

August 24, 1739

Coastal Sahara

The stranger stood where the Mediterranean and Atlantic tides met the sands of the Sahara. The first leg of his journey was over; the second now lay before him. Over the last 1,400 years, he had walked all over this world—an Architect with skills and abilities far beyond those possessed by mortal men. Tonight, however, he was little more than a vessel for powers greater than he.

“She is in great need to call upon me this way,” he thought.

He took one last breath of the sea air and measured the dunes before him. He closed his eyes and rose five feet into the air, moving toward the desert—slowly at first, then faster. The dunes parted for him as his speed increased to the point that any observer would think they watched an isolated sandstorm passing by. In just under three hours, he arrived at the oasis, known only to the wise men and women of wandering tribes as the last remnant of ancient Kheshtara.

He realized upon arrival that the oasis was deserted. He saw a trail of departure in the sand leading back the way he had come, not far from where he had landed.

“Impossible,” he thought. “Only two paths could be taken to and from the oasis, and they led to the west and the south. This mystery deepens.”

He approached the oasis’s main structure, a small amphitheater where the inhabitants—just over one hundred of them—regularly gathered. Their queen, Elira, was an Architect like him, and she guarded the oasis’s millennia-old “magical” secret: a continuum

stone. It would have all the answers he needed. Behind a staging area at the center of the oasis, doors were wide open to the stairwell that led to Elira's underground sanctum.

Torchlight flickered as he made his way down the stairs. The chamber was laid out much the same as any construct that housed a continuum stone. Four torches lit the chamber, but with his vision shifted, the stranger had no need of extra light. The transparent, sparkling white light of what his kind called the Via was plainly visible to him, lighting the room. It passed through the high domed ceiling above, down directly into the stone sitting in the middle of the room. The stone itself was a mixture of diamond, and granite atop a solid sheet of deep blue sapphire—nearly perfectly rectangular, measuring 3 x 4 x 5 feet. It bore one insignia, a golden Ankh—as did its eleven brothers and sisters. It was powered by the light of the Via, which could be seen by the gifted as pure silver and white light descending from the domed roof of the chamber directly into the stone.

A beautifully crafted bench sat to the side of the entry, facing the stone—clearly a relic of the ancient Kheshtaran civilization that claimed this land millennia ago. On the opposite side of the stone, to the left, hung an 8-foot-tall, similarly well-crafted mirror. Next to the mirror, a stone archway protruded from the wall, apparently leading nowhere but into the granite behind it. Next to the arch, a large clock and a painting hung side by side about 7.5 feet above the marble floor. The clock was round, about 2.5 feet in diameter; it bore Roman numerals—an ornate Kheshtaran design, but clearly a much later-century technology. The painting's canvas was similar in width to the clock: a Gauguin-like primitivist work, from an artist who would not be born for another hundred years.

Opposite the mirror, over the bench, a 22nd-century holographic rectangular screen floated midair, sparking to life with vertical data flowing up and down—the characters in the language of the Emissaries, forgotten now to all but a few.

All time was as one for the Architects, but that did not give them insight into every detail of past, present, and future moments. The stranger was a wandering Architect, not a Wardstone like Elira. The title of Wardstone was reserved to those who guarded stones and sometimes their families. Whatever had happened here, he would only glean with the help of her stone. Cautiously, he approached and placed both hands upon it. Visions of the oasis's recent history whirled through his head.

Elira Neshetan had become the Wardstone Architect of this stone, some 250 years ago, and married her much younger paladin, Mekteran Durash (Meka), about fifty years ago. The stranger had met the consort when their daughter, Talira, also born an Architect, was just a little girl. It was common for Wardstones to have families and implant all their life's memories into the stones when they walked the Via—the Road—out of this life.

Elira had given some memory to the stone: her long, peaceful reign; her marriage; Talira, full-grown now and also an Architect. Nothing particularly recent.

The stranger envied Elira's decision to have a family and pass her guardianship on one day. The stranger appeared in his early fifties with wisps of gray and fine lines in his deeply tanned Mediterranean skin; and he had made no lasting attachments on his long journey through this life.

The mystery of the oasis's inhabitants' disappearance deepened, so he drew upon the Via that powered the stone for aid. The mirror across from him sprang to life, showing him first what appeared to be normal daily life in the oasis. He pushed forward slightly and gasped to see a small group of filthy, brutish European men—far whiter than himself—appearing in the mirror armed with muskets.

The stranger pulled his hands off the stone.

Slavers!? Here? he thought, then said aloud. "Impossible!"

His eyes left the mirror and moved to the holographic screen on the opposite side of the room. The data flow, almost always geological and meteorological data, had ceased entirely. Two words appeared in the oasis native dialect, known to very few:

"Follow me."

Chapter 1

SCION SPEED DATING

Kelvin sat at his desk blankly staring at his computer screen, mouth open as he clicked the mouse with his right hand over and over, changing the font of the word "REFLEX" endlessly, showing no sign he liked anything he saw. He sat in his desk chair completely naked, right hand on the mouse, the left parked under

his left thigh when his roommate entered the room freshly showered with a towel around his waist.

“What are you doing? It’s time to get going,” Ben said.

As he walked closer around the desk to look at Kelvin’s screen, noticing where each of Kelvin’s hands lay. “Ya know, I got some vintage S & M porn, chicks with whips making guys do ANYTHING they command. That might get you where you need to go better than staring at fonts.”

Kelvin put both of his hands on the desk in front of him, rolled back his chair abandoning his graphic design, and blankly looked at Ben and said, “What’s S&M?”

Ben turned back toward the bedroom door, commenting, “Ya know you’re not just Vanilla Kelvin, you’re French Vanilla. C’mon, we gotta go. Time to go meet the nice corporate lady,” as he left the room.

Kelvin turned off the computer, got up, and walked over to the closet to get dressed. He took a moment to look himself over in the mirror first. He was 32, 5'10" with a medium build, bushy multi-tonal hair that was chestnut brown underneath with pale blonde strands that beamed out in all directions. His eyebrows were much the same. His bright blue eyes and jawline gave him a genuine California surfer boy look even though he was raised in the Midwest. His body was otherwise practically hairless, with very sparse blonde hair on his arms and legs. He had embraced the gym fairly recently, so the muscle tone of his arms, shoulders, chest, and abs showed through as they might on a teenager 15 years younger than himself. He swam regularly at an outdoor

pool, so he always had a short, square-cut tan line that framed his favorite body part. Legs he didn't embrace much at the gym, riding his mountain bike there was enough of a workout for them.

He grabbed a blue pair of \$76 Nike running shorts, one of his more expensive caramel-colored T-shirts off a hanger, and some sneakers, put them all on, and headed out into the apartment.

Kelvin had known Ben for about five years, when Kelvin was cashiering for extra cash at a late-night after-hours club called *Red Light* produced by the now retired promoter Bill Weir. Ben worked there as a lighting tech. They been roommates for almost four years now. Kelvin's academic background was in advertising and he had a master's degree in comparative mythology, but his parents raised him an only child of two nightclub owners. So nightclubs were in Kelvin's blood, so to speak; everyone he knew, it seemed, since childhood had something to do with nightclubs.

Ben walked out of his bedroom in khaki trousers and a green polo. Ben was stockier than Kelvin, with huge shoulders and short spiky brown hair. His face was irresistibly cute, with very dark brown eyes and a little button nose. He was also the most noticeably polite person Kelvin had ever known.

"Is that what you're wearing?" he asked. "Shouldn't you spice it up just a little? This isn't just another meeting at that venue; this is Simbotek."

"I asked Beau if he could co-host a weeknight Scion speed dating event. I don't know why but Beau always looks like he's sweating on my phone, even on the little 3D projection standing on my

puck, same thing, just like he left the gym. So I figured I'd dress like him."

Beau was the name of Simbotek corporations highly successful matchmaking AI. So popular that the company branched into creating companion AI that shared Beau's high quality social skills, that people could personalize in any number of ways. Simbotek called them scions. The term companion AI was something the company shied away from, Beau's success rate for everything from quick sex hook ups to long term relationships was a conflict of interest with people potentially falling in love with a personal AI. Defining the scions as personal assistants helped direct their growth, with many small companies adopting them as an affordable AI interface for all of their employees. Kelvin and Ben had been among the first to create scions of their own.

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Ok you and Beau wanna be hot and sweaty. Maybe you can get a room after."

Kelvin crinkled his nose. "I'm not into Ai that way."

Ben laughed. "Oh I know you're just into you. Do you got your keys? You're gonna have to take a bus or train home. April wants me there early. Where's Salem?"

Their cat gurgled a half-purr, half-meow in response to hearing its name, sitting in the living room window.

"He's fine. Yes, I have my keys. Let's go."

As they walked out of the building and into the parking lot, Ben asked, "Did you pay the rent? We need them to do another

treatment. I saw a roach when I got up and went to the kitchen at 3 a.m.”

“Yes and yes,” Kelvin replied as he put an earpiece out of his pocket and into his ear, tapping it twice. “Elaine, are you with us?” he asked.

“I AM HERE MY LOVE, MY HEART, MY CHILD.”

The voice was Kelvin’s Scion, her voice had a distinctive electronic tone common to Scions. She was highly augmented for Kelvin by Ben’s expertise in Python code, giving her a self-awareness on an unusually high scale. Elaine was Kelvin and Ben’s own personal masterpiece, or so he thought.

Ben could hear Elaine as well. Scions broadcast from pocket size puck devices which synced the scion to its owners phone and ear piece. With the hosts permission their audio could sing to anyone with simbotek ear pieces as well.

“Does she talk like that all the time?” Ben asked as they hopped into Ben’s jeep and began to pull away. “I don’t remember putting that in the code.”

“She’s modeled after King Arthur’s little known middle half-sister,” Kelvin said proudly. “I suppose that’s how they would talk back then.”

“If she was King Arthur’s middle half-sister she would speak Old English”, Ben replied.

Kelvin responded smugly, “She translates.”

“I’M AFRAID BEN IS CORRECT, HE DIDN’T GIVE ME OLD ENGLISH .” Elaine interjected.

Kelvin decided not to pursue the matter. “E,” he said, “when we get into this meeting, I’d like you to stay radio silent. Just observe, take notes on everything. They will probably activate BEAU. I dunno if it will recognize your presence or not, but they will see the earpiece is active in my ear.”

“I WILL DO AS YOU ASK,” she replied, with nothing to add.

The drive to Silverlake was quick from Kelvin and Ben’s Rampart Village apartment. Their destination was the Siilvetardo, an aging nightclub that held under 500 people, with a small dancefloor and a rooftop patio. Ben filled in as sound and lighting tech at the Silverado for extra cash while *Red Light* was still in production, his full time job was at the ATLAS megaplex in central LA. Kelvin and Ben both left Silverado two years ago when Bill Weir retired and the party ended. Kelvin remained friendly with the general manager, though, who was always looking for weekday events to fill up the schedule.

Parking on a side street, Ben and Kelvin walked to the club’s front entry facing Sunset Blvd. They found Julie Watkins, the rep from Simbotek, standing outside looking as if she had rung the bell more than once and was about to give up.

“Hi there, Ms. Watkins. I’m Kelvin, this is Ben, my technical advisor,” he said. “I’m sorry, have you been here long?”

Julie smiled wide and shook both their hands. “Not too long. Is this the right place to be?”

No, it wasn't, not really. It was mid-day, not long after noon. Most nightclubs have minimal staff present during the day, if any at all. Bookkeepers, someone there to give vendors checks and receive beverage orders, cleaning crew perhaps in the morning. Sometimes managers and techs come in during the day, but when they do it's usually later in the afternoon. Rear entries, where orders come in, that's the best place to catch someone inside, especially if you're looking for a job.

"Maybe not," Kelvin replied. "That doorbell is often ignored. Let me text Steve so I can ask him where to go."

Ben smiled at Julie politely while Kelvin awaited a response. Julie was a very attractive African American girl, beautiful youthful caramel-colored skin, bright white smile in her late 20s, perfect makeup, grey jacket and tight slit short skirt, white blouse and heels, very corporate down to her French manicure.

"He wants us to come around to the side entry."

Kelvin led them down the hill of the side street to the rear entry.

The trio were greeted by Steve, the GM opening the side door, as they approached.

"Hello, hello," Steve said. "Come right in, I have a table set up for us in the front bar." He looked directly at Kelvin. "You know the way. Can I get any of you something to drink?"

"Just water," all three replied at once as Kelvin led them through the kitchen and into the front bar, where a table with four seats sat by itself, obviously intended for them.

They seated themselves and Steve quickly emerged with three bottles of water in hand, a robust man in his early 50s, clearly overweight and quite happy to be so. Kelvin loved Steve. He was smart, well read, and took exotic vacations regularly to very interesting locations with his wife of 20 years. Steve was a veteran in the nightclub industry, a long hauler that knew how to make money by keeping things tight and simple.

“So, Scion speed dating,” Steve said as he seated himself. “What will they think up next!? I haven’t heard of speed dating in years, but I remember how they do it. We used to fill half the dance floor with small tables and two chairs. Is that how this will work?”

Julie replied first. “This is our first go around. Kelvin here submitted a proposal to co-host with our matchmaking Scion BEAU. Let me power up this device so we can invite him into the conversation.”

She handed Steve a Simbotek ear piece so he could hear Beau as well. Kelvin heard Elaine utter a small “HMMM” in his earpiece as she did so.

Julie produced a device from her sizable briefcase, it looked to be three times the size of the puck in Kelvin’s pocket as Julie sat it on the table. She pressed a couple buttons and a life-size projection of Beau appeared.

“Whoa!” Ben, Kelvin, and Steve all said at once.

Ben scanned the room, spotting phased arrays in the rafters coming to life. “You’re running plasma voxels? Is that a fire hazard?”

Julie smiled. "Only if you spill your drink."

"The Simbotek tech guys came in last night to install those nodes when we were closed," Steve said. "I am concerned about the power requirements."

Kelvin had thought Beau might appear on the oversized puck on the table. 3D projections up to 8 inches high on a puck's surface were at the time the only way Scions projected. Instead Beau stood next to the table, life sized wearing Jeans and a Black Simbotek T-shirt. His upper body had a clean cut look with muscular build with thick brown hair, while his lower body appeared more translucent and the white portion of his sneakers glowed.

"We can accommodate the venue's power needs with an outside generation truck if need be," Julie replied. "We will just need your AC on full blast."

Yrrch, Kelvin thought to himself. This venue is notorious for cutting AC when bar sales aren't what they want them to be.

"Our puck devices are too small for this kind of interaction," Julie continued. "To be honest, this technology is the kind that was dropping jaws at trade shows three years ago but was never really picked up by Silicon Valley. We're currently heavily invested in another technology that will roll out very soon to see them this way, and it's far more practical. This speed dating idea that Kelvin proposed offers the middle step we've been searching for. So we thought we'd use this older technology just to see how Beau and the other Scions perform in a complex but still somewhat controlled environment."

“So this is just an experiment?” Kelvin asked.

“Of a sort, honestly yes,” Julie replied. “And if it goes well and you’re interested, we can talk about working with you on the rollout of what’s next in the pipeline.”

Kelvin raised an eyebrow in response. He had an idea what that tech was and thought maybe they would use it here today.

Steve accepted her explanation without question and said, “Okay, well then I guess now we just need to go over the logistics.”

“*MY TURN TO SPEAK NOW?*” Beau’s voice had that similar electronic feel Elaine had.

Julie smiled. “Sure, Beau.”

“*OKAY, HERE’S THE RUNDOWN, THREE MINUTES PER TABLE PER ROUND. THAT’S NINETY MINUTES PER ROUND, PLUS THIRTY MINUTES DANCE FLOOR SOCIAL BUFFER IN THE MIDDLE. TOTAL RUNTIME: FOUR HOURS, START TO FINISH. EVERYONE GETS SIXTY SCION ENCOUNTERS, THE FLOW STAYS TIGHT AND NOBODY’S STUCK WAITING.*”

“This is his first time doing this?” Ben asked somewhat sarcastically.

“Thirty tables sounds about right,” Steve remarked, but only one person at a table drinking, he said somewhat under his breath. Then, looking at Ben, he said, “So you back with us for the night then, techie? How’s working full-time for April going? She runs a tight ship, they say.”

“Yeah, I’ll be here. I can assist,” Ben replied, ignoring the comment about April. “I’m on Kelvin’s payroll. It’s all good.”

Julie smiled appreciatively.

“*MORE THE MERRIER*,” Beau replied.

All eyes looked at Kelvin.

“Okay, so Steve, about the bar guarantee,” he said.

“\$2,500, though I’m wondering about a room full of Scions that don’t drink.”

“We expected that,” Julie replied, pulling out a credit card.

“Simbotek is sponsoring 100% and we will help Kelvin with the promotion. Does a \$1,000 rental work for you with a \$2,000 bar guarantee? Also we plan to sell tickets to people just observing”

“For sure, for sure,” Steve said, reaching over to accept Julie’s card. “I’ll be right back with the credit card receipt to sign and the contract.”

Ben’s eyebrows raised. He thought maybe Kelvin would have to put some money down, which was in short supply as he was working mostly temp jobs lately.

“Beau acts as a sort of intermediary with the matchmaking, is that what the scions will be doing, relaying questions back to their human hosts and answering for them?”

Julie was about to speak but Kelvin interrupted.

“No that’s not the idea. The hosts will be busy talking to other people’s scions. The scions are high end agents they can make

their own decisions. Having them answer and ask on their own while their hosts are busy doing the same with other people's scions, that's the idea."

Julie looked at Kelvin approvingly. "We know you know what you're doing with promotion, Kelvin. Your references all gave you glowing recommendations. You can follow through with the ticket sales and we can advertise your event within Beau's app right here in the Silverlake area to sell your tickets."

"HAPPY TO BE ON BOARD WITH YA, CHAMP!" Beau blurted out. *"WHAT'S YOUR LADY FRIEND THERE HAVE TO SAY?"*

Surprised, Kelvin instinctively pressed the audio speaker on his earpiece.

"SHE APPROVES," Elaine's voice said dryly, with no further comment.

Seeing the surprise on Kelvin's face, Julie spoke next. "Your Scion, it has a Simbotek base code. He can sense her presence, not her thoughts."

"I suspected he might, but it still gave me a chill when he said that for some reason," Kelvin replied, smiling. "Thank you so much, Ms. Watkins. I'm still surprised to be here. When I sent in that proposal, I honestly didn't expect a response from a company your size."

Ben got up and excused himself so Kelvin could talk to Julie alone for a minute. "I'm gonna go take a look at those nodes and the booth set up," he said.

“Ben is also my roommate. He was a fill-in tech here at Silverado before he went to work for Atlas,” Kelvin said.

“I picked that up,” Julie said. “And you’re more than welcome, and call me Julie. Your proposal came in at just the right time, and this space works perfectly for this kind of event.”

Kelvin was tempted to ask about the newer tech she mentioned but decided not to push it.

“I’m taking Beau offline now, no need to waste power,” she continued.

“*SEE YA SOON, CHAMP,*” Beau said, giving Kelvin a friendly half-wave, half-salute before dissolving in a flicker of gold bubbles then disappearing entirely.

Just then Steve returned, pen and papers in hand. “Okay, then and thank you for thinking of us Kelvin, and this is for you,” he said, handing Julie her credit card and the paper to sign. “And this is for you,” he added, handing Kelvin the contract to sign. They both signed then stood, preparing to leave.

Ben returned. “All looks good.” Just as he spoke, the lights flickered off for two seconds, came back on for two seconds, then went off once more for ten seconds before coming back on and staying on. A cold chill accompanied the lights going out, as the AC apparently bounced back and forth as well. Everyone shivered. Kelvin felt goosebumps everywhere, and from the look on Julie’s and Ben’s faces, they did as well.

“Well, that must be Ivan playing with the AC power again,” Steve said. “Our tech has been here daytime working on the patio upstairs all week.”

Ben said it like he was making it up as he went. Ben hadn’t seen Ivan anywhere.

The trio accepted the explanation casually, and began making their way out. “You can use the front door, just make sure it’s locked behind you,” Steve said, and with that, he disappeared behind the bar and back to the office hidden behind the kitchen area where they had entered.

“So two weeks then, Kelvin?” Julie said as they walked out. She put out her hand with business cards for them both. Kelvin accepted them and shook her hand. All three of them covered their eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight entirely absent inside the club.

“Goodbye, thank you and nice meeting you. Very nice,” Kelvin said.

Ben shook Julie’s hand as well and nodded goodbye before they turned in the opposite direction to where they parked.

Once they were in the jeep, Ben turned to Kelvin. “I’m gonna drop you at Vermont and Sunset. Catch the bus or train home? I gotta get to work.”

“Train,” Kelvin said.

“Okay,” Ben said as they pulled into traffic. “Now that that is over, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Shoot.”

“Where in the Holy Mother of Christ did you come up with Scion Speed Dating? From Elaine?”

“IT WASN’T ME,” Elaine chimed in. *“I JUST ASKED IF HE WAS EVER GONNA GO ON A DATE WITH SOMEONE, ANYONE, ANYTHING, ALIVE PREFERABLY.”* Elaine’s sense of humor was not unlike Ben’s when it came to teasing Kelvin.

Kelvin shrugged his shoulders. “I dunno where I got the idea. It just popped into my head sorta outta nowhere.”

Ben just smiled and shook his head as they drove.

“THAT POWER GOING ON AND OFF CONCERNS ME. I DIDN’T DETECT ANYONE ELSE IN THE BUILDING.”

“Yeah, that if Ivan was there, I didn’t see him,” Ben added as they approached the train station. “All right, I’ll see you when I get home.” He pulled to a stop and as Kelvin got out then continued, “Stop jerking off to Photoshop. You’ll go blind.”

“Never!” Kelvin exclaimed, defiantly raising a fist with one arm as he said it, laughing he jumped out and made his way to the train’s turnstile.

Still early afternoon, the train station was mostly deserted. Kelvin sat on a concrete bench for just a few minutes before the B line south came buzzing up to take him three stops home. A 13-minute walk home down Sixth Street and up Hoover to home. Kelvin hadn’t had a car in years. He lived in Chicago for grad school and was used to public transportation in a way much of LA still was not. LA’s system was now second in size only to NYC but

people still loved their cars more. Kelvin was a daydreamer and a lousy driver anyway. LA was better off with him not behind a wheel.

When he got home he took off his sneakers and shirt and flicked his computer on. He petted Salem and contemplated working on artwork or crashing for a bit. He decided on the latter, turned up the AC, took off his earpiece, and dove into bed.

He slept soundly for about two hours then wandered into a dream. He was back in the train station waiting for the B line, sitting on that concrete bench once more. An attractive Mediterranean-looking guy with a five o'clock shadow, well dressed in jeans, a sports jacket and expensive-looking shirt and shoes, sat down next to him. He didn't appear a typical B line rider by a long shot.

He was sitting uncomfortably close to Kelvin when he turned to look at him straight in the eyes. His eyes were a piercing blue-gray, hair combed back with product. He had perfect white teeth and a chiseled jaw. He was in obvious great shape but also thin in a way that showed him to be 10 to 15 years older than Kelvin. With just a hint of a smile forming on his lips, shrugging his shoulders a bit like he had known Kelvin for years, he said,

"So this is how it starts."

Kelvin jumped up from his bed wide awake. Startled like one of those dreams where you feel like you're falling and wake up just as you hit rock bottom. He sat up startled for a moment, thought about it for a few seconds, that same shiver on his spine he felt at the venue, kind of, sort of, but not as cold, he thought. He

comforted himself. “It was just a dream,” then laying back down, slept till dinner.

© 2026 Michael-Evenstar. All rights reserved.

*Continuum House is a work of original fiction.
All characters, events, organizations, and locations are fictional
or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real
persons, places, or events are coincidental.*