

## Eliathan's Wake

By Hank Whitson

"We must move the body. Immediately."

"What? Leo, we can't!" Jacqueline cried. "What will the police say?"

Leomat sighed. Even in death, his dearest friend proved a pain in the ass. He stared at Eliathan's corpse, shape-shifted into human form by a contract that couldn't last much longer. In twenty to forty minutes, the spell would wear off and the apparent man would revert to a two-story tall, hundred-ton dragon, with a wingspan of one hundred fifty feet. The shift would destroy his Long Island mansion and injure his insipid human wife.

*I should just let it happen. The shameless quim played dress up to announce his death.* She wore a white terrycloth robe and her hair was wet, which suggested a shower, yet fresh mascara ran in tracks from her eyes.

"Why did you call me before the police, Jacqueline?" Leo asked.

"B-because you were his friend! His closest friend! I called you as a courtesy, you—"

*Good thing you did.* If the Firms learned what happened, there would be a cover-up, and every cover-up began with somebody learning more than they should. *Human magi have no place meddling in our affairs.*

Jacqueline continued to stammer. He took her by the shoulders and considered soothing her with magic but decided against it. *Don't resort to spellwork when diplomacy will suffice. She's a skittish little creature. Calm her.*

"A courtesy that is deeply appreciated. But I think you also knew I would know what to do. You know how this might look."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Jacky. You're a smart woman."

Leo congratulated himself on keeping a straight face. Near as he could tell, Jacqueline Harris-Acton's chief achievement was leaning into the good luck of her circumstances. She was born pretty by the standards of her era—bright blue eyes, perfect teeth, bronze hair, and a firm, delicate figure. Her family was old money by American standards. She attended a prestigious college and learned how to speak and write about comparative literature with a thin veneer of sophistication. She had expensive tastes, inoffensive opinions, and no discernible practical skills. Eliathan had loved many such women in his life. *Of course, he stoops to the stereotype and goes after princesses.*

"You are young and beautiful. While I know that you loved Eli in earnest, there is no denying he was absurdly wealthy, and almost thirty years your senior." Again, he had to keep himself from choking on his words. He and Eli were born not long before the American Civil War. "If I claim Eli was in my company this evening, I can produce an alibi asserting that he died of natural causes in my presence, so you won't have to deal with any... aspersions."

“Oh god, you think I killed him?” She asked, voice quavering.

“No,” Leo sighed. “But others might. Let me take him. I can provide an alibi.”

“What about... what about forensic evidence! They’ll find carpet fibers...”

“From his house, on his body. That’s hardly suspicious.”

“I... I don’t know. I think I’d rather just call the police.”

Leo sighed once again. *Magic it is.*

He moved his hand in front of her face, fingers moving as fluidly as any hand dancer or magus on earth, but there was no talent or training behind it. He did not have to make bargains or sacrifices for such a simple contract. It came as natural as breathing. Dragons did not merely cast spells; they became them. The boundaries between matter and magic were thinner for their kind.

Jacqueline’s eyes fluttered and Leo spoke in an even, authoritative voice.

“Tonight was a blur. After Eli told you he was going carousing with me, you decided to have a drink.” Leo walked over to the bar and held up a bottle of red wine, then continued: “You started reading magazines, and before you knew it, the wine was gone and you were tired, so you went to bed. Change into your nightgown and go to sleep. Everything else shall be forgotten upon waking.”

Leo could almost feel the neurons in her head rewiring themselves; synapses interrupted and redirected, as her eyes glazed over. *They are so much simpler than us. So inherently meek, and fragile.* She swayed slightly and then obediently disrobed and began to undress. Leomat took no notice.

He had lain with humans only a few times in his long life, usually at Eli’s urging, and he almost always felt shame afterwards. It was not quite tantamount to bestiality—humans could consent to sex, give, and receive pleasure—but it was undoubtedly a deviance.

He turned his attention to Eliathan, studying his pale, rigid body. *It’s possible he’s not dead but merely dormant. Likely even.* Magic was leaking out of the world, and relicts like dragons required it to live. Without it, they would often enter a state of torpor. For all intents and purposes, torpor was indistinguishable from death. Some held out hope that magic would flourish again and raise all the sleepers from stasis. Leo was not one of them. *Dormancy is usually entered voluntarily. We have an inkling that it is coming for us. Eliathan would have told me, would have confided in me. No. Something else is wrong.*

Leo swaddled his friend in a blanket and pulled him over his shoulder, just as Jacqueline sleepwalked her way back to bed.

*I will have to stay in constant contact with him to recast the shapeshifting contract until I can finally get him to the crypt of his lineage.* The logistics made the situation real for the first time. The solitary heart of his human form turned to lead in his chest.

*I will weep for him later, in the company of my kindred. There is work to be done.*

He carried Eliathan down to the estate's private beach. It was roughly twelve o'clock, in mid-August 2008, and the night was damnably clear. If any neighbors were watching, they would have no trouble seeing the transformation. *More magic then.* Leo raised his hands and appealed to the energies that slumbered in the surf. Running water generally acted as a solvent for spells, which made water-based magic challenging, indeed. He spent a full minute negotiating the contract, offering some of his powerful blood to expedite its effects.

When he engaged the contract, the ocean seemed to crawl into the air, waves whipping their froth into unnaturally thick fog. It seemed to deepen as you stared into it, like an ever-yawning darkness. Leo specified that the fog be released in a ring, leaving an unobstructed and conveniently large eye around himself and the body.

He laid the body on the shore probing it for the contract. A similar spell on a human would have dissolved within seconds of their death, if not instantly, but dragon wyrds had greater weight to them, a certain pseudo-physicality. It gave Leo hope. He plucked at the weave, which compressed and folded the dragon's true form into his wyrd.

Eliathan's white, gold, and blue scaled body exploded out of his suit and with it came a horror. Black ichor stained his sky-colored plumage. It looked like a congealed shadow, and it squirmed like an arachnid. The infection's presence had been completely masked by the shape-shifting contract, but its stench washed over him now. Distilled decay and rot. Festering, evil, the likes of which Leo had not encountered for over seventy years.

He recognized the danger just fast enough to save himself. A blackened prong of shadow lashed out, ripping scales from the corpse like old shingles, and curving in a sharp hook towards Leo's face. He deflected it with a sorcerous gesture, a quick and dirty ward with the force of a gorilla's punch. The deflected arm of pitch curled in a hook, swiping at him again, and the body launched two more tendrils, like cuttlefish tentacles stabbing at prey. Leo used more sorcery to bat all three appendages; trivial telekinesis with a great deal of force behind it.

Before the thing could start another assault, Leomat heaved in a breath of air and ambient energy, and then exhaled with a roar. Black fire exploded from his lungs, consuming the thing. He continued breathing until the body became a pyre unto itself. The infection let loose an eerie sound; the hum of an old television with the volume of a scream.

Leomat breathed heavily as he watched his friend's desecrated body burn. This was not a case of supernatural suffocation, or age finally taking its due. And it did not conform to any natural ailment or illness he had ever encountered. Eliathan had been murdered.

After the corpse was reduced to ash, Leo did what he could to gather the remains into a vase from the mansion. The embers continued to glow blue with wyrd energies long after the flames had faded. Leo's life would depend on them.

When the ashes were secured, Leo began to search the estate. He doubted he would find the assailant; most xenomancers were cowards. So were poisoners.

He began his search in the pool house which Jacqueline jokingly referred to as Eli's man-cave. Ironically enough, it held the entrance to Eli's lair; there was an illusory wall behind the sauna's boiler. Leo ducked past the machinery and inspected the cave system below.

The heart of the lair was a large cavern where Eli and perhaps four other dragons could comfortably assume their true form; with jugs of wine, sides of beef and butchered goats that could be quickly cooked in a large kitchen nestled in an alcove. Leo performed a hasty check of the rooms, and then proceeded to the office.

Eli had been writing a grimoire, a book of magic, since they fought together in the war. It was his obsession. He claimed it held 'unparalleled significance,' to the dragon community, and he wrote, and re-wrote for days at a time. Writing a grimoire was far more complex than putting ink to paper or text to screen. The best books of magic had the power to permanently augment the reader's wyrd. They did not merely open one's mind to new perspectives, but gave them supernatural tools they did not have before. To achieve such an effect, each page had to be imbued with elaborate ritual magic. Few people knew he was working on it—he told Jacqueline he was writing a memoir—and Eli was very secretive about the subject matter. There was no possibility that it was xenomantic, but Eli's research may have unwittingly led him into contact with his murderer. Which meant they likely had an interest in the manuscript.

The office cavern was large enough to accommodate Eli's true form, but its tools and instruments were all human-scaled. The walls were stacked high with books, sheets of vellum, and jars of ink in every hue and grade of magical potency. There was a glass wall which he used as a whiteboard, plastered with equations and a madman's corkboard full of notes and pictures. Unfortunately, the utter disarray made it impossible to tell if somebody had tossed or otherwise tampered with his research. There was also no telling if anything was missing.

Leo was tempted to scour the notes or search for a journal, but there were more pressing tasks at hand. Like the chore of making a body for the inevitable human funeral.

Leo procured a small mountain of protein and bone from a butcher who never asked questions, then hauled the stinking mass back to his house in his Escalade. He dumped the gore into a cauldron of saltwater, where he wound sinew around bone, and layered skin across muscle. The resulting facsimile was well-shaped with believable pallor, but if you were to cut it open, it would be a horrifying, gutless mesh of flesh. Any ME or doctor would be able to tell there was something off about it, even without a scalpel, but Leo had all sorts of friends who could make inconvenient inquiries disappear.

One of the advantages of long life was an increased opportunity to make money and friends, and to pay said friends with said money. He called Ecumene and explained that he had

a body that needed to be ruled a heart attack, and go from coroner to crematorium without an autopsy or any questions. *For Jacqueline, “natural causes” is as far as this will go.*

The advocate who answered him pried pleasantly, asking if there were any other services required, or any pertinent details he could share in the interest of creating a more convincing cover story. Leo gave him nothing. The Executor of Ecumene knew Leomat’s true nature, but most of the Firm—the quaint human cartel that ran magic in North America—had no idea who, or what he was beyond an independent benefactor.

With the preparations concluded, Leo stripped naked in the front hall, and retired to the cavern beneath his palatial house. He canceled his shapeshifting contract, reverting to his true form. Three pairs of wings, each the span of two sedans, erupted from his back, and armored black scales slid from his skin in a wave. Muscle grew upon muscle, bone branched from bone, extending his limbs until he had grown to his full two stories of height and three tons of weight. Finally, a crown of horns sprouted from his forehead, and his mouth extended to accommodate three rows of teeth.

He inspected himself thoroughly for signs of corruption, almost hoping for a trace of infection, so he could prove his story and give himself a lead. *Then again, I’m not sure I would find anything.* The rot was parasitic and at least partially intelligent, yet it didn’t have a wyrd. Which meant it was the work of xenomancy. traceless, forbidden magic from outside reality. *That would explain how Eliathan didn’t notice the infection.* Otherwise he should have felt it growing, even if he stayed in his human form.

*I will need to contact the others. The longer I wait, the more suspicious I will look. And the situation already looks awful. I stitched his human paramour, and burned his body to ashes. I may not survive this one.*

In ancient times, during their Dominion over humans, dragons not only killed, but cannibalized each other. By consuming each other’s flesh, dragons could gain each other’s power, thanks to the more physical nature of their wyrds. But magic was fading from the world, shortening lifespans, and making sterility increasingly prevalent among their kind. With the candle burning from both ends, the survivors of dragonkind convened and created the regional Flights. Kin-slaying was declared the greatest crime one could commit, second only to kin-eating, and as their population dwindled further, the offense grew increasingly heinous.

*There are fewer than a hundred of us left the world over, and another one of us has fallen. If they think I ate any of Eliathan’s ashes, they may kill me out of self-preservation, to say nothing of punishment.* There were vague prophecies and old stories foretelling an oath breaker who would devour his kin, and bring ruin to the world. So far as Leo could tell, it was superstitious nonsense. Unfortunately, it was the kind of nonsense that their kind had to take very seriously. Leo’s father had committed such sins in war time, and only received clemency in exchange for permanent exile.

*But the war is long over, and Eli is not an enemy of the Occidental Flight. Leo's only defense was a feeble, dangerous one. I could have theoretically gotten away with the crime, and instead I am choosing to come forward.*

Another plan offered itself. *I could always eat the ashes, feign ignorance, and assist in the inevitable investigation of his disappearance, hoping to catch the real culprit.* Leo was relatively well-liked and respected, despite his father's exile. And his fondness for his friend, while understated, was known to all. Nobody would suspect a thing. Devouring Eli's body and deceiving his kin for a higher cause was the fundamental logic of his ancestors. But he couldn't entertain the idea any further. Just as humans had stolen magic and language from the ancient dragons, the new dragons had taken compassion from humanity. Even though he often berated Eliathan for his hopelessly romantic, decidedly human ideals, Leomat held many of the same principles in the core of his being.

A wave of fatigue swept over him, like a gale blowing against the grain of his scales. He had done a fair bit of magic that night, and while none of it was terribly impressive by draconic standards, the toll could sneak up on him if he wasn't careful. Magic was fading from the world. All creatures needed it, but most were blind to it. Dragons were relics from an earlier age, when the power was plentiful, and their otherwise impossible biology required more of it to survive. They had adapted to the scarcity, just as humans at higher altitudes learned to make do with less oxygen. But the paucity would eventually wear dragons down.

*The dark comes for us all.*

Leomat did not fear the pain of dying or the oblivion that would follow. He did not recognize any gods, so the prospects of an afterlife seemed remote. Relief was the worst-case scenario. His only hope was that he met his end nobly, in the pursuit of something greater than himself. *And what could be more noble than avenging a dear friend?*

The ring of a phone rattled the cave only four hours later. Leo stirred, grogged and irate. The damnable thing was too small for him to answer in his true body, and he was sorely tempted to burn it from the Earth. After a tremendous sigh, he cast his shapeshifting contract and endured the collapse. It began with the stab of retreating bone and oppressive shrinkage, followed by the sensation of suffocation as his wing hearts 'popped' into his wyrd. The entire transformation took five excruciating seconds.

He missed the first call, but the phone immediately started ringing again.

"Leo?" Jacqueline's voice came through. "Leo, are you there? Is Eli with you?"

*Change tactics.* He affected a slur.

"Jacky, my dear! To what do I owe the pleashure?"

"Is Eli with you?" she repeated, sounding exasperated.

*The stitch had held at least.*

“Well, he’s here, but he’s quite drunk.”

“Thank god. When I woke up and he wasn’t here... I just had this awful feeling.”

Even if her specific memories were sealed, emotions often lingered after a stitch, especially if the concealed memories were traumatic.

“No need to worry. I’ll cook us breakfast and shend him back your way.”

“Thank you...Can I talk to him?”

“I mean. I’ll have to wake him up.”

“Please be rough about it. He didn’t let me know he wouldn’t be home last night and—”

“You want to give him a tongue lashing. Alright. Hold on.”

Leo pulled the phone away and bellowed “Eli,” then he waited a beat, murmured “‘s your wife,” and then resumed speaking in a perfect replica of Eli’s voice. Dragons were the natural-born masters of magic for a very simple reason: they were the lords of language. A dragon’s tongue could imitate any accent, understand, and speak any tongue. Simple ciphers and puzzles fell apart under their gaze.

“Hello, darling,” he said, with Eli’s voice.

“Thanks for the heads up.”

“Come on, Jacky. I’m five blocks away!”

“Be home in an hour or I’m coming to get you, and I’ll forbid Leo from having you over.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong! What’s the rush?”

“We have a joint tennis lesson at noon.”

“Christ... alright. Let me... Jacky, I’m hungover as hell...”

“Good. Maybe if I make you suffer through it like this, you’ll think twice about doing this *again* next time. I’m not going to let you drink yourself to death.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll be home in two hours.”

“Eli! I said an hour!”

“Love you,” Leo said with Eli’s glib laugh and hung up.

The conversation soiled him. He was playing ventriloquist with his best friend’s corpse. But it couldn’t be helped. He needed at least that long to work out a story that would be convenient for the Flight. Fortunately, Jacqueline’s bark was worse than her bite. She wouldn’t show up until one, or whenever their lesson was over, so she could lord it over him and make him feel guilty after the fact. They were one of those tedious couples that loved to track slights like it was some kind of game.

Leo was suddenly cold in his human body and he walked across the cave and up the stairs. He paused at the stop of the stairway leading to the manor. *What day is it?* Thursday. Unlike most of his kin, he did not employ a staff, but he did have maids and gardeners—the house was too large to keep up without them—and he didn’t want to raise inconvenient questions like ‘why does our employer walk out of his wine cellar stark naked every night?’

His clothes were where he left them in the living room, and he deposited them in the laundry upstairs, then dressed in a simple black suit.

*I need to call Bahamat.* His adoptive father, Dragonsire of the Occidental Flight, would hear him out and give him a public trial. There were no guarantees beyond that. *He might start his own investigation and keep me in the dark. He may blame the infection on his dalliance with humans, and call the matter closed.* Both were unacceptable outcomes. All the same, Leo dialed his private line. He hoped to leave a message, but to the familiar baritone answered.

“Leo?”

There was a party in the background. Murmurs. Glasses clinking.

“Salutations, Dragonsire. I’m afraid I bring bad news.”

“Continue then.”

“Eliathan is dead. Murdered, no less. By xenomancy.”

There was a measured pause, and the noise in the background faded with footsteps, before finally being muffled by a door shutting. Leo could imagine the polished wooden halls of Westspire; Bahamat’s restored castle in the English countryside that served as a school of sorts for young dragons. He had spent many pleasant afternoons there as a hatchling, soaring over the grounds and practicing magic, receiving an education that would shame any private boarding school or university.

“How do you know it was xenomancy?”

“His human wife, Jacqueline, found the body. I stitched her to prevent her interference, and undid his shapeshifting contract to confirm it was not torpor. When I released the spell, I found an... infection of some kind. No magical pulse, but clearly not of Earth’s biology. Semi-intelligent. It tried to attack me. I had to burn the infection in order to survive. My flames took his body as well.”

Another, much longer pause.

“Do you have the ashes?”

“What I could salvage.”

“Then I believe you are telling the truth, so far as it appears to you. Unfortunately, these circumstances will appear... highly dubious to the others.”

No dragon knew greater infamy than Leomat’s natural sire, Alderath. Famed for his contributions to the great war, and then condemned and exiled for the crime of kin-eating. The Last Generation spread rumors about him ceaselessly. Some alleged that he was plotting to raise a second Far Flight. At least one fool hatchling believed that he would become the Endwurm of prophecy; a dragon to devour all dragons, and ultimately, the world itself. Leomat himself had forsaken the name of his lineage to escape the stigma.

“I mean to investigate,” Leo said. “If this assassin identified Eli’s true nature, he may be able to do the same to the rest of us. He could be a threat to the entire Flight.”

There was another long pause.

“My immediate suspicion is that this is an unfortunate consequence of Eli’s deviance. Time and again, I’ve warned him that we involve ourselves with humans at our peril. Did he reveal his nature to his wife?”

“Eli was a romantic, but he was not a fool,” Leo snapped.

“Peace, Leo. We simply need to consider all the options, especially given the unusual circumstances of his death.”

“I’m the only logical scapegoat, yes.”

*Perhaps the killer planned it that way.*

“You must interrogate all of his human associates. If there are notable absences at the funeral, hunt them down. Compel all of them.”

“Give me four days.”

“That’s acceptable,” there was a pause. “Any death is a hard blow to my Flight, Leomat, and I’m sure it’s struck you the hardest. You have my condolences.”

“Thank you, father.”

Leo hung up, resisting the urge to smash the phone. *Condolences? Don’t insult me.* Bahamat never liked Eli. None of the elders did. His fondness for humans, his bleeding hearts, and his boundless hopefulness for salvation made them nervous. They would be relieved to know he died, dismissing *xenomantic murder* like some kind of karmic venereal disease.

*And I will be a pariah from present to perdition.* Even though they would be relieved to be rid of a deviant, Leo’s potential culpability would make the rest of the Flight nervous. The trial would probably find him innocent, out of convenience if nothing else. *But the stain of suspicion, the possibility that I am a kin slayer will remain forever.*

There was nothing to help it. He went downstairs to cook breakfast; an elaborate three egg omelet with a Bloody Mary. Soon, he would need to feast in his true form, but cooking helped clear his mind, and he could subsist for nearly a month at a time by regularly eating in his shapeshifted form.

After he finished, he staged the scene of Eli’s death, positioning the fake corpse near a collection of drained glasses and liquor bottles. There would be no fine-toothed forensic investigation, so a cursory display was fine. He dialed 911, and then called Jacqueline back to tell her that her husband had a heart attack.

The rest of the day was unrelentingly awful. Jacqueline shrieked that it was all his fault. She slapped him, beat his chest, and finally collapsed against him, clinging to him and sobbing. Rank melodrama. A routine she had rehearsed for years no doubt, and she left no soap opera trope neglected. It was curious. Last night she seemed genuinely afraid to find him dead. Today it was all theatrics. *But last night, she was the prime suspect. Today, her payday finally arrived.*

It made him sick. She had just inherited some three hundred million dollars, Eli's manor, garage, and she had the gall to play the victim. Still, he took her blows, feigned contrition, comforted her with a Cosmo, and assured her that he would take care of everything.

And he was as good as his word.

Eli Acton's funeral transpired two days later with just over a hundred in attendance. No dragons were present apart from Leo. Just a bunch of high society assholes, some of whom had the temerity to inquire about who would be receiving Eli's inheritance, under the auspices of 'potential charitable donations.' *I should burn them all.*

Instead, he interrogated them. During the funeral, and in the days leading up to it, he sequestered all of Eli's acquaintances, friends and business associates and forced them to speak with draconic magic. Even if they were awakened, none of them would have the might to resist his wyrd. The most suspicious character was a stockbroker, who left for Colorado with his family on the night of Eli's death, but his balding ape-head held nothing out of the ordinary. Only one person at the funeral had a wyrd; Eli's contact at Ecumene. Leo was disgusted to learn that the suit assumed Eli was some kind of elder vampire lord.

Leo stitched him the same as the others, concluding his search without a single lead. He so wanted a human to be responsible, not because he loathed them—he was fonder of humans than most dragons—but because it would be neater. An obvious answer that would be easier to explain to the Flight.

Eli's human will publicly left Leo Black a few token items; the sort of treasures one would expect a best friend to bequeath another. A collection of rare books; mint condition first-editions and unpublished works, including a near-complete manuscript of Dicken's *Edwin Drood*, that, when subject to psychometry, revealed the author's intentions for the novel. Cuban cigars. The entire contents of his liquor cabinet. A Pollock Leo always admired and threatened to steal. All trifles to throw people off the scent of his true inheritance.

One of the books was hollowed, and contained the keys to a block of personal storage units housing Eli's hoard. The first garage was filled with grimoires written by both humans and dragons. Living tomes of magic which permanently enhanced or altered the reader's wyrd. There was a surprisingly cooperative transcription of the *Tiamatrius*. A pristine copy of Innismat's *Moratorium*, the volume that essentially served as the guide for fighting the Far Flight during the Great Wars. Grevithan's *Scribe Sworn*, which detailed the secrets of transcribing magical arts to paper. Mortimer's *Gallows Chicanery*, a cheekily named and viciously playful volume on dangerous enchantments, hexes, and curses. Another unit held weapons. A truly priceless sword with a hijiritsuka hilt that could sever the unseen connections between a summoner and their enthralled targets. An arrowhead that made demonic

egregores implode. The Peacemaker pistols allegedly used by the legendary Iudex Regionis, Jane Salt, and an accompanying collection of black iron and silver bullets.

Amidst these riches, one item was conspicuously absent. Eli's manuscript. *He claimed I would finally have it by summer's end.* Leo had an idea of where it was. One storage unit held an enchanting workshop, and an almost comically elaborate safe. The locking mechanisms were layered with so many protective wards that it would take days to crack safely. Leo itched to begin immediately, but it would have to wait until after the wake.

Preparation took nearly as long as the flight itself. Leomat had to shield himself from naked eyes, cameras, radar, and glamour his wyrd so it would be less obvious to magi. He layered the contracts in a careful pattern, making sure none of them would interfere with the others. The spellwork was similar to both braiding hair and wrapping one's hands before a boxing match; stylistic and practical. When he was finally ready, he slipped into the ocean through his lair, swam until he was a mile away from shore, and shot into the sky.

Pushing hard with a good jet stream, he could make it across the Pacific in roughly four hours. He managed three and some change once during the war, when lives were counting on him. But now, clutching his friend's urn to his chest, encumbered by the weight of his death, it took him the better part of a day to reach Europe.

The solitude, miles above the ocean, was cruel yet cathartic. He thought of his last encounter with Eli. A pleasant night of idle chatter and drinking, spent in their true forms in the cavern beneath Leo's house. It was not unlike the evening he fabricated for Jacqueline's sake. That was when Eli promised to finish the book before year's end.

"It's going to change everything, Leo," Eli said.

"Look here, flitwurm, if you're going to talk about it, talk about it."

"Can't spoil the surprise."

Leo, in his drunken state, allowed himself to be teased.

"Tell me *something!* The broad discipline, at least."

Eli scratched his chin thoughtfully, then pursed his lips and flared his nostrils in alternation, a ridiculous habit that always made Leo laugh. After a moment of faux contemplation, Eli said.

"It's about the language of language."

Leo groaned.

"Postmodern magic. May the powers strike me dead."

"I'm serious. Leo. You'll see soon enough."

"I can't wait, Eli. And you know I'm very patient."

Tears blurred Leomat's eyes, and he began to sob. It was an ugly state for a dragon. Base and abject. His body seemed to triple in weight, both flight bladders and wyrd failed him,

and he simply gave up. Allowed himself to plummet toward the ocean below, wrapping his form around the urn. He spread his wings and spared himself from the impact at the last moment, but sloppily fell into the water just after. The water hurt, but not nearly enough to drive away his grief. He floated to the surface, bobbed with the waves, and sobbed for what felt like an era.

Leomat reached Svalbard approaching nightfall.

Alderath's lair was truly impressive. Its entrance was a small crevice in Nordaustlandet's tundra, and the subterranean palace was made almost entirely of enchanted ice; the result of decades of hard work. Even when frozen, water was tricky to work with. Structuring the necessary contracts would be like trying to build a sandcastle against the surf. One had to persist until the waves themselves were tamed by repeated shows of magical force.

Leomat felt the wards trying to drive him away from nearly a mile out. Intangible energies instilled the sensation of disorientation and dread that would divert wayward travelers. He touched down, and drew a simple greeting contract in the snow, waiting for the wards to abate. It was possible that Alderath would turn him away. *I probably would, in his position.* But the repelling energies abated abruptly. They even inverted, guiding Leomat toward the shocking blue chasm that served as an entrance to the lair.

It was an extremely narrow fit, and the ice cracked downward at odd angles. Leomat clipped a wing as he descended, his weight thrown off by the urn. At the bottom of the chasm, frigid waters and a collection of unnaturally sharp, spear like rocks waited. *Joy. A trap.* But before he was impaled, he was caught by a sudden updraft that scooped him upward. A magic safety net crafted specifically to help dragons.

Leomat landed, shaken, on a stone platform that was covered by an overhang of ice. And he was greeted by a black-and-gold scaled dragon half-again his own size. *Hello, father.*

"Fair tidings, Alderath," Leo said, straightening to his full height.

Alderath fixed him with an intense gaze and scratched his chin before responding.

"Fair tidings. It's been some time."

"Thank you for receiving me."

"You should know that I would never turn you away. However, the straits must be dire indeed for you to seek my counsel."

"You are uniquely qualified to advise me. Tomorrow I intern Eliathan's ashes. And I will likely be put on trial for kin-eating."

Alderath eyed him seriously and then tilted his head toward the sanctum.

"Let's get you something warm to eat. And then start at the beginning."

“How do you get the meat and spices?” Leo asked after he had finished his second Szechuan braised cow. Alderath waved his hand dismissively. He hated small talk, but Leo pressed him. “I’m genuinely curious.”

“There’s an observatory about a mile from here. Beneath it, there is a cave system connected to a tunnel leading to my larder. Twice a year, I charter a ship to bring supplies to that ‘government research outpost,’ which I staff with a crew of laconic illusions and homunculi. The whole thing is terribly tedious. Furnishing the place was even more troublesome. Save for a few pieces of human furniture, I needed to carry raw materials and do all the manual labor myself.”

Leomat was impressed. He looked at the cushioned, stone studded rug that covered the glassy floor. It was essentially one enormous pillow. Even with magic on your side, it was the work of several days. Dragons were long-lived and they mastered skills quicker than humans, with physical disciplines being cousins of language.

They sat in the central chamber of Alderath’s lair, a domed room spanning roughly one hundred by fifty meters. The ice was enchanted to be temperate, and the ceilings were made to be perfectly transparent from underneath, despite layers of sediment and snow above.

“You didn’t come here to discuss logistics and home decoration. Now that I’ve heard your story, I suppose my first question is...Well, what do you want to know exactly?”

“What is your general counsel?”

Alderath snorted.

“Don’t allow yourself to be exiled. Life is lonely enough to begin with.”

“Anything more specific?”

“Well, our situations are somewhat different. I *did* devour my slain kin, and I attempted to make a case for it, whereas you are genuinely innocent. You even have fairly compelling evidence,” he said, nodding at the urn of Eli’s ashes. “As long as you keep your head, they will rule in your favor.”

“I’ll still be ostracized.”

“Very likely, yes. The best you can do is hope that those who matter will stand by you.” Alderath’s words were like icicles wedged between Leo’s vertebrae. “I don’t blame you, Leo. You were still very young, and after your tour of duty, you had a promising place in the Flight. If you had not renounced my line, you very likely would have been exiled as well.”

“It would have been easier on you.”

Alderath shook his head dismissively.

“The trial will be whatever it will be. If they exiled me, they definitely won’t put you to death. So, what will you do when it’s over?”

“Avenge Eliathan.”

“Do you have any leads?”

“Nothing. The black infection vaguely resembled some of the xenomancy we saw in the war; I think it was itself a lesser xenomancy. It was able to infect Eli, undetected, through his shapeshifting contract. None of Eli’s pets knew anything. I compelled them all to speak truth. Even a xenomancer would be forced to confess. Besides, I have trouble believing this is the work of a human.”

“Underestimating humans is what cost us our dominion.”

*Our supposed dominion.* The truth of draconic society was lost to ancient history. There was no evidence of their empire on Earth, just as there was no evidence of Eden; the mythical, magically saturated worlds that cast humanity out. Leo spoke:

“From what I understand, our yoke united humanity in belief. They to prayed to gods, creating them in the process. Then they interbred with their egregores, birthing nephilim. But those bloodlines have thinned. Science has advanced, collective belief has fragmented and dwindled. The gods are dead or diffuse.”

“You’ve forgotten the Anagnostes. They were the original catalyst.”

The Learned Slaves, or Spell Thieves were an apocryphal breed of humans who could spontaneously contract magical talents from other sources. According to draconic lore, humanity first learned language when the Anagnostes stole the concept from dragons. This in turn led humans to a collective awakening of magic. It struck Leo as an excuse for dragonkind being taken by surprise.

“Also, long-dead, if they ever existed.”

“If a human seems so farfetched, what alternative predator did you have in mind?”

“I was hoping you had some ideas.”

“Well. The fae are all but gone, and Eli had enough sense to stay clear of their schemes. Other relicts give us respectful berth. As you said, gods are governed by collective belief, and there aren’t enough humans who know about us to move gods against us.”

“What about another dragon?”

Alderath smiled.

“Ah. Now we’re getting somewhere interesting. It is in a kin-slayer’s interest to devour his opponent. Usually, that’s the whole point. Eat their flesh, gain the power of their wyrd. But if this dragon was a xenomancer, somebody hoping to avoid detection...”

“They would leave the body to avoid suspicion.”

Leomat shifted on the palisade and looked up through the transparent sheet of ice above. *Is this the beginning of a new Far Flight? After a public defeat, it would make sense that their successors—and of course, there would eventually be successors—would act in the shadows.* For some insipid reason, Bahamat spoke like the Far Flight would never resurface. As if the appeal of siring children, immortality, and living an open life had diminished.

Alderath must have read his face, or his wyrd.

“You fought the Far Flight, but what do you know of their motivations?”

“They believed in the legend of Eden. That there were a multitude of worlds, rich with magic, until Earth was supposedly sealed away by ancient human magi. The Far Flight’s goal was to restore access to Eden by tearing down the invisible spells that segregated us.”

“Yes. But why.”

Leomat snorted.

“So we can regain our longevity? So we can breed again?”

“Small thinking. What then? What do you do with your immortality? What do you raise your children for?” Alderath prodded.

“What are you getting at?”

“As our number increases, our secrecy will wane. What then? Do we renew our war upon humans? Or attempt harmony? The Far Flight lost, in part, because they were divided on this issue. Some wanted to restore our ancient dominion over humans. Others wanted a world of peace and acceptance between human and dragon. Does that sound like anyone you know?”

Flames boiled in Leo’s chest. The horned frills at the edges of his cheeks contracted then flared with a hiss.

“Eli was no xenomancer.”

“Perhaps not. But if I were a xenomancer, looking to recruit him to my conspiracy, I would promise him those things. A world where he could be admired for what he is. Children. Near-eternal life.”

“He would refuse their invitation,” Leo said with certainty.

“Yes. And if he had your sense, he would inform the Dragonsire. But Eli always wanted to save everybody. He would try to guide the recruiter’s wayward hearts back to the fold. But the recruiter wouldn’t take any chances that their secret would be exposed. Stitching Eli’s memory would be insufficient. Such things can be undone. Hence poison.”

“And the assassin used an infection, because he knew I would discover it. Suspicion would fall upon me. The son of the infamous kin-eater.”

“Indeed, it would. It’s possible this is all politics. An excuse to cut us both down.”

“Both of us?”

Alderath smiled sadly.

“Once I learned you were put to death in a sham trial—and I have ways of finding these things out, despite my exile—I would avenge you, my son. And everybody knows it. Except you, apparently.”

Again, Leomat felt embarrassed and chastened. *I cast my father aside with the rest of our kindred. Assumed he would not forgive my treachery. Yet he welcomes me into his sanctum, gives me counsel, and swears that he will die for me. I’ve been a fool... Unless this is a ploy, and he truly has been infected by the bodies of the xenomancers that he consumed.*

“Tell me something, Leo. Are you satisfied with Bahamat’s plan for us? To go ‘nobly into the night?’”

Leomat regarded him carefully. Questioning the word of the Dragonsire was dangerous. Dragons suffered no gods of their own. They realized any true higher powers were beyond their understanding, so there was no authority higher than Bahamat. Alderath pressed him.

“Assuming there was a way to regain magic without resorting to xenomancy, would you pursue it?”

“Of course.”

“It’s a great relief to hear it. I fear our Dragonsire is so terrified of war that he refuses to consider any change, even if it means working toward salvation.”

“We could be doing more in the way of research,” Leomat agreed.

“Tell me. How far would you go? Would you research xenomancy, but stop short of practicing it? Would you reveal your nature to human hedge lords, Judges, and Firm leaders? This is not an idle line of inquiry. To catch the killer, assuming they are indeed draconic, you must think like them. My guess is, it’s someone who did not experience the horrors of the war. Someone as idealistic as Eli, but far angrier. Somebody who feels that we failed our kind.”

“A member of the Last Generation, then.”

Alderath smirked. “It’s unbecoming to complain about ‘youth today,’ especially since they are such a rare commodity, but as humans say, ‘if the shoe fits...’”

Leomat nodded, losing himself in thought. Beyond putting faces to names, he knew almost nothing about the last generation of dragons. On the few occasions they met—wakes and what not—they asked him for war stories, hoping to hear about heroic violence, caring nothing for old wounds and actual history. He could only bear their company for a few hours in a span and felt no richer for the exchange.

“The wake is soon. I must take my leave. The Flight expects me by dawn tomorrow.”

“Despite the circumstances, I treasured your visit, Leo. For your sake... I would not visit again, until this business is well-past concluded. I know you’ve already considered this, but if somebody is eying you now, you’ve already taken a terrible risk.”

Leomat paused. Bahamat may have ordered sentries to follow him. He learned precious little, and upon deeper reflection, he realized that he was seeking comfort more than counsel. An eyewitness report of a visit to the exiled kin-eater would be another unfortunate canker on his trial. *No helping it now.*

Ogof o Raddfeydd, the Cave of Scales, was not actually a cave, but a cove. He shot out of the sky, toward the waves roiling at the base of the cliff. He swam through the waves and the illusory crags into a narrow trench. He paused at the mouth, and cast a contract on his eyes. It would reveal markers in the network of caves leading to the central chamber. Even a dragon could fall prey to the maze, and meet a literal dead end.

The stone floor of the cave itself had been paved by magic in an ornate scaled pattern. Each wall bore historical tapestries, and the ceiling was painted, gem-encrusted, and enchanted to control light, temperature, humidity, and salinity from the ocean. Furnishings included fountains, and stone-padded pillows large enough to accommodate the largest of their species.

Leomat emerged from the pool, shook himself dry and made his way through the entrance hall to the grand chamber. No sentries were posted. Anybody foolish enough to trespass on dragon territory was welcome to try their luck.

The others were already there. Almost the entire Occidental Flight, and three emissaries from the Oriental Flight as well; an Imperial Serpent Patriarch and his two Jade paramours. All of the old guard appeared, as did Leo's peers who had served in the war. He was surprised to see that most of the Last Generation had shown up as well. *Are they more respectful than I imagined, or did they have some link to Eli I didn't know about?*

His heart lurched when he saw Kiviathan. Her brilliant plumage—yellow, green, and blue radiated from the orange-red core of her breast. *Of course she's here. What did you expect?* But his mind had been so clouded with thoughts of grief and his defense that he never considered who would be present.

Bahamat, sat on the throne of the Dragonsire. He was a Brightshade Patriarch. Normally, his scales were a gleaming, near-white silver, rimmed with navy. Now the silver was immaculately painted black, and his four pairs of wings were covered by a black and grey cloak mourning. Every member of the Flight wore some token to express grief or condolences, depending on their familiarity to Eli; black and white banners, gems that had been clouded with age. Leo alone, was naked. The closest to the deceased never wore tokens. Their suffering was supposed to be self-evident and laid bare. Any further expression of grief was considered sarcastic, distancing, or flamboyant.

The other dragons in the chamber hastily knelt to the ground upon Leo's entrance, bowing low before him. Even if they thought him a kin-eater and Eli a deviant, certain traditions would be observed. Bahamat waited until Leo set down the urn of Eliathan's ashes, and bowed, then he returned the bow, low and deep.

Before the Flight could rise, Leomat had to give words. A brief speech expressing his current state of being, and how the deceased met his end. Sadly, Eli had not died in battle, or peacefully, but somewhere in between. Death by murder was unbecoming of dragonkind.

"Thank you, kindred," Leomat said. "My hearts are empty stones, and my scales grow against their grain. But my blood burns for vengeance." He paused, letting hate harden his eyes. "Eliathan was a courageous warrior with a bright spirit, and he deserved a noble death. But rather than the Final Sleep, or a known foe, he was taken by treachery. His body was infected—poisoned—by xenomancy. And I was forced to burn him to save my pitiful self. I present his ashes to be interred here, among his people, with you as his witnesses."

Bahamat raised his head first.

“Rest receive him. Ancestors welcome him,” The others roared in affirmation, loud enough to shake the surface above, through nearly a league of Earth. “The circumstances of his death are unusual, with disturbing implications. So it pains me to state that an inquiry must be made, Leomat. However, I declare this distasteful necessity will wait until you have eaten and received rest.”

Leo heard a stir of conspicuous inhalations from behind him. Uncomfortable shifts of wings that betrayed suspicion. *They were hoping to try me straight away. Not that I can blame them. Who would want to suffer a suspected murderer at the supposed victim’s funeral? Who wants to drag out a black sheep’s wake?* It was a tremendous mercy though. By delaying the trial, Bahamat gave Leomat the benefit of the doubt. An endorsement that would go far.

This was the only courtesy granted. Bahamat turned to his lieutenant, Alathan, Kiviathan’s sire and Eli’s uncle, speaking in a hushed tone. The others made their way into the cave’s recesses, where food waited.

Leo had little desire to speak to anyone. Conveniently, customs aligned; the grieving were to be given space until they sought conversation, and those suspected of treachery were to be shunned until tried. Kiviathan had never been one for tradition, however.

She approached on all fours, wings folded tight to her body in submission, and waited three paces away. Leo surprised himself by lurching forward, wings and arms outstretched. She stood on her hind legs, and they embraced; long necks intertwining, wings wrapping around wings. She reached out with her wyrd as well, and he could feel the warmth of sympathy warring with grief.

“Leo, I am so sorry.” He said nothing, but hugged her tighter. “I can’t imagine. I...just can’t imagine.”

“Thank you, Kivia.”

They stood there a long time. It was human of him. Showed weakness. But he didn’t care. In that moment, she was all he had in the world.

Dragon lives were long, and monogamy was rare among their kind, but favorite lovers were common. Most assumed that Eli and Leo were a couple. And in many senses, that was true. They never tired of each other, finding endearment even in their flaws. The rest of the Flight naturally assumed that their relationship was sexual as well. In truth, they had only lain together twice in their hundred fifty-one years, and both times they were cherished moments.

Kivia, Eli’s cousin, was different. Passion flared between them, three to five years in a span. They would become inseparable, sometimes mating and talking for weeks at a time. But lust and scintillation always gave way to turbulent arguments and vituperation. One innocent morning, they would wake up disgusted with each other, sick with a mutual intolerance that only years of absence could cure.

The current tenderness suited her strangely—she was not a gentle creature, even by draconic standards. It was what he needed though. Finally, he broke away.

“Come on. Let’s get you some food,” she said.

He had no appetite, but he could smell the feast prepared. They walked together, wing in wing, and came to the massive dining cavern, a trove of food. There were immaculately prepared whole cows and goats. A massive cauldron of stew with the meats of smaller animals, and several fountains of wine. He imagined the Flight had a similar system to his father for transporting food, but on a far more impressive scale. *Bahamat must have started preparations as soon as I called.*

Seeing that he was accompanied, three members of the Last Generation paid hasty respects, trying to take their cues from Bahamat’s apparent reprieve. Three other hatchlings hung back. *Unfortunate. There are skeptics even among the hatchlings.* There were roughly twenty dragons present. Those who said nothing were skeptical, or had already decided that Leo was guilty, based on his father’s reputation.

Leo forced politics out of his mind, and food down his throat. Finally, two members of his generation approached. Emethast and Herathast. Thunder Scale twins who had served with Leo and Eli in the war. *At last, some sympathetic faces. People who can look past Eli’s predilections.* Their faces were indeed drawn; frills closed, and tight against their cheeks, nostrils narrowed. But Hera’s eyes were hard and gleamed with tears. Her wyrd seemed to vibrate slightly, as if she were holding herself back. *She suspects me.*

Hera had been one of Eli’s draconic paramours. Their relationship was roughly equivalent to Leo and Kivia’s, with milder spikes in passion and acrimony. They had a more regular rhythm too. *And they would have been due for a dalliance soon.* Yet she wore almost no tokens of grief; her amethyst scales were outlined in black. According to custom, she should have been the most elaborately dressed. Her meaning was plain. *She wanted to come naked. She suggests that I murdered him, and therefore have no right to grieve.*

Kivia placed her fore-wing claw on Leo’s shoulder, trying to comfort him.

“Peace, Leo,” Emethast said.

“Peace,” Hera repeated, far less convincingly.

“Peace, kindred. It has been... twenty years?” Leo inquired.

“My mother’s death,” Em confirmed.

Leo bowed his head respectfully.

“Did you have fair winds?” Em asked.

“Fair as it can be under the circumstances.”

“Yes, of course,” Em said apologetically and looked away.

Kivia had also lowered her gaze to the floor, not knowing what to say. But Hera’s eyes were locked on Leo, tight.

“Was it painless?”

She asked the question so abruptly that Leo thought she was lunging at him at first. He stared into her bright blue eyes before answering, genuinely hurt and incredulous.

"I have to assume so. Or else he would have suspected."

"Did you interrogate his harlot?"

Leo had used compulsion magic on Jacqueline at length the day before Eli's funeral.

"All she mentioned is that he had been spending more and more time writing."

"And you have no other leads? No friends from that Firm?"

"I have no 'friends' in any Firm," he said sharply.

"Forgive me," She said tersely. "You were so careful during the war. I never assumed your vigilance would fade so quickly."

Leo bristled and Kivia's claws tightened on his shoulder. *She's trying to bait me. If I lash out here, my fate during the trial is as good as sealed.* He bowed his head.

"I must relieve myself. And then I believe it would be best if we begin my trial."

The trial chamber was even larger than the feasting hall, built to accommodate a hundred dragons. Even when they equally spread themselves throughout the space, around the circular stage, it felt inescapably empty. *Another reminder of how few of us are left. Another reminder of how severe my alleged crime is.*

Bahamat was the last to enter, so that the others would have time to settle themselves. They would lose face if they made him wait after calling the trial to order. He sat on all fours, fanning out his four pairs of wings before folding them against his back.

"Leomat, son of my brood, the Occidental Flight calls you to testify regarding the death of Eliathan, son of the brood of Than. Under the circumstances, the Flight must consider every potential explanation for his demise, including your possible culpability, and further, the crime of kin-eating."

The charges seemed to tighten the room. Leo felt the wyrds of his kindred shift with suspicion, dread, and an almost lurid curiosity. He kept his eyes forward, nerves silenced by Eli's death and the aspersions of his lover.

"I plead not guilty to all of the charges, Dragonsire. I hope to lay the accusation of kin-eating to rest swiftly. First, I ask that my kindred perform the necessary analysis on Eliathan's ashes. They bear the impression of his wyrd and they are of such a volume that I could not have devoured him."

One of the Last Generation, a haughty Scarlet Scale named Venitheer scoffed and fanned his wings. Bahamat nodded at him to speak.

"Who knows the volume of our kindred's ashes?" he asked.

"Those of us who fought in the war," Leomat replied coolly. "It's also a matter of fairly simple mathematics."

Venitheer flared his nostrils at Leomat, but folded his wings. An Azure Scale by the name of Thadreon was the next to raise his wings. Again, Bahamat bid him speak.

“Kin-eating aside, there are other ways to derive power from a dragon’s death. His death energies could have been instrumental in some form of sacrificial magic.”

Leomat didn’t have a convenient answer for that one. It was simply true. Every time a wyrd was snuffed out, energy was released. When focused or harnessed, it could be put to a powerful purpose. *Were that I was human. Or Fae.*

Fae could not lie outright; only through turn of phrase and omission. Humanity started a rumor that dragons were the same as fae; unable to speak falsehood. In actuality, they were the best liars on the planet. Whereas humans could be placed under compulsion spells, and forced to speak truth, a quirk of the dragon’s tongue made it possible for them to ‘speak around’ any compulsion involving language. Few ever resorted to the option, however. Honesty was a point of pride among the kindred.

“I cannot deny the existence of sacrificial magic, and I cannot prove a negative,” Leomat answered stiffly.

Galathast, a Goldenscale, scratched his chin, a greedy look in his eyes.

“Would you concede to open your lair to investigation for evidence of the ritual?”

It was an odious, openly degrading request. Secrecy was another crucial point of draconic self-respect. The invasion of privacy was made even more insulting by its obvious futility. If Leo committed a crime, he had the sense to cover his tracks. Like every dragon, he also had a number of hidden lairs around the world. Galathast’s sole purpose was to squeeze and shame him.

In a strange way, it was a courtesy. An offer to avoid ruffling scales. Leo, in his grief, was supposed to consent to almost anything to clear his name and make his overwhelming grief apparent. He would assume all the dishonor associated with an ignoble death, as well as any lapses in judgment—like laying with humans—that led to said death. Such was the way of politics in the twilight of the Occidental Flight. Forsake honor in the name of harmony. Pretend your problems away with grand expressions of empty melodrama.

The new draconic ideal was shared, stoic martyrdom and Leomat had no patience for it.

“You all know that will resolve nothing. I am not going to play games. I will not surrender my privacy, or beg forgiveness for a crime I did not commit. Instead, I have a proposition.”

There was a stir of whispers and wyrds. Hard, incensed eyes. Bahamat swept a wing across the room for silence, and then nodded at him to continue.

“This world tires me. More so now that it is empty of Eliathan. He deserves vengeance, and his murder has compromised my honor, personally as well as publicly. I would rather die than allow the culprit to go free. Grant me a year to find out who is responsible, or put me to death for failing him.” A hush fell over those assembled.

His proposition hearkened back to older customs. It recalled the times before the war, when the ideal dragon was a proud individualist who did great deeds, swore oaths, and saw

them through. He suspected it would incense his contemporaries, intimidate the Last Generation, and earn the approval of the elders. It was a gambit. The decision rested with Bahamat alone. He would have to decide whether it was more scandalous to compromise his own ethos of forbearance, and put his chosen son to exile, or risk Leo's pursuit of justice, which could lead to inconvenient revelations.

The Dragonsire closed his eyes slowly, sighing heavily. *You think I'm being brash and dramatic. But I mean every word of it, old wurm. Regardless of how this trial plays out, I am stained until I have proven my innocence and avenged him. I don't want to live in this world, disgraced and alone like my father.*

"If my terms are not acceptable, I consent to death here and now."

Cannedraed, an eccentric green who was even older than Bahamat raised a wing, and asked his question without waiting for the nod of permission.

"Interesting. Do you have any suspicion as to who would want him dead?"

Leomat looked to Bahamat before answering. The Dragonsire nodded, while looking daggers at Cannedraed.

"Not yet. His human widow is a fool with a dormant wyrd. Ecumene is the only Firm who knew of his existence, and they reliably oppose xenomancy. There are no notable communities of vampires, weres, or other Stained in the United States. The Fae are all but gone, as are the other relicts. I think we are dealing with a Stranger...or perhaps another dragon."

The last comment raised an uproar amongst the crowd. Bahamat raised a wing, then when the rabble continued, he roared. It began as something subsonic and haunting, almost like whale song and then the chamber exploded. The deafening boom would have killed any human present, and could have leveled small buildings. In the pre-ancient era, when members of the Flight could demand trial by combat, court chambers had also served the function of ritual arenas and were constructed to withstand the appropriate force. But the chamber still shuddered at his bellow. Leomat winced out of reflex, but was otherwise unmoved.

"That's enough," Bahamat snarled. "I can sense your resolve, Leomat. As an *honorary* son of my brood, I will accept your proposition. But you shall recount Eliathan's death in exacting detail, and answer the Flight's inquiries until all present are satisfied. Else I will strike you down myself. Is that clear?"

Leomat performed a gesture of full compliance, lying on all fours, and spreading all his wings on the ground, like wilted, fallen leaves.

The questions that followed were tedious, but shorter than expected. As calculated, Leomat's declaration was befitting of the old ways. Those who held out, hatchlings of the Last Generation hoping to appear clever, and snide contemporaries with various grudges, grew tired of trying to catch him in a lie and eventually lost interest. Nobody save Herathast seemed genuinely suspicious of him. The trial was a farce.

"This trial is adjourned. Leomat, a word."

Leomat approached the throne. The Dragonsire paced, waiting for the others to leave, then used telekinesis to shut the doors gently behind them. He stared at Leomat in the eyes for nearly a full minute without speaking. The force of Bahamat's wyrd was like the weight of an ocean; unfathomable and terrible. Leo held his gaze just long enough to convey courage, then bowed low to convey he meant no defiance.

"What were you thinking? Openly proposing that a dragon might be responsible for murder? Are you trying to sew discord? Investigate all options, but stick with the premise that a human is responsible until you have concrete evidence to the contrary. It is what the Flight expects. It is *what they want*."

"Apologies, Dragonsire."

"It is also not the place of the accused to issue ultimatums. That was a petulant display."

"If I consented to their conditions, I would have disgraced myself, and your brood."

"You could have walked a more tactful path to reach the same destination. Consider my position. Others may accuse me of favoritism toward you as my adopted son."

"I promise to tread more carefully moving forward," Leomat said.

"Yes. You will. To that end, I forbid you from beginning your investigation here. Anyone you question won't cooperate, and everyone involved will lose face."

"I am merely here to do my duty and mourn my friend," Leomat assured him.

"Have you given any thought to how will you begin your search?"

"Eliathan was writing a grimoire. It's been his obsession since the war. I believe it is in a safe in his hoard. I mean to open it and examine it... see if it gives me any ideas about who he may have consulted, or what magic he was working with."

There was a long pause. Bahamat took a deep breath before speaking.

"What will you do if you discover Eliathan was working with xenomancy?"

Leomat grit his teeth and shook his head. He couldn't believe it was the second time he had to defend in his friend's honor in as many days.

"Impossible. He fought the Far Flight in the war."

"That is not an acceptable answer. I need your assurance that you will tell the truth. Even if it means disgracing your wingmate. After that display, the Flight deserves nothing less."

"You have my word."

"Leo," Kivia said. "I think I may know where you can start your search."

He sat up to look at her, all thoughts of sleep banished. They were sleeping in caverns deep in Ogof o Raddfeydd, each with massive silken pillows, and blankets sewn with polished stones that were pleasant against their scales. Kivia's scales glistened with the waters of an enchanted pool, having washed herself after they mated.

"Where?"

Bahamat's warning was fresh in his head, but a tip hardly constituted an interrogation.

"Have you ever heard of Goetia?"

Leomat peered at her, confused. The Goetia was a form of gnostic demon summoning practiced by King Solomon. It was also an ancient Greek word with a meaning similar to magic, or legerdemain.

"The art?"

"No, the place. A speakeasy in New Orleans. Supernatural neutral territory, supposedly run by an Abrahamic fallen angel. He's an information broker."

"I won't debase myself by bargaining with demons," Leo said simply.

"Eli was the one who told me about it. He said he was struggling with a part of his book, and was considering going there for insight."

*Eli dealing with demons?* The statement was absurd. Kivia read his expression.

"I doubt he actually made a bargain. The bar is a sort of supernatural congregation. Everything is welcome, as long as it has an awakened wyrd. The Firms can't even pursue hedges within its walls."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"He mentioned it years ago, the last time the three of us were together. And I didn't tell you at the time because Eli is entitled to his secrets. He specifically asked that I not tell you."

Leomat was wounded.

"Why?"

"He probably knew you'd act like this. You'd forbid him from going, or insist on playing chaperone. It could also be the nature of his book. He was looking for answers, and he was so desperate to surprise you..."

Demons were not xenomantic but they had an odd link to Strangers. Gods satisfied a primal need in humans. They personified the forces of creation, and humanity used them to make itself feel significant in an indifferent universe. Devils played a similar role; something to tip the scales and deal out justice... but at the same time, they were also echoes of the unexplainable. Leo long suspected that Strangers provided the original inspiration for demons. He could see how one could slide from demonology to xenomancy.

*But Eli? Eli who was noble to the point of ridicule? Whose compassion for humanity led to ostracization from his own kind? How could he be moved to consort with demons?*

"You should have talked some sense into him. Called me in. Together we could have scared him straight—"

"It wasn't my place! It's not our job to police his life. Besides, I didn't know the discipline of his grimoire. Maybe he could discover something valuable."

"Yes, well. You always were more open-minded than me, weren't you?" Leo said.

Before the war had begun in earnest, and their practice of xenomancy had come to light, Kivia had been an advocate for the Far Flight. She was even open to the idea of meddling

in human politics to turn the energies of their great war to draconic favor. In the end, she renounced her association with them and joined the ranks of the Alliance.

The fervor of her service spoke of shame and regret, and her insights of the Far Flight's members proved invaluable. Years after, when he asked her what convinced her to defect, she had given a complicated answer. *We were working with power we could not understand. We lowered ourselves by preying upon humans. I was fighting the ones I loved.* All good arguments, but none of them was presented as a turning point. He feared her allegiance was based on something more pragmatic: *she knew they were the losing side.*

*"I made a mistake. And apparently you'll never completely forgive me for it."*

Leo bowed his head in deep apology. He had crossed an unnecessary line.

*"I'm sorry. They killed my mother. Most of our brood. Drove my father to exile..."*

"I actually think the Far Flight may have saved Alderath," Kivia said. "Think about it. He was always skeptical of them politically, but he was also curious about xenomancy. I think they served as a cautionary tale. Put him off a path he might have headed down himself."

The anger came roaring back like a wave ushering in high tide.

*"You know nothing of my father."*

Kivia laughed and shook her head.

"Powers, you're fucking impossible. You completely disown him, find shame at every mention of his name, but our fathers' fathers forbid I suggest he was anything less than a misunderstood hero."

*"He was a hero. And like all heroes, he fell victim to hubris. I take shame in his fall."*

"Of course, you do! You're so desperate to torture yourself that you claim his legacy both ways. You cling to your precious pride, but go on and on about the evils of hubris—"

*"There's a difference. Pride is dignity. Hubris is thinking you can save the world."*

"You really do have a death wish," she said, shocked. "Today I figured you were being dramatic to make a point, but you're in love with the idea of extinction, just like Bahamat. You've romanticized the notion of going down with the ship."

*"I'm a realist, Kivia."*

*"Eliathan was something better."*

Leomat didn't have an answer for that, and she left him to chew on it.

*That could have gone better. But neither of us wanted something neat and clean.* Kivia wanted to shout and recriminate as much as he did. Hell, she may have planned it. Once she remarked, "A fuck and a fight. That's all I am to you. All I'm good for." His reply had been less than political back then, too: "You're half-right." He didn't even know which half he meant. Presumably whichever she found more offensive.

Nothing cleared Leo's head quite like a fight and he made incredible time back to Long Island. It was mid-day when he arrived, so he had to empower his veil before touching down, and perform his shapeshifting contract while concealed. He then slipped inside his own house, past the gardeners and maids, and dressed hastily in his quarters. They were shocked when he appeared, and apologized profusely for failing to greet him. He assured them that everything was fine and told them to take the rest of the afternoon off.

There were half a dozen condolence cards waiting for him, and a letter from Jacqueline.

*Dear Leo,*

*I hoped to say goodbye in person, but your staff said you left without a word. I can understand why. I can't stand another minute in that house, surrounded by the memory of Eli. Everything is an echo. It's merciless. I'm going away for a while and it will be some time before I return. Long enough that I am putting the staff on leave. Feel free to stop by the house to collect whatever you want. I hope your trip gives you some measure of peace.*

*Love,  
-Jacky*

He snorted, and crumpled the perfumed stationery. *You've finally reached your pay day, and now you're off to find a trophy of your own. Good riddance.* It was convenient for his purposes though. If she had lingered, hoping he would comfort and fawn over her, it would be harder for him to go about his business.

The storage facility that housed Eli's hoard was halfway between Bay Shore and Patchogue. He got into his Escalade, which reeked of the meat he used to make Leo's false body, and drove out to the containment unit. When he thought he was clear, he used his draconic strength to hoist Eli's one-ton safe into the back of his vehicle—only to see a gaping security guard. *I really should stitch him.* But Leo honestly couldn't be bothered. He did not feel the tell-tale spark of the man's magical talents awakening. Even if the guard relayed the story to everyone who would listen, no one would believe him. Instead he smiled and waved, and went back to moving a few other objects into the SUV.

After driving home, he carried the safe into his cave, as easily as if it were emptied cardboard, and placed it in the middle of his workshop. The place existed on two scales. There was a workbench, a tool wall, and an alchemy cabinet, all sized for human hands, next to a ritual circle and several cauldrons sized appropriately for his true form.

Leo started by appraising the physical lock and enchantments in his human form. Opening the lock would be child's play, but there was an outer layer of wards that would cause

the lock to break; sealing the grimoire inside. *It's an elaborate weave, too.* He picked up the crate and carried it over to his shower; a colossal waterfall, and set it under the stream. Running water over the enchantments would soften them slightly, making them weaker and duller. His shower was not as effective as a natural stream or tide, but it would have to do.

After seven minutes, he removed the safe and placed it in his ritual circle, then started to go at the weave with a wand; prodding it for weakness. To his surprise, the thing gave way fairly quickly; almost as if it had been damaged and repaired, or replaced once before.

A chill rattled Leomat's scales. *That is unsettling.*

With the weave removed, opening the safe was trivial. The magical discipline of psychometry was based on animist principles; that every object, even inanimate ones, had some form of nascent wyrd, or at the very least, objects retained the wyrds of those who touched them. And with a wyrd, a thing had a memory. Leo searched it for the combination used to open the lock. A few quick twists, and the pins and tumbler sprung free. Leaving him with the last enchantment.

It was a simple, but potent trap. Opening the door would spring a sympathetic alarm to notify Eliathan, while simultaneously binding the intruder. Now that the caster was dead, the spell was considerably weakened. Though again, Leomat had the impression that the spell had been tampered with.

When the weave gave way, Leo opened the safe. Nothing was inside.

Flames erupted in his stomach, crawled up his throat and licked the back of his teeth. He nearly burned the safe out of sheer rage, but forced himself to swallow the fire and took several heaving breaths.

He used a second psychometric contract. This one was far more focused than the first; specifically searching for the identity of the person who last opened the safe, and failing that, anyone who was last present in the room. But he came up against a black curtain. *Xenomancy.*

Leo melted the safe with a jet of black flame. *That book is Eli's legacy, and he entrusted it to me and me alone. I should have opened the safe immediately, as soon as I had the chance. The killer probably robbed me as soon as I left. But no. I flung myself into duty. Made excuses because I was afraid...of what? Meeting Eliathan one final time through his words?* He roared again, heedless of whoever heard him above.

The rest of the night was devoted to research on the bar known as Goetia. Leo called Ecumene and asked them for their inevitable dossier on the place. The concierge who took his call surprised him by transferring him directly to the Executor; the Firm's leader. He expressed condolences and pried for details in equal measure. Leo admitted that xenomancy might be involved, but told him he would be handling the investigation alone, and that any human

interference would be dealt with harshly. In exchange for the dossier, the Executor asked that Leomat simply keep him apprised of the proceedings. Unfortunately, he had little choice.

Ecumene was not willing to admit that they were just another cartel; another troop of apes using magic to manipulate human society from the shadows. They had ties to the US government, and they believed that legitimized them somehow. But they would never be able to escape their identity crisis. Their agents relied upon the very magic they tried to eliminate to enforce their laws. It was the kind of human turmoil which always resolved in corruption. That said, they also had access to drones, military squads, and an infinite arsenal of bureaucratic and economic weapons they could bring to bear against Leo. It was simpler to just play ball.

Their dossier on Goetia was remarkably patchy. A pithy local legend stated the club was owned by Lucifer himself, but everybody knew the real proprietor was an obscure egregore known as Vassago, AKA 'the Good Demon,' AKA 'Mr. Crocodile,' which amused Leo. *You would think 'Mr. Alligator' would be more appropriate given the locale.* The staff consisted of several aging-but-powerful Echoes; 'ghosts' that had been bound in servitude to the proprietor.

Despite the rundown on the staff, there was nothing on layouts, menu, decor, or criminal etiquette and customs, save for a note that these things 'changed seasonally and capriciously.' Ecumene usually documented and surveilled so-called 'neutral territories' much more carefully.

Part of the problem was that New Orleans was the most magically active city in the United States, and they could impose only the most tenuous degree of order upon it. The local Firm, Ochre Dumaine, and the notoriously corrupt Judge of the city, Collette LeClair, fought hard to keep the city supernaturally liberal—it was good business. Goetia was the premiere meeting ground for members of the supernatural community, so the staff did everything they could to guard the club's secrets, changing the password and moving its location as soon as they realized it had been infiltrated. Ecumene suspected that the club was not housed in New Orleans at all, but rather that it bounced around the world, and only the entrance inhabited the French Quarter.

Leo was in luck, however. Ecumene managed to get a man inside only two days ago. Usually it took the club a minimum of three days to shift locations. Unfortunately, that meant he had to leave immediately.

*I'm out of shape and getting old.* It was a relatively short flight from Long Island to New Orleans, but there was no denying the ache that stretched from his horns to his wingtips. His wyrd was straining too. It felt thin and tight; something between an overworked tendon and breathless lungs. He touched down on the top of a parking structure not far from Jackson Square, and cast his shapeshifting contract. It would be the end of contract magic for the night

and he would need to find another way back to Long Island in the morning. Hopefully his visit to Goetia would not entail violence, or an elaborate, magical test of etiquette.

Leo dressed himself in a suit he had carried on a light harness, which he ultimately left on the roof. What would people make of the massive band of leather, with its comparatively normal satchels and holsters? *Life needs its little mysteries.*

He descended from the parking structure and walked north until he hit Decatur Street, and kept walking until he came to a bookstore. It looked like a shop pretenders would frequent; a haven for pierced, dye-haired children covered in ridiculous tattoos, aisles lined with common herbs and self-help books masquerading as modern grimoires. The lights were on, but the sign on the door declared the place closed. As per the directions on the dossier, Leo used simple sorcery to spring the lock and let himself in.

The place held a measure of power, but it was mild. Not what he would have expected of Goetia. Following the dossier's directions, he proceeded to the store room, and then descended the steps. No noise. No sign of the raucous, dangerous crowd that supposedly frequented the place. There was a red door in the basement. He knocked three times, as instructed by the dossier.

When the door did not audibly unlock or swing open, he tried the knob.

There was an intense charge. He was the one who seemed to turn, rather than the knob. He felt his draconic body, folded inside his wyrd, twist again.

*A portal. Dangerous magic.*

The spell took only a second, and then he was standing in a lively French Colonial courtyard, filled with crowded tables and bustling staff. His simple Armani suit had been replaced with something comparable from the jazz era, and everyone else was dressed according to the norms of the same period. The air was thick with magic, the ground paved with red and brown bricks, and the building trimmed with climbing plants. But the climate had changed, from the fever-sweat heat of New Orleans into something milder. At the center of the courtyard, there was a stage occupied by a jazz band. Then Leo noticed the bouncers.

Their skin was red-bronze, their rough, braided hair a striking silver, and their features European. *Creole skinwalkers.* One would be no problem. Leo could probably take them together in a fair fight. *But on a demon's turf? Best to toe the line.* They probed Leo with both eyes and wyrd, and were taken aback by his strength, clearly unaccustomed to being outclassed. His presence cast a ripple through the entire bar, in fact.

The music didn't stop, conversations didn't grind to a halt, but there was a noticeable hiccup in the flow of energy as people turned to look. Leo smiled broadly, inspecting his new clothes and pretending to be charmed. He approached the bar, nodding at a young, emaciated vampire despite her stenchful wyrd. *One of Shreveport's coven no doubt.*

The echo of a regal woman dressed in an elaborate headscarf blinked through the air to meet him as he approached the bar. She had a near-even mix of French, African, and Native

American lineages which yielded black hair, sepia skin, a long nose, generous lips and high cheekbones with full cheeks. There was something familiar and sagacious about her profile.

*Doesn't matter a damn.* Echoes were tedious, not unlike human computer programs. They were stains of their former selves left behind to follow rote patterns endlessly. Some were more elaborate than others, but if you interacted with one long enough and you would get caught in a useless loop.

"What are you having?" she asked.

"A Sazerac, please."

She nodded, flickering from ingredient to ingredient, making each levitate in turn, before vigorously stirring them in a shaker. Leo pretended to be interested, pretended to admire her craft. She served him his drink, and he raised it to her before taking a sip. He had to admit it was excellently done.

"Why are you actually here?" the ghost asked with good natured exasperation.

That surprised him. Usually they didn't have that much autonomy, to say nothing of the powers of observation. Leo was at once charmed and annoyed.

"When was the last time one of my kind came calling?"

The woman squinted at him and laughed easily.

"I'm afraid I can't figure you out."

"My name is Leomat. And I am trying to find out what happened to my friend, Eliathan."

"Not many with names like that running around. I'm afraid, Mr. Dragon, you and yours are above my paygrade. You'll need to speak to the boss when he finishes his set."

She nodded at the handsome, young-looking man deftly jabbing away at the piano. He had nearly-white blue eyes and jet hair that spilled over his brow in wild curls.

"Vassago?" Leomat asked.

She nodded to confirm, smiling coyly.

"Have we met before?" he asked.

"Maybe in a past life." she joked. Leo laughed despite himself, sliding from intrigue to shock. Most Echoes couldn't recognize what they were. The refusal to accept death was the foundation of their being. "You must be old indeed to recognize me. I'm sorry to say I can't return the courtesy. My memory isn't what it once was."

Leomat had been to New Orleans several times in his life, but the most recent time had been at least a decade prior. The sight of the woman stirred something older, at the very far reaches of recollection. *I was a hatchling. She posed herself as a hair-dresser and Alderath went to her for information. She was a queen in her own time. Her name is a legend to this day. Perhaps that legacy helped sustain her?*

"How do you live?" Leomat asked, intrigued.

“It depends on how you define ‘living.’ By some standards, I fake it. I’m no different than my brothers,” she nodded at the other echoes tending bar. “We go through the motions and exist from moment to moment. There’s no continuity. No new record.

“I prefer to think of myself as unfettered. Purified. There’s nothing left of me except my convictions. That’s what allows me to face the truth. When memory fails, that’s all we have left to guide us.”

With that, she flickered away to greet another customer, leaving Leo to contemplation. He turned his attention back to the jazz band. The echoes accompanying Vassago were all young to middle-aged black men...human legends from a later era. Famous jazz musicians. *Are these genuine echoes or constructs based on the crafter’s memories?* Leo waited for them to finish their set, and applauded when they finished.

Vassago took a bow and looked around the room as he stood up. His icy eyes lingered on Leo, almost lasciviously. The band started up again as he left the stage, and the clientele seemed somewhat reassured now that the owner had taken notice of his powerful guest. As he approached, Leo probed his wyrd. His power was respectable, but without the sort of predatory aura Leo had come to associate with demons. Instead he was cheeky. Mischievous. *An egregore shaped by thoughts of “nice” demons. How quaint.*

“Mr. Black,” Vassago said, voice tinged with a faint creole accent. “I long awaited the night you would grace us with your presence. A pity it couldn’t be under more pleasant circumstances.” All the goodwill the bartender kindled in Leo’s heart evaporated. Vassago withdrew, both hands held in surrender, and he seemed genuinely afraid. “Please. I just learned two days ago. I had nothing to do with his demise.”

“Tell me everything you know.”

“In my office, in my office,” The demon urged and tentatively guided him by the shoulder towards a staircase leading to the second floor of the courtyard.

They arrived at a highly eccentric, yet richly appointed office. The walls were lined with grimoires and macabre curios—bottled sharks, genuine shrunken heads—save for one cabinet which held a voodoo altar. Power throbbed from it; Leo suspected it governed the echoes. Vassago poured himself a glass of brandy and offered Leo the same. When he declined, they both took seats at a massive wooden desk in the center of the room.

“I didn’t know Eliathan terribly well. A couple years back, he came to me and offered me a rare book in exchange for some writing help.”

“What kind of help exactly?”

Vassago pursed his lips and then smiled.

“You’re in luck. Most of my clients demand confidentiality in our arrangements, but Eli made no such demand. He said he’d finished the core lesson of his book, but he wanted to make it more accessible to human readers. He knows that demons are universal reflections of what the human heart holds, and hoped my universality might lead him to an insight.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“I told him temptation was the key. Lectures make skeptics of the strong and slaves of the weak. To impart truth, you must appeal to desire. I told him to look at the stories modeled after your legends of the Anagnostes. Eve, Prometheus, and Pandora. They all have a special talent for acquiring knowledge, but temptation is what draws it out of them. Seduction inspires them to steal what you would gladly give.”

Leomat narrowed his eyes.

“That sounds like the kind of advice a ‘patron’ would give a prospective xenomancer.”

“That’s because it works. Only difference is that Strangers feed their acolytes lies. Eli did not ever reveal the strict discipline of his grimoire to me, but our conversations made it plain that it was a story of this world, written in the raw text of our reality. Most people think that xenomancy represents the margins and kerning in a story, when really, it is the caustic weather outside the book. The oils and moisture that eat away at the pages, the harsh light that erases the ink.”

Again, Leo detected no falsehood, though if anything could successfully lie to a dragon, it was a demon.

“How did you find out about his death?”

“Are you familiar with the stories that shape me?”

“You aren’t terribly well-known. Listed in the Lesser Key of Solomon as a ‘friendly demon or spirit’ who will foresee events, find hidden things, and tell people secrets.”

“Just so. Secrets are drawn to me. I can feel them. Invisible things displacing wyrds like bodies moving through water. I prefer to be surprised, so most of the time, I choose not to look at them, unless somebody pays me to do otherwise.”

“Who paid you to learn about his death?”

Vassago shook his head.

“My gift is not the only way I learn secrets. I must barter for the truly rare ones. I can appraise them when they are close. And I knew that Eliathan’s death was something special, though I am only beginning to understand why.”

“Somebody told you about Eli’s death as payment? Who was it? What did he buy?”

“I’m afraid that’s another secret, and one I cannot sell. Part of the bargain we made bound me not to disclose their identity. You can torture me if you like, lay waste to my establishment, but I can’t help what I am. My kind live and die by our deals.”

Leo knew it was true. Demons played by a very old set of rules that could not be easily re-written with magic. Vassago was incapable of speaking the truth.

“That said, I have information that I know is worth your time. Eli came here recently. He met with someone... But nothing in this world is free, friend.”

“What do you want?” Leo demanded.

Vassago drummed his fingers on the desk.

"It's your first time and a small ask, so I'll give you a discount. One vial of your blood."  
Leo scoffed.

"So you can enthrall me with sympathetic magic?"

"Come now. You do yourself a disservice. I am an obscure demon, and a dragon of your caliber cannot be bound by such a thing. This is a courtesy, Leomat. Blood replenishes itself. It's a transient payment. I know you must have remarkable artifacts in your hoard, but you have brought nothing and you are in a hurry, yes?"

*How could I be so stupid!* Every second in an investigation counted. The culprit had more time to obscure his path, lay traps, destroy evidence... *He has me.*

"Half a vial."

"Hardly enough to mix in a Manhattan," Vassago mumbled. "But good enough."

The demon walked over to a cabinet and extracted a wrapped syringe. Leo rolled up his sleeve and Vassago dabbed his arm with cloth and slid the needle in with the precision of a practiced addict. Before Leo could regret his decision, it was done.

"Eli met with a younger dragon. A red, I believe. I think Venitheer was his name."

Leo's eyes flashed with excitement and anger. Venitheer fit the profile Alderath proposed. A member of the Last Generation. Haughty. When last they spoke, years ago, he had been curious about the war. He was skeptical of Leo's innocence at the wake, but otherwise conspicuously circumspect.

"Is he a regular?"

"As your kind goes. He's another one hunting for Eden. He speaks to magi from Ochre Dumaine, and the older hedges. He's asked me questions from time to time. Never openly courting xenomancy, of course, but he has a distinct interest in undetectable magic."

Leo's heart thudded. He felt phantom pain where his other two should have been beating in tandem.

"The humans he meets with. Do they know what he is?"

"At least one of them must have figured it out by now."

"Were any of these human contacts present when he met with Eli?"

"No. It was a quiet night. We had just moved."

Leo stood to leave. "I may return. How can I find this place again?"

"Can you keep a secret? It's on the house if you can." Leomat nodded. "On your way out, take a matchbook. Burn all but one and lay it in your palm. The head will point the way whenever you are in the French Quarter. I started that trick when I became the manager, nearly one hundred years ago, and Ecumene has yet to figure it out. No imagination there."

"You aren't the proprietor?" Leo asked.

Vassago smiled.

"That's another secret, Mr. Black."

Leo spent the night in Le Pavillon and booked a flight to Wales the following morning. Hopefully the day in transit would give him enough time to recharge his energy. He had to charm airport security with minor glammers so he could board without a passport, and avoid suspicion for traveling without luggage, but those were mere trifles.

The plane ride was purgatorial. *I can't be hasty.* It had become a chorus in his mind, interrupted by verses of rage. Venitheer knew something, yet said nothing, which was cause for suspicion by itself—following the dubious assumption that the demon could be trusted. Still, launching into an interrogation could destabilize the Flight. It would test Bahamat's wrath past reasoning. But there was no way to verify the tip. Anything he tried, from backchanneling to scrying or divination, could get back to Venitheer and make him go to ground.

Which left only the most direct approach.

He prayed that the hatchling was present at his estate—a humble manor on the Irish side of the Llŷn Peninsula, near Nfyn. It was rude to arrive unannounced; a transgression as grave as trespassing in the era before the war. If Venitheer refused to meet him, Leo would set up camp and inform Bahamat. If he attempted to flee, Leo would catch him. *And if he attacks me, that's all the answer I need. The Flight can do whatever they see fit after.*

Leo rented a car to conserve his wyrd and at arrived Venitheer's estate near nightfall. The young red answered him at the door in human form, clothed in a robe.

"Tidings, Leomat Please, come in."

His human expression was pleasant if strained.

"Tidings, Venitheer. I apologize for arriving unannounced."

"No need to apologize. May I offer you some refreshment? And would you prefer to speak as we are, or change first?"

*Do we speak as we are, or as dragons?*

"As we are. And thank you, but my appetite is not what it once was."

Venitheer nodded and led him through the foyer to a massive two-story library, overlooking the coast. "I can imagine. Compared to how close you were to Eli, I was practically a stranger. But I've still been bedridden since the wake." He lit the fire place with a quick bit of gestural sorcery, and bid Leo to sit. "We grew rather close in the days before his death. Which is what I imagine brings you here at this late hour."

Leo nodded feeling slightly surprised. He hoped that Ven would be foolish enough to play dumb or deny their conversations. But dragons were known for their elaborate dances, and this would be no different. Best to be polite for the time being.

"Indeed. My investigation's hit a snag, and I was hoping you might be able to help."

"Leo, it's been two days. Give yourself some time to mourn."

“If I let myself grieve, I won’t be able to do anything else.”

Venitheer smiled thinly.

“How can I help?”

“I was hoping you might tell me about your conversations.”

“I assumed Eli already told you. Mentioned my questions about the Far Flight. I figured you either knew, and thought them irrelevant, or you were doing me a courtesy by refraining from interrogating me at the funeral. Apparently, I was wrong. I can only conclude I’m your prime suspect now.”

Leomat blinked slowly to confirm. Venitheer sighed heavily.

“I have never dabbled in xenomancy and Eli was a treasure to me. I had hoped...I had hoped that Eli would help me with a project. Investigating the ancient magi who supposedly sealed our world away. I don’t want to die before my time, Leomat. I want to sire children. I want a world where we don’t have to hide in caves. I don’t intend on consorting with Strangers to achieve those goals. And there was a time where the Far Flight was the same.”

“Did Eliathan agree to help?”

Venitheer shifted uncomfortably, tried to crane his neck more than his human form would allow, straining to preen wings that weren’t there.

“He was noncommittal. He agreed that he wanted those things as well, and said he would be willing to help once we found a lead. But he also cautioned me that the pursuit of such things tended to...twist dragons. Desire consumes them.”

“You should heed his advice. What do you want to know about the Far Flight?”

“When did they turn. To xenomancy, I mean. Why?”

“They turned when they got answers they didn’t like. The Watchers are a myth. There is no world beyond this one; only darkness. But the things that live in the dark will tell you otherwise. They will tell you anything you want to hear if you let them in.”

Venitheer smiled, setting down his saucer and walking to a bookshelf.

“With respect, elder, you are wrong. There are artifacts. Eden, the age of magic—there are stories all over the world, even draconic records that—”

“Who else is involved in your enterprise?” Leo demanded.

“Why, so you can lead a witch hunt?”

“I know you didn’t kill Eli, Venitheer. You don’t have the fight in you. But whoever recruited you may have felt differently. They might have found it necessary to keep him quiet, before he told a person like me, or Bahamut about your little club. Tell me where to keep looking and we will part in peace.”

“I am young, but I will not cast aside my honor for your baseless suspicions.”

There was a moment’s hesitation and then the world exploded. Venitheer cancelled his shapeshifting contract, and his immense, red body exploded outward from his human form,

bursting through the walls of his own library. Leomat was a tenth of a second behind him, taking a step forward mid-transformation.

Venitheer cancelled his contract in such a way that his right arm transformed first, creating a giant's limb that managed to surprise Leomat with a vicious haymaker. Leo was thrown to the far wall mid-transformation, ego hurt worse than health. *Focus, Leomat. You need to be in control of this fight. You need him alive, but he will fight to kill you.* Leo beat his powerful wings to disengage himself as he completed his transformation, demolishing the outer wall of the salon.

Before he could launch a counter attack, a gout of red flame consumed him. Legend had it that reds breathed hotter than any other breed. While their breath was several times as hot as any blast furnace, their prowess was exaggerated. Rather, red fire excelled at consuming oxygen, and producing thicker smoke faster than non-magical flames. They were suffocators.

Leo beat his wings powerfully, and dove straight for the soft earth. He smothered the fire before it could do the same to him, and then quickly turned back with a contract; a gout of compressed air. He hesitated before firing, waiting for the younger, inexperienced wurm to make his mistake.

*And there it is.*

Venitheer fired off another gout of flame, but before it could leave his throat, Leomat fired the pulse of air, making the gout explode in the back of his throat. A dragon was immune to the heat and consumptive effects of his own breath; but the kinetic shock of the detonation nearly took his jaw off.

Leo was on him in a flash. He seized both the younger dragon's forewings with his hands and snapped them back against their joints. Then he battered his crown against the younger dragon's already aching jaw.

"Yield, whelp!" He bellowed.

Then a burst of wyrd, light, and sharpness followed immediately by cold. Something had impaled Leo from behind and above. A shaft of light. His head swam and he swooned to one side. As he fell, he saw another dragon descending from above. *Four wings. Familiar.*

*Kivia.*

Venitheer scrambled out from underneath Leomat, moaning. The shaft of energy had stabbed him as well, through the right haunch. Prismatic dragon breath was referred to as "the spear." Its fire did not catch or spread, but pierced whatever it was directed at. The beam had pierced them both like nothing.

"I knew you'd save me," Venitheer said shakily, and went to embrace her. "I knew—"

Kivia received him, looking at Leomat who still lay in shock. She opened her mouth and drew in a sharp breath, sucking all the color out of the world around her. *This is it. My wyrd is too weak to defend myself. Slain by a lover while avenging a friend. How very poetic.* Leo braced

himself for oblivion. Instead, Kivia shoved Venitheer back and blasted him through the stomach. He staggered back, staring at the new hole, neck craned so he could see through himself.

“K-Kivia? W-wh—”

She grabbed him around the neck and began to choke the life out of him.

“I’m sorry, Ven. If he dies alone, the investigation will intensify and everything will be in jeopardy. If you kill each other, the matter comes to a close.”

*You orchestrated everything. You are part of this new, incipient Far Flight. You knew our meeting would come to blows, and the fight allowed you to approach unnoticed. You stab me in the back, and allow me to bleed out without so much as a goodbye.*

*But you missed my spine, my dear. And my core heart.*

Despite the gaping hole in his back, Leo flung himself off the ground and onto Kivia’s back. He bit her in the neck, tearing at her like a mad dog. Scales and blood showered the ground. They began to wrestle. *No good. She’ll overpower me. Unless...* Desperate, he used the last of his might to bite down on her flesh. A chunk of her came free in his fangs.

He gulped it down.

For a second, he felt like a toddler who mistakenly drank a full snifter of whiskey. Heat blossomed in his chest, as if he were being consumed by his own flames from the inside. He thought he would explode. Then his stamina came flaring back, and the hole in his back stopped bleeding instantly.

Kivia clutched at her throat with one claw, and tried to cast a contract with the other. Leomat slapped her in the side of the head with his forewing, and pinned her to the ground with his claws. Then he inhaled deeply, and blasted her with black flames. A black dragon’s breath did not burn much hotter than normal fire, but it ate away at the wyrd of whatever it touched. Supposedly, it was immensely painful. She screeched, gasped, and hacked. Leo struck her again as she writhed. And again. He continued striking her with wing, claw, and tail until her body was a mangled, melted paste.

Venitheer croaked from behind. Leo drew in breath, wheeling on the hatchling who cowered, attempting to cover himself with his broken wings.

“Please Leo... Spare me... Heal me. I’ll testify...”

“Yes. After you give me the names of the others involved.”

“I don’t... I know very few... Kivia.... she recruited me...”

“Tell me all you know. Swear it upon your wyrd, or I will watch you bleed out.”

He nodded, but the effort of it made his eyes roll back into his skull. Leomat sighed. Kivia’s flesh, imparted just enough energy to mend Venitheer’s body. Healing magic was an art that humans had lost or never attained, but the tight bond between dragon flesh and wyrd leant the former to rapid recovery.

When Venitheer was stabilized, Leomat cast a simple spell to veil the three of their bodies from any potential prying eyes, but near as he could sense they were alone. He waited

and weighed his options, refusing to look at Kivia's corpse. Refusing to allow anything resembling remorse to creep into his veins. *I will be exiled. Temporarily if not permanently. Like father. Like son.*

The Flight had not held two trials in a single month since the war. Even then, they did not concern the same dragon. But Leo found himself back in the stony chamber, standing before his peers as they debated his fate.

"Self-defense or no, kin-eating is still kin-eating," Belsigore said.

"He did not devour her corpse. What difference does a bite make in terms of power?" Seyvardin, a young green asked.

"Life and death, apparently," Belsigore grumbled.

Bahamat raised a hand and waited for the room to cool.

"There is a difference between biting somebody in desperation and cannibalism. Being put into a such a position betrays a lack of sound judgment, and it is far beneath our kind. But in sentencing, we must factor in the extenuating circumstances. The discovery of a conspiracy. The apprehension of one of its members, and the death of a traitor. To my eye, this is sufficient cause to remove Leomat as a suspect of Eliathan's murder."

Leo said nothing. He did his best not to look bored, but it was a struggle. He would not be put to death, and he did not care about exile, seeing how the only people precious to him were dead, or themselves exiled. If he were younger, or if different dragons had died, he would be eager to investigate this new conspiracy. To prove it had already succumbed to xenomancy, and kill every worm of them. *Get on with it.* Bahamat looked him in the eye gravely, as if guessing his thoughts and sighed heavily.

"Regrettably, trouble follows you wherever you go. For that reason, I sentence you to a year of exile from the Occidental Flight. You are still beholden to our laws, but you are not to meet with another dragon of your own volition."

Leomat bowed his head deeply and did his best to look chastened.

"Do you have anything to say in farewell?" Bahamat asked.

"There was a book. A grimoire. Eli promised it to me, but it was gone from his hoard. I don't know what it contains, but it seems possible that Kivia stole it. Out of respect for the dead, and by my right as its keeper, I ask that it is returned to me, should it be discovered during the investigation."

"If we find the book, we'll return it to you after your exile," Bahamat said gravely. Leomat felt a flash of anger, and barely suppressed it. *He wanted me to apologize for bringing disgrace to his line, and to thank him for his leniency. Now he's punishing me.* Bahamat saw that this last detail struck home, and smiled slightly.

"If you've said your piece, begone, son of Mat."

Leo bowed low, and walked out of the sanctum without another word.

The next two days were spent in languid stupor back at the manor. Lots of sleep, strong drinks and rich food. Leomat scarcely allowed himself to think, but an itch grew in the back of his mind; poison oak that climbed as Ivy. *What if Kivia was not responsible? She didn't use xenomancy in our fight. But would she really turn on me—no, entrap me and attempt my murder if she had nothing to hide?* It was ludicrous. Yet something tugged at him, hitched his core heart like it was a sweater dragged along barbed wire.

Eli's grimoire. That was the key. It would explain what Kivia was planning, why she was willing to kill her own and betray a lover. Unfortunately, it was probably hidden in one of her hoards. *But there has to be some evidence of what he was working on. I know he had a workshop full of notes in the cavern beneath his house. He refused to let me go near it.* Kivia probably cleaned it out while he was investigating Goetia. But it wouldn't hurt to look.

Leo drove over to Acton estate, found the gate barred. He unlocked it with ease, and did the same to the front door. The house was a fresh tomb. Cleaned, sterile, and still clear of dust. Room by room, he swept through the house, reading every piece of paper he could find. The closest thing to a find was the false journal Eli kept, along with notes on the false memoir he claimed to be writing. There was a very normal calendar on the home computer. Tedious email correspondence between Jacqueline and her fellow socialites. Nothing salacious, or even interesting, on the hard drive, though computers weren't really Leo's forte.

*Alright. Enough procrastinating.*

He stepped into the August afternoon heat, and returned to the pool house that held the entrance to Eli's lair. On the upper floor of the house there was a guest bedroom and an office overlooking the sea, where Eli claimed to do most of his writing. When Leo last looked in, it had been a tempest of papers, which seemed like a promising habitat for stray notes. Unfortunately, somebody had tidied it. Searching the drawers revealed a jig-sawed manuscript of the false memoir, but nothing magical.

*You didn't expect to find anything above ground anyway. He would never be so careless.*

Once again, Leo slipped behind the sauna's boiler, and through the illusory wall behind it. He savored the touch of the enchantment against his wyrd. It was like reading a letter from an old friend. Eli was not terribly powerful by draconic standards, but his spellwork was elegant. His contracts had a remarkable, poetic symmetry to them, and the weaves were intricate and efficient. They would last for decades to come.

Inside the cavern it was cool and mildly humid, but the usual briny scent of sea water was cut with something sharp, and sterile. *Bleach?* Leo used sorcery to enhance his senses. The

floor had been cleaned. There were no scuffs, no shoe or footprints of any kind. Leo's heart sank. He sprinted down the winding passage that led to Eli's office.

The books had been burnt, and then doused in water, wiping away their magic. The glass marker board was shattered. The reference photos and equations had been ripped off of the corkboard. *Kivia cleaned it out while she had me investigating Goetia.* He probed the ruins for some memory of a magical touch, only to run headlong into a curtain of blankness. Like the floor, the place had been purged. She had erased all the energy that had percolated there.

*Xenomancy again.*

Tired and defeated, he returned to the house and went to the bar to help himself to a drink—as per the will, all the alcohol belonged to him now anyway. But he froze with the wine glass against his lips.

*The will. The hoard. How did Kivia know where Eli's hoard was?*

Eli had taken Leo years ago, and told him he was the only one entrusted with the location. Eli could have lied, but he wouldn't have told Kivia. Somebody else could discover it through careful research—there was no way apart from xenomancy to completely mask the power of the artifacts—but such a search would have taken time. So would cracking the safe. And if Kivia came around before the funeral, Leo would have sensed her presence.

*Whoever cleaned the safe struck during the wake. Same with the office. When did Jacqueline leave? She may have seen something.* He dialed her cell and was unsurprised when she didn't answer. *Busy celebrating her payday no doubt, making eyes at some damn cabana boy. I should hunt her down on general principle.* But thinking back to her note, she had not left an itinerary. Or even a destination.

A chill rattled Leo's scales, despite his shapeshifted form. *No. I questioned her under compulsion. There is no way an unawakened woman can resist a dragon.*

*Unless she was awakened.*

*If she was a xenomancer, her power did not come from a wyrd.*

Leo drank back the wine, dropped the glass, and started searching for hair. A few strands would do. A piece of the whole was enough for a simple sympathetic tracking spell.

The house had been cleaned immaculately. There was nothing in the master bedroom. Nothing in the couch cushions of the salon where Jacqueline liked to lounge and read. Even the drains had been cleaned—bleached in fact. The house had been stripped of anything that could be used for sympathetic magic. *No matter how well you pay a human staff, they are fallible.* People left pieces of themselves behind unless they were trained, conditioned to do otherwise.

Finally he appealed to the foundation of the house itself. Jacqueline had lived there for five years. Her wyrd, however faint, however calcified and impotent, would have left some kind

of imprint on the place she called home. He could use that link to track her. But there was nothing. Her magical presence had been stricken from the Earth.

Within an hour, Leo had taken wing to New Orleans. Desperation and fury conquered age, vanquished his fatigue. He landed at the same location as before, shifted to human form, dressed, and lit all but one of the matches from Goetia. The surviving match began to quiver in his palm as he walked the streets of the French Quarter while the sun set and the bars began to stir. In one hand he held the match, and in the other, a bag of rare grimoires. This time, he was prepared to bargain.

The match guided him to a bar called Devil's Due that had either fallen on the hardest times or recently closed. The window on the front door was boarded, and those on the facade hadn't been cleaned in a fortnight. The interior was dusty, though it hung in the air with the stench of spilled spirits rather than coating the table and floors. The match pointed to a storage closet in the back hall. Leo knocked three times, then turned the knob.

Again, he felt the awful twisting sensation of teleportation, and found himself somewhere new. The bar had been rebuilt on some sort of cliffside ruin—Greek at a glance—overlooking a black sea. Lights were strung up across the tables, nestled in a shallow maze of broken stone walls. The atmosphere was more sedate than the first night Leo had entered. There were hardly any patrons and only one of the skinwalker thugs was on duty at the entrance. The jazz band chuckled and chatted idly amongst themselves as they slowly set up. Vassago was nowhere to be seen.

Leo approached the bar, looking for the echo who served him last time. She appeared with a wry smile on her lips.

"Hello again, Mr. Dragon. Another Sazerac?"

"I'd like to skip straight to speaking with Vassago."

"I'm afraid the boss is currently waiting on another meeting—"

"It's alright, Marie." Vassago called, emerging from behind a wall. "I suspect Leomat is the one I was meant to meet."

The demon gestured for Leo to follow him to a narrow path that ran down the cliff face, ending at the entrance to a catacomb. All the trappings of Vassago's office had been comfortably transplanted within, virtually unchanged, save that the walls were lined with skulls.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Vassago asked.

"You know I didn't."

"I must be wiser than I thought. And you must be wiser still to know—"

Leo interrupted him, in no mood for word play. "Kivia was the one who sold you news of Eli's death. In exchange, she asked you to direct me to Venitheer. She told you to sell me news

of their meeting cheaply, because freely given information would be suspect. I wondered why you didn't try to counter-bargain. You were worried I would balk."

Vassago held his hands to the side, smiling pleasantly.

"A delightful hypothetical. Of course, I cannot comment on whether it is true."

"I don't know if Kivia killed him herself. If she did, she didn't act alone. Either way, she knew I would discover her little conspiracy, and decided to lead me into a trap. I think you knew all that too. But I was foolish. I implied my intentions and assumed you'd give me relevant information. You played me like a lute."

"We demons generally favor fiddles," Vassago said mildly.

Leo allowed his true voice to roar through his human form.

"I came to bargain in good faith, imp, but you may yet persuade me to burn you from this Earth!"

Vassago smiled and fished a gleaming red pendant out of his shirt.

"Half a vial of your blood may not be enough to enthrall you, honored Son of Mat, but it makes for a potent protective charm. At the very least, it will buy me enough time for my staff to intervene."

In his hundred eighty years of life, Leomat never felt more foolish. Played from start to finish. Vassago was courteous enough to let him seethe for a minute, and casually dismissed the skinwalkers when they came to check in on him. He stood up, poured two glasses of brandy and handed one to Leo before returning to his seat.

"If I could simply sell you the name of Eliathan's killer, I would gladly do it. I am not beholden to any more bargains, contracts, or compulsions relating to you. But I tell you truthfully, I do not know who killed your friend. I may yet be able to help. But you will have to ask the right question, or make the right request."

"A xenomancer is involved. Somebody other than Kivia. I suspect it may be Jacqueline Harris-Acton. Eli's human widow. Can you track her?"

Vassago shook his head.

"I cannot do anything you could not do yourself. Xenomancy is hidden to all save those who use it. If you don't have a sympathetic focus, a place to start looking...she can easily mask herself from my gift with the void arts."

Leo sank into the chair across the demon's desk. *There had to be another way to find her. Or whoever was responsible.* Then the thought sprang into his head.

"The killer, or Kivia's accomplice, almost certainly has Eliathan's grimoire. Or, the person who possesses it will be a trailhead to the culprit."

Vassago nodded eagerly.

"Do you have an early draft? An excerpt?"

"No. His workshop was burned, soaked, and bleached... But there must be a way."

The demon pursed his lips, furrowed his brow, and then closed his eyes slowly, clenching them like fists. Leo looked up eagerly.

“God is cruel,” Vassago murmured.

“Then let’s not waste our time asking him for help.”

The demon spared him a wan smile. “There is a way to find it. But you won’t like the price to be paid.”

Leomat picked up the bulging satchel of books he had dropped on the floor, and started to lay them out on Vassago’s desk, citing their rarity, subject matter, and authors. Vassago protested, and took Leo by the shoulders when he didn’t listen.

“It is not a matter of value. It’s a matter of relevance.”

“What do you mean?”

“I need you to provide me with something that I can use to establish a link to the book. The basic principles of sympathetic magic still apply. Yes, these are grimoires, and we are looking for a grimoire, but as you know that is a weak link. It would yield some kind of hint, but it’s likely to lead you astray again. We need a personal connection.”

Leo’s head began to understand, but his hearts refused to listen. Vassago continued.

“A part of Eli’s wyrd is in that book. I know dragons are not fond of the word ‘soul,’ but... his core being exists in his writing. You shared the same connection. Beings that love each other leave impressions on each other, through memories, shared experiences...”

“What’s the price?” Leo demanded.

“You must sacrifice part of the impression he left on you. A portion of your memories of him. A portion of your understanding of him. I don’t even know which part will be taken. It could be a specific span of time. It could be a specific aspect of his personality, your most intimate moments—”

“How much of the impression?”

“To be sure your sacrifice is not in vain, I would say half.”

“No. There must be another way. I can make a smaller sacrifice, and we can augment the spell with other offerings. Take a tenth of my impression and funnel it—”

Vassago shook his head sadly.

“You know how demonic magic works. You know the cruel ironies that shape us. This can’t be overcome with cleverness or artifice. Some things are only possible through sacrifice.”

He did know. It was true. There was no other way to find the book. No other way to catch the culprit and bring Eli justice. He also knew it would not be worth it. There was no life beyond this one. Not for dragons. There would be no sweet reunion in the ever after. Once the memories were gone, they would be gone for good.

But could only live with himself so long before caving in. How long could he live, haunted by the truth that he could have done more? Could he look into a mirror ever again,

knowing Eli's killer had stolen his life's work? *Maybe I could bear it if I were smarter, or stronger. I know it is not worth it. It will not be worth it. But...*

"I will do it," Leo said.

"Please. Think about this," the demon begged. "The culprit has already had ample time to prepare. They may have destroyed the book! Take some time to think on this. Seek the counsel of your kin."

"I have been exiled from my kin. And if the book is already gone, it is already gone. If it can yet be saved, then I cannot afford to delay an inevitable decision."

Vassago opened his lips to object; for the first time since Leo met him, he seemed afraid. Then he shook his head sadly.

"The price we've discussed is not mine to keep, Leomat."

"Name your fee."

"Swear upon your life that you will never return to Goetia."

Leomat scoffed.

"I own some of the world's greatest treasures. Any one of these books are—"

Vassago held up a hand.

"I accepted a bargain at your expense. And the cost of you returning here years later, sick with regret, would be incalculable. If this episode proves nothing else, it is that you are a creature of extreme vengeance. After this wretched business, the greatest profit I can make is freedom from your retribution."

Leomat held out his hand.

"I accept."

Leomat woke in a cheap hotel bedroom in the French Quarter and nothing felt different. Nearly a full day had passed, but he could remember every detail of Eliathan's face and personality. There were no obvious gaps in his memories. Then he realized that he would not necessarily be able to determine what was forgotten. He began to laugh. *It's a strange kind of mercy, but still a mercy.* He supposed the wondering might drive a lesser mind to madness. Admittedly, in time, the potential loss could take a toll on him. *But I love him no less and there is no wound in our time together.*

The books he brought to barter were back in their satchel, sitting on the desk along with a handwritten note on stationery bearing Vassago's sigil:

*Dear Leomat,*

*The book is here. I hope it brings you a measure of peace.*

*May we never meet again,*

*-V*

On the back of the note was an address in San Francisco. The supernatural community sometimes referred to the west coast of the US as The Land Where Dragons Fear to Tread, though few knew where the expression came from or what it meant. The truth was, indigenous beliefs had been thoroughly quashed, and new legends had yet to settle in. Belief was thin, and magic was scant. It was quite literally a place where relicts went to die.

*I don't give a damn. I'm going to get my book back, and powers help anything that dare stand in my way.*

Midway through his flight, Leo got lost. He had been thinking about the book, anticipating and speculating. *What did he write? What is the discipline? After all these years, I will finally find out. I will finally have it...*and then his mind seemed to fade into the mists. What was the book? It was important. It was vital to everything, and someone had taken it, but...who wrote it? It was like he slipped into a dream. The logic in his head was alive and well, but the context, the reason behind it had evaporated.

He touched down in the Arizona desert, frightened. Drawing upon the rich ambient energies of the area, he attempted to cast contracts to assist with his memory, but found himself giving circular criteria; remind me, so I can remember. Tell me why I am going where I am going. Eli was integral to Leo's identity. Losing those memories unmoored him, left him adrift in a world that no longer made sense. The red horizon looked the same in every direction, turning each minute into an echo chamber of endless wandering. After an hour of mounting despair, whatever had been derailed abruptly clicked back into place.

*Eliathan. Your best friend. His grimoire.*

The memories came crashing back in a wave. Their volume confused him and crushed him with the shame. *How could I have forgotten?* And then Leo understood the price. It wasn't a neat, devastating cut, or even a messy onetime fee. Everything he had would come and go, like the symptom of a chronic disease.

He forced himself to be calm. *There are workarounds. I can write myself notes. Make recordings...* But those were half measures. Things that could confuse and distress as much as they might help. *Vassago was right to banish me from his bar. He deserves to die for this. A lie would have been kinder. I've died in this desert. And it was no warrior's death.*

"What would he have wanted?" Leo asked the sand.

*Not this. Never this. He'd kill himself to spare me this pain.* Leo laughed despite himself. *What a circular little world I've created. But now that it's done, what would his solution be?* Hope. It was always cloying hope and optimism in the face of despondence. *He'd search for a way to win back what was lost, or, failing that, he would invent a purpose for my broken life.*

Marie's words haunted him. *"There's nothing left of me except my convictions. That's what allows me to face the truth. When memory fails, that's all we have left to guide us."*

Leo read the patterns in the clouds to reorient himself, and took wing once more.

The spires of San Francisco's skyline poked through the nightly fog. Leo landed on the helipad of a luxury hotel, and shapeshifted to human form. He strode into the business center and used a computer to search for the address he'd been given. The browser returned a new luxury condominium complex called Avalon; a collection of squarish white buildings trimmed with glass and metal. It was designed by an architect who had no last name and was given no introduction. The units were built on top of shops, restaurants, a theater, and an art museum boasting "modern, mixed use living."

He descended to the lobby, reserved a suite, and asked a bellman to take his satchel full of books to the room. Then he called a cab to his destination.

The city flashed by, vibrant and lively. *I can see why Eli loved them.* Leo respected their artifice and innovations, shaped by brief lives, and accomplished in the absence of magic. He hoped, desperately, that the xenomancer was not Jacqueline. He wanted to believe that his friend's mercy was not his downfall. *Our universe should be kinder than that.*

The complex was excessively lit and surprisingly crowded despite the hour. Collateral damage might be unavoidable. Leo found the lobby locked by a security door. A security guard came to meet him at the door, all smiles, and asked if he was meeting a resident. Leo cast a compulsion contract with a string of gestures. The man fell into a daze.

"Who lives in suite seven?" Leo demanded

"I can't remember her name. New. Less than a week ago."

"Is she tall, blonde, and pretty?"

The guard nodded. *Of course, it's her.*

"There is a gas leak in suite seven. I am going to get the woman who lives there. You need to call the residents in the adjacent suites and tell them to evacuate, *immediately*. This is all you will remember of our conversation."

Again, the man nodded, and Leo brushed past him, sprinting to the directory. Thankfully, Jacqueline had one of the largest suites off in a corner by itself. He pounded through the hallways, movement enhanced by sorcery, and reached her front door in seconds.

He couldn't sense any magic on it, though it was probably warded with some invisible alarm. *No time for doubt or hesitation now.* He picked the physical lock with sorcery and swept through the doorway. The apartment was luxurious but sparsely furnished. He crept from room to room, and found the bitch sitting up in bed, dressed in a gossamer robe...

*But who was she?* The answer was just out of reach. Something clouded the horizon of his mind. He knew she was cherished by a friend, and that familiarity stayed his hand. *I came here to kill, but did I come to kill her? Is she a victim?*

Jacqueline's eyes flashed in the darkness, sclera and pupils inverting colors, glowing with unnatural light. And he couldn't move. There was no other warning. No intake of ambient energies, or swell of wyrd. The magic was perfectly silent. He tried to resume his true form, but she had trapped him somehow; co-opted his shapeshifting contract and turned it into a prison. His nerves burned like they had been threaded with ice.

"So close, Leo," she said, in dragon's tongue. "We were both so close to escaping this."

He stared, uncomprehending. *A dragon? Impossible.* She relaxed the spell around his mouth, allowing him to speak.

"What...are...you?"

She considered the question for a second, stretching, and stepping out of bed languidly.

"You still can't fathom it, can you? That you could be fooled by a human. Admittedly, I have certain gifts beyond cunning. A silent wyrd, bestowed upon me by my patron, Aivass. Eli never suspected either."

*Eli? Who is Eli? How could I forget him?* Leo struggled against the spell as she slowly paced around him. From behind, he heard the hinge of a chest creak, and a short blade sing free from a scabbard. She continued speaking in a purr.

"I recognized you two from the start. You hide your forms, but you rarely make any effort to glamour your wyrds. Admittedly, it would be difficult for you to mask your power without the forbidden arts. The night Eli proposed, he confessed his true nature. You should have known. I suspect he chose to marry me specifically so he could tell somebody the truth. Because secrecy was never a burden to you, was it? It came naturally and you belittled him every time he questioned it. How could he take comfort from that?"

Her words wounded him, even as he struggled to recall Eli.

"Yet he still loved you better. You and his book. I was never a wife to him, only a mistress. He was always dismissive of me, and it was always worse after he spent time with you. If it weren't for the irony, my feelings might be hurt."

She appeared in front of him, holding a dagger with a wooden core. Peridexion wood. The tree was long extinct, but according to legend, it's wyrd was so toxic to dragons that even its shadow could burn them. The wood itself worked like a virus in their bloodstream. She traced the dagger's steel tip across his Adam's apple.

"Dear, sweet, Eli dreamt of a world where humans and dragons could live in harmony. He thought we could jointly find some way to solve magic's evaporation. Which is why he wrote the book. It teaches the reader your dragon tongue. I read it the night I killed him. It taught me to lie to you. Allowed me to resist your stitches and compulsion. And it has opened many doors since."

She slinked behind him, took him by the shoulder and prepared to slash his neck.

“I’m impressed you found me. I confess I have no idea how you managed it. Care to share?” Again, she relaxed the enthrallment enough for him to speak, but he said nothing. She shrugged. “It’s an answer I can live without.”

Her words parted the clouds. Live without. *Eli. I came to avenge Eli.* The impression returned in full, and the flood of memories reshaped his wyrd. Jacqueline felt it, and her hold over him was shaken. Leo jerked his head backwards with all his might, breaking Jacqueline’s nose, and her hold over him. She grazed his neck with the dagger’s metal edge as she fell backwards, but the cut shrank into a nick as Leo exploded out of his human form.

The building disintegrated around him as he grew, walls breaking like Styrofoam, floor buckling under his true weight. He beat his wings to keep from falling, and roared shattering every window in the side of the building.

Jacqueline tumbled with the rubble, knocked breathless. She made a gesture at him, trying to bind him again, but his wyrd was awake and blazing now, consuming whatever she threw at him. He picked her up, carefully pinching her dainty arms with the tips of his claws, and began to pull. Slowly.

“Aivass... Aivass protect me...” she wheezed.

“No god or stranger can save you, witch!”

He tore both arms from her shoulders, letting her drop to the courtyard below. Then he bathed her wailing, bleeding body in black fire.

Humans screamed from all around. There were dozens of them, far too many to stitch. Leomat knew the Flight would prefer he kill them all. Leave no witnesses or survivors. It was a preference Ecumene would share as well— a few dozen dead humans were better than several hundred asking questions, looking into magic, and potentially awakening their wyrds.

But Eli would never forgive him. Despite Jacqueline’s treachery, despite everything, Eli would be merciful to these pathetic creatures.

Leo ignored the screaming masses. He pawed through the rubble, searching for the power radiating from Eli’s grimoire. It was in the same chest that had held that damn poisoned knife. He thought of searching for the knife, but the masses’ shock and disbelief ate away at the already-thin magic in the area. It began to suffocate him. He clutched the chest, and launched himself into the night sky.

Leo retreated to the coast of Golden Gate National Recreation area, still clutching the chest. He shapeshifted down to human scale, wondering if the lack of magic would kill him, or plunge him into torpor. Weary, he opened the chest. Aside from the grimoire, there were pages of mad scrawling dedicated to the Stranger, Aivass, her so-called patron, but no evidence that she had been working with Kivia. Nothing mentioned other dragons or a broader conspiracy. He

kept a few pages of her ravings, enough to prove what she had been, and burned the rest of the detritus, dumping the chest of ashes into the ocean.

He forced himself to endure the next lapse before he started reading. It hit just after midnight. The forgotten memories of Eli formed a wall around his present circumstances. He had no idea how he got to San Francisco, what exactly he had done, or why the book before him, cryptically titled *The Anagnostium*, was important. There was nothing but a word he scratched into his palm: *wait*. It took nearly six hours for his memories to return, and Leo began to read by the light of the predawn glow.

Eli had taken Vassago's advice to heart. The book seduced him with his premise; that the first tongue humans learned was the dragon tongue, and their speech fragmented when Eden was lost. The biblical expulsion from paradise, the fall of Babel... all echoes of the same event. Each word was layered with enchantments to impart visions and implant linguistic abilities in the reader's wyrd. Fundamental precepts of pattern recognition. Common roots. But it was not more than a primer for humans, and a history for dragons. It was a love story. For the first time, Leo understood Eli's affection for these dangerous, fragile creatures. It illustrated how their imparted greater meaning and how their individuality gave them strength. All told, it took him six hours to read and he finished it weeping.

Jacqueline had been right about Leo's love for secrecy. The truth of it stung him twice. *I was blind to Eli's faults and deaf to his needs. She was never just a beard to him. He genuinely loved her. And how could he keep a secret from a woman he loved? If I had not been so desperate to see her as an inferior, I may have been able to save him.*

When he went to retrieve his books from the hotel, Leo checked the news. Cell-phone cameras captured blurry images of his form amidst Avalon's blazing ruins. Eyewitnesses stammered and swore that they saw a dragon. The anchors played it for laughs. Their official story was that there was a gas leak and a heroic security guard managed to evacuate most of the residents before the explosion took place. He was humble when interviewed. "I just had a hunch, you know? Something didn't feel right. I don't know anything about monsters, though." There were a handful of injuries, but only one casualty; a woman burnt beyond recognition.

Leomat wrote in the depths of his most secluded lair; a small cave outside Washington DC. He dipped his index claw into an inkwell and scratched characters on a large telescription scroll. The writing would appear on a partner scroll in his biological father's lair once the missive was stamped. It was a secure, but archaic mode of communication, and it would be weeks before Alderath bothered to check for messages.

*Too late for him to talk me out of my decision.*

His wyrd tingled despite the trivial use of magic to focus the ink, and enchant the words with images. It had been a week since he returned from the West Coast, and he had yet to recover from the excursion. The sparseness of magic there and the preceding expenditures of magic had weakened him more than he could have anticipated. But the lapses were far worse. Power leaked out of the missing memories like blood from a torn artery.

Stacks of grimoires on draconic biology cluttered the cave, and its floors were littered with loose sheets of diagnostic spells and equations. Based on his research, Leo's wyrd would fail in a matter of months, unless he voluntarily entered torpor. Hibernation would conserve his power and support his biology for nearly a decade.

Death tempted him at the beginning. But the notion became more repugnant with each re-reading of Eli's grimoire. Like many magical books, it held secrets that revealed themselves gradually. And those hidden meanings instilled hope in Leo's hearts. Eli argued man's capacity to learn dragon tongue proved a point of common origin, and a time when the world was richer in magic. It convinced Leo that the myth of Eden was real. If a link to that realm could be re-established, the long sleep would end. The slow death would be averted. *And then my true work will begin. If magic returned—when magic returns—I will use the grimoire to fulfill Eli's dream. I will be my kin's ambassador to humanity.*

He forgot himself mid-word. *Did I lapse again? No. The question proves I'm lucid.*

Fighting off a chill, he finished his letter to Alderath. It imparted the location of all his hoards, and the core insights from the grimoire. He was confident they would lead to a breakthrough in his father's research. Bahamat could not be trusted. His prejudices against humans ran too deep, and he was too content with the peaceful path toward oblivion that he had laid out. No other alternatives would be seriously entertained. That was why Kivia had been so desperate to keep her conspiracy a secret, even though it was likely innocent of xenomancy. *If you only trusted me with the truth, we could have done this together.*

Leomat thought of entrusting the entire grimoire to his father, but he couldn't bear to part with it. He stamped the letter with his seal, wiped his fingers clear of the ink, and then caressed the cover of the book, savoring the final touch of Eli's wyrd. Carefully, he placed it in a chest, and locked it with a powerful spell. The cave was sealed. His preparations were done.

Safe and secure, he coiled his massive frame around the chest and closed his eyes.

*To sleep, perchance to wake.*