

Off the Coast of North West Africa

September 1, 1739

The Voyage of the La'Marchant from the coast of the Sahara to New Orleans would take approximately eight weeks. On the third day of their journey, the August new moon made the skies especially dark. Elira stood alone on the ship's deck, looking at the stars. On the railing, she had placed a parallax device, a handheld instrument that appeared to be made of brass and crystal. The devices were used, or so the Architects believed, primarily to collect geological and meteorological data that would be transferred to the continuum stones they guarded upon returning to them. As Elira looked out onto the sea and the stars, the Stranger joined her.

"A beautiful night, my queen," he said.

Elira smiled. "I think it's time we let that title go. I'm to be a businesswoman now, you know."

The Stranger smiled and looked at the parallax device sitting on the railing.

"Always working, aren't we?"

"It says the spheres are dancing out there on the horizon."

"A hurricane, you mean?"

"Not one. Two."

"It is that time of year."

“I’ve advised the captain on how to navigate around them. It might lengthen the journey.”

The Stranger acknowledged this with a nod, then changed the subject.

“So tell me, what do you know of the stones in the Americas?”

“There are four stones. Ours will make it five. The Architects who guard them are descended from both humanity and emissaries, same as we. I have visited them all through the arches. The wardstone families are all Native American. They and their deities have lived in relative peace for thousands of years. The coming of the Europeans, with their guns and their diseases, has greatly disrupted their cultures and their faith in their deities. The deities blame the Architects for not warning them, as if we could somehow conjure a defense against the passage of time.”

“We now both appear invaders by the color of our skin.”

“Indeed,” Elira said sadly. “But it shall not always be so. The days move more quickly now.”

“Indeed,” the Stranger agreed, looking down at the waters caressing the ship. “Is it a blessing or a curse for us to see, to know what we know of the future? I don’t know.”

“We know what we need to know. Nothing more, nothing less.”

The Stranger looked out at the sea quietly for a time, then spoke again.

“And what of the Absence? It has not troubled the Americas, for the most part, to my knowledge.”

“It has come to the Oasis in search of healing three times across the millennia, when its more benevolent personalities held it. My people never discovered the secret to curing its torment. We have only been able to put it to sleep. And so it has slept for decades, perhaps centuries, over the long years. But its more antagonistic personalities are always roused, and so it rises to trouble the world once more. Circe has returned to its service, last I heard. She travels with two M’Naads, together posing as the Hecate, seeking out circumstances where her words will seed the spells that sew lies that can grow. And so the cycle begins once more.”

“Circe is as time-lost as her companions. Sophie will have to deal with her for a time. Things will go bad in France soon.”

They then stood together in silence for much of the night, staring at the Milky Way as it descended below the horizon, speaking silently, one mind to the other, with no words anyone could hear. Looking both into the past and the ages yet to come.

With no moon visible, the Milky Way looked spectacular falling into the ocean—like the Via itself, a waterfall of white light.

“The galactic core,” the stranger said. “Heavenly.”

“Heaven it may be,” Elira responded.

“Perhaps it is, yes. My queen. Perhaps it is.”

Just before the sun rose, Captain Marchand approached the two Architects standing in silence.

“Good morning, my lady, monsieur,” he said. “I have some documents here for you to sign. Lady Clea gave them to me in Cairo for you once we were on our way. They are from Lasy

Sophie in Paris—a deed to your new home and the theater they have built in your name.”

The Stranger raised an eyebrow. “Your name?”

“The last name I have taken for myself—and the theater.”

She took the feather pen the captain offered and signed:

Elira LaCroix.

Chapter 4 - Round Two

Time stood still for Kelvin from the moment he heard the scream. He looked around him, and it seemed as if everyone in the room was doused in shadow, as if he was seeing some hidden world between moments. The creature that was pouring out of the video screen continued to move forward like a deep, dark ooze, and it seemed to have a voice—no, several voices.

“I know secrets.”

“I know the truth.”

“What you are.”

“Who you want.”

Each comment came from a different voice.

Kelvin felt a deep sense of revulsion. *Who I want?* he thought. *What the fuck is going on?* He looked around and started to wonder if he was dreaming. Dreaming that was it—the stranger in his dreams had said that strange word. Elaine knew it; she was

not responding. Kelvin closed his eyes, and it came right to his lips.

“Via.”

Instantly, the world came back to what it was: the creature was gone from the screen, the lights were up, and the round-2 scions whizzed into place. In the booth, Claude was visible, looking over the CDJs. He looked up at the crowd, offered up his most charismatic smile, and said,

“My English isn’t always the best, but I think the word is—blooper?”

Everyone laughed with a sigh of relief. The scream, it turned out, was a girl that spilled her drink on herself when the lights went out. She was now telling Renaissance she expected the club to pay for her dry cleaning. Ben, Cyrus and April, however, looked visibly alarmed, and Ben was staring very intently at Claude’s companion in the dj booth, Sabine, who seemed more than happy to glare right back at him.

Still, the room became increasingly calm, interested more in the new round of scions and obviously assuming it was a simple power outage common enough in nightclubs.

Kelvin was well on his way to the booth to check on Kira and Claude; and radioed Ivan to meet him there.

Claude pulled his headphones off upon his arrival. “Hey, Buddy, that was pretty weird. Was that a Simbotek thing, the fog and the eyeballs?”

So it wasn't just me that saw that, Kelvin thought. Julie had made her way to the booth as well and looked just as concerned.

"Well, whatever it was, that was a great save calling it a blooper, Claude. Thank you."

"No problem, buddy. I think fast on my feet."

Kira smiled as she was packing up her things. "That was an interesting jolt. I'll give it that. But it looks like everything is going fine now."

Kelvin nodded relieved, Claude could have been pissed and a dick about it, but he handled it like a pro. *Duly noted* Kelvin thought and walked down to Julie, who was speaking with Ivan.

"I'm really not sure what that was," Ivan was saying. "Steve should be here any minute. It's possible that the visual was just in the cache of the video and the screen defaulted to it. I wasn't here Sunday Night, but there was a goth event, and I know they utilized the screen."

Julie seemed satisfied with the answer. Looking at Kelvin, "I looked at our logs. I thought that was a hack pulled off by the Synapse folks upstairs for a minute there, but I think Ivan's explanation is more plausible. We had a few people exit from Round one already. The feedback is pretty good according to our KTLA gal. One man said he felt like he was interviewed by a girl's ex-boyfriend. I'd call that a win." finishing with a big smile.

Kelvin was relieved to see Julie wasn't freaking out, though she really didn't seem the type to freak out over anything. He headed

back to the front room, where he found Ben standing alone, still staring across into the main room at Claude's assistant.

"Ok, I get the Asian girl is way fucking hot, and since she works for Claude and most people seem to think he and Delphine are a thing, she's likely available, and looks to be your type, but we got a few other concerns right now."

"More than you know," Ben said, almost under his breath. "Go say goodbye to April. She and Cyrus won't be here much longer. Turn around I there's someone that just came in you want to say hello to."

Kelvin turned around and nearly dropped his drink, Bill Weir the promoter he had worked for here at the Silverado was standing in front of him grinning ear to ear.

"Hello Kelvin"

"Oh my god Bill, I thought you never left PV, I can't believe your here. Jason and Serena will flip out."

"I just saw them, I've had business here this month, saw your flyer sent to my old e-mail list, thought I'd come check it out. So Scion Speed Dating eh," he said looking around. "I always knew you'd do something interesting, I thought it would be sooner, but timing is everything you know. And this seems the right time the right place to me. I saw April out in that front room with Cyrus, I'm working with two friends of theirs down in PV Eduardo and Marta Good people, Really Good people. "How's Steve treating you?"

"Pretty Good. He booked a Simbotek competitor upstairs."

Bill shook his head, “Typical. Well your busy I’ll be in town for awhile. Go do your thing we can catch up later.”

“Thanks Bill, seriously, It means so much to me your here.”

Bill tipped his hat and made his way over to the bar. Pushing 60 he was a big muscular intimidating man, twice Kelvin’s size. The crowd parted like the red sea as he moved forward.

Kelvin looked to the door and saw that Delphine had just walked in accompanied by her two dancers, with Billy Oxford and Michael Warren from Proxima magazine. They were all chatting with April, Cyrus, and Renaissance. Probably about the bizzaro hologram that just happened.

Delphine reached out her hand as soon as Kelvin appeared.

“Hello, my darling. I am sorry we are vate, but stuck in travvic.” Her Hungarian accent was thick. “My dancers are costumed and ready to go; you only need to point the way.”

“Oh, snap, I totally forgot about them, but yeah, the boxes are there on each side of the room. I’ll go tell the lighting booth to light them.”

He was about to turn away when April threw him a glance letting him know she was about to leave; so he walked over to say goodbye.

“You handled that...*blooper* well,” she said.

“I did! Actually, it was Claude that thought fast...”

“It’s your event, Kelvin. Events are *a time in space* or *a space in time*, depending on your perspective. This scion speed dating was

a very, very innovative idea Kelvin, the kind of idea that gets you noticed. When you get noticed, pardon my French, but...shit happens. It's all going well enough now that's all that matters. We would stay longer but I need to get Cyrus home. He just flew in from New Orleans, and he is jet-lagged. Come and see us this weekend. We can talk more."

"I'd like that." He appreciated April's frankness no matter how intimidating he found her. He shook Cyrus's hand one more time to say goodbye; got a wink from him and a noticeably firm grip for someone who appeared in his 70's.

Kelvin returned his attention to the main room as soon as April left, round two was progressing as smoothly as round one. Delphine's dancers were already lit, one boy and one girl in classy costumes made of a fabric the likes of which he had never seen, almost holographic reflection.

Billy and Michael approached. "Hey, Kelvin, you know we don't come out til the sun sets, knight owls that we are."

Billy & Michael had been together as a couple "forever." Their online magazine Proxima covered all of LA Nightlife, and they took pictures at clubs probably seven nights a week. They were both astonishingly good-looking with ripped, muscular, well-tanned bodies. They had hit on Kelvin more times than he could count; he took it in strides, saying couples aren't his thing. Kelvin was hit on by both women and men regularly, giving rise to the notion he was a closet case in some gay circles. The truth was he had no sexual preference or orientation, and that's exactly how he put it when asked.

“Thank you both for coming. Did you see Jason and Serena are here? Serena has drink tickets; she will take care of you.”

“I’m glad KTLA isn’t inside,” Michael said. “Let’s get a picture of you”

Kelvin looked around the room. Delphine was nearby, so he motioned to her. She excused herself and walked over.

“What can I do for you?” Delphine said

“Quick picture for the boys here.”

“Of course.”

Delphine Varga was widely considered one of the most beautiful women in LA’s nightlife scene. She has a refined, classic beauty look with an oval face with expressive dark hazel eyes, standing an elegant 5’ 10” inches tall with an hourglass figure. Her crowning glory is her thick, amber-blond hair, typically styled in chic updos that framed her striking facial symmetry.

Kelvin always thought her the kind of woman that makes men feel they need to correct their posture when speaking with her. Taking a photo with Delphine was a strategic move for someone as shy as Kelvin. She made the perfect comrade, Kelvin in his see through sting up tunic and Delphine in her professional black pants, heels, elegant blouse with a shiny silver jacket. Despite her accent, her voice was particularly melodic and mesmerizing, a voice people had a hard time saying no to. The voice alone made her particularly successful when it came to getting promoters to sign on the dotted line.

Michael snapped a couple photo's of the two of them, then he and Billy went into the to find Serena for drinks.

"Oh, but here is Maury," Delphine said.

"Heyyy," Maury had just come in behind them. "I didn't have a ticket, but Renaissance let me in. I wanted to see how it all looked, and wow." he said peering in. "It's playing out pretty good, I think."

Looking at the room, Kelvin agreed all was status quo. Beau could be seen blinking in and out at each table, laughter could be heard from the tables, and people were gently swaying to Claude's music. He could see Jason and Serena at the bar with Billy and Michael. Then he saw Julie was at the bar with Steve, who must have come in through the private entry. Kelvin began to walk over to them, passing Kira on her way out.

"Hey, honey, I'm ready to go."

Kelvin hugged her warmly. "Did you get your check?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, Etsy has them at the door."

"Ok, good."

"That KTLA van is still outside, I think. Julie asked if you could say hello to them and say you're the DJ. They'll probably be gone by the time Claude leaves."

"Oh, ok sure. Wow, do I look alright. Is my face all sweaty."

“Please. You look amazing and the reporter is on the look out for the pretty blonde girl with ribbons in her hair.”

“Aww thank you.” She hugged him and made her way to Etsy and the door out. Kelvin took a moment to check in with Elaine.

Tapping his earpiece. “Hey, can you hear me ok? It’s loud in here.”

“I can hear you, and I think it’s all going wonderfully.”

“But that thing in between rounds, on the screen, it—”

Elaine cut him off mid-sentence. “You know what Bill told you: get a lemon, make lemonade. And this is far from a lemon.”

“I know, it’s all going so fast, but there was this—”

“We can talk about that later, Kelvin. You should go see what Julie is saying to Steve; she is your partner in this event.”

Elaine sounded unusually firm and slightly alarmed. Kelvin decided to do as she asked and go up to Julie and Steve right away.

“Hey, Steve, I didn’t see you come in,” he said.

“Heyyy, there, the man of the hour. Pretty good crowd you guys got here tonight, and KTLA too.”

He was in the process of handing Julie a receipt.

“The bar is all good. Now we are going to hold this deposit for your event next month.”

Julie gave Kelvin a reassuring look. “Let’s talk about that in a day or so? I have to write a lengthy report on the scions performance tonight and go over next steps with R&D. Everything has gone perfectly though, just a bit of a surprise with our competitor upstairs.”

Steve blew the comment off and instead apologized for the video loop that ran between rounds. “I wasn’t here on Sunday night, not sure what that was, but we don’t have an actual video person on staff here, out of our budget. We do sometimes have issues with that screen.”

Julie nodded, accepting both his blow off of the booking upstairs and the apology. “It’s all good. Every road has a few potholes in it.”

“I’m happy, you’re both happy,” Kelvin said. Steve offered them both a cocktail, but Julie excused herself to go speak with one of the Simbotek techs about breaking down after the event.

“We have no event tomorrow, but a movie crew is in here on Thursday,” Steve said, handing Kelvin a Jack and Coke. “They can come in tomorrow and remove all those plasma nodes. So I heard April LaCroix came in with her uncle Cyrus?”

“Yes, they were here in round one, left shortly after round two started.”

“She’s a pretty intense woman, and her uncle is a bit of a legend. Our owners get on with the LaCroixs fairly well. They’re competitors, mind you, but they stayed in business a long time, survived Covid and changes in how people drink, and all the

warehouse parties that thought they were an Atlas back before the Olympics."

"Yeah, I'm a little scared of April."

"Not a biz for the feint-hearted, Kelvin. The biz is what it is."

"I hear you, Thanks for being open to doing something different."

"All good, my friend, all good." Steve excused himself and vanished down the stairwell that led to his lair.

Kelvin turned around to take it all in one last time. The second round was nearly over. He had meant to go try and listen in on some of the conversations people were having with the scions, but it was all going by so fast.

Walking back to the DJ booth, Claude was busy mixing, so Kelvin spoke to Sabine.

"Hey, so that bell is gonna ring, and the scions will disappear soon. Claude can play for another 20 minutes as people are winding down. I see quite a few of the gawkers are dancing now. That's cool.

Sabine cracked the first smile he had seen on her face that night.

"Understood," she said. Then, reaching out to wrap her left arm around Kelvin's left arm, "You did the right thing tonight." She said quite seriously, looking him straight in the eye.

Kelvin nodded. "Oh, well, thank you. It was really nice to meet you tonight."

She looked past Kelvin to the entry to the booth. Kelvin saw Ben was standing there with Ivan, staring rather intently at Sabine once more.

Kelvin walked up to Ben and Ivan.

"You two need to get a room."

"Later," Ben replied. "The bell is about to ring."

"I know, I need to get back up front."

Kelvin walked back to the front to see Delphine, Maury, Billy, and Michael, chatting with Renaissance, Etsy, and Beau on his X mark. He walked to Etsy's left to count the cash in her box. \$400 plus the bank, just 10 tickets sold in cash. No surprises there; most people use credit cards these days.

"Have you given everyone their checks?" he asked Etsy.

"Yesiree," she replied. "Is it ok for me to go?"

"Sure, you can go. Thank you, honey." He reached forward and gave her a hug and turned to Renaissance.

"I'm so sorry about the list."

"It's ok, girl. I get it. That was weird. I saw April's name on your phone; how it could vanish on mine, I don't know. The only really annoying thing tonight were those people from upstairs. I'm used to people trying to talk their way in for free at sold-out parties, but these took the cake. Oh my god. Like 5th-grade little girls in suits."

"I know. Julie was not happy they booked like that, we could have put video screens up there and had more watchers. But hey, by the way, forgot to tell you—love your gown."

Renaissance lit right up. "Do you? It's Maury's design." She did a quick twirl for Kelvin to bedazzle him with what seemed like a million silver sequins. Just as she did so, the second bell rang.

Kelvin put the \$400 in cash in his pocket, then turned to say goodbye to Maury, Delphine, Billy, and Michael, giving each of them and Renaissance a hug as they made for the door, to beat the herd of participants rushing the door.

Beau looked directly at Kelvin. "Hey, buddy, so what do you think? If I was human, I'm pretty sure I'd say I'm exhausted."

Kelvin laughed. "So how do you think it went for actual hook-ups, I mean matches, Beau?"

"I think as well as can be expected. We calculated a 20% chance of hosts meeting other hosts after the event. Some of the conversations were guarded, especially the Troll in Round one and the Gorilla and Round 2. The Gorilla's host is a 5 ft. very petite young woman."

Kelvin laughed. "Wow, bizarre."

"I think the KTLA people are outside. Julie wants me to appear out there; we set up a node on the street from the Simbotek van parked next to KTLA. I'm just going to talk to the reporter. If they film me, I'll just be a pixelated blob, kinda like that thing on the video screen after round one. That was really, uh, different. Was that Claude's normal intro?"

"No, it was something rendered by another event left in the cache, I guess."

"Hmmm. Ok. Well, yeah. I thought I heard it talk for a second but Julie said no. Probably just a feedback loop. Anyway thank you, Kelvin for the opportunity. This was totally unlike anything we have ever done before. Looking forward to seeing you with less constraints when we release phase 2." With that, he cracked a smile and whizzed out of existence.

Julie came out just ahead of the crowd just as Claude placed his last song.

"There you are, you were right these things do go by so fast. Your friends Jason and Serena were lovely hosts for our suits that haven't been in a club in a decade." she said. "Did Beau go to his spot outside?"

"He zipped out just before you turned the corner."

"Ok then. Well, our techs will be here first thing in the morning. I think everything else is wrapped up. We will be staying in touch with the participants to see how the interactions with the scions went."

She looked at Kelvin's earpiece, the green light signaling Elaine was still listening and watching everything.

"You know we could have arranged to project Elaine as well tonight, but I think you'll be seeing her soon anyway."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small case.

"Shhh. This is for you and this miracle of an idea of yours. Just a quick step ahead of what's coming."

Kelvin's eyes lit up; he had a pretty good idea what was in that case, putting it into his pocket.

"I'll be in touch by Friday," Julie said. "I'm taking tomorrow off and Thursday I'll probably have my phone off so I can finish my reports."

Kelvin nodded sympathetically.

"Thank you, Julie, for everything."

"You're very welcome. Looking forward to your help with phase 2," she said with a wink as she made for the door.

Shane entered, stepping aside as more and more participants and watchers exited, then asked, "Are you all good?"

Kelvin said goodbye and thank-you to as many people leaving as he could. Finally, Claude and Sabine emerged with Jason and Serena.

"What fun this was!" Serena said.

"Agreed!" said Claude. "Thank you so much for having us!"

Sabine looked at Kelvin once more with an approving look and lightly mouthed the words "Thank you" as well.

When it was just Kelvin, Jason and Serena left in the front room, Kelvin stepped over to thank Barbara, the bartender, handing her a \$40 cash tip, for which she thanked him graciously.

"Come with us, Kelvin. Let's catch up a bit. Jason can give you a ride home before it gets too late."

Jason nodded in agreement. Kelvin looked at Ben.

"Go on ahead," said Ben. "I know you. You need some down time with friends. I can see you're all wound up with worry about things you don't need to worry about."

Kelvin consented and made his way out with Jason and Serena, leaving Ben to wrap it all up.

When they were gone, Ben looked for Ivan and found him, up in the DJ booth.

"So, did you find the viedo in the cache that we saw between rounds?"

"No," Ivan said. "I found nothing like that."

Ben wasn't surprised by his answer. It's exactly what he expected him to say.

- - - - -

Here's your spelling/grammar/punctuation/run-on pass. I kept your wording and style intact and only fixed errors, awkward phrasing, and punctuation.

Kelvin was happy to accept Serena's invite and rode with her and Jason back to their place. The evening went as intended and had

its hiccups, but they pulled it off—that's all that mattered. He was exhausted; his nerves were shot. The night went by so fast he wasn't sure what people thought. The blackout between DJs came off mostly as a prank; the speed dating itself had worked out flawlessly. Julie seemed pleased with how the Scions appeared and behaved, and Beau came off as a familiar face to pretty much everyone.

Jason and Serena knew how to read Kelvin pretty well. They knew the event went well and he should be happy, but he was more than likely second-guessing every single moment. He needed to unwind, and they knew what to do to make that happen.

Once inside, Kelvin collapsed on the couch. Serena lit a couple candles and disappeared into the bedroom while Jason went to the kitchen and poured three glasses of red wine—Barolo, an Italian red they all liked. He found Kelvin on the couch, one leg on the floor, one propped up, left hand dangling.

“Here you go, buddy.”

“Thanks,” Kelvin said, sitting up and warmly accepting the offering. “So, you think it went well?”

“I think it went great,” Jason said, offering up his best Cheshire-cat smile to reassure him. “It was fun to see people we haven't seen in years whose lives have moved on, the same as me and Serena. Careers do that to you. It was a great, unexpected surprise to see Bill there—I thought he never leaves PV.”

“I was shocked to see him, but it was great,” Kelvin replied. “Quite the distraction, actually—with Steve and Julie there, and April and her posse. We only talked a few minutes, but it was, I dunno, a great distraction, I guess. Like Obi-Wan Kenobi showing up at a New Republic cocktail party after the fall of the Empire.”

Jason cracked up laughing. “Ha that’s a jump, but I think I know what you mean. Bill’s a great guy. A one-of-a-kind. We miss him.”

“I get what he is saying,” said Serena, re-emerging to grab her glass of wine as well. “I thought it was the best-of-show for everyone across the board. Renaissance was great, Claude fast on his feet when the chips were down. They’re really both quite professional”

“People give them a hard time just cause they are good at what they do.” Jason added. “But the girl with Claude what a kock-out, what was up with her and Ben, they were like staring each other down all night.”

“I saw that too,” Kelvin added.

“Her name is Sabine, I’ve met her before, She’s really nice, kinda scary in a Kill Bill kinda way, but I get nothing but good vibes from her.”

“Me too,” Kelvin nodded, taking another sip.

“The Simbotek people were all really friendly” Jason continued as Serna vanished into the bedroom once more. Some of them almost seemed nervous. I guess it’s a big step for them. Watching them take pictures with Renaissance was funny. Those two

dancers were great—sexy but costumed appropriately. Maury did them up right.”

“I dunno if Steve realizes how many people that regularly work at the Atlas were involved. I don’t think he’s paid for costumes or decor for any event that happens there ever.”

“I’m sure,” Jason nodded in agreement. “Steve probably knows this will only go so far in his venue. The AC barely kept up. I think he was just happy the KTLA van was outside talking to people. That kind of news coverage doesn’t come to a club often—it will help all his events.”

Jason reached over to a bong, pressed a little weed into the bowl, and lit it, coughing a bit as he exhaled and handed it to Kelvin.

Kelvin took the lighter and hit as well. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

Jason smiled, slapped Kelvin on the thigh a couple times, and said, “I’m gonna hop in the shower. Take Serena some more wine for me.”

Kelvin nearly blushed. He kinda knew where this was going but didn’t want to assume anything. He went to the kitchen, poured another glass of wine, and walked to the bedroom.

He found Serena making the bed, dressed in one of her \$300 negligées—pure silk that complemented every curve without revealing too much.

“Hey, sweetie, lie down. I’ll give you one of my Ancient Mayan massages.”

Kelvin made a funny face. “I haven’t paid tribute to Santa Muerte recently; not sure I’m worthy.”

Serena just smiled and motioned for him to lay down.

“Ahem,” Elaine remarked in his ear.

Oh shit, he thought. Forgot this was still in my ear.
He pressed the power key, excising Elaine from where this was going.

Kelvin took off his shoes and shirt and lay face down on the bed so Serena could squeeze oil out of an exquisitely designed bottle onto his back. It was cool on his skin and smelled like rose petals, almost giving him goosebumps.

Serena massaged his lower back, spine, and the space between his shoulders relentlessly—she was strong for a woman her size. Kelvin began to feel relaxed like he hadn’t been in weeks. He looked to the side to see Jason’s massive, muscular frame emerge from the bathroom, completely naked and obviously aroused.

He lay down on the bed next to them as Serena slipped out of her negligée, then bent behind to take off Kelvin’s pants. This wasn’t the first time they’d done this. Jason and Serena were mostly monogamous, immune to the constant flirting they received in clubland. They warmed up to Kelvin, who was always notoriously single, to give him the affection they knew he needed. Kelvin was a giver, not a taker. Generally speaking, there was no jealousy here—no one person more into just one of the other, just love and affection for love and affection’s sake.

Serena now lay on top of Kelvin from behind, the feel of her tender breasts sending a mild shockwave through his entire body. Sex with women made Kelvin tingle everywhere, from the tips of his toes to the hair on his scalp. He felt himself go rigidly hard at Serena's touch, while looking over at Jason lying there with his 10.5-inch cock rock hard, smiling ear to ear. Instinctively, Kelvin and Serena traded positions, Serena on her back facing him. Kelvin instinctively dove into her, intoxicated by her smell, her smile, and the feel of her body.

As he moved in and out, Jason began to massage Kelvin's ass. Kelvin tensed instinctively as Jason pushed his fingers into him, using Serena's special oil to make everything slick, inside him as well as out. Jason moved behind Kelvin and slid his dick between the cheeks of his bubble butt, moving slowly at first, easing him open with just the tip. After a couple of minutes and a few milder thrusts into him, he pushed in with all the force his massive cock could bring to bear, so much that Serena felt every bit as much as Kelvin. Sex with men was something altogether different to Kelvin—man to man, it was all about the act itself, the physicality of the fucking. Kelvin approached being top or bottom without hesitation with men; he just took the position the other man wanted, making him ultimately submissive in either role.

They rocked back and forth, the three moving as one. Being with both a woman and a man didn't happen as much as Kelvin would like, but he had made a successful enough practice of it to know what to do for both Jason and Serena at once. Jason came first, then Serena, then Kelvin—one, two, three—before collapsing sideways into a break, catching their collective breath.

Serena rose quickly, slipping into the shower. Kelvin and Jason smoked some more, and Kelvin found himself aroused once more. Jason happily complied this time, pulling Kelvin's legs over his shoulders and ramming into him while Kelvin stoked himself. By the time Serena emerged in her robe, they had both cum a second time, and it was Jason's turn for the shower—he had been at work since 5 a.m. the day before. It was 12:30 a.m.

“You're a horny one tonight,” she said, laughing. “Stay the night with us, sweetie.”

Did they plan this? Cause last time they did this, it was Jason who showered first and Kelvin & Serena who went round two. They took such good care of him; he hadn't actually had sex with anyone in months; his mind was just elsewhere lately.

“I should Uber home. Jason's gonna have to get up again soon anyway.” He reached for his trousers, feeling something in the right pocket, then sprang up out of the bed.

“Oh shit, I nearly forgot.”

He looked for Elaine's earpiece as Jason emerged from the shower in a towel and fell back onto the bed.

“What, no round three?” Jason asked.

“What a horny pair of piglets I have here tonight,” Serena said, bouncing back onto the bed in her robe, then pulling away when Jason tried to untie it.

Kelvin was about to switch Elaine online when he looked down at himself, realized he was still naked, and unexpectedly ... blushed.

“Oh my god,” Jason laughed. “Did the boy with the prettiest always-half-hard dick in the locker room—the one who never wears a towel or pants—just look at himself and blush?” Serena saw it too and laughed.

“No—I mean, yes—I mean, I totally forgot about this.” Kelvin pulled a case out of his pocket to show them. “They’re SPEKS. This is that new Simbotek tech that’s replacing all that clunky hardware they used last night.”

“Oh, I’ve read about that,” Serena said. “Neural-interview contact lenses that work with pucks, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kelvin said, pulling on his pants.

“Well, try them out.”

“I gotta sync them with the puck. Where’s your Wi-Fi the strongest?”

“Living room.”

Serena and Jason followed—Serena in her robe, Jason naked once more, arms crossed, his square-cut tanline giving the appearance of shorts.

Kelvin set the puck on the table and pushed the sync button, which would usually make Elaine’s face appear on his phone rather than the six-inch hologram on the puck.

It took about three minutes. He blinked several times, and then, out of nowhere, Jason and Serena were no longer in front of him. A 5’10” Elaine was staring him right in the eye. The long blonde hair appeared to be moving slightly, as if from a breeze. Her oval

face, blue eyes, and lips all exactly as she appeared in a 2D environment and a thousand times more detailed than the puck projection. Her outfit was a brilliant white suit with green lace and Celtic-looking overlay that would make every man and woman in a nightclub turn their heads. She was every bit her mythic origin and as cutting-edge modern as Kelvin ever dreamed. Beau had looked very cool last night. Elaine now transcended Kelvin's wildest dreams. Jason and Serena could not see her but put their earpieces in and synced them to hear.

"Hello, my love, my heart, my child," she said, her voice clearer and noticeably less electronic sounding than ever before.

"It's good to see you this way, at last."