

Coastal Sahara

August 26, 1739

Moving a stone was not something that happened every day.

Ten of the twelve had moved location since their activation, each leaving behind a fragment so their original chambers remained either operational or sealed, depending on necessity. Cairo and the Oasis had been the only two that never moved.

Now, apparently, there would be only one. These moves were predestined, not chosen. Architects did not decide them—they followed them. So the stranger could only ask one question.

“Where?”

Elira smiled. “We sail with Captain Marchand for the Americas. A French colony—New Orleans. Sophie has arranged everything; the paperwork is already on board. The chamber lies where a theater is to be built. Meka and I shall own it.”

“That’s quite a change from three centuries guarding the Oasis, my queen.”

If you want, I can keep going from that line and continue the rest of the scene in the same style.

Absolutely — here’s a natural continuation in the same tone and with the names kept consistent:

“That’s quite a change from three centuries guarding the Oasis, my queen.”

“Indeed it is, my friend,” Meka said, stepping forward. “Which is why you’re coming with us.”

“Talira will remain here,” Elira added. “She’ll join us once we activate the arches. The future of the Oasis—and the fragment we leave behind—will rest with them.”

She gestured toward her people, now mingling with the freed captives—no longer slaves, and never to be again. As she walked toward them, the stranger followed without hesitation. Meka and Captain Marchand trailed a few paces behind, silent, letting the Architects lead.

The petrified man still stood where he had been frozen—mouth open, fist raised, suspended in a moment he would never complete.

The stranger took in the night. Warm. Luminous beneath a full moon. La Providence bustled with life and light; the slaver ship sat dark and still. Elira had frozen its entire crew. Their fate was already clear.

He turned his attention back to her people. Shifting his vision, he saw the Via in them—strong, bright white, remarkably strong. All living things carried a spark, but the Oasis population burned bright. Above them, the blue aurora shimmered: healing magic.

“Your people,” he said, “the white light of the Via shines bright in them. And that blue continuance... that is a rare sight.”

“Yes,” Elira replied, her smile bright with pride. “Healers—all of them. Look there—the pregnant woman directing the others. Look closely at the child she carries.”

The stranger paused, focusing.

“Architect,” he said quietly. “Wildborn, I assume, and no relation to you.”

“No relation for millennia,” Elira said. “But all of them are of Keshtaran descent. Now look at the boy she’s speaking to—a captive just freed.”

The captives were weak, dehydrated, their connection to the Via faint—human, ordinary.

But the boy—

His glow was unmistakable.

“Paladin,” the stranger said aloud. “Remarkable.”

“A new dynasty for the Oasis,” Elira said. “Our numbers have dwindled, and this continent has a long history ahead of it in need of hidden healers. These people were once in service to a royal house in Ghana. When the kingdom fell, they returned to the bush—living in harmony with nature, as the Emissaries of old once did. Their knowledge... their culture... beyond what we’d call technological progress.”

She shook her head faintly.

“These men who enslave them call them primitive. Some are even missionaries. The Via burns bright within my people, and they accept the great mystery of life as much as our creators do. These men who would enslave based on the color of their skin would not survive a single cycle of the moon in our wilderness. Sometimes I wonder if agriculture should ever have been introduced at all.”

The stranger understood.

Direct interference in the course of human history was not their jurisdiction. No matter how corrupt leaders might become, no matter how warlike their passion, the Architects remained hidden and did not intervene. Time was the magic, the lock and the key. The stones they served and guarded were inflection points in the stream—points where the concurvity changed. If this stone was bound for New Orleans, if Elira and Meka were meant to step into the outer world, then higher powers had already judged this moment an inflection.

Humanity had faiths—beautiful faiths, deep, reverent, sincere. The faiths themselves were never the problem. Missionaries entangled in the machinery of this slave trade—that was an abomination. Elira’s disgust had purpose; bringing the Oasis population out here was clearly a ruse to show her people what was happening in the outside world.

As he thought through it all in silence, and they drew closer to the people now mingled on the beach, Talira approached, bowing her head slightly at the stranger as she recognized him.

“My lord Architect. It is good to see you—and to know you will travel with my parents.”

“You’ve grown, little one,” he said warmly. “And you’re as striking as your mother, Princess. It’s my honor to assist, though I learned of this only moments ago.”

Talira smiled. “The visions we receive through stone are never clear until they arrive. But like my mother, I’m honored to take part in this shift.”

The stranger allowed himself a fleeting thought: it's fortunate that intervention was limited. These two could conquer the world with beauty alone.

Meka and the captain approached once more.

"Are we ready then to depart?" the captain asked.

Meka looked to his wife and daughter, embracing them both before turning to the stranger.

"I believe we are."

Talira moved toward the dunes, shifting the spheres with practiced precision—proof that she was more than capable as an Architect in her own right, guiding her people and those they rescued back to the Oasis and into its new destiny.

Elira, Meka, the stranger, and the captain boarded one of the small boats that had ferried the captives ashore. No oars were needed. At the Architects' will, the vessel glided effortlessly across the calm waters out to La Providence.

By the time they reached the merchant vessel, they saw the last of the group on the beach step into Talira's pathway before it winked out of existence.

Once aboard, the captain excused himself to ready the ship for departure.

One task remained.

No spoken words were required. Elira and the stranger moved to the stern, turning toward the slaver vessel. Facing one another,

they raised their left hands, palms hovering inches apart. A thin wisp of white light appeared between them.

As they slowly drew their hands apart, the light grew—brighter, denser, pulsing with contained force. When it reached its limit, they turned in unison.

The release was instantaneous.

A massive bolt of white lightning tore across the water and struck the slaver ship, splitting it open as fire consumed it from within.

The flames burned impossibly hot—so bright that the crew of La Providence shielded their eyes.

There would be little left. Ash. Splintered timbers.

Nothing more.

Elira released the frozen minds of the slavers' crew as the fire engulfed them. Awareness returned just as their flesh began to sizzle and boil. Their screams rose—brief, terrible—cut short as death came faster than pain could fully take hold.

The crew of La Providence watched without sympathy. They had served the Architects most of their lives. Clea of Cairo was the Architect who lured the slave ship into this trap, drawing the greedy, now-petrified captain with the promise of fresh slaves and right into the sphere of Elira's influence.

As the flames died, La Providence began its graceful departure. The wind carried the stench of burning wreckage and flesh back toward the shore.

Still frozen in time, the petrified slaver captain stood alone in the dark on the beach. When the ship reached the horizon, Elira released her hold.

He collapsed to his knees.

He had seen everything.

Understood almost nothing—except the screams of his men as they burned, and the knowledge that he had lived while they had not.

Chapter 3

REFLEX 1.0

“Okay, Elaine—so the big day starts here.”

Kelvin walked toward Ben’s Jeep as he spoke. “Julie confirmed the speed dating is sold out, but she and Steve are on board with standing-room-only tickets at the door. I need you monitoring emails and social media all day—my inbox, DMs, everything. Julie sent instructions with the tickets, but you know how people are. They won’t read anything, then ask what to wear, where to park, what it costs...”

He climbed into the Jeep as Ben started the engine.

“Jason and Serena will be in the lobby with ID lanyards. Silverado’s security is solid—they just need to know who’s on our team so people can move in and out easily. Honestly, I think it’ll run pretty smoothly.”

“On top of it all, my love,” Elaine replied. “I’m so happy for you. Today is the start of something entirely new. If I could feel the way humans do, I’d say I feel it in my bones.”

Ben grinned and smacked Kelvin’s knee. “See? We’re all with you tonight, buddy.”

Kelvin felt it—a small, sharp pulse of warmth in his chest. Love hit him that way: a flicker of heat, a sting of tears at the edges of his eyes. He felt it deeply, even if he wasn’t great at saying it.

When something worked—really worked—whether it was his idea or someone else’s, a euphoric rush shot up his spine. It started between his shoulder blades, climbed into his neck, bloomed into the back of his head. Music amplified it, turned it into goosebumps.

High art, he called it.

The end of *Battlestar Galactica* Season 3. Starbuck’s return. The final moment in *Stardust*, when the star shines. The beacons lighting in *The Lord of the Rings*. Moments when everything aligned into something greater than the sum of its parts.

That was magic.

And for that reason alone, Kelvin believed in it. Magic wasn’t spells or illusions—it was creation. Timing. The impossible feeling of something becoming more than you imagined.

Tonight, he wanted that feeling.

More than anything.

His usual insecurities—misreading people, feeling like an outsider—felt distant, left behind in the rearview mirror.

Tonight, he would shine.

They pulled up beside Silverado around 10:30 a.m. and parked on a side street. On the way, they stopped at a donut shop—an offering for the cleaning and tech crews already inside.

The Simbotek team arrived early, hard at work installing plasma nodes. Ben jumped in immediately, repositioning ladders and lighting rigs.

Kelvin unfolded the table map, double-checking placements against the venue layout and Simbotek's specs, when a familiar voice cut through the noise.

"Hiiii, Kelvin! Long time no see!"

He turned to see Maury Vista in front of him, holding a piece of fabric taller than himself.

Delphine had mentioned Maury might contribute décor—he was already handling Renaissance costuming and the dancers. It seemed all the eye-popping talent had decided to be part of this event.

Well, it was a Tuesday night, Kelvin thought. Corporate bookings were normal on a weeknight—but this? This was something else. He was fusing two completely different worlds: high-tech corporate futurism and full-blown Saturday-night fantasy.

Maury was thriving. His designs were bold, original—turning heads at premieres and after-parties all over Hollywood. Back in the day, he'd worked for Bill at Silverado, the same time Kelvin had been cashiering.

“Hey there!” Kelvin beamed, stepping up for a hug. “All us old-timers out on a weeknight—look at us.”

Maury laughed. Late twenties, about five-eight, lean and athletic, expressive face—thick brows, deep-set dark eyes, wide smile framed by a mustache and goatee.

“De nuevo juntos; tal vez, por primera vez. Felicidades por la nueva fiesta,” Maury said, then introduced his two assistants.

“We’ll see,” Kelvin grinned. “So what are you working on?”

“Two things—fabric slinkies for movement, and pieces to guide people through the dating section. Can’t go too heavy—Ben warned me about fire hazards with those plasma projectors.”

Kelvin nodded. “Yeah, but this already looks great. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh—and these.”

Maury gestured to a large cardboard box filled with foam footprints he was sticking to the floor.

“This was Ben’s idea. They mark the walking path between tables so people stay out of the projection zones.”

Kelvin studied the layout. Plenty of space—but this would help. Add a little blacklight, and people would instinctively know where to step.

Smart.

The tables had already been set—Steve must've had the cleaning crew handle it after closing the night before. Each table had a taped X on the floor beside it.

Maury followed his gaze. "What are those for?"

"Not sure." Kelvin glanced toward a Simbotek tech on a ladder.

"Hey—quick question. I'm Kelvin. Those X's... are they for Beau?"

The tech climbed down and extended a hand. "Brad Connors. Production tech for Simbotek. Yeah, those are for Beau. The daters stay seated, but Beau will phase in at each table at least once per round—quick greeting. He'll also have a larger projection unit in the lobby."

He nodded toward Maury's footprints. "And those are perfect. Helps keep people out of the projection paths."

Kelvin nodded. "We wanted it structured. I just thought the tech involved would be... newer."

Brad smiled. "It's coming sooner than you think. Brings a whole new set of problems. But for this event?" He nodded. "Good timing. Julie showed me your proposal—it's exactly what we needed at the right time."

He headed back up the ladder. Kelvin turned to Maury.

"Are you hungry? I'm grabbing lunch for everyone working setup. Donuts up front by the bar."

"Yes, please—my guys are starving." Maury leaned in, lowering his voice. "Also... ask that Simbotek hottie if he wants lunch. I'll

buy—and he can be the dessert.” He grinned. “Café Lombardo’s down the street. Sandwiches are about fifteen, but worth it.”

Kelvin shook his head, smiling at both comments. Not even noon, he thought, and already worrying about people fucking in the bathrooms.

“All right. I’ll check on Ben, then grab menus. Cold bottled water at the bar—help yourselves.”

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By 3 p.m., tech and setup were done. Everyone had gone home except Silverado tech Ivan, who was upstairs on the patio setting up for a different event. Ben and Kelvin sat on the stage, taking it all in.

“So, who’s doing sound check?” Ben asked.

“Kira. She texted me. She should be here any minute.”

Kelvin had barely finished speaking before the venue doorbell rang.

“I got it!” Ivan yelled from the DJ booth.

Ben and Kelvin hadn’t noticed he came down from the patio. Ivan was a mild-mannered sound tech, a decent-looking white guy who wore hats and baggy clothing that hid his body—and his hair. He disappeared into the front greeting room and re-emerged with Kira right behind him.

“Hey there,” Kira said, her bright, wide, signature knockout smile, arms spread for a hug. “Thank you for thinking of me—gigs on Tuesday nights don’t happen often.”

“It’s so good to see you,” Kelvin said, hugging her tight. “I hope you’re okay with Claude doing the second round. Delphine sort of slid that in with the Simbotek rep under my nose.”

Kira giggled. “It’s fine. Claude is my friend. If Delphine wanted him here on a weeknight, I’d take it as a good sign.”

Kira was dressed to spin—trademark white lace blouse and jeans, sun-kissed honey-blond hair in loose waves pulled back to complement her bright blue eyes. She stepped into the DJ booth, put down her purse, and looked over the equipment: two CDJ-3000s and a Nexus mixer—standard practice. Ben had brought an extra CDJ-3000 from the Atlas, knowing Silverado would only provide two.

“Thanks for giving me three.” She gently placed her hands on the decks and inserted a USB with her music into the right deck.

“Ready when you are.”

Ben looked to Ivan, already powering up the amps. “You ready?”

Ivan nodded.

“Good to go.”

“I’m assuming you want a milder lounge sound for tonight. Nobody will be dancing, will they?” Kira looked over the setup with all the tables for two.

“No dancing, I think,” Kelvin said. “Just a lot of people coming to see how it all works out.”

Kira smiled. “Self included. So these are real people meeting other people’s scions, right? The scions negotiate dates for the real people? I’m not sure I’d trust mine.”

“I’ll take the fifth on that,” Kelvin replied.

A green light flickered on his earpiece—Elaine heard everything but said nothing.

Kira played a soft progressive house track, walked out to the floor to listen, and checked if the EQ needed adjusting.

“Sounds good,” she said, walking over to each sub. “So I have a scion—it’s a she. Zoe’s her name. We interact mostly at my day job. What if people sit at a table and the scion is the same sex? And what about LGBT?”

“That was all covered in the ticketing. Julie said there are 40 LGBT participants, and Beau has them all matched to meet LGBT only,” Kelvin said, looking up at the nodes. “It’s entirely possible the scion could be the same or opposite sex as its host. Either way, it’s like—you want to date my host, you’ve got to get through me first.”

Kira laughed. “They’ve been talking about using scions at my day job—we work with underprivileged kids—and I’m still on the fence. It’s one of the reasons I only have Zoe with me at work. I don’t want her confused or polluted with my crazy personal life or nightclub drama.”

Ben walked back over. “I know what you mean. I wish I could say the same. My scion is Ike—I couldn’t get through a night at the

Atlas without him. I worry nightclub drama will overwhelm him sometimes.”

“This night is really just about Simbotek testing the scions in a social setting—that’s what my entire proposal was for,” Kelvin said. “I don’t know squat about speed dating. I saw it once on *Charmed*. I’m single for life.”

“Well, that was a pretty intuitive idea, Kelvin. And yeah, I think people get it,” Kira said, looking around the room one last time. “I think we’re all good here.”

She walked back to the booth, shut the music off, pulled the USB out of the CDJ, and slipped it safely into her purse.

“See you in a couple hours, then?”

“We can walk out with you,” Kelvin said. “We’re done here for the day. Time to go home and get ready.”

Kelvin’s shrug conveyed both excitement and uncertainty.

“It’s going to be great—a real who’s who. I know a lot of people coming just to watch it go down.”

“I hope so.” Kelvin motioned to Ben, and the trio made for the door.

As they walked out, Kelvin stopped by Ivan, busy working on a TV monitor.

“Okay, Ivan, we’ll see you in a couple hours. What’s the event on the upstairs patio?”

“Some corporate birthday party,” Ivan replied dryly. “Steve booked it last minute.”

Kelvin nodded, and the three made their way out. Hot outside; the sun wouldn’t set until 8 p.m.

“I definitely need a shower,” Kelvin remarked.

“I hope the AC holds up,” Ben said. “Steve has a bad habit of turning it down to push bar sales.”

“Try to stay positive, boys,” Kira said, waving goodbye as she made her way to her car.

Kelvin and Ben jumped into Ben’s Jeep parked right out front.

“You get everything, Elaine?”

“I got it all,” Elaine replied in her most sympathetic tone.

Kelvin and Ben returned to the club two hours later and had a hard time finding a place to park. To Kelvin’s surprise, a KTLA news van was parked outside, and a line had already formed. Shane, a sturdy Black man in his sixties and Kelvin’s favorite security guard, was setting up stanchions to divide the line.

“Shane! Hey, how are you?” Kelvin said, extending his arm for their familiar double-handshake, followed by a quick fist bump.

“Kelvin! And brother Ben, I see,” Shane said warmly. “So you’re the architects that got KTLA on here on a Tuesday night.”

“I’m no architect,” said Ben, shaking Shane’s hand. “I’m strictly on the sideline.”

“Is that so?” Shane said with a smile. “Ivan was out here a minute or so ago looking for you guys. He’s probably up in the DJ booth.”

“I’ll find him,” Ben said.

Shane nodded to Kelvin. “Let’s get in there.”

Once inside, they found the entry and main room bristling with activity. Simbotek guys were up on ladders checking connections with Ivan, and Ben immediately rushed to join them. In the front room, bartenders and bar backs were rapidly preparing for thirsty participants and the drinks in sealed cups Julie had requested.

Sitting on a bench, Kelvin found Estelle (Etsy), his short, friendly Latin American cashier, seated with Renaissance in full drag. Just behind them stood Julie on her phone, looking very corporate in a shiny gold-and-black blazer, speaking to Beau projected on his X mark. All four of them looked at Kelvin as he and Ben entered.

Renaissance stood and walked up to Kelvin, towering in heels in a sleek silver sequin dress and a towering gold wig, with perfect makeup, nails, and luminous East Indian skin that made her the most desirable door host at any event in LA. Her costumes were often created by Maury Vista, and she booked exclusively with Delphine. She was one of the many independent contractors who worked out of the Atlas. Renaissance was so striking that people joked she could stop a bullet with a glance. Luckily, that metaphor had never been tested.

“Hello, Kelvin. I met Julie just before you came in, and she gave me the Simbotek list. Do you have yours?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Kelvin, smiling at Julie and Beau as he pulled off his backpack filled with supplies for the night. “Where do you want me to send it, email or text? I thought for sure my scion had sent it over already.”

A green light flickered on Kelvin’s earpiece, but Elaine said nothing.

“Text it please,” Renaissance replied, looking at her phone. Then she looked up and smiled. “I’m sorry, how are you?”

“I’m good. A little nervous, but good.”

“That’s good,” said Renaissance, looking back at her phone. “OK, I got it. I haven’t been here in a while. You and Ben both used to work here, right?” She continued without waiting for Kelvin to reply. “Well, apparently Beau is going to stand over there and talk to people as they enter on that X on the floor, but will disappear when the dating starts. So Estelle will be here right at the podium to scan the tickets, and I will greet the guests and scan their tickets and mark them off the list. If you could just make sure Estelle and I have something to drink, I think we are all set.”

They walked together toward Julie and Beau, no introductions needed. Julie was about to speak when Kelvin suddenly remembered he hadn’t given Estelle her cash box with the bank in it in case anyone paid cash.

“Oh, excuse me, just one sec.”

He pivoted back to Estelle, reached into his backpack, and pulled out the cash box. He hugged her and set it on her stool behind the podium.

“It’s all good, sweetie. I know what to do.”

Estelle was like a munchkin, full of joy. She could say no to people trying to get in for free with a smile no one could stand against. With Renaissance at her side, the door would be the least of his concerns tonight, or so he thought. He moved back over to Julie and Beau, somewhat more composed.

“You guys look amazing. Love that jacket, Julie, and those pants, Beau.”

Julie’s gold blazer looked like it was spun from 24K fabric, and maybe it was, considering the kind of salary a Simbotek SVP of R&D would make. She reminded Beau of Michelle Obama speaking at a TED Talk, with Simbotek’s most modern earpiece, complete with camera, mic, and speaker, over her left ear.

Beau stood out even more. His head and upper body were a perfect holographic projection: a familiar, friendly face with a taut jawline, a black Simbotek T-shirt suggesting an athletic, muscular build, while only the veins in his arms revealed the holographic nature as they appeared to be composed of white light. The pants were something altogether different. They appeared to be normal black jeans at the waist, but as they went down they were filled with specks of multicolored light, descending to sneakers that were black and pure white light. So you looked him in the face like anyone else, but all you had to do was look down to see he was something else entirely.

Kelvin himself was dressed in jeans with one of his signature black tunics, slightly see-through to reveal his own athletic frame, with strings in the front that crisscrossed at the neckline.

“Cool shirt,” said Beau. “So you ready for tonight, buddy? I think we’re about thirty minutes from showtime by my count.”

“I think we are on schedule,” said Julie, looking up from her phone with a big smile. “I’m planning to do a little intro once everyone is seated for round one, then away we go with the DJ as soon as the scions appear.”

Almost on cue, Kira walked in, made up in her most familiar DJ look, with multicolored ribbons in her hair. Right behind her came Claude, dressed in jeans and a white METRIX tank top showing off his massive, muscular frame, and behind him an Asian woman dressed all in black whom he did not know, clearly accompanying Claude.

“Speak of the devil,” said Kelvin as the trio approached.

“Julie, these are the DJs Kira and Claude,” he said, looking toward the Asian woman.

“This is Sabine. She’ll be assisting me tonight,” said Claude.

Everyone nodded in recognition, then Kelvin said, “And this is Julie Watkins, Simbotek R&D SVP. She’s our corporate liaison, and this guy some of you might know as Beau.”

“Hello, everyone,” said Julie. “I was just telling Kelvin here that I’ll do a little introduction before we begin. Our scions will then appear at the tables on cue when the music starts, for both rounds.”

“I can’t wait to see, mademoiselle,” said Claude in a noticeably stronger Montreal accent than earlier, reaching out to take Julie’s hand.

Kira smiled and said, “Sounds good. I know my way to the booth.”

She shook Julie’s hand as well. Sabine did the same, barely cracking a smile, and the trio made their way in.

Kelvin returned his attention to Julie and Beau.

“So I was surprised to see the KTLA van outside.”

“I have a friend there. I gave them the exclusive,” said Julie, looking to the door where Renaissance and Etsy were busy getting ready. “They won’t be coming inside. They’re just talking to participants in line and catching them on the way out to hear what they have to say about speed dating with scions.”

“That’s cool.”

“I’m not sure the cameras would pick us up correctly if they came inside,” said Beau.

“Makes sense. I’m gonna go check on our team inside. Can I get anyone something to drink?”

“Just water,” everyone present said in unison.

Kelvin looked at the bartender, a pleasant-looking brunette with her hair up, wearing a red blouse with a black velvet jacket.

“Steve hasn’t given us drink tickets...”

“I got you covered. I’m Barbara. I’m doubling up as both the bar manager and bartender up front tonight.”

“Crown Royal for everyone then,” said Kelvin, flirtatiously winking and smiling as Barbara handed him four waters.

Kelvin distributed them and excused himself.

The front room at the Silverado was basically a cozy lobby with a bar, holding about 150 people. The larger room could hold 400 and had an expansive square dance floor. A bar for four bartenders was placed opposite the entry to the room. To the left was a stage elevated about 10 inches above the floor, the same height as the lounge area, which lay in the far corner between the bar and the stage. To the right, the elevated DJ booth overlooked the entire room, and between it and the bar was a stairwell leading upstairs to the outdoor rooftop patio where the other event was taking place, as well as downstairs to the lower basement where bathrooms and a smoking patio were located. The building itself was built on a hillside close to where Sunset Blvd and Santa Monica Blvd intersected.

The lounge area, the stage, and a third of the dance floor were filled with tables for two where the dating would take place. The rest of the room was left for people to socialize and watch.

Kelvin spotted Ben on the stage looking rather intently at the DJ booth where Claude, Kira, and Sabine were getting ready for Kira to spin round one. The stage had a large video screen behind it that alternated the Simbotek logo with Kelvin's Reflex logo.

Kelvin walked over to the booth to see if Claude and Kira needed anything.

"No monsieur," Claude said, gesturing to his backpack, then opening it to show it was filled with sports drinks. "Sabine packed these for us. She knows what we like."

He offered one to Kelvin.

“I’m good.”

Kelvin didn’t know Claude well, so he took a moment to take in the details. Claude was a massive, imposing physical specimen, standing 6'3" with a heavily muscled frame characterized by exceptionally broad shoulders, a thick neck, and a dense, vascular chest and arms. His face was rugged and sharply chiseled, defined by a strong, square jawline, piercing blue eyes that projected intense focus, and a short, light brown crew cut paired with a rugged, meticulously maintained five o'clock shadow.

His companion, Sabine, was a very athletic-looking woman, 5'11", with large, dark brown, expressive eyes and soft, slightly almond-shaped features. She had a soft, oval-shaped face characterized by high, gently defined cheekbones and a rounded jawline.

Sabine stood next to Kira, looking intently across the room, apparently at Ben, to the point it was becoming noticeable.

Kira broke the silence. “How long till we start?”

“About ten minutes now,” Kelvin said, getting anxious. “Julie will step on stage and welcome everyone, and when the scions appear, you start to play.”

“Thank you for adding us to the event,” Claude said. “I was so curious I begged Delphine.”

“It’s all good,” said Kelvin, heading back out of the booth to see if they were ready up front.

Several corporate people had arrived, obviously Simbotek. Julie walked straight over to Kelvin.

“These are mostly my co-workers. Has Steve arrived? Just so you know, that birthday party upstairs is one of our competitors. Can we make sure there’s security on that stairwell by the DJ booth? We don’t want them sneaking in.”

“Of course,” Kelvin said. “Yeah, I’ll tell Shane. And no, I haven’t seen Steve yet.”

Julie nodded, smiling, with no sign that she was seriously upset.

Kelvin passed by Etsy and Renaissance on his way to Shane and saw the line had grown to nearly one hundred people. Shane assured him security was posted at the stairwell and asked if they were ready inside. Kelvin checked once more with Julie, then gave the OK.

“Let ’em in.”

The first hundred participants came in looking for drinks and the bathrooms first, like any crowd. Men and women entered, some dressed casually, others as if they had just come from work. With them came Serena and Jason, who immediately took to playing host. Jason was a 6'2" Caucasian man and Serena a 5'5" Latina, a beloved couple in LA’s nightlife scene who seemed to know quite a few of the participants. Their bright, girl-next-door and boy-next-door smiles moved easily through the crowd, gently encouraging people to make their way to their assigned seating.

Renaissance and Etsy had little to do, since these were advanced-ticket participants with specific instructions for arrival.

Jason and Serena joined Kelvin at the entry to the main room just as a few people with spectator tickets arrived.

“Hi, sweetie. Sorry we didn’t come right to you. We were both running late at work and saw people here already.”

Kelvin hugged them both, Serena first, then Jason.

“I’m so glad you guys could make it.”

Just then Julie stepped onto the stage to welcome everyone and gave Kira the signal to start.

A whizzing sound moved through the room for a couple of seconds, and when it stopped, one hundred scions appeared seated opposite the participants, several of them matching the participants’ gender. The crowd let out a collective “OHHH” as they appeared.

Kira began to play, and gentle laughter drifted through the room as participants and scions began to converse. What stood out most were two scions that did not look human at all. One looked like a wizard in blue robes, with a long beard and a tall pointed hat. Another resembled what most people would probably call a troll. Beau could be seen popping in and out at each table, greeting participants and scions for the first twenty minutes before returning to the X spot in the front room near Renaissance and Julie, who were greeting the incoming ticket holders coming only to watch.

Jason and Serena continued talking with people in the front room as they slowly extended into the open area of the dance floor

where the speed dating was taking place. Renaissance waved Kelvin over.

“OK, girl, so there have been a couple people who are not on the list. Apparently they’re attending an event upstairs?”

“Oh, sorry, yes. I thought Julie would’ve told you, but that event is apparently all Synapse employees.”

Renaissance made a face and rolled her eyes a little.

“Ooooo, that’s kind of tacky,” she said.

“Yeah, I was surprised Steve booked them without saying anything.”

“I’m not. Claude had a Saturday-night event here once, and the venue did the same thing. One other thing: that list you gave me—I don’t see April on there, or Delphine, and I know they’re coming plus one.”

“Huh?” Kelvin reached for her phone. “I know I had them on there. I’m positive.”

Renaissance handed over her phone, still looking annoyed. The very list Kelvin had texted her did not include April LaCroix or Delphine Varga. He checked his own phone, and the names were there.

“This is impossible.”

“Kelvin, if I was going to delete anyone from your list, which I would never do anyway, I assure you the last person I’d delete is April LaCroix or the woman who booked me to be here tonight.”

Renaissance sounded a little more annoyed now.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I have no idea how that could’ve happened. Please let me know if anyone else has vanished,” he said, handing Renaissance his phone so she could look over the names.

“OK then,” said Renaissance, handing it back.

More and more people were coming in, including some Round 2 participants. Julie approached Kelvin while Jason and Serena looked on.

“Seems to be going pretty smoothly,” Julie said.

“It’s amazing,” Serena said, giving Kelvin a look that clearly asked for an introduction.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Julie Watkins, this is Serena Garcia and Jason Bennett. Julie is SVP of R&D at Simbotek. Jason and Serena are two of my closest friends. Jason’s a civil engineer, and Serena works at Elson & Parker, the PR firm downtown.”

“I know Elson & Parker,” Julie said, shaking their hands. “We’ve done some trade shows with them.”

Just then Kelvin felt Ben’s familiar grip on his shoulder. He looked over to see Ben pointing at the door. An African American couple walked in: the man looked to be well into his seventies, dignified in an expensive tailored suit, with deep brown eyes. The woman was exactly six feet tall, with long, thick, dark brown rope-twist braids that fell down her back to her narrow waist. Her face had prominent cheekbones and a sculpted jawline, her skin a radiant golden brown, almond-shaped dark brown eyes with a piercing

gaze, and full, luscious lips. She wore multiple necklaces of varying lengths.

April LaCroix, Kelvin thought. But who was the man with her?

Practically reading his mind, Ben said, “That’s Cyrus LaCroix, April’s uncle, the man who converted the Atlas from a warehouse into the club it is today. I haven’t seen him in years. He’s retired to New Orleans. He must’ve just gotten into town.”

Beau suddenly appeared on his X mark and greeted the couple after Renaissance hugged them both. Everyone in the room was watching, including a couple of people Renaissance had just rejected from the Synapse event upstairs, who were trying to sneak in.

“Clear the doorway, please,” Renaissance told the crashers, who reluctantly returned to the outside entry for their event upstairs.

April’s beauty was legendary in LA nightlife and commanded attention wherever she went. She walked straight to Ben and Kelvin. She knew them well, as did Jason and Serena.

“Hi, April. This is Julie Watkins, SVP of R&D from Simbotek, and this is April, the owner of the Atlas,” Kelvin said.

April shook Julie’s hand. “No need for introductions, Kelvin. Julie and I have met. It’s nice to see you again. Please let me introduce all of you to my uncle Cyrus.”

Kelvin noticed a look in both Julie’s and April’s eyes that suggested they knew each other fairly well. Cyrus shook everyone’s hands. His face was framed by a neatly trimmed mustache and close-cropped hair, a striking snow-white silver.

Deep, expressive lines mapped his face, radiating outward from eyes that still sparkled with warmth, sharp intellect, and a lifetime of intense social conviction. Cyrus was a living legend in his own right, not seen in LA in over a decade.

The group moved together into the now considerably crowded main room to join everyone else watching the spectacle of the scions flickering in and out at the tables for two. After about ten minutes, a bell rang, signaling that round one was complete.

The scions vanished, and the participants quietly rose and moved into the watching area as the round two participants made their way to their assigned seats. Once everyone was seated, Kira finished her final track, and Claude and Sabine could be seen in the booth as well, Claude studying the CDJs closely. The music was scheduled to stop briefly so people could applaud Kira.

When the music stopped, the room went unexpectedly dark. Another power outage, similar to the day Julie and Kelvin signed their contract. A cold chill went up Kelvin's spine when the video screen sprang to life. A thick black fog appeared on the screen, filled with lidless eyeballs of varying sizes, some looking outward in rage, others in fear, and some looking around as if confused. The fog itself seemed three-dimensional, as though it were oozing out of the screen.

What the fuck, Kelvin thought.

Then he heard someone scream.

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