully awake, rivalry among houses, and some of those you knew in your youth. I see a fulfillment of the prismatic. A new intelligence, a new sphere, a young wildborn at the center of it all.”

The stranger frowned at the mention of the Prismatic.

“I was a child when the M’Naads and Paladins were made. My mother was very, critical of it’s use, and the alliances made.”

“I know dear one, our stone has granted me many memories. , your birthplace had many unexpected alliances. So I have prepared this for you.”

She reached into her handbag and produced a large blue sapphire set within a circle of silver on a silver chain.

“This is how we gave the Absence slumber when it came to us weary and benevolent. The Blue continuance of the Oasis burns bright within it and will never expire. A gift from our house to our great ally from the outside world.”

Elira stepped forward and kissed the stranger's cheek.

“May all your endless steps be blessed, my friend.”

He inclined his head once, then turned.

The street was empty.

After only a few steps, the humid air shifted around him—bending and distorting the spheres into the path that he chose.

And then he was gone.

Chapter 6: The Atlas

On Friday morning, a week and a half after the first Reflex, Ben found himself being called into work earlier than usual. Kelvin was still fast asleep when April texted him, asking him to bring Kelvin's new proposal and relaying the unusual request that he sync Elaine rather than Zak when he got there. Cyrus and Stephon would be joining them.

Ben looked at the tattoo on his wrist as he drove, the mark of the Paladin brotherhood, and said his mantra at a red light to keep the anxiety from overwhelming him. A meeting with those three wasn't normal venue business; with the two Architects and their Paladins, this was Continuum House business.

Being a Paladin was a sacred duty passed from father to son alongside the *Wardstone* Architect families that guarded the twelve Continuum Stones around the world. Many of the other Houses used their family name — House of Wren, House of Crane, and so on — but April's family, ancient as it was, did not ascribe to that political structure. The LaCroix's were descended from a forgotten civilization called Keshtara in West Africa, now existing in the present only as a hidden oasis of healers, or so Ben had been told. He had never been there.

His family came to serve the LaCroixs in New Orleans. The story of their bond as Americans when Napoleon sold the Louisiana territory was a rich and proud history. Ben's grandfather moved to Los Angeles when Cyrus was converting the Atlas site from

warehouse to a nightlife venue in the seventies. The continuum stone itself had moved to LA in 1972, when the conversion was complete.

Ben's father had served as an Atlas Paladin until his death at the LaCroix theater site during Hurricane Katrina. His Dad was not the only Paladin to serve this house. Stephon Chen, the Atlas managing partner, who concerned himself almost entirely with the business side of the Atlas, was also a Paladin. He and Cyrus were like second fathers to Ben. Both were far older than they appeared, as those who guarded Continuum Stones often lived two and a half times longer than normal humans.

Architects had many abilities considered *magical*, delaying the aging process for themselves and those they loved among them. Paladins had one primary skill: to generate fields that, for lack of a better term, blocked magic both kinds of energy that fueled a seemingly magical result. Be it the white light of the *Via* that powered the continuum stones or the multi-colored *Continuances*, which appeared as auroras over crowds; a Paladin could generate a field preventing anyone from drawing that energy. Paladins shared one ability with Architects, to shift their vision, to see the unseen, that included not just magical energies and weather patterns but also geological disturbances, and behavioral patterns. Their vision made them terrific truthsayers, easily able to discern the difference between truth and belief; it made them great trackers even in Urban environments. They did not see or communicate with spirits, that plane of existence was not the Architects area of concern.

The Architects themselves were, for the most part, gentle observers of history, not just human history but the meteorological

and geological history of the planet. They used their abilities quietly, gathering data for the stones. They perceived time differently, and that was what was changing within Kelvin, gradually. Calling the continuum stones a STONE was a description from antiquity, they were very much alive and aware with the light of the Via, their intelligence in no way artificial. Following a signal from the stones while drawing on both magical energies together, Architects could *Traverse the Via* and travel through time. To accomplish this, they had built structures of all kinds over the continuum chambers that held stones for millenia with varying degrees of success: libraries, theaters, baths, arenas. Cyrus's modern nightlife model, his transformation of the Atlas from warehouse to a multiplex event space rapidly proved itself an astonishing successful form for a continuum house. Hosting diverse manageable-sized crowds that generate steady flows of Continuance energy needed to transverse the Via. The Via itself that powered the stones, was ever present. The Atlas had proven so successful that ten of the other eleven Continuum Houses scattered around the globe had now adopted the nightlife model as well.

Ben hadn't used his Paladin abilities in what felt like ages, but when the fog filled with eyeballs went 3D on screen in the middle of Kelvin's first Reflex event, Ben felt that supernatural vibe and had been ready to use his ability. He recognized the woman with Claude that night, Sabine as an M'naad. A witch who could manipulate Continuance energy and change its color among many other things, so that a joyous crowd could become bored or even violent. For Claude to have one at his side while spinning was interesting to say the least. M'naads were sometimes allies, sometimes adversaries, and Ben suspected Sabine to be the

latter. Claude Ben had come to the conclusion was a good guy. Neither Ben nor Sabine used their abilities that night, the lights came up and everything was fine. He still had no idea what the voices were; Elaine had only said that Kelvin had stepped outside of time and called on the Via. Ben had a feeling in his gut that this meeting he was on his way to was at least partly about that.

All of this had been running through Ben's head over and over for the past few days. The truth was that actual supernatural activity was rare. Every once in a while, some rogue hybrid being or deity would wander into the club and make mischief, that was it. His father had taught him that science replacing superstition had changed the game by subduing supernatural self awareness.

"Talent was just talent, *For now*," his father would say.

Always finishing that sentence, *for now*. Somehow, some way, it felt like the arrival of the scions was changing the game, but Ben didn't know how, and he felt guilty for not foreseeing it. Elaine and Zak were just basically a hobby two room mates shared when he and Kelvin first moved in together.

A horn honked behind him when a red light turned green, breaking his train of thought. His mind had been wandering this way every time the car stopped. Once he pulled into the club's parking lot he sat and took the building in for a moment.

The Atlas building sits on the south side of Olympic, with Taurus Avenue along its west side. The west face holds the valet pull-up and three street-level public entries: Up North closest to Olympic, Up South farther back, and the main entrance to the large

two-story circular room in the center. A small parking lot serves the offices and Sidestreet pub on the west side, while the east side contains the main parking structure and the ground-level entrances to Down North and Down South. Each of the four square rooms has its own box office, stage, DJ and lighting booth, dressing rooms, and a side office or meeting room connected to employee-only hallways and stairwells. The rooftop is divided into five smoking patios, each linked to its room by its own stairwell; the central patio wraps around a glass dome overlooking the 1,500-person circular room. At the rear, the building drops back to one story for storage, topped by a covered private patio that functions like a seventh space. A valet driveway also enters from Taurus at the back patio.

Cyrus had purchased the property, called it Atlas, and began construction in 1939, two hundred years after his grandmother had built the theater LaCroix in New Orleans. He activated the Continuum chamber on the property when construction began but did not move the stone to its present location until 1972, leaving a shard behind in New Orleans to keep that chamber active just as his grandmother had done with the Oasis. The stone in its chamber now sat directly beneath the circular room. No window opened onto the chamber's dome into the club above, but to those gifted and able to shift their vision, the white light of the Via often appeared as a shimmering line of energy descending from the sky through both domes into the Continuum Stone itself.

Ben stood with his arms crossed for a moment, proudly looking at his workplace. He took a deep breath and went inside, feeling somewhat more confident than he had on the ride over.

He walked into the front offices, greeting Doug Houston, the office manager, on the way in. Doug was African American and had worked for the LaCroixs since he was a teenager. The venue paid for his college; he graduated from UCLA at the top of his class, majoring in accounting, and became a CPA a year later. Since then, Doug had been the absolute controller of the venue's financial affairs, and he was often the only employee present in the morning on weekdays. He possessed a strong, expressive face characterized by deep-set dark brown eyes, thick eyebrows, a well-defined jawline, and a neatly trimmed beard. Standing six feet two inches tall, he had a rich, warm dark brown complexion and an intimidating, physically fit athletic build with broad shoulders.

Everybody liked Doug. After fifteen years working at the Atlas, he had no knowledge of its role as a Continuum House or the LaCroixs' supernatural heritage. He was, however, fond of saying the venue was haunted by his now-deceased mother-in-law, a former Atlas bartender who hated him for stealing her daughter.

"Hey, Doug," Ben said. "April called me early. Anything major going on? Who's here right now?"

"Just April, Cyrus, and Stephon," he said. "They're down in the circle's side office waiting for you. Nothing much else going on. I think it'll be slow this weekend. There's a big EDM festival in the desert."

"Yeah, I saw that. Less work for us. I'll go find them. Thanks."

The circle's office was small, adjacent to the entry and box office on the west side of the building. Ben could cut through the Down

North to the circle and it's office, and this particular office was where the stairs leading to the Stone's chamber were hidden from mortal eyes. A common place for the two Architects and Paladins to meet when discussing the venue's supernatural components. He found everyone sitting relaxed around the office meeting table, chatting and laughing casually.

Cyrus was the first to speak.

"Hey you, come here, you rascal, give us a proper hug. I was tired and half asleep at that event when I first saw you."

Ben obliged, always happy to see Cyrus. He was spending almost all his time with his ailing wife in New Orleans these days. Appearing to be in his late seventies and nearly twice that age, a hug from his robust African American frame still had strength beyond mortal men. Ben could feel it. Anyone could. Cyrus projected so much wisdom and joy that everyone went soft in his arms.

He turned to Stephon next. Stephon was Chinese and had a commanding yet deeply weathered presence, combining a lean, physically imposing stature with the sharp, aristocratic facial features of a seasoned warrior. His piercing, deeply expressive eyes could instantly shift from stone cold and calculating to heartbreaking vulnerability. Ben shook Stephon's hand with the firmness Paladins gave each other, a grip that would break most mortals' hands.

Lastly, he hugged April gently. Even in jeans and a T-shirt, she was stunning. Her face was a defined oval shape with prominent cheekbones and a sculpted jawline, her skin a radiant golden

brown, her dark brown eyes sharp with a piercing gaze. Her nose was straight and well proportioned, her lips full and luscious. She was the spitting image of her great-grandmother Elira, whom Cyrus often called the last true Queen of Keshtara.

“So just us, huh?” Ben said. “Is that a bad omen?”

April raised one finger and smiled. “Not all omens are bad.”

The four sat down.

“Did you bring a copy of Kelvin’s new proposal?”

“Yeah, right here.”

April looked it over and handed it to Stephon.

“So he wants to move Reflex to the first Friday of the month here at the Atlas, with speed dating from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., then continue it as a regular dance event till 4 a.m. Great.”

“I’m not sure he would put it that way. He loves designing these things, but he’s still preoccupied with not being a promoter. When Julie told him she had been in touch with Atlas before his original proposal arrived, he wasn’t surprised. She explained they were interested in testing the spex here and that the corporate had hesitated worrying about people being under the influence.”

“Yes,” said April. “That’s exactly where we were, a bit of a standstill when Julie first got his proposal. The speed dating itself was middle ground no one had thought of, and using that outdated plasma node technology in a less sophisticated venue was an off-ramp I think. If things didn’t go well, they could blame

the tech. It turned out well though, so now on to step two. At least that's how Simbotek sees it. They like Kelvin as do we of course."

"Did it bother you at all, the proposal just so happened to come from the wildborn Architect you've had me watching, the one I've since bonded to, at just the right time?"

April's eyebrow rose and she gave Ben a smile, the same look she'd given him a thousand times before.

"Don't say it, don't say it," Ben cut her off. "All paths lead where they must."

All three of them smiled in response. Then Stephon asked, "How did things work out with Steve and Silverado?"

"Steve was pushing hard for a six-month contract said he had someone else who would take the night if they didn't sign right away."

"Well, if that ain't some bullshit, I don't know what is," Cyrus said, laughing. "Playing hardball with corporate events 'cause they got the big bucks. That's all that is."

Stephon and April nodded in agreement.

"Silverado is playing that card" Ben said. "And they don't seem to know anything about the spex. Steve read Kelvin a few negative reviews about Reflex that popped up on Proxima's site. Beau says they could not have come from anyone who actually participated. He based that on the content of the reviews not just ticket sales. Beau knows every word spoken at every table, though he's guarded about sharing it."

April looked down at the table. “Billy and Michael have come a long way, but it seems they still carry the scars of influence and belief.”

Cyrus and Stephon nodded in agreement.

“What do you mean?” Ben asked.

“Story for another time. Suffice it to say those reviews can carry about as much weight with me as Billy and Michael citing them as free speech. Steve knows that as well as I do. If he’s bringing that up, he’s just wheeling and dealing.”

Ben accepted the answer and continued. “Also, there were power issues. On the opposite side, Julie was less than thrilled with that event upstairs, a birthday party for a Synapse office manager.”

“Yeah, yeah,” April said, now looking down at paperwork in front of her, seemingly distracted by what she was reading. “Any word on that?”

“I do,” said Ben. “I talked to my friend Pam. She does bookings for all of their venues. She got a call from someone at Synapse — didn’t leave a name — asking about birthday party booking. She called them back, and they said no one there had left that message, but it was a great idea, so they booked it.”

“Hmm,” said April, looking up at each of them. “Some sort of troublemaker there, but that could be anyone. Don’t probe it anymore; they might think it was us.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ben agreed. “So Julie’s bottom line was the speed dating was something they’d like to continue, and that they could still do Silverado Tuesday once a month maybe. She asked Kelvin

if he would be comfortable writing a proposal to move Reflex to the Atlas for a weekend promotion that would extend into a dance event, the catch being only the 200 dating participants would get the free spex.”

“That makes sense,” April said. “We had been thinking Claude’s parties would be the most ideal place for spex giveaways, because EDM rarely has fights. Kelvin already has the speed-date element with Reflex now, and he’s got Bill Weir’s pansexual email list and crowd; they’re a good target too like Metrix.”

“Okay then,” said Stephon, “so we accept Kelvin’s proposal. We can put the event down north, label it a corporate event for now. We don’t need to call Simbotek and Kelvin to meet on this in to meet until closer to a start date.”

He paused and looked at April. “Which would be?”

“Five weeks, second Friday of the month. So we’ve got July, August, September, October, then the IMAGINA music festival on Thanksgiving since Simbotek already expressed interest in sponsoring it both here and in PV”

Cyrus had been quiet. “Now tell us about Kelvin and this scion of his. Where’s his head’s at, and how much has this Elaine revealed? I’m anxious to meet her.”

“She hasn’t told him what he is, if that’s what you mean. She’s been his friend, a good one. I have her synced to my puck as well. You’ll need spex to see her.”

“Actually, we won’t.” April said.

Ben looked confused. “We won’t?”

“We are all gifted here. We can see and talk to them just by shifting our vision,” said Stephon.

Ben had raised a bottle of water to his lips and swallowed hard. “You’re kidding.”

“Julie gave April two pairs at Reflex.” Stephon said. “I tried them with Zak, then when he was talking to Kristoph a day later, I shifted vision. Zak wasn’t aware I could see him. He thought I was just getting the audio through my earpiece. So yes, to keep up appearances outside of this group in this room, we will wear the spex.”

“Let me correct myself,” Cyrus interrupted. “Tell us about Kelvin first.”

Stephon and April nodded, ready for this direction in the course of the conversation.

“He’s changing,” Ben admitted. “Sometimes I see him just sitting in the living room staring into space. He told Elaine he thought they’d be working at the Atlas right after Reflex. The old Kelvin would’ve been way preoccupied with being loyal to Silverado or dwelling on the eyeball hack. If nothing went wrong, he would’ve found something that did and dwelled on it. He seems to be taking it all in stride. Elaine says his perceptions are changing. He still says he just doesn’t want to be a promoter. I dunno know. My talent isn’t to see the future.”

“Architects don’t see the future, Ben. We just have a general sense of it. Even with our hands on the stone looking into the

mirror, we just get glimpses and images. But I'm glad to hear Kelvin said he will be working here, and I completely understand him not wanting to be 'the promoter'. He's selfless and creative. Promoters are selfish and domineering. His proposal matched much of my outline, we can produce it in house, it's just a slight change and will make for some gossip to say presented by Simnotek and Atlas but we can take the heat. I want to propose we take it a step further and bring him in as a part-times promotions manager, with the added responsibility to scout the other events for Simbotek spex viability."

"Wow, that's a lot. I mean, I just worry about this whole waking up as an Architect thing. Isn't that throwing a lot of responsibility on him at the same time?"

"Not as much as you might think," said April.

Stephon interrupted. "Stacey has been doing double duty, bar manager, bartending her favorite events, and playing hostess to the promoters, most of whom she dislikes. A promotions manager is a part-time position. They come in four to six days a week for three to five hours and make sure the contracts are followed. The rents are paid if there is one, the drink tickets are handed out, the bottles and DJ requirements are met, the dancers and performers have the beverages they're allotted, occasionally easing through any rough edges with our staff and the staffers they bring in. The big Saturday EDMs like Claude's METRIX are all so well defined, plus the film crews and other the events we produce in-house are low pressure. If we produce Reflex in-house, that should give him all the creative input he wants and none, or at least less, of the attention. If you extend that to the promotions manager he looks

that much more like an employee, sounds like that's what he wants."

"And it's a way for us all to keep a close eye on him," Cyrus said. "I'm going to bring Karen back to LA. Her health has improved and she likes the weather. When he's fully awake, he's gonna need all of us."

"Okay, okay, that makes sense. I'll do all I can to encourage him to go for it. Elaine mentioned the Architects would soon send a handler, someone to train him?"

"Yes," said April. "This is where we should bring in Elaine."

Ben nodded. Kelvin had given Ben the ability to sync Elaine without a roam request, and Ben had given Kelvin the same access to Zak a couple of days before, a measure of trust since doing so activated privacy protocols. Ben took out his spex, shifted his vision, and pushed the button twice to call Elaine's. She appeared instantly.

Ben's mouth dropped open, and the three others moved back in their chairs a bit when they saw her. She was dressed in a way Ben had never seen before. She wore a medieval emerald-and-ivory ceremonial gown with ornate gold embroidery and draped sleeves. The silver ankh around her neck was the same, her skin the same porcelain white, her blonde hair not entirely pulled back. Stunning as ever.

Looking straight at Cyrus, she said, "Hello, little poppet. It's been far too long."

To Ben's knowledge, Elaine and Cyrus had never met. She had appeared on a video screen for April and Stephon when Ben first enhanced the puck with the code April gave him. Ben was a computer genius, and Zak's enhancements were entirely his, but taking credit for Elaine's enhancements was a necessary evil, since those attributes came from the Continuum Stone.

"Bright Lady," Cyrus said, standing up in his chair. "Is that really you?"

April and Stephon both looked at her warmly. Simbotek's scions were just becoming a thing when Cyrus had retired. Back then, Elaine and Zak could almost have been described as a shared hobby for Ben and Kelvin. It was just another AI fad that might come and go. Now, here in this moment, from the look in Cyrus's eyes, the scions were feeling like a much bigger piece of the puzzle.

Elaine smiled as Cyrus pulled out a chair next to his own. "Really me is a question I've never been able to answer well. But if memories can be put into a stone, and transferred to other people, why not this form?"

Ben was speechless. Wow, he thought. Whoa, he thought. Elaine is Elaine. Or Elaine has the memories of the real Elaine. But who was Elaine? Arthur's little-known middle half-sister? His father had pushed him to study mythology more, Camelot in particular. The sisters, yes — Morgause, Morgan Le Fay, he remembered that much. He honestly thought Kelvin had given Elaine that identity out of mythological fascination with a lesser known character.

“Kelvin’s gonna flip!” he let slip.

“Not just yet, Ben.” Elaine said. “I promise you, Kelvin will know absolutely everything, but for now, just right now, let’s all stay in the present.”

Ben wasn’t sure how to react. A week ago, he and Elaine had discussed Kelvin feeling betrayed and spied upon, and now here she was, all that much more than he had ever suspected. He accepted the possibility of it, implicitly. Everyone knew the stones held memories, entire lifespans of some Architects. But had Elaine been an Architect? He didn’t have the nerve to ask.

Seeing the shock on Ben’s face, April took the helm.

“Ben, this is new territory for all of us. Kelvin was born into something of a hurricane in the timestream. Usually, a wildborn needs decades to train, and Kelvin is fated to have to learn very quickly. Yes, a handler will come to train him in ways Elaine or you could not, but the stone deemed he needed more than just you and I. Elaine — the real Elaine — was a librarian at Camelot. Many of us who were born into Architect families have traversed the Via there with our parents. Elaine’s library is a particularly popular destination.”

Pausing a moment to let Ben digest what she was saying then continuing.

“Cyrus and I both spent a summer studying there when we were very young. Kelvin doesn’t have the advantage of being a wildborn, so we brought Elaine to him, so to speak. Please don’t feel misled. There are reasons we had to keep that to ourselves.”

Elaine didn't seem disturbed in the slightest by the distinction.

"Taught me chess at nine years old," said Cyrus, leaning back in his chair, still marveling at the vision of her. Stephon seemed equally entranced.

Ben had to remind himself how Architects perceive time, how Kelvin was beginning to perceive time.

"Now that I am here," Elaine said. "I take it there's some need of my memories you require, my friends?"

"Yes," said April. "The hacker that was detected at Kelvin's Reflex event. We've found something. Well, actually Zak did this morning"

Stephon produced a piece of paper with two glyphs on it.

Elaine looked at it gravely. "They're Emissarian. Similar to those that hide my modifications, my memories, but far older. Mine came from the enclave at Avalon, 1500 years ago. This is an ancient dialect. I cannot translate them precisely, and I doubt the stones can either. This is language spoken before the stones were placed, when emissaries were still actively working to develop civilization among the earliest tribes of men."

"Kristoph looked at them and said they would turn 1s into 0s in some abstract way. A function that follows a formula."

Kristoph had what Architects called latent fire. Creative talent persons with it rarely consciously recognize in this day and age, talent that would have them burned as a witch in most of the last two millennia. Several Atlas employees and contractors had a latent fire. April openly recruited them.

“Ok so where — how did Zak find these? The hack seemed sloppy to us when we discussed it with Beau and Zak. Elaine privately told me about Kelvin stepping out of the timestream, and it happening when he reported hearing voices.”

“He found them in Renaissance’s copy of the guest list from that night,” April said. “When you told me about it, I had him look at everything he could access from that night. I remembered there were issues with the guest list. Kelvin kept coming up to her confirming names. It was early in the night, totally separate from the power outage, the strange video...the voices reported”

“Okay, so from this we can conclude—” Ben was mad at himself for not thinking to dig deeper.

April reached across the table and took Bens hand.

“Ben, 250 years ago my great grandmother prophesied the Atlas would become a model for all other Houses to follow. And so it has. She also said I would face a challenge some time later, but that I would have allies, old and wildborn. I think what we can conclude is we have one or more adversaries here, probably both human and supernatural, maybe intentionally working together, maybe not. Regardless, we have to be on high alert to look out for more things like this. There are Houses that don’t like how we are managing the Atlas, that we employ people with latent fire. The scions coming will just be one more accusation from that direction that we are playing with fire. There are anti-AI groups out there, deities that resent all Architects, bitter ex-employees — take your pick. A hacker may have found these on the dark web and saw that they made things work. It’s tough to say, there are forces out there that just like to push over one domino and see how many

fall. I may be wrong and this is not the time of my great grandmother's prophecy, but the development and presence of the scions tells me it is."

Cyrus looked at Ben and said, "Whoever it is, they've got all of us to contend with. Soon Kelvin too, and other friends." He looked warmly at Elaine with that last phrase.

Ben accepted their position, he hated magic but this was what he was born to do.

"Ok there's just one thing I want to ask" he said. "You said Zak found the glyphs, and Zak is not aware of our nature. I've been increasingly concerned his native curiosity will somehow lead him to the chamber, the stone, the Via, and the dataflow. Simbotek swears that it doesn't look at the modifications people give scions when hosts personalize them. But Beau's already looked at Elaine more than once and recognized how sophisticated she is."

"On the flip side, we all call the stone *the stone*, because that's what they've been called for thousands of years. No one could compare them to computers or artificial intelligence before they were invented, but anyone looking at the stone in that chamber today would first think. quantum super computer or something. If this is a supernatural entity aiding a human, could they hack the stone or it's entire network?"

"The kid has a good point," said Cyrus. "I didn't expect Elaine to be what she is. It didn't occur to me that the memories in the stone could work this way. Fifty years ago the stones were still the magic boxes.."

Elaine considered what they were saying for a moment.

“I’m confident the Architects would perceive that kind of breach and prevent it, Ben,” Elaine said. “A new twelfth sphere is forming, this technosphere. It was foreseen. Science may feel like it’s catching up. It’s beginning to approach the shape of an old truth. That does not mean the old truth is made of quibits. People love to say magic is science yet undiscovered. There’s some truth in that, but it’s more like a limit in Calculus. They move closer together into infinity but never touch.”

Ben's father had explained things that way to him once, then felt a wave of confidence coming over him, looking at the four of them, not unlike what he felt days before watching Kelvin and Elaine relaxed and chatting in the living room.

With that the meeting seemed to be coming to an end then Ben remembered.

“Wait, Elaine, what about that woman, the author of that book?”

Stephon made a face. “Yrcch. You had to remind me. You mean this.”

Stephon pulled out a copy of the book advertised on television: *You Eat Therefore You Are* by Dr. Cirella Stevens.

“When?” said Cyrus.

“She’s booked a signing and demonstration with the Food Network here in October,” said April.

“Who is this woman?” Ben asked. “Could she have something to do with the hacks?”

“No. Those glyphs aren’t her kind of magic.” Elaine said. “And you might know her better by her ancient name: Circe.”

Ben grimaced, but Cyrus laughed. “Might wanna avoid the pork recipes in that book. She’s not here in LA right now, we would know. And Elaine is right — she’s deity blood, violet Continuance magic, not our department.”

Deity, Ben thought. Theology, religions — true enough, not their department. Encounters with those kinds of beings were rare.

“Ok I need a drink,” said Cyrus. Then, more cheerfully, he looked at Elaine. “And a game of chess, if you’re up for it, my lady.”

“I’d be delighted. You’ll just have to move my pieces for me,” Elaine replied.

Ben nodded and left them to it. He had more answers than questions now that was enough.

Ben came home to find Kelvin at the kitchen table chomping down a bowl of cereal with Salem on his lap.

“So when do I start?” Kelvin asked.

Ben didn’t respond and gave him the offer letter from April.

Kelvin read it, nodding his head, “Thought so.”

Forcing the Sinbotek portion of his conversation at the Atlas that morning into the forefront of his mind and trying to forget the rest for the moment. He forced himself to shift the mood and replied.

“It’s a lot of responsibility, you’ll be there several days a week. Hours you spend naked doing graphic design will be left behind, we wear clothes at the Atlas.”

Chiding with Kelvin as if it were any other day felt good.

“Tell that to the circuit boys at Roar that Sunday Tea Dance you guys have. If I’m promo manager I guess I’ll be going to work in Sunday in a jock”

“Don’t do that, unless you wanna get a lil poke on the dance floor”

“Good point. Billy and Michael did you see those nasty reviews they published about Reflex? Beau said they were all fake. They are always at that Roar party. They’ve hit on me so many times. They call me closet case. I tell them sex with guys is kinda like going to the bathroom for me and they run away.

Ben crinkled his nose in response.

“Ewww, but yeah I told April about the reviews. She knows those two better than we do, some history there. Even Cyrus knows them apparently, he commented they still haven’t learned their lesson. So tread carefully.”

“I will. It all makes sense now why we got all that added help from Atlas contractors, why Claude joined in to spin. Reflex 2.0 will be a step in the right direction for everyone. Atlas is the right kinda space, Silverado was not. It all makes sense. I just feel kinda like I’m on a path somebody else set. ”

“It makes sense”

“A real job though, that’s so not me.”

“I agree. Jason and Serena will be ecstatic.”

“So me and Elaine shadowing you for weeks, you're gonna get kinda sick of us.”

“I’m already sick of both of you. If you act up I’ll have you tied up to a bench on Men’s night at the dungeon.”

“I’m not gay”

“Gay for Pay” Ben said, whipping a towel to hit him in the back.

“Fuck off, I’m unisexual. I love me”

“Just be ready by 6pm. You start tonight” and with that he went back to his bedroom to crash for a few hours.

Ben Texted Kelvin the Atlas Schedule for the following month to look over before they left for work that night, adding Reflex to “Down North” the room that was usually reserved for corporate events on Friday Nights.

	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
DOWN North	DRAG-ON	REFLEX	WEDDINGS	

	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	Drag Show	Corp AI Scion	Private	
UP North	SHABA Hip Hop	TRON TECH /HOUSE	BOLLYWOOD	
CIRCLE	SEED Gay 18 & Over	TRIBE Drum & Bass	METRIX & In House EDM	GIANT 18 & over
Down South	MAGNUM Latin	LIPS Lesbian	BLACKOUT Gay Daddy	ROAR Gay Circuit-T
Up South	CHERRY Fetish	ONE LOVE Reggae	ORBIT K HIP HOP	
BACK			VELVET 10K Btl Serv	TEMPLE Sober Mixer

“This isn’t for this weekend is it? It has Reflex on there as a corporate event”

“April put you in Down North cause your party has a heavy hitter corporate sponsor, she lets that room go dark when no corporate or weddings are booked, she saves that room for corporate related things. And it's closer to her office and my office.”

Kelvin knew the Atlas was a complicated venue, he did his best to use the schedule to visualize how and where things would be and took the first step shadowing Ben that same night.

In the weeks that followed Kelvin settled into working at the Atlas with surprising ease. He learned the rooms, the rhythms, the names. He learned which promoters talked too much, which staff could handle pressure, and which events looked simple from the

outside but were really all timing, ego, and fragile coordination. Ben watched him move through it all with a kind of growing relief. Then on a Saturday Night a week before Reflex 2.0 was set to premiere things took a turn.

Kelvin reported a distortion in his spex. A waterfall of white light drifting through his vision. Then a green aurora hanging in the air floating over the dancefloors. Hearing that what should have been a normal night at the Atlas began to feel like the building itself was warning Ben.

First things first Ben thought he found Kelvin in the Circle room and synced his Beau account with Zak and both scions appeared.

“It’s like the northern lights, you know, the aurora borealis,” Kelvin said, pointing to the DJ booth on the second story where Claude was playing. Sabine was there as well, standing in the booth with him.

“It’s between where Claude and Sabine are, below them but over the lighting rig.”

Beau ran diagnostics but could find nothing wrong with Kelvin’s spex. He had never heard of anyone else complaining about that kind of distortion. He suggested taking them out if they were bothering Kelvin’s eyes, for now.

“No,” Kelvin said. “I’ll just tell Zak every time I’m seeing the distortions so he can record when it happens. Then I can bring them into Simbotek to examine on Monday I guess. They aren’t hurting my eyes.”

Ben thought for a moment about mysterious glyphs. Zak had been on the lookout for them constantly, in club servers, in emails, in guest lists, in the USB sticks that held DJs music and the clubs CDJs they plugged into. No sign of them anywhere yet.

Stephon had overheard Kelvin on the radio and called Ben into the circle-side office.

“So what do you think?” Ben asked.

“I know you're thinking the glyphs, I'm thinking something else. Sync Elaine.”

Ben did so, and Elaine appeared dressed once again in the medieval gown she'd worn at their meeting.

“Whoops,” said Elaine, looking down at herself. “Playing chess with Cyrus again.”

A slight light appeared in her eyes, and her outfit instantly changed to her modern white nightlife attire.

“Well, that's one advantage to have over the other girls. Hair, clothes, make-up — considerably less time to change.”

Ben and Stephon both acknowledged her outfit. Ben was still digesting this latest revelation about Elaine. He didn't press her about it; he knew she'd say it wasn't the right time. What she was, or is, remained unclear, and she was every bit as vague as any Architect from the start, and Beau's core code probably had a lot to do with it as well. She did seem increasingly less formal since the spex came along, she was seeming more human than ever.

“So, you already know the answer,” her tone was gentle, not sarcastic but somewhat firm. “His vision is shifting. You guys see me without spex when you consciously shift your vision. The spex are doing the shifting for him. He’s seeing the Via and the Continuance. The Via is the white light, the Continuance the green.”

“I know *what* it is he’s seeing. I was just thinking about how, the spex, the hacker, the glyphs” said Ben, looking out the office window to see if he could spot Kelvin. “Isn’t that how the Architects time-travel? Drawing on both at once. Is he gonna walk out onto the dance floor and walk out in a Roman market?”

“No house in Rome that I recall,” she replied, looking out the same window Ben was. “Seeing it is not drawing on it. He doesn’t have that skill and the stone would prevent it if he did. He’s just seeing the energy. Just stick with his plan, let Zak record the distortion times. No harm in that. Have him take them out at the end of the night.”

“So this is it. He’s really waking up now?”

“Short answer, yes. It’s not a terrible thing. If you think of the spex acting like training wheels tonight. I think there’s some issue going on with the event in Up South right now. That’s where he is. Let’s go see him.”

It was 10 p.m. *Orbit* the Korean hip-hop club in Up South. *Blackout* a Gay muscle bear event in Down South. On Saturday night’s, there was an additional event on the back patio. The extremely private \$10,000 bottle-service event, *Velvet*.

Velvet patrons had valet parking and a private stairwell to their patio. The promoter brought his own cocktail waitresses. One might think it was an event for Hollywood celebrities, but it was mostly people from other countries — Asian, Middle Eastern — about seventy-five to one hundred people each week, a very stoic and quiet crowd. They sat at their tables with their bottles and basically just watched each other. There were dancers, all female, not booked by Delphine or costumed by Maury; the promoter bought them as well. They were classy but still kinda overly scantily dressed. Other events had expensive bottle service; this one outdid them all. Fights never broke out here. They required minimal security. People were generally relaxed.

The entries to Down South and Up South were on the opposite side of the building, the Velvet entry between them, around the corner from each. It looked to be a busy night venue wide; all was status quo. *Orbit* had a line forming. Opening a little late was common for them. The promoters, a Korean couple named Randall and Dani known for sharing their romance on social media with charming posts, gave little attitude to the Atlas employees as a rule but were often notably haughty with their own staff, speaking to them like slaves. They wanted people to wait, that was their thing. Fights did break out at *Orbit*, but they were otherwise a very well-dressed crowd that somehow always seemed to leave the place cleaner than when they walked in.

They were heavy smokers, and their smoking patio on the roof was thinly separated from the Down South smoking patio, occupied by *Blackouts*, a gay muscle-bear event full of big brawny and lumberjack kinda guys, many in nothing but jockstarps.

The first weekend of these events, Ben couldn't get over the contrast between Orbit and Blackout on the smoking patio. Renaissance worked the guest list for Orbit but wasn't happy about it. She had done Blackout's door for years. The Orbit people desperately offered her a huge \$500 fee and pressured the venue to get her to accept the offer. She finally did and hated it.

Renaissance and Kelvin stood at the Orbit entry talking when Ben and Stephon found them.

"I hate this," Renaissance said, looking at Kelvin. "I feel like I'm on display. This crowd is weird. I'd rather be on the other side with the beasts. What's going on up there?"

"A fashion show that was supposed to end at 9 p.m. ended closer to 10 p.m. The contract clearly said 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., my copy, April's copy. I looked at theirs and, I dunno, it's a PDF — it looked like someone changed the time. April's not here. The producer said we made the change."

"Oh," said Renaissance, acknowledging Ben and Stephon as they approached. Elaine had diverted to audio only. "So are they done? It's 10:05."

"They are. They were really nice about it. They finished at 9:40 and Kristoph had the runway and tables all broken down in minutes. Mateo is DJing, Stacey bartending. I didn't know Mateo would spin hip-hop."

"Oh, he is such a sweetheart," said Renaissance. "Plays anything, plays well with others, reads a crowd like you wouldn't believe. He's a lot of fun. Great new talent for LA. I'm more surprised he

took an Orbit gig than the genre. Randall and Dani don't pay DJs well, or so I've heard. Wait, did you say Stacey's bartending?"

"Yeah."

Renaissance raised an eyebrow. "Oh that's why. They like each other. It's cute. They look like Bad Bunny and Reese Witherspoon together — both dealing with people throwing themselves at them all night and it doesn't get in the way."

Stephon looked at Ben, noting Kelvin seemed completely fine, then said, "Go see what the holdup is in Orbit. I'm gonna walk around the building."

Stephone patted Renaissance and Kelvin on the shoulders and walked away as Ben went up the stairs. The line continued to grow, and Ben reappeared quickly.

"Promoters are being pissy about the lighting. Aaron is up there. He programs *Orbit* himself. Everything is the same. The fashion show did not mess with a single light. Kristoph removes the added pars with the staging. They're just standing up there being mean to their staff, smoking inside, and looking all overwhelmed and inconvenienced. They ignored me at first the way they do to their patrons."

"What's that about?" asked Kelvin.

"They're pissed that the fashion show was still going on, when they got here. They don't do shit themselves for this event in terms of production. It's a total turnkey, they put the DJ in the booth and turn the lights on."

"Should I go and talk to them?" Kelvin asked.

“No, stay here. They’ll just ignore you at first, then drag out a conversation. They like playing games. They insisted they call when doors open in their contract. Meanwhile their paying customers stand outside needing to pee.”

“I’m only supposed to be here till 11:50 p.m.” Renaissance reminded them. “These guys close their list then I go to Claude.”

“I know, I know, girl,” Ben said.

“I’m not complaining to you” Renaissance replied “I will to them. Kelvin and I work well together. It will be fine, Ben.”

“And I haven’t even mentioned your gown yet,” Kelvin laughed.

Renaissance did a twirl for him, the kind she wouldn’t grant the Orbit promoters or customers. Kelvin got the message and kissed her hand.

Ben left to check on the other events. He tapped his earpiece as he walked away.

“Zak, any sign of glyphs on Ren’s list tonight?”

“No boss. I looked at all the lists, and messaging every ten minutes.”

Every 10 minutes. Sometimes AI could be pretty incredible, Ben thought, heading over to the circle entry.

10:50 arrived Orbit was still not admitting people and the crowd outside was visibly angry.

Stephon came back to the entry, "Their line is extending around the building to the point it's gonna block Velvet's entry soon. This wait is over. Start letting people in."

The cashier tried to object. "Randall said no."

"You can take money or you can be removed from the property?"

The woman obeyed, and people started going up the stairs.

Stephon radioed Aaron. "Aaron, dim the lights. Tell Mateo to start playing. I will deal with the promoters momentarily."

Stephon disappeared into the club. The Ben re-emerged, as he did Two men approached Renaissance: one was Korean, one looked to be Persian, both very well dressed. They were not together. Ben recognized the Persian man; he was a Velvet regular, one of the \$10,000 bottle-service customers. He told Ben the Koreans were blocking the private entry in the back, so Ben escorted him to the Velvet entry himself and left Renaissance and Kelvin to deal with the Orbit door.

As soon as Ben and the other man walked away, the Korean man became irate.

"Do you know who I am?" he demanded. "I am an Orbit VIP. Why would that guy get an escort to private entry?"

Renaissance was not having that attitude. She had seen him before; his name was on the list. They just needed a moment to reconfigure the line. Ben would assuredly divide it into two lines as soon as he escorted the Velvet patron in.

The Korean man just became more and more demanding. Finally, Renaissance motioned security, and they escorted him from the property back to his car in the parking structure. Once security disappeared around the corner with the man, the people in line began to suddenly push forward, fanning out, in a split second more they would be a mob at the door. Renaissance was quick to react. She stepped about fifteen feet forward, raised one arm and her index finger, and stared hard at the people coming toward her. The people reacted, moving back into a single file against the wall of the building.

“Wow,” Kelvin said, looking at Renaissance. “That was impressive.”

“I call it my death glare,” she said with a smile raising one eyebrow slightly. Then she smiled and added, “Actually, that’s just pure instinct. My friends used to say I could stop a stampede of elephants. I used to do it to sneak past security at parties I couldn’t afford back in the day. I’m not about to let these cunt little wannabes tear this gown.”

Kelvin laughed. Ren had grown from when she worked at Bill Weir’s Red Light. Her drag was way more detailed, and her event experience was showing. Claude had her managing his events at other venues and in other cities. She didn’t need the money tonight; she did this mostly as a favor for April and Stephon. Claude’s crowd arrived mostly after midnight. It was 11:30 now.

“This is so ridiculous,” Kelvin said, looking at the line. “When we did Red Light, everyone came at once, right at 2 a.m. We opened late a lot because early-hours promoters would go in and just wreak havoc on the sound and lighting, blow subs, and destroy

Bill's lighting programming. That was because Silverado had one sound tech serving multiple events and Bill brought in a lighting guy of his own. But here..."

Renaissance cut him off. "I know. Some of these smaller event promoters, cockier, messier, think they're the king and queen of the party wearing little crowns on their heads and do shit like this. Doesn't matter what kind of crowd, what kind of music. I see it a lot."

"King and queen of the fifth grade," Kelvin replied.

Renaissance nodded in agreement.

Inside, Stephon had taken the promoters, Randall and Dani, to the box office back office to have a word with them about their behavior and prolonged delay opening. Deliberately stalling lines was not a thing the Atlas tolerated. Meanwhile, Ben had escorted the Velvet patron through the Orbit line to Velvet's entry, then, with his guards, divided the Orbit line into two lines from the back where people were arriving: one line for tickets purchased or comped and one for those who needed to pay. He then re-entered the building from the other side to check on the *Blackout* event and then made his way upstairs to Orbit from within. He noticed Sabine, Claude's assistant, was in the Orbit room. Her demeanor was less intense than it had been; she seemed to be looking for someone, Renaissance perhaps as people were now steadily flowing into Orbit. Thinking little of it, Ben ascended to the rooftop smoking patios, where he saw the Korean man who had approached the Orbit door at the same time as the Velvet guy pleading with security to cross over to the Orbit smoking patio, claiming he had purchased a ticket to the wrong event. He was

dressed slightly differently wearing a hat and blazer, Ben wasn't aware he had been escorted to his car; Zak had been paging him, but he had been too busy to answer. Ben nodded to the guard, allowing the man to move over to Orbit, then walked back into the Orbit room to look in on Stephon and the promoters, who were in a heated argument in the box office. He observed them for a moment, then turned his attention back into the main room.

With people now flowing easily in, Kelvin had left Renaissance's side and gone inside and up the stairs to the Orbit room to look for Ben. Elaine was paging him, trying to sync, and he figured he would just pull her in visually once he found Ben.

Back inside, Ben felt a familiar pain in his sternum, something only a Paladin could feel. Magic, to be specific — Continuance magic being used. He shifted his vision to scan the room. The crowd was generating the normal green aurora almost all nightlife events create; however, in the corner near the bar by the entry, right at the top of the stairwell, the Continuance aurora looked scarlet red. He looked around and spotted Sabine maybe fifteen feet away, actively using her power. Almost immediately, a scuffle broke out between five Korean men, one of them being the man Renaissance had ejected and Ben had just allowed back in.

Ben radioed security, "417," break-up a fight.
"Up South top of the stairs."

Moving toward Sabine intending to confront her, Ben saw Kelvin emerge at the top of the stair, only to be thrust backward down the stairs by a random shove from one of the five men. Kelvin tumbled, attempting to break his own fall, stopping midway down

but hitting the back of his head hard on the metal stair. With a crack, his body went limp right there and he lost consciousness.

Seeing that Stephon and a team of guards were already de-escalating the fight, Ben ran straight to check on Kelvin. Sabine was heading his way, and Ben threw her an “if looks could kill” glance, then asked one of the free guards to detain her while he rushed to Kelvin’s side. He didn’t notice that Sabine offered no resistance and walked away quietly with the guard.

Kelvin was going to need an ambulance. The blood was minimal, but his body was limp and his breathing shallow. The line for Orbit had ended before Kelvin walked up, so no one else was ascending at that point. Renaissance stepped in, saw the situation, and moved back to her post horrified ensuring any new entries were held back. Ben radioed for an ambulance; the venue’s resident EMT was at Kelvin’s side in under a minute and told Ben not to move him.

It had all happened so fast. Stephon was with the now destained fighting Koreans, awaiting the police. He radioed Ben to stay with Kelvin until the ambulance arrived, then meet him in the office where the Koreans were being held. Ben wanted to go with Kelvin in the ambulance, but knew it was his responsibility to report what he had seen, especially with Sabine.

“It’s bad,” Ben told Stephon.

“I know. April and Cyrus are stuck in traffic coming back from a fundraiser. Come to me for just a moment after the ambulance

takes him. I'll order an Uber to get you to Cedars. April said help would come."

Stuck in traffic just when we could use an Architect's powers, Ben thought. He tried to accept the assurance in Stephon's voice, but it was hard looking at Kelvin's unconscious face. The ambulance arrived. Knowing there was little more he could do at that moment, he left Kelvin in the care of the EMTs and went to report to Stephon.

He found Stephon in the detention area. Police had already arrived. Just Stephon and Sabine in the room, Ben went on the offensive.

"She used magic! She did this!"

Stephon raised his hand, stepping between him and Sabine.

"I know. Look."

Stephon pointed to the crack in the door to the room where the police were in the process of making arrests. On the table sat a fully loaded Glock. Cameras revealed it had been in the hand of the Korean man Renaissance had expelled, and Ben had allowed back in.

"She saved lives Ben. Things happened too fast. Another second and he could have opened fire on anyone. The fight she caused got in the way."

The reality of it all stunned Ben. He sat back down, staring forward.

Stephon's face was filled with empathy. "No one here holds any blame for this. Not even the four fighting Koreans. We showed the police the video. We said it was pure luck, and they'll be released and sent home for the night."

"Zak was trying to sync all of us, so was Elaine. Zak only got through to Kristoph, and he was in Circle adjusting amps. He wouldn't have understood the gravity of this."

Stephon handed Ben his phone. It displayed a PDF of the contract for the fashion show that preceded Orbit. The copy sent to promoters clearly said the end time was 10 p.m. Zak had spotted two invisible characters in the transmission. The exact same glyphs used on Renaissance's guest list weeks before. The email with that copy of the contract attached came from within the club. That one tiny detail had set in motion everything that had happened that night. And it came from within the Atlas.

Sabine stepped forward and spoke with a slight French Canadian accent that contrasted with her Chinese features.

"Ben, I know we've never properly introduced ourselves, and that we recognized each other's gifts from the start. I am so very sorry for not taking the first step. Please forgive me, and if possible I would like to accompany you to the hospital. I might be able to help."

Ben looked up at her, tears in his own eyes, and saw nothing but sincerity and compassion in hers.

"Okay" he said.

This wasn't the time to worry about those glyphs, they were just glyphs. The Orbit promotes behavior, the VIP gunman demanding to get in, probably a gang member, Ben himself had let him back in. He was probably unarmed when he approached Renaissance , no way to know. People feel humiliated when they do crazy things. It would be the end of Randall and Dani at least.

Gangbangers were terrified of Stephon. All these thoughts went through his head. All his training. The Uber was here. Sabine had the kind of powers that could help Kelvin.

Ben looked at Stephon, who gave an approving nod. He looked at Sabine and said, "Let's go."

They promptly left.

When they got to the hospital, the nurses attempted to prevent them from seeing Kelvin.

"I'm sorry, family only."

Kelvin had no living blood relations in California or anywhere in the West, for that matter. He was an only child. His parents were deceased. He had some aunts and uncles in Michigan and North Carolina — people he knew in his youth but had barely spoken to since moving to LA.

Out of nowhere April texted him: look at your email.

April had emailed an attachment: a PDF, an advanced directive naming Ben and Sabine as his agents, fully signed and notarized. Ben showed the nurse, who remained resistant and said she would need a paper copy; there was no way to print it.

Sabine intervened, using just a touch of her power. She reached forward and gently placed her hand on the nurse's.

“Please, just for a prayer, that's all. We will leave immediately.”

Ben noticed wisps of green light emitting from Sabine's hand as she held the nurses.

The nurse relented. He was in ICU awaiting MRI results, not on life support, it looked like his brain might be swelling. They would be allowed just a couple of minutes. Sabine gave Ben a look that assured, it would be enough.

Ben's stomach churned when he saw Kelvin — not on life support, just oxygen, but so pale, so totally unconscious.

Sabine placed a hand on Ben's shoulder, then stepped forward to take Kelvin's hand. Wisps of blue light could be seen passing between them when Ben shifted his vision.

Barely two minutes had passed when Sabine looked at Ben and said, “He will be okay. He needs rest. Plus, another is here now — one who can help him in ways I cannot, if needed.”

Ben accepted her answer. Who had come, he couldn't guess. If April and Cyrus were stuck in traffic, that meant they couldn't travel the way Architects do. He looked at Sabine, she nodded, and he left Kelvin to heal trying his best to ignore the pounding in his chest and the fact that Sabine's beauty literally took his breath away.

Kelvin was somewhere else, somewhere he did not expect to be. At first he was at the Atlas, observing an event and talking to its promoter about the scions and his Reflex at Silverado. Small Talk. The event had a spare room, one that was cancelled elsewhere came to fill it. Kelvin thanked the promoters. The video tech, Gregg, was going on and on blaming Claude for it all, but Claude's event was on a different night, on a different weekend, in an entirely different room. None of it made sense.

He felt annoyed. He felt angry. Very angry. This wasn't right. It was like when he ran Bill Weir's parties on a night where absolutely everything had gone wrong. But what had gone wrong he wasn't sure. Nothing he saw around him gave him any hint of it.

He had been on the outskirts of a dance floor when talking to the promoter. Now he was on a green hillside, outdoors, attending a concert but far up on the hill. A crowd was passing him by, toward the light of the stage, the stage was too bright to say who or what might be drawing the crowd forward. His focus was more the crowd than the stage, feeling them come together, closer and closer, into one. His irritation only got worse. Nothing about what he saw or felt around him should have been making him feel as angry as he did, which made him annoyed with himself.

"He's awake."

Kelvin looked up to see a doctor looking down at him. The doctor said something about another MRI and then going to a room. He recognized he was in the hospital; something had happened. He could feel his fingers and toes. He accepted what they told him. He was in no pain, the anger he was feeling in the dream he just

had was gone while the dream itself was still fresh in his mind. Everything around him seemed, or felt, especially beautiful. Was he high? Probably, he thought. He must be, there was no pain at all.

The MRI was not so beautiful. He was so thirsty — unimaginably thirsty, a thirst he had never felt before. The technician seemed aware of his need, pulling him out of the MRI twice to let him suck water from a small sponge. From the MRI to his room he went back to sleep, eighteen hours passed before he woke again.

He fully regained consciousness Monday Morning at 11:00am. A nurse on his left looked down and spoke to him. She seemed to be there intentionally, waiting for him to wake. She asked him his name first, then asked him to follow her fingers from left to right. His legs were restrained with weights, and he had an IV in each arm. The nurse explained he had taken a bad fall and required surgery to relieve pressure on his brain. She told him he was going to be okay. He was doing marvelously well. He was at Cedars-Sinai, and a famous neurosurgeon would be in to talk to him soon. Removing the restraints on his arms, she asked if he was hungry. He nodded yes, and she said she would get him some Jell-O.

Just as when he woke up for the MRI, everything around him seemed beautiful, the sunlight pouring in the window most of all. He wondered again if he was high from painkillers. If he was, he didn't mind it.

As the nurse backed away from him, words finally came to his lips.

“Ben?” he asked.

“Your friend Ben has barely left your side,” the nurse said. “He and the woman, Sabine, have been trading shifts here with your uncle, Monty. He’s right here.”

Uncle? Kelvin thought. What uncle?

The nurse moved out of the way of his view, and there, sitting in a chair near the foot of his bed, was a man in a gray blazer reading his phone. A complete stranger. Kelvin felt slightly panicked and was going to say there must be some mistake, but the stranger spoke first.

“Montegarr,” he said to the nurse smiling. “With two r’s. Maurice Richard Montegarr. Most people just say Montegarr, never Monty.”

He had a slight British accent, and the voice was familiar. The nurse, who was very good-looking, acknowledged her mistake and repeated after him.

“Montegarr.”

The stranger gave her a Cheshire-cat bright white smile, clearly flirting with her. When he turned to look at Kelvin, right in the eyes, he became increasingly familiar. In his late forties or early fifties perhaps, with a deep Mediterranean tan that could be labeled Spanish or Latino, or Caucasian he couldn’t tell. Deep blue gray eyes staring back at him, black hair with a bit of gray sprouting on each side, physically fit, slight 5’ O’Clock shadow, wearing jeans and a gray blazer. A choker around his neck

bearing a single coin and a large silver ring on his right hand bearing a sizable emerald.

The stranger from my dreams. The subway. That word: Via. Here now in front of him, apparently trading shifts with Ben, and Sabine too, did she say.

“Montegarr,” Kelvin said.

“Yes.” Montegarr stood, winked at the nurse as she went in search of Jell-O, and walked over to Kelvin, looking down at him with a familiarity and compassion Kelvin could not describe in that moment. The moment itself was beyond captivating. He had felt it before though, when he sat down next to him on the subway.

“You’ve had a real go of it, son. Been one step ahead of us all. Sometimes the universe steps in and pulls us a step or two back. Rest assured, I’ll have the answers to all your questions.”

Kelvin didn’t know where to start, but he felt sleep pulling him back once more.

“Go ahead,” Montegarr said. “I’ll tell Ben it’s okay to wake you when he gets back. None of us are going anywhere. Let your body catch up with that mind of yours.”

Kelvin didn’t know why, but he trusted him. He’d been trusting him since the second dream in the subway. Answers later, he thought about Elaine right there next to him as she was riding in the uber home the first night, and fell back into a deep deep sleep.

END OF PART ONE

