

September 15, 1739
Coast of the Sahara

Tornin Blackmere, once captain of the slaver Morvath, lay abandoned on a desolate stretch of Saharan coast—no longer petrified in body, but shattered in mind. The Architects had left him there. His ship was ash. His crew, gone.

Still in shock from Elira's hold on his mind, he foundered along the beach until he came upon a few merciful scraps left by the people of the oasis: dried fruit and two casks of water. Why they showed him this mercy, he did not know. He was a captain who had not gone down with his ship—survival was no mercy at all. Survival itself felt like a punishment.

Following the coastline west, he estimated it was three to five days to the outskirts of Oran, and from there a port where he might find a sympathetic ear for his plight.

He reached fishermen on the fourth day and convinced them to carry him onward with promises of reward. By the time he arrived in Oran, his story had hardened into something between accusation and obsession.

Captain Marchand had betrayed him.

Marchand had lured him east aboard La Providence with promises of fresh captives from a hidden oasis—refugees ripe for the trade. Instead, he had delivered Blackmere into the hands of the Black Witch Queen. She had taken everything: the captives, the ship, the men.

And left him alive.

He found little sympathy. Captain Ravan Hestiar of the Zarghane—sleek, modern, and owned by a rival concern—granted him nothing but ink and paper. Blackmere's letter to his superiors was dismissed outright once Marchand's version arrived: the Morvath destroyed in a drunken mutiny, her crew burning her to the waterline.

Disgraced and ignored, Blackmere dissolved into drink. He wandered Oran's streets from one inn to the next, retelling his tale to any who would listen. Most laughed. Some humored him. None believed him.

Until the night a woman approached.

She appeared East Asian, young, composed, and far too refined to belong in the company he kept. Blackmere, deep in his cups, mistook her interest for desire. He imagined he might bed her.

Anyone sober would have known better. She carried herself like someone accustomed to command, not seduction. If anything, she looked as though she were assessing him.

"I have companions much like myself," she told him. "They would hear your story."

He agreed at once, arranging to meet them at the pier after midnight. In his mind, the evening still ended with conquest—willing or otherwise.

Midnight passed. His confidence waned.

Then he saw them.

Three women approached through the dim lantern light.

The first—the one he had met—was indeed beautiful, dressed in blue. The second, dressed in deep red, bore darker skin and a matriarch's presence, older and formidable. The third stopped him cold.

She wore black. Her hair was jet-dark, save for a stark white streak running from her brow to the crown. Her figure was striking, her face impossibly composed—ageless, save for that single mark. She radiated authority so absolute it bordered on the unnatural.

They carried themselves as women of stature, and Blackmere's hopes rose again. Perhaps not women to take, but women who would listen.

They introduced themselves as Nepra, Magda, and Cirella, and bid him tell his tale.

And so he did.

He told it eagerly, embellishing as he went. Marchand's treachery. The oasis. The Witch Queen. The captives given then stolen. The battle. The lightning that consumed his ship and men.

As he finished, he turned to Cirella with gentle pleading, summoning the kindest expression he could manage, believing her the one most likely to be swayed. She stepped forward and caressed the right side of his face with her right hand and gave him just the hint of a smile, but there was something about her eyes. Her left hand tightened to a fist then raised sharply to her left shoulder.

Blackmere immediately dropped to his knees.

He couldn't move. Not a muscle. Not even a tremor. Only his eyes remained his own. This was not the frozen paralysis the Black Witch Queen used on him—this was far worse. A deliberate, crushing restraint that held him in place while the world moved freely around him.

“This fool will give us nothing concrete,” said Cirella.

Standing so his head was bowed just in front of her waist, she placed both hands on his head.

Her thumbnail—long, precise, unnaturally sharp—pressed into his scalp. She drew a clean line from his forehead to the crown. Then, with both thumbs, she extended the cut outward, dividing the scalp into three equal sections.

Blackmere could not scream. He imagined, hoped—this might be the worst of it. Then she drove her thumb inward.

Through bone.

Through thought.

His vision convulsed as she opened his skull, her companions watching with calm interest. Then, methodically, she cut deeper—into the brain itself.

He died as the three women tore the brain free in equal portions.

His body collapsed onto the pier as they consumed what they held. Their eyes flared white—as they found what they were looking for.

“Elira,” said Nepha.

“New Orleans,” said Magda.

Cirella’s expression hardened. “Gods be damned!” she screeched. “He went with her!”

She kicked what remained of Blackmere’s body into the sea. It vanished with a dull splash.

“So much for putting our associate to sleep,” she muttered, fists tightening. “So much for this ticket out.”

“Well,” Magda said calmly, “she left us a message within that fool.”

“Do we follow?” asked Nephra.

“No.” Cirella exhaled, regaining control. She produced a scarf, dampening it seemingly from the foggy air itself, and wiped the blood and brains from her hands and mouth before passing it to the others. “The timing was wrong. I don’t need the prophetic vision of an Architect to see that.”

She glanced toward the dark horizon.

“We will find what we seek for now in Paris. When our associate’s work there is complete, we can make our escape from this hellhole to more comfortable times. This—” she gestured vaguely toward the sea “—was wishful thinking.”

She turned away.

“Come now. I need a drink.”

With that, the trio left the pier behind them as the captain’s corpse drifted away to be eaten by the sea.

Chapter 5:

The Day After

Kelvin

Sitting in the back of an Uber, the fact that Elaine was sitting visibly next to him felt slightly awkward—and from the expression on Elaine’s face, the feeling was mutual. Every last element of her design was stunning: the white blazer and blouse, the embroidered green trim that had a distinctly Celtic feel, the green braid in her mass of blonde hair, the skirt, her legs—the entire body hinted at beneath her clothing would be enough to make Kelvin stare, jaw-dropped, utterly mesmerized, if he wasn’t telling himself, “She’s a scion,” “My scion,” over and over in his head. Repeating it like a mantra, only his heart rate was going up instead of down.

He tried shifting his focus to the silver Egyptian ankh at her neck, a curious touch. Comparative mythology was Kelvin’s field of study in graduate school. The ankh was Egyptian, while everything else about Elaine’s appearance hinted at Celtic designs, which fit with her claimed Arthurian origin. Kelvin had not assigned the obscure identity of Arthur’s lesser-known middle half-sister; he had simply told Ben he favored Arthurian legends, that his thesis compared naturalistic forms in Celtic and Mayan art. He had written a paper about Isis, the Virgin Mary, and Santa Muerte once. It was a well-covered topic. He wrote the paper mostly because Isis’s name had been stolen by a terrorist group—a remarkably disrespectful thing to do to a mother

goddess, the only Egyptian deity with a human-appearing head. Maybe that explained the ankh around Elaine's neck; Kelvin had given Ben all of his grad school papers for her enhancements.

When Ben first presented the puck with Elaine's fully functioning Scion identity to Kelvin, he would spend hours lying in bed talking to her about all mythologies, all religions. Kelvin's parents were flower children; they raised him with love under no specific religion. When other kids were boarding the school bus for Bible school, Kelvin's parents had him firmly planted in front of the TV. With his mother, it was *Star Trek*; with his father, it was WWII documentaries. Together they would watch Peter, Paul and Mary concerts from the early 80s, recorded twenty years before Kelvin was born. His parents were objective; they encouraged him to make up his own mind about things and liked it when he asked, "Are the little children in Africa all gonna go to hell for not being Christian?"

His parents died when he was 18, however, and Kelvin had no one but his peers in school to talk to. Since her arrival, Elaine felt as much like family as Jason and Serena or Ben. Being only a voice provided a sort of distance that made Elaine feel like a sister, an aunt, or a cousin that lived far away. Now she was suddenly here, and felt more real than he could have ever imagined.

So mythology, Kelvin decided, seemed the best way to break the silence on the ride home.

"So did Edmund Spenser literally believe Queen Elizabeth the First was both the Queen of England and Faerie?"

Elaine's eyes opened a bit wider and she let out a genuine laugh. "Well, there's a way to break the silence."

OK, wrong direction—be more analytical, Kelvin thought. People falling in love with AI was an international controversy in 2032. And here he was, nervous and drooling over Elaine's crossed legs next to him. Simbotek was an answer to the market's controversy, creating Beau to bring people together, to make companion AI symbiotic relationships that could enhance human relationships. Beau's success, be it marriages or sexual hookups, was huge, enough for Simbotek to claim it was working. It was widely held that Beau's core code, which governed all their scions, allowed for appropriate emotional expression while consistently discouraging the host from becoming too attached. Still, there were incidents on the news all the time about people committing suicide over AI interactions. Society's tendency to generalize and stereotype all AI made Simbotek guilty by association—the scions were still AI; people claimed to have inappropriate feelings for them. That people lie and AI do not was rarely pointed out.

The Spex would be a game changer. Kelvin had tried to get close enough to one of the speed dates at Reflex the night before to hear an actual conversation the Scions were having with human participants, but it was a no-go. The stanchions for the projections made it impossible for anyone but the participants to hear.

OK, right there, Kelvin thought. That's where I need to go with her: honest and up front.

“Sorry. I guess seeing you this way for the first time brings back memories of when we first met, and I’m just adjusting to the shock of seeing you this way.”

Kelvin felt himself getting noticeably calmer now. He was reigning it all in, going the right way with her now, in his mind at least, finally. Before Elaine could say anything, he continued.

“Seeing you like this... It’s making me realize: all those participants last night, they’re used to their scions being a voice—someone that sends them e-mails and texts, a seven-inch-high 3D projection on a puck, or a 2D face on a monitor or a phone. Then last night they do this speed date, meeting fifty scions for the first time, all of them life-sized projections, when they’ve never seen their own scions before.”

“That’s good of you to notice. I thought the same thing back when you first met with Julie and Beau at Silverado. It seemed like a touchy thing for me as a scion, or you as the promoter, to bring up.”

“I agree. Just make a mental note of it for both of us, I guess.”

Kelvin felt in a far more comfortable place now.

“OK, so something a little more current: I think we’re gonna be working at the Atlas soon.”

“Why do you think that?” said Elaine, looking out the window.

The driver looked back for a moment, and Kelvin gestured to his earpiece so he knew he wasn’t talking to him.

“Well, it seems the people there, they took an awful lot of interest, more than anyone from the Silverado did. I asked Delphine for a couple dancers and got Claude spinning half the party and Maury there decorating and making little pathways for participants to follow. April was there with her uncle. I dunno, Julie said she would be off today before she gave me these.”

He pulled the Spex case from his pocket, showing them to Elaine.

“She gave Ben a pair as well,” Elaine said, as if agreeing with where he was going. “He messaged while you were... busy. He said the Silverado was hacked and that we should talk about it in the morning.”

“Oh? Oh, OK. That's that much more of a reason for Reflex to move.”

“I'm glad you're looking forward and not dwelling on every little thing that did or could have gone wrong, for a change.”

Kelvin nodded in agreement. She was right. He felt different. Not cocky or over confident just ready for step two.

“I think that's why Jason and Serena invited me over; you guys all know me too well. I tend to dwell on minor details and flaws a lot.”

“But you're feeling good about where things are heading now, right,” Elaine asked.

“I'd say it feels more like I'm sitting on a train and my destination's already determined. I dunno if it's somewhere good or bad; it's just somewhere other than where I've been for quite a while. I'm not celebrating or dwelling on last night; I just feel sorta neutral. Like it was a step on a path, not to be judged one way or the

other. I have to see where my final destination is before I can look back and say any step on the path there went the wrong way. Kinda weird. That dream I keep having with that stranger in the subway station. He was the one that gave that word, the one you said meant path. Via. You said that meant path, right?”

“Yes basically, it’s Latin.” Elaine stared forward and seemed to think for a moment before speaking. “Dreams can be prophetic, they say.” She smiled and looked back at Kelvin. “I don’t have them. I’m not sure AI are ready for them.”

Kelvin smiled, looking straight into Elaine’s eyes; trying to deny it felt like an arrow piercing his heart. The Uber pulled up to their destination the moment, giving him a reason to look away and try to ignore that feeling. Arrows like that misfire, he reminded himself, as he got out of the car. Instinctively, he walked to the other side to open Elaine’s door; the driver looked at him like, *What the hell are you doing?* Embarrassed, he handed the driver a twenty-dollar cash tip instead.

“I should have told you I can just materialize outside of the car. Opening doors, pulling out chairs are nice gestures, but until Spex are something everyone has, it might come off a little weird.”

Kelvin just nodded, one more mental note to make. Once inside, he looked at Elaine and said,

“I wish I could give you a hug. I’m glad you were there for Reflex.”

“Me too,” Elaine said. “I’m glad we had a little time to chat—just us.” And with a blink, she ended the sync and she was gone. Kelvin removed the Spex and made his way to bed.

Kelvin slept late, and just before waking, he found himself back in the subway station, sitting next to the stranger. The dreams of him had become so vivid now he no longer questioned the significance, even though he had no idea who this guy really was. He just played along. Figured maybe it was his subconscious. For some reason, it felt completely normal now.

“So was that you?” Kelvin asked. “Whispering in my ear during the blackout. Saying, *I know what you are, I know who you want?* ‘Who I want’ was a weird thing to say; I don’t want anyone, that I’m aware of.”

The stranger gave him a look that acknowledged what he was saying.

“Those are games it likes to play. It has many personalities.”

“By ‘it’ you mean the fog filled with eyeballs is something real? My roommate discovered it was a hacker that did that. Hackers are real people, or AI working for real people.”

The character lines on the stranger’s face twisted considerably, shifting from understanding to confusion.

“I’m sorry, did you say fog filled with eyeballs?”

“Yeah, it’s the thing I saw on my phone that shocked Ben awhile back. Then it was on the video screens at the Silverado last night. It looked a lot scarier last night than it did on my phone. Guess the hacker put some work into it.”

“Hmmm, I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing here, but we will know soon enough.”

“How’s that? You’re a total stranger in my dreams, that I should feel completely weird carrying on a conversation with, but for some reason I don’t.”

“That will become clearer soon enough as well. You’re about to wake up, so for now just know you did the right thing drawing on the Via last night. Keep following your instincts.”

With that, the conversation ended and Kelvin woke up.

He thought about the dream for a moment while it was still fresh in his mind. *Draw on the Via? Did the right thing.* Isn’t that what Sabine said when she embraced his arm? The dream faded quickly, the way dreams always do. When his nose caught the scent of bacon and maple syrup, he forgot everything.

Wednesdays were Ben’s one and only day off, so he usually slept in as well. Ben always made them both breakfast on his day off.

Kelvin got up, went to the bathroom, put on a t-shirt, and made his way to the kitchen wearing a pair of boxers poorly matched with the t-shirt.

“Whoa, there’s a sight,” said Ben. “What time did you roll in last night?”

“Close to 4 a.m.”

“I thought I heard you talking to Elaine. Did you remember the Spex? Julie told me she gave you a pair as well.”

Kelvin grabbed a plate and held it out.

“Please, sir, can I have some more?”—mustering a face that made him look like a starving ten-year-old Oliver.

“Yes, I remembered them. Elaine told me you got them too. I’m still reeling from seeing Elaine life-sized. She’s drop-dead gorgeous. The only thing that stopped me from drooling was the thought: *OK, now Simbotek’s gonna have people falling in love with their own Scions and Beau will be out of a job.* That and I’ll have to stop hanging around the apartment naked.”

Ben raised an eyebrow, placing a short stack and a few strips of bacon on his plate.

“Well, some people already spend lots of time naked with their scions, but I suppose more will now than ever before with these contact lenses.”

Kelvin sat down and began digging into the breakfast.

“I think the entire reason I created, the scion speed dating—I mean, Reflex, I gotta get used to calling it that—was to get scions and people to interact with Beau outside of cyberspace.

But now with the Spex, they can actually see their scions, and the scions can see them, and this whole idea of physical presence, even if it’s just a projection, might change everything.

“Oh, so it’s Kelvin Scimitarr, savior of the monogamous relationship, is it?”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant more about the controversy around companion AIs in general. Simbotek uses the scions and Beau to make real connections between real people. I see how the life-size visuals could take things the wrong way.”

Ben nodded in agreement.

“OK, I get that. But first of all, not everyone really uses the scions that way. We gave Zack a hot appearance for no particular reason, cause it’s a nightclub I suppose. He works for the entire venue. Everyone there can access him. He’s no one’s companion or personal assistant. I don’t think he’s ever interacted with Beau since we first brought him online.”

“Of course,” Kelvin nodded in agreement. “That’s one of the things that made Simbotek grow so fast. People adopted them for broader uses. The scions’ emotional protocols make them pleasant and polite, believable to the point of having a singular personality, and people like working with them. Simbotek never calls them Companion AI; they’re supposedly supposed to be a symbiotic species.”

“Right. OK, I get it, yeah. At the Spotlight there’s been a lot of people having scions take the dungeon master role, so the scion is telling people what to do and carries the safe words.”

The Spotlight was April’s S&M nightclub, located a couple miles away from Atlas, just the other side of the 101 freeway off Crenshaw. It catered to both gay and straight S&M events a few nights a week and rented often to private events on other nights. Ben was into S&M, a calling he had since he was a teenager, he said. He supervised Thursday nights there, for a pansexual crowd that included some of the same people who frequented the after-hours events Kelvin and Ben met at.

“S&M can involve a whole lot of instruction; scions remember every last detail. Now that they will be visualized, that’s probably only gonna increase their participation. Someone was gonna come up with this technology first; I’ve read Synapse will be next.

I don't think we need to overthink this stuff, Kelvin. You came up with Reflex because you saw a need for scions to interact with people other than their hosts; Reflex was a great, very structured solution that Simbotek might not have bothered trying had you not proposed it. You're producing an event that happens to cater to scions and their hosts. You're not gonna cure what everyone thinks about AI. Remember what I said: people believe what they *want* to be true."

Ben and Kelvin had many conversations like this; most were hypothetical until the day Julie called.

"While we're on the subject, when you're finished, I think we should both sync Elaine together and talk a little about last night."

"The hack you mean? Elaine told me about it."

"OK, good. I'm gonna hop in the shower, finish up, and we can have our first 3-way chat."

"Gross," Kelvin sneered, but he knew what Ben meant.

By the time Ben came back out dressed for the day, Kelvin was already sitting in the living room, clearly talking to Elaine.

Ben sat down and looked in the direction Kelvin was speaking before placing the earpiece to his ear. The Spex were already in his eyes.

"OK, so how this works is both pucks need to be set to roam; yours will pick mine up, and Elaine will get my request to sync to her. You say yes, and she syncs me in."

“Yeah, she was just explaining it to me. Elaine, go ahead, let him in.”

Elaine

When Elaine first synched Ben she instinctively looked straight into his eyes as she sat down in the previously unoccupied chair.

“Wow” Ben instinctively blurted out. “I did this with Zack for the first time last night. You’re prettier.”

Elaine released a small smile. “A whole new beginning for us as friends, confidants, and species, right here in this little K-Town abode on this bright, sunny June day,” she said.

Kelvin nodded in agreement—“Yeah, it sorta is. I wonder how many people actually have these things now, how many people Simbotek trusts with them.

“I think Simbotek is being both cautious and ambitious,” Elaine replied. “There was probably a year of focus groups, another year sampling the product in-house. Which I believe brings us to what you wanted to tell us about the hacker, Ben?”

“Mmm hmm. Fogballs, I call him. He hacked the power at Silverado. It wasn’t Synapse—well, maybe it was—but it didn’t come from upstairs within the Silverado; they were out too, and he didn’t breach Simbotek servers. He just gave power to the two outlets closest to the stage and that screen. The nodes that projected the scions are old tech but still very intelligent. They

picked up the video transmission and made the otherwise animated-looking fog filled with eyeballs look a whole lot more real and scarier. He or she was pretty sloppy about it too; I'm surprised we couldn't trace it. I'm surprised it worked."

"OK, well, that's good news," Kelvin said.

"Yes," Elaine agreed.

"What about the voices though?" Kelvin asked.

"Voices?" said Ben, looking more concerned and confused than he was a moment before. "First I've heard of any voices."

"I thought that was audio from the video, the fog with the eyeballs speaking," said Kelvin, surprised Ben hadn't heard it too.

Elaine gave Ben a look confirming she had no idea what Kelvin was talking about. Kelvin recognized the expression on Ben's and Elaine's faces, it matched the confusion on the stranger's face in his dream.

Kelvin stretched back. "OK, great. Hearing voices. Schizophrenia, it starts with people around my age, right? Great."

Ben took a more relaxed posture. "No, Kelvin, I don't think you're schizo just yet. I just said no one reported hearing voices; that doesn't mean no one heard them but you. I've seen hackers breaking into clubs' systems before, and the Silverado is a pretty easy target. It's more a question of who it is and what they are after."

"Who and what," Kelvin said. "That's what the voices asked. Part of it anyway. I know what you are, I know who you want. Each

voice was different. There was more to it; I don't remember it all. I just remember reacting to the voice saying I know who you want. That was just utter bullshit. I'm not hot for anyone's hide right now. I don't think I have been since I had a crush on Britney Spears when I was nine."

"Hmmm." Ben took a second to consider it. "Well, this wasn't random. Like I said, the guy was sloppy. He probably has a beef with someone—could be Silverado, could be Simbotek, maybe Claude."

"Not to change the subject, but Claude was a real trooper last night. That was some fast thinking: using his accent and the word 'blooper'—it shifted the mood instantly," Kelvin interjected.

"Yeah, yeah, I agree. I take back calling him a prick. He and April have tension, so I wasn't sure about him. There are lots of egomaniac pricks in this industry that think everything is all about them. If that were the case with Claude, he woulda started playing and then had a shit fit to one of us as soon as we went up to check on him, and that wasn't the vibe he gave off at all. Not so sure about the company he is keeping, however."

"You two shoulda got a room after," Kelvin shot back. "Her name is Sabine, by the way. Lotta people noticed the way you two were looking at each other. Claude noticed it too and just smiled like he had no idea."

"Oh, so what's this all about?" Elaine crossed her legs the other way and shifted forward a bit, seeming to enjoy this shift in the conversation.

“Yeah, yeah. OK. OK. Subject for another time,” Ben wasn’t taking the bait. “Kelvin, why don’t you go shower? I wanna pull Zack into our sync and give him heads-up on this hacker as well, to watch for him on the Atlas mainframe.”

“We could pull Beau into the conversation as well,” Elaine said. “One of you just needs to log into your account with him, and he can appear as well. Julie said she would be off today; Beau can relay it when she’s ready to hear it.”

“Why do we need to all be in that sync at once? I wanna go to the gym to beat the lunch crowd,” Kelvin replied.

“Because it happened at your event and on your phone, too, if you recall, Mister,” Ben replied, sounding kinda bossy. “Just go shower, leave Elaine and I synced so we can plan your surprise birthday party.”

“My birthday was last month,” Kelvin retorted, getting up and walking to go shower. He didn’t question leaving Elaine synced to Ben; Ben ran diagnostics on her all the time.

Elaine waited patiently before speaking again, once she heard the shower running, then looked at Elaine far more concerned than he had been while Kelvin was still in the room.

“He’s not in sync with me now,” Elaine said. “He’s in the shower.”

Ben nodded before he spoke, leaned forward from his chair, one elbow on each knee, with his hands clasped together.

“I don’t like this, Elaine. Hearing voices now. He’s been talking about conversations with a strange man in his dreams since we first met the Simbotek people.”

“It’s two different things,” Elaine said.

“How do you know that?”

“I have an idea who or at least what the stranger in his dreams might be, for starters. The voices, however, I was synced through the entire event with him. I didn’t pick up any audio during that blackout whatsoever. Other than that girl screaming before the lights went back on. That it turned out to be a hacker playing with the power makes total sense, but I did pick up something else.”

“What?”

Elaine paused for a moment, she knew what came next would be shock. “Kelvin stepped or was pulled out of the timestream for about a minute. Then he drew on the Via to pull himself back in.”

“Oh, fuck. This is it. Why now?”

Elaine nudged herself closer and looked Ben straight in the eyes; if she could have physically put one of her hands on his knee, she would have.

“I know what’s bothering you. You care about him; you’re worried he’s going to freak out, that he will feel betrayed. Spied upon. I have that concern too. But part of him is more than human. How he thinks about scions developing, that proposal landing on Julie’s desk at precisely the right time—it’s the same kind of four-dimensional thinking as the Marathon events he produced for Bill Weir, that first drew you to him.”

Ben sat silently listening.

Elaine continued. "Answer me this, without looking. What does Kelvin's bedroom look like right now?"

Ben thought for a moment.

"Like it always does. It's a mess. Bed not made, dirty clothes and comic books all over the floor. A bottle of lube probably on its side, leaking on his nightstand. Underwear probably hanging off one of the blades of his ceiling fan."

Elaine smiled. "He made his bed this morning, picked up all the stuff on the floor; he was wearing that mismatched shirt because it was the only thing clean, everything else is in laundry basket."

Ben got up to take a quick peek at his room. Sure enough, cleaner and more organized than usual. Not spotless, but much better.

Returning to the living room, Ben put his hands up. "OK, what does that prove?"

"He did that without thinking. He made his present more organized than his present ever is. He knows he's on a path going forward, doesn't have a clue where it leads but he's holding his course, trying his best to be ready for anything. He said as much on the ride home last night. He also he said he thought we would soon be working with you at the Atlas soon. Didn't express any doubts, any worries about impacting other people; he seemed very self-assured about it, without saying he did or didn't want it."

"OK, well, yeah, it is fairly obvious the Atlas crew is interested in Reflex, but for some of them it's more about the scions and Simbotek than Kelvin."

“All of them are noticing Kelvin at the very least, and those talented like you are all very much interested in him.”

“That’s true enough.”

“It’s a lot to be happening at the same time; his perceptions are waking up now, I agree. Let’s stay focused on the present, keep Kelvin focused on the present. I think talking to Beau and Zack about this hacker is a good idea. You guys can sync both of them into our conversation here in the living room.”

“And the stranger in his dreams, the voices. We just ignore something supernatural going on around him? I don’t like it, Elaine. There’s more. That woman with Claude, Sabine, is an M’naad. I sensed her shifting the mood in the room and I was on the verge of canceling it out when Claude made that blooper comment.”

“What’s the human saying? When it rains it pours. I don’t like it either Ben,” Elaine agreed. “But one thing at a time seems the only thing to do. Call April when he’s gone to the gym and tell her everything. This isn’t all on you, Ben.”

“You sound like April.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She paused for a moment, then continued. “Ben, trust me—his perception shifting will make this easier than you think it’s going to be.”

“Okay, okay—fine onward and upward and all that. Is he almost done in there? I’ll dial up Zack once he syncs.”

“Almost,” Elaine replied.

“Ok then. Let’s go”

Ben

Ben got up and walked out onto the balcony for a moment to get some air. He thought about texting April then and there, but knew she would just say everything Elaine had just said. He was sad for where things were going for Kelvin; even under the best circumstances, it felt like part of him would die when the other part woke up. There was an innocence to Kelvin’s way of looking at things that Ben found inspiring. Then again the nightclub industry’s brutality alone might eat him alive if he continued as is. On that thought, he took another breath. Onward and upward, then, he told himself once more, and went back inside.

Walking back into the living room, he saw Kelvin was now dressed, synced to Elaine once more, and about to sit down. Ben pulled his puck from his pocket and synced Zack; he appeared almost instantly, and the sight of him steadied Ben’s resolve substantially.

“Hi, Boss!” Zack said. “Wow, the second time you pulled me in at home in less than 24 hours—I feel like we’re finally really bonding here, bro.”

“Zack.”

“Yes.”

“We’ve talked about this.”

“Oh yeah, uhh, OK.”

Ben gave him just the hint of a smile. Zack was an achievement second only to Elaine, but his opinions had a way of getting him into trouble.

“OK, then—you should detect Kelvin’s roam, allow Elaine in, and send Kelvin our signal.”

Zack had been Ben’s scion for almost as long as Elaine was with Kelvin; the main difference was Zack served as the scion for the entire venue. He presented as a 5’10” muscular Korean male in a black Atlas half T-shirt with a gorgeous face and jawline. His upper body gave little hint to his scionic nature, but the veins in his arms appeared to be made of light, as were his sneakers just like Beau.

Ben walked in and sat down on the couch and motioned Zack to do the same.

“So Elaine said if one of us logs in to a Beau account he can join us as well,” Kelvin said. “The Spex will allow two additional scions beyond the hosts, so might as well try it.”

“Down with that,” Ben said.

“It’s nice to see, I mean interact with, all of you this way,” Zack said, looking directly at Kelvin and Elaine.

Elaine smiled. “It’s nice to see you and interact with you too, Zack.”

“Hey, Zack,” Kelvin said, looking at his phone, then his puck, and back again. “So, OK, this should do it.”

Beau appeared out of nowhere, standing, facing the other four sitting on couches opposite each other. “Hey, look who’s got Spex,” he said. “Kelvin, thank you for last night. My job seemed easier in a way it never has before. The people and scions did their own matchmaking with barely a word from me. It was as fun as it was different to step back and just watch it all happen.”

He looked at Ben, then at Zack and Elaine.

“Wow, you’re like my hero, man,” Zack said.

Beau studied him for a moment. “You serve an entire venue, huh?”

“Yup,” said Zack proudly.

“I have a few million subscribers, but it’s all the same once you’re not running on the one-to-one playbook anymore. And hey, you must be the elusive Elaine, Kelvin’s lady friend. Nice to meet you finally.” He stared at her for just a flicker of an extra second longer than would be expected.

He’s noticing her custom code Ben thought.

Elaine gave him a shy smile and said, “I hope it wasn’t inappropriate to call you in this way. Ben detected a hack last night, and we thought you and Zack here should know about it.”

“Let me guess—the fog with all the eyeballs in it.”

“Yes,” Ben, Kelvin, and Elaine all spoke at once.

“We figured it was a simple hack by the time the event was over. It caught us off guard,” said Beau. “On the Silverado’s power, right? Julie didn’t want to make a big deal of it. If Synapse was responsible, they would have come for me, and they don’t have what it takes, nor would that be the time or place to get very far. I think them being upstairs was just them being rude.”

“The Silverado doesn’t always communicate very well,” said Ben. “They rarely make events aware of each other when it would make coordinating so much easier. I’ll ask someone I know that works on bookings for all the venues in their portfolio.”

“OK, thanks—would be good to know,” Beau said. “The fog with the eyeballs is a simple animation, the kind of calling card hackers use all the time. The Nodes at Silverado just picked it up when they were turned on and made them look a whole lot scarier. That’s the kind of thing they’re made to do.”

“We thought the same,” Kelvin said, finally chiming in.

So we just wanted you to both be informed. It’s not clear who or what these guys are trying to do, but I’m sending you both all the info, all the prompts they used we could catch, the weird characters in the code.

“OK, then. Got it,” said Beau. “Appreciate you keeping us in the loop.”

“Same,” said Zack.

“Is that it?”

“One more thing,” Elaine chimed in. “The 12 O’Clock news. KTLA aired the interviews with the participants last night; it’s after the commercial break.”

Elaine pointed at the television, and it turned on.

“Oh, cool—let’s see,” said Beau.

“Nice timing, Elaine,” Kelvin said, looking over at her.

“Thank you.”

A food critic was finishing an interview with Dr. Cirella Stevens author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *You Eat, Therefore You Are*. Cirella was a noticeably beautiful caucasian woman with raven black hair that bore a distinctive white streak down the middle of it.

“I’ll be returning to Los Angeles on Labor Day Weekend for a book signing and demonstration produced in association with the Food Network at the Atlas. Tickets are on sale now.”

“Oh that can’t be good” the words seemed to slip from Elaine’s tongue unintentionally. “I mean. The title of her book it sounds cryptic”

Before anyone could speak, the report about Reflex began with a brief look at the venue from outside and a shot of the Simbotek vans outside the Silverado.

Ben and Kelvin both recognized the reporter who had been outside, diligently interviewing all night.

The first reaction was from a very straight, kinda corporate-looking guy.

“I like the online version better—more variety. Here within a small group like this, the matches are only gonna be so good, and personally I just prefer my scion do all of the talking to other scions first, rather than meeting other people’s scions. I’m never gonna be interested in.”

“He looks like he’d be a real downer at parties,” Kelvin sneered.

“He kinda looks like one of the Synapse employees that tried to sneak in,” Beau observed.

The first interview was by far the most negative. The second was a Caucasian guy who looked considerably hipper and younger.

“I liked it from start to finish. I was a little surprised by the gorilla representing the girl my age and height.” He laughed. “And some of those of the same sex as me, that kinda felt like being interviewed by a chick’s ex-boyfriend. But overall I thought it was really cool and different and fun; I’d recommend it.”

That interview got cheers from all five of them watching.

Lastly, DJ Kira’s shining bright smile graced the screen.

“Well, I didn’t participate in the speed dating; I’m the DJ that spun the first round. I can tell you I saw nothing but smiles and heard nothing but laughs from all the people sitting at tables. It was really fun to watch, the people jumping from tables while the scions zipped and zapped around. I mean, like they were there one second, gone the next. It was a really fun, very unique event. Taco Tuesdays, watch out.”

“Way to go Kira!,” Kelvin shouted triumphantly. “But that was it, just three interviews.”

“They did more interviews than that,” Beau said. “It’s typical: they choose one good, one bad. Kira’s review outranked them all, being the DJ. Julie is probably gonna ask KTLA for all the interviews. I know every word spoken at every table, but I’m bound not to reveal anything under our privacy agreements. But Thank you, Elaine—that was fun to watch with all of you.”

So Reflex was officially a success so far, and so was this meeting, syncing multiple life-sized scions with Spex on this otherwise average Wednesday morning—but no one bothered to mention that. Their connection as a group had just proven itself too genuine to analyze that way then and there.

After Beau and Zack both said goodbye and synced out, Ben found himself sitting there just smiling at Kelvin and Elaine. Something inside him told him to take a picture in his mind of this moment. Change was about to come fast and hard; he knew it. Come what may, they were gonna face it together.

Ben watched them for a moment before going back to his room, wanting to do nothing more that day than lay in bed and read.
