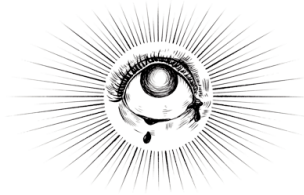


THE PROPHET AND THE NUN



Evidence N-0112 to the investigation I-7242

Arnaud Demeure's handwritten note

*Scribbled on an ancient text—the title translates as “A weapon that
pierced the heavens”*

A ring,
A vow,
The soul of an angel.

Only two men are fit to use. One who has lost the will to live,
and one who has given himself to death.

The young sister ran through the silent city while the prophet waited for her to arrive. The old man knew she would come; he had seen her already. Hidden by the shadow of an old staircase, eyes fixed on the door, he tried not to get distracted by the creatures in his vision.

Thousands of them, maybe millions, all crammed within glass walls.

The youngest sat at the center of the glass prison. It was taller than the tallest mountain. It was quiet amid the frenzy of its brothers. Its head so high it saw beyond the ceiling of its prison, straight into the realm of the Eldest Lords. Light leaked from underneath its shaking, half-closed eyelids. It peeked into the future.

As the prophet watched them, the creatures stared at him from far away. He could see them, yet his mind could not make full sense of their shapes, only of a few features. A crowd of wings, fangs, stingers, and every piece of every animal he could think of, and some he had never seen, crawling on each other while human parts pushed their way through. The tall one, its eyes closed, hummed over and over.

“We are so close. It won’t be long.”

The others followed its chanting and moved back and forth in front of the glass holding them prisoners, just like animals expecting a bite of their prey.

The prophet almost missed the nun’s arrival. She ran up the stairs, hesitating as she put one foot on the first step.

Unseen, the prophet followed.

From the roof, he tasted the entire city. A forest of concrete and metal spreading in every direction, so much so that nothing existed if not within it. The sun blinded him, shining in white and gold. Dawn was a miracle. He stood still, in awe of the most magnificent city, and he almost forgot he had followed someone.

But there she was, the young sister, standing close to the balustrade, her arms raised to the sky, her shape dark against the sunlight.

The tall metallic tower pierced the sky and stabbed the sun, just like an arrow. The star bled, scattering its light all over the town.

White particles fell from the sky. Snow perhaps, or dust, he could not say. He dared to look up. The sky had turned dark despite the sun shining in it, light still leaking over the city.

In the cold air, no sound but the wind.

Nothing else made a noise. No sound of cars or their horns. No talking or music playing, no chirping of birds.

The prophet stood transfixed.

Cars were still on the asphalt, their lights on. Some stuck in place, some coasting along the streets. Many had slid, hitting nearby objects. Tombstones in an old graveyard, they lay against each other, against lampposts, or sat on the sidewalks.

Men and women, asleep, still clung to their steering wheels. Their heads blasted out of the windshields or hung from the windows. Hundreds and hundreds of bodies covered the sidewalks and the streets. More must have been resting within the buildings, unmoving, untouched.

Here and there, white, black, and red stains, each tens of meters long, covered the streets—flocks of birds caught in whatever happened.

Nobody moved, nobody talked, everyone rested in this cemetery, testimony of a dark miracle.

The world had moved on. The city, now empty, stayed behind.

Paris was dead, and the Great Ones were free.

Preface to the investigation I-7242

Letter, John Ricart Wilhelm to Horace Hastings (Interim Headmaster of the School of Winchester)

Sir, I have taken the liberty to send this to your personal address, as I am not sure I can trust anyone else on the matter. I have drafted and sent it, ensuring others, even the councilors,

could not intercept the missive. In it, you will find everything pertaining to the Paris Paranatural Occurrence and the related investigation (I-7242).

After our investigation of Demeure's palace, we believe there is a connection between the events in Paris, the sudden disappearance of the headmaster, and the potential death of Councilor Dryden. We also suspect the headmaster and most of the council have been in contact with Mr. Demeure for the past few centuries. I have collected all the evidence in the packet accompanying this letter. It contains Mr. Demeure's memoir, notes, scraps, voice recordings, and photographs relating to the guests.

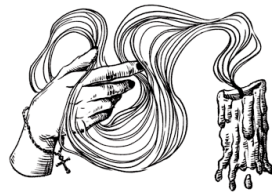
Whatever magick-related event has happened, it has dissipated already. Our agents in the area claim they have observed an increase in telluric pressure beyond Schwarzschild level. Assuming this information is true, we did not find remnants of a Schwarzschild box, and it would be a first for one to appear and disappear in such a short time.

What we found is concerning, though. We have discovered traces of fights and, at the time of writing, three dead bodies: two women, one beheaded, the other killed by what seems a rib piercing her skull, and one man who had gone through full turning before dying from an unknown cause. We suspect at least another one dead, incinerated. The analysis of the ashes will confirm.

Councilor Dryden might have encountered a similar fate. We have not found her body, but we found a bowl of blood, confirmed to be hers, and marks suggesting she performed some kind of ritual.

I will send an update as soon as my agents complete the sweep at the guests' addresses (you can find the locations in the notes I sent over).

THE WITCH OF WINCHESTER



Evidence L-0354 to the investigation I-7242
Letter, Tylanus Spencer to the Eminent Gwrtheyrn Blake (Headmaster
of the School of Winchester)
2 March 1549

It was bound to happen.

The servants carried the bodies to me immediately after the fact, but there was no hope to save them. Cracked skulls, burns all over, dislocated elbows, and broken knees. Bryce's back had been snapped in half, and by the time the man reached my rooms, he had bled out enough that nothing, not even magick, could save him. Katrina was already dead. They are Drydens, so it will cost me many favors to keep this quiet.

It is not hard to see, eminent headmaster, that the child is out of control. She is showing the traits of the monsters she got her blood from. She is restless, does not trust any of her tutors, and still refuses to learn our language. But she is powerful indeed. Such a gift I have never seen. The servants report she lifted Bryce and Katrina Dryden, accomplished wizards of their own, using only her mind, burned their skin using pure tellur as

heat, and threw them flying against the walls with such sheer force it cracked the stones.

This is power the School cannot leave uncollected. We need to grow and use it.

I have an idea that might allow us to harness the child while also solving the situation she has created with the Dryden family. A spell of my devising, but seeing now how strong she has become, I will need the council's support.

I will be back at Penrose in two days. We can discuss the details then.

Councilor Tylanus Spencer

The moment Alex stepped onto the small stage at the helm of the class, a murmuring chatter spread across the students.

"Silence," Alex hissed and snapped her fingers. Everyone stopped talking and stared. "Not yet the time to show your true colors. The reason you are here," Alex said, stepping forward, "is we have selected you as the most gifted among your peers in the great families."

She was one or two years older than the teenagers in front of her, or at least so it must have seemed to them. Her body, crystallized in an unchanging youth by the secret magick of the School, might have made them doubt her authority, but she was sure she had enough attitude and presence to stop any of their rebellious thoughts. For sure, she had been already more effective than Professor Corbyn, who stood next to her; a greasy old man who had lectured for decades but had, nonetheless, failed any attempt to halt the kids' chatter.

"I came here to welcome you to your new school, your new life, and your new family. The School of Winchester is one of

the few institutions of its kind, hailed as the most honored among this few.

“What characterizes us,” Alex said, pacing from one side to the other, “what makes us special, is our continued pursuit of knowledge. Where others lingered on the teachings of the ancients, we have pushed the boundaries. Therefore, today should be the happiest day of your life. The day you start a new one.”

Alex paused and breathed in. The house smelled like daisies, as it always did for her, but only for her. She glanced out of the window, and there it was, a beautiful garden nobody else could ever see. There, bushes and trees, masterfully shaped as animals, formed a labyrinth where only she could walk. Alex looked at the kids again. She had seen so many coming and going over the years, and the thought the house would never be such a caring mother to them as it had been to her clung to her stomach. But their puzzled faces made her realize she had been silent for far too long.

“Now, what are we going to teach you?” She cleared her throat and signaled to her assistant: Ricart, a man with fiery red hair, so tall and slim it looked as if someone had stretched him. He had a frowning expression persistently stuck on his face, of which Alex suspected herself to be the cause.

Ricart, who had stood waiting near the door, rushed out, followed by Corbyn.

“We are going to teach you how to change reality in your favor. The noble role all humans and us, the pinnacle of humanity, play every single day. This is what we learn, what we discover, and what we apply.”

The men brought four candles, each on its own identical golden pedestal, and placed them on the desk between Alex and the class. The same four unextinguishable candles she had enchanted when she was still a pupil herself. They had seen as many kids come and go as she had.

“As some of you might already know, this reality is nothing but an agreement between the parts that compose it. Physics, chemistry, and mathematics result from this agreement. At first —” Alex stopped as a man rushed into the room.

Sweat ran down his forehead and his blond hair stuck to his skin. His desert boots, brown trousers, and wide green jacket over a striped T-shirt made him look like something between a hipster and a soldier.

The girls in the class giggled at one another.

The man panted, bent with his hand on his thighs. “Grand Inspector Dryden,” he said, taking a deep breath. “We need your help at the containment quarters. A creature has escaped.”

Alex opened her mouth to speak, but before she could do so, her assistant roared. “How dare you? It’s Councilor Dryden, you fool! Don’t you have someone else who can help you?”

The audience chuckled, but Alex glared at her assistant with such bitterness he froze in place. “Kids,” she said without taking her eyes off Ricart, “I give you back to Professor Corbyn, who actually has something to teach you and has been eyeing me for stealing time from his lesson. I promise I’ll stop by before the end.” Then she glanced at the black-haired man next to her assistant. “Professor Corbyn, make sure you show them the basics with the candles.”

The professor, still standing in front of the entrance door, waved both hands and mouthed something that read like “*I would never . . .*”

Alex ignored him. “You,” she said, now talking to the man in desert boots, “lead the way.”

The man nodded and rushed out of the room. Alex and her assistant followed.

“There is no need to run,” Alex said flatly as the man, who had run ahead, turned to look at where she was.

“But, Councilor,” the man in desert boots said, stopping, “if that thing escapes the house—”

“What’s your name, young man?” Alex asked, interrupting him.

“Thomas Blake.”

“And have you solved the house, Thomas Blake?”

Thomas swallowed without speaking and glanced away from her. “No, Councilor Dryden, I haven’t.”

“What are the rules of Penrose House for someone who hasn’t solved it?”

Thomas stared at her and spoke, his voice shaking, with the cadence of one repeating something learned by heart. “A condition to leave the house is to solve it by learning how to navigate the currents of its tellur. The house forbids pupils from performing magick unsupervised. They must not run, stare straight through glass and mirrors, or draw on any surface of the house. If they open a door, should they find a corridor behind it, they should close it and reopen it until the room they expect appears. Ignore any creature, humans included, that appears in such corridors. Pupils must not turn right in the main hallway over five times in a day. Should a portrait or poster appear hanging on a wall of their dormitories, they must not remove it, nor look behind it. Should they not respect these guidelines, the council takes no responsibilities of the consequences the house might cast on them.”

“Good,” Alex said, smiled, and took to strolling again. “Now, as we walk, tell me about this creature.”

“We couldn’t see it,” Thomas said. As he continued, he kept upping the pace, gaining a few steps on Alex and Ricard, then stopping until they caught up. “But there was a loud buzz, and all the wizards in the lab ended up killed, cut into pieces by an

invisible sword. Only one assistant was alive when I left but badly wounded.”

“Invisible and buzzing,” she said. “And it killed the wizards before the assistants? I might know what it is. Stop.” Alex stood still and counted to five.

The other two stared at her.

“Turn around now,” Alex said as she finished counting and spun on her heels.

As she did, she found a wooden double door a few inches from her nose. “*Containment Rooms*” had been engraved on the top of the door’s stone arch. A metallic sign attached to the side of the door read, “*Warning: authorized personnel only. Any creature you might see with your peripheral vision is likely an illusion. We store the real ones in the cells.*”

Alex shrugged. “Not true anymore.” She was about to open the door, but she turned back to the others. “Ricart, off you go. Fetch me a tea. I’ll meet you back at Professor Corbyn’s classroom.” She glanced at Thomas. “You should wait outside while I sort this one out. It’s dangerous in there, and, in any case, it shouldn’t take me long.”

Ricart didn’t wait for her to repeat herself, and by the time she was mid-sentence, he was already leaving.

“I’ll come in with you, Councilor,” said Thomas.

As he spoke, Ricart stumbled and muttered a curse.

“You won’t,” Alex said, and she glared at Thomas. “There is no need for you to get back in and risk your life after who knows how you managed to escape.”

“I can’t sit out here while she . . . my colleague is in there.”

Alex sighed. “Okay, we are wasting more time arguing. You can come in but stay out of my way, and don’t even think unless I tell you so.”

The hall of the containment area was like she remembered. A large circular room acted as a hub for the real containment sectors. No more, no less than labyrinth-like dungeons, where the School stored any specimen (animal, human, or parahuman) that piqued its interest. The headmaster had hence arranged the space as a laboratory to support the experiments on parahumanity and immortality. Since then, it had always worked as one of the most respected institutions within the School of Winchester, having produced paper after paper for decades and promoted many council members from within its ranks.

Two hospital beds sat empty at the center of the room, enveloped in pieces of electronics attached to cables that sprouted from the ceiling above them. Some old-looking tables ran along the walls, covered in whirring and puffing lab instruments. Portraits of illustrious former members of the laboratory decorated its walls. In one glance, Alex found a picture of herself hanging between the two doors leading to the dungeons —“*Alexandra Emilia Dryden, Councilor*” was engraved at the bottom of the frame. They had received the memo. She would have a hard time being just Alex anywhere she would go.

All normal, if not for the two dead wizards. One, a woman, had fallen facedown a few inches from the beds, both her hands cut away and nowhere to be seen. Another, a man, sat against one of the doors. His decapitated head rested on his lap. A young woman, blonde and fair who, judging from her clothes, was an assistant, was alive but pale as a corpse. She had crawled under one bed and was curled up like a ball. She hadn't seen Alex and Thomas come in.

“That your girlfriend?” Alex asked Thomas, pointing at the woman. “Kinda obvious, but fits your type of hero. What's her name?”

Thomas swallowed hard. “Ariel . . . She . . . You think that thing is still here? You know what it is?”

“Yes, to both. Those two were experienced wizards, and they

likely tried to use their sight but didn't see it. This, and that it cuts everything in its way, tells me it's a fully turned fae. Nasty beasts, invisible even to people with the sight, eyes all over, and two pairs of claws as sharp as razors. We are in luck as it can't see us either."

"But it did," Thomas said. "It followed them around the lab as they tried to escape."

"That's because they moved. If you stay still, you'll be safe. It can't see you, and it can't hear you either. It just follows the flicker of light as we move."

"So, what do we do?"

"Easy," Alex said, and carefully took off the robe she was wearing on top of her mundane clothes. "We bait it out." She threw the robe in the air.

A loud buzz filled the air, as if thousands of insects had flown in.

"There you are," Alex said, and she opened her mind's eye. With it open, she had the sight, and she could see the network, the mesh of tellur and its translucent floating strands that connected everything with everything else.

Alex was ready to cast a spell, but before she could, Ariel, having noticed them, and probably believing Alex's distraction would offer her a cover, rushed out of her hideout. But as she did, the buzzing noise shifted in her direction.

"No," the young man yelled, and raced toward his girlfriend. As he did so, the strands of tellur around him shook, and a single wave traversed them, running away from him.

"Don't! You foolish child," Alex said. "Don't do magick without a plan."

The network of tellur vibrated as Thomas reached Ariel and hugged her tight. A moment later, a splash of green sticky liquid drowned them both, and a pair of enormous claws, severed from the fae, fell from thin air. The beast shrieked so loud it covered its own buzzing.

The strands of tellur moved again. This time, a wave traversed them toward the young man.

“Newbie,” Alex called, “handle your dissonance!”

It was too late, and Thomas too slow to react. The wave reached him and, again, a spatter of liquid, red this time, covered both him and his companion. His own right arm vaporized.

Thomas’s screams roared so loud they rivaled the buzzing and shrieking of the fae.

Alex hurried. She focused on the network in front of her and the place where she heard the noise coming from, above the other two. Once again, the strands pulsed, this time with her at the center.

Another loud shriek, and the creature fell out of thin air, now visible. It smashed against the floor in front of the couple, cracking it as if someone had smacked a huge invisible hammer on the monster. All that remained was a mess of wings, eyes, and claws curled together.

Alex had no time to celebrate as the network already throbbed once again around her. She focused on the wave of tellur that moved in her direction through the strands. Under her watch, the wave changed direction and flew toward Thomas, who sat, ghostly white, on the ground, one arm around Ariel’s shoulders. As it hit him, the wound on his shoulder burst into a bright flame that died out in an instant.

“It’s done,” Alex said, exhaling, “it’s done.” Then, looking at Thomas lying in Ariel’s arms, Alex’s face burned, and her heart beat hard again. “I told you not to move,” she yelled at the man, pointing a finger at him. “Teaches you a lesson not to disobey me!”

But Thomas didn’t react. He had lost consciousness. Alex found Ariel’s watery blue eyes staring at her the same way they looked at the beast dead on the floor.

She glanced at the crushed body of the fae too, and was

reminded that for most wizards she was closer to the specimens than she was to them. She might be an improved version, a better parahuman, and the School made sure to stress that being turned immortal should be considered the highest honor, but after all, she still was a parahuman. Just a receptacle for the bundle of instincts that boiled within her soul.

Maybe one day she'd lose control, turning finally into a beast like the fae she had just killed. The odd sense of peace coming from this thought left a dull feeling in her stomach.

"I told him not to move," Alex said, but to Ariel this time, slowly, almost soothingly.

"Councilor," said Ariel, her voice cracking, "can't you help him?"

"I did," Alex said, checking that the man was still breathing. "I cauterized his wound. The healers will get to fix the rest in a couple of days. We'll just have to wait for them to arrive."

Once Alex reached the classroom, Ricart was outside with her tea in his hands. She ignored him, distracted as she was by Professor Corbyn's long-winded discourse on the magick principles of will, energy, form, and dissonance. He had already lighted three of the four candles, and since Alex knew that lesson by heart—as she had taught it for decades—she also knew what came next.

But Corbyn went on for minutes on a rant so obscure even Alex struggled to understand. On and on he went about the divine waters and the Lord of Shards, the Thelema and the Kia.

Alex watched the man talking in disbelief. He was such a quack. How could someone speak like that in this century? Her blood pumped into her ears at the thought Corbyn would indoctrinate the children with his religious misrepresentation of something as natural as magick. It was only quantum physics,

a network, and a basic reapplication of Newton's third law. No need for divine waters and mills of God.

Corbyn glanced at the door and nodded at her. "You have also seen that, to impress your will on the collective agreement, you must use a form, a shape, that helps you focus on the outcome you desire. We used our voice and a wave of our hands. Now, I want to show you how an expert wizard can do the same by just focusing on the shape of the desire in their mind. Councilor," he said, "would you lend a hand?"

Of course he would ask her. Corbyn, the quack he was, could never do formless magick.

Alex stepped into the classroom without taking her eyes off the professor.

Corbyn jumped, startled, as the last candle caught fire, burning so high and bright it looked more like a torch. An instant later, the other three flared too. An icy breeze traversed the room and frosted the glass of its windows.

"Magnificent!" Corbyn said. "A round of applause for the councilor and her perfect demonstration."

Alex waved one hand, stopping the kids before they could obey. "Can I have my tea, please?" she said, gesturing to Ricart.

The assistant rushed into the room and almost tumbled, but delivered the cup of tea safely in her hands.

She took it quickly and sipped the tea. As she did so, her face contorted in disgust. "Cold, as usual," she said. As she spoke, the fire on all the candles extinguished and their tips were covered in frost. The cup in her hand fumed. She took another sip, and a smile escaped from her.

"Magick in reverse, and using the dissonance to the wizard's advantage," said Corbyn. "This, right here, is the mark of a great wizard. We should be grateful to the councilor for being so generous to show us. Now," he continued, "any questions before we let the councilor go?"

The kids glanced at each other hesitantly, and no one spoke.

“Well then,” Corbyn began, but a girl raised one hand.

“Sure,” he said, pointing in her direction.

“I just wanted to ask . . . well . . . Father says you are immortal. Is it true?”

The other students looked at each other again.

Ricart, who had been leaning against the wall looking at his own shoes for the previous few minutes, jumped up as if about to run to put himself between the student and Alex.

The witch just offered a faint smile. “What is your name, dear?” she asked.

“Maggy . . . Margareth Owen, Councilor Dryden.”

“Owen,” Alex repeated. “Daughter of Jonah and Lilian?”

“Yes, I am,” said the girl, sitting with her back now rigid against her chair.

“Your father is a good man, but he overvalues me,” Alex said. “I’m not immortal. Hard to kill, maybe. Unless someone puts some effort into it, I won’t die of age, no. But I can still die, for sure.”

The kids exchanged even more puzzled looks and whispered.

“Immortality is an honor only a selected few of our pupils receive,” said Corbyn. “The greatest achievement of the School, I might say.”

“Any other questions?” Alex asked.

Many hands rose among the students. She smiled. “Anything not related to me or the likelihood of my departure from this world?”

The same hands went slowly down.

“Excellent!” she said, nodding, and glanced at Corbyn.

“Class,” Corbyn said. He took a book from his desk drawer and showed it to the class.

On its leather cover, three figures were etched—a crescent moon, a long-legged bird, and a dog-faced baboon. Alongside the three figures, also carved on the leather, stood four words:

knowledge, wisdom, intelligence, and valor. Alex recognized that book. She had studied it herself as a young pupil.

“Take your copies of *Mercurius ter Maximus’ De Natura Absconditus* from the library as you walk to your dorm,” Corbyn continued. “But before you go, stand up to thank Councilor Dryden for visiting us.”

The class stood. She nodded at them before disappearing through the door, followed by her assistant, who had gathered the candles and the tea she had left behind.

Alex had reached her office at last. With Ricart gone for a while, she would enjoy some time alone. She already savored the silence of the room and the relaxing idea of an armchair against her back, thus took her seat, threw the glasses and heavy robe on a nearby chair, dropped her feet on the desk, and hard-pressed her eyes, massaging their surroundings.

It had been barely a minute like this when Ricart swung the door of the office open. “Councilor Dryden,” he called.

She opened her eyes too quickly, and the light blinded her. All she saw were blinking circles. As she returned to a sitting position, she pushed a few papers off her desk with her legs.

“Ricart,” she chided. She could only see his shape without her glasses on. “For God’s sake, haven’t I told you to knock first? What now?”

“It’s the headmaster, Councilor. He wants to talk with you.”

“What does the old man want with me now?” she asked, scrambling to find her glasses.

“I asked, but he didn’t say. He demanded you go to his office right away.”

“Does he understand I don’t work for him anymore? He can’t boss me around like this.”

“Shall I . . . shall I tell him you won’t go?”

“What?” Alex’s tone was a pitch higher than she wanted. “No, I’m going right now. It might be something important, you know, if it’s this urgent.”

A few minutes later, she knocked at the headmaster’s door.

“Come on in, please,” a voice said from inside the room.

As she opened the door, she found the room illuminated by the faint light of candles. There were many of them on a candelabra on the headmaster’s desk, others on the cabinets that ran along one side of the room, and more on the chandelier that dangled from the ceiling. She could not grasp what was the root of the headmaster’s aversion against modernity, but the room was still like the first time she had entered it.

Even the smell was the usual mix of wax, wood burning, and old books, so many of them stored in the same cabinets that hosted the candles. The very first memory she had of the School was in this room. Just like him, she hadn’t aged much since then, but at least she had let the simplifications of modern life have the best of her. In a way, it still made sense for someone as old as Headmaster Tylanus Spencer to be nostalgic.

The man sat in an armchair behind his desk and looked straight at her as she walked a couple of steps inside. He smirked, and she found it ironic the man could still be so full of himself when dealing with her. The high and mighty Spencer, who had turned himself into an immortal capable of doing magick, hailed as a hero of the School. He was a legend.

Yet, she knew the truth now, that it had all been by accident, and no one, including him, had been able to repeat this feat. All the others since then had been created from his blood, and then from the blood of the ones he turned, and so on. Alex was among the first the council had turned, or so she was told.

The council had wiped any memory of the events from her

mind, a habit they had kept when turning wizards from outside their VIP club. But she was in the club now, so she knew their secrets, and as much as she hated it, she had to keep them such.

“Ricart said you had asked for me. What can I do for you, sir?” She stood, hands folded behind her back.

“Alexandra, my dear, you used to wish me a good evening when you were little,” said the man with a smile. “Look at you now, always ready for business. Take a seat, please.”

The headmaster was a plump man. His cheeks full, eyes too tiny for his face, a broad nose, and a large bush of curly hair on his head. As he spoke, he gestured for her to sit in one chair in front of the desk.

She sat, saying nothing.

“Alexandra Dryden,” the man said, clasping his hands. “Look at you, all sitting straight. It seems yesterday you used to sit on my knees.”

“That was half a millennium ago. People would talk if I did that now, sir.”

“Always a smart answer,” said the man with a bitter grin on his face. “If only your old man could see you. First in class, accomplished witch, and even appointed to the high council.”

Alex gripped the flesh of her own thigh. “Not thanks to you, sir. You voted against me at the council. Would my old man be glad of that too?” She looked out of the window beside the headmaster.

“I tried to protect you from yourself. I’ve held my position in the council for many centuries. I understand it isn’t just about talent or skills, and you are not what one would call a people person. Had I been gifted with a talent as bright as yours, I would have spent less time studying and more time learning how to be liked by my fellows.” His voice turned from sweet to low and serious in an instant. “Speaking of which, I heard what happened to that kid today.”

“He did it to himself. He should have listened,” she replied. “And how did you hear about it already?”

“That’s just a perk of the headmaster’s job,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “That, and he is a Blake. His family will make my ears hurt, you know that.”

“Did you call me here just to talk about this, sir?”

The headmaster leaned forward, both hands under his chin. “You and I both know that one day or another you’ll annoy enough of them. You need to be more careful now that you are a council member.”

“Yeah, the prestige of the council is important to you.”

“You paint a worse image of me than you should,” said the man in a condescending tone. “I care about your safety.”

“Sure, you care about the safety of the order, sir.”

The man laughed and smirked. “Anyhow, that is not why I called you here.” He took an envelope from a drawer and slid it over to Alex.

“What is that?” she asked.

“An invitation to a party for you to attend.”

“You send me to parties now?”

“Well, it’s from an important friend of the order in Paris.”

“Paris?” she asked, dragging her chair back. She was about to stand up, but restrained herself. “The courses have just started. I can’t go on a trip now. I have to monitor the state of the programs.”

“The School will be fine. As a councilor, your time is better invested away from teaching, and the place has survived for a while without your monitoring, anyway.”

“That is what I’m trying to fix, sir.”

“Read that letter, Alexandra,” he said, leaning back again and looking at the ceiling.

Her hands shook as she reached for the letter. She almost tore it apart while opening it. How could he dare give her, a member of the high council, such a direct order?

She pulled the letter out with some trouble and skimmed it up and down. Then her eyes stopped on the signature at the bottom.

“Is this some kind of joke?” she asked. “The man has been dead for what? A few centuries?”

“We never said he was dead. He retired from the spotlight.”

“And what would Mr. Demeure want from me, anyhow? I have never met him or been at his parties.”

“Beats me if I know,” the headmaster sighed. “He is an eccentric man and comes from a time when he could do anything he wanted. I think he has sent this invite to me under the false assumption I still hold any authority over you.”

Alex tapped her fingers on the desk. “Are you saying I can refuse?” she asked, grinning. She knew the answer already.

“No, I’m not. The order requires you to go,” said the headmaster. “That man was an important ally for us in our early days. From what it says there, you are not to bring any servants with you, so make sure you can arrange your security somehow.”

No servants. It sure sounded suspicious, but as much as they disliked her, the other councilors would not do this to her. Not this soon. She still had enough support.

“You know what the man was famous for, right?” asked the headmaster, interrupting her thoughts.

“All of those stories about fulfilling wishes?”

“Exactly those. I have seen him with my own eyes. I have been to those parties. Those are not stories.”

“I’ll take them for what they are then,” Alex said, standing up. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir, I have to prepare myself for this trip if I have to leave so soon. I also have to arrange things so everything here keeps running as it should in my absence.” She half-bowed and headed to the door without looking back. “Have a good night, sir.”

“Alex . . .” said the man behind her. Something new was in his voice. Concern.

“What now, sir?” she asked, one hand still on the knob.

“Nothing,” said the headmaster. “Just have a good night and safe travels, Alexandra.”

Evidence L-0472 to the investigation I-7242

Letter, Arnaud Demeure to Tylanus Spencer (Councilor of the School of Winchester)

24 February 1532

I have received the stone. The inscription is authentic, so I will pay my side of the bargain. And yet, I know you don't fully trust me, despite what you have seen with your own eyes. I couldn't fathom I would live to see the day when a wizard would not trust the infinite ways of magick. But you were there when I, an immortal, did the impossible and performed the art.

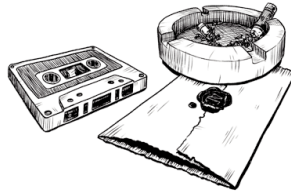
Let me tell you, there is hope in your quest for knowledge. With eternity in front of you, you will have the time to discover every secret this world offers.

Go east, in the land of the Strigoi. If you want what I have, you must make an enemy of them. One Strigoi lord has a jewel, a weapon of my making that hides in the guise of a child. Find it, and in the blood of that child, you will find the secret I carry.

Once you find the child and discover the secret of how immortals can do magick, you will keep the child with you and use it for the glory of your dear school. But remember, the child is mine and mine alone. One day, when I will come asking for it, you will return it to me.

Arnaud Demeure

THE OLD PRINCE'S PARTY



The fireplace was lit and ready to consume his life, or, at least, the memories of what it had been. Roman had waited for this day for so many centuries, and now?

That piece of paper, that invitation, didn't want to leave his hands and, instead, kept moving in them. The letters, piled on the table beside the armchair, stood there too, looking at him, scared of the fire but not bothered by how hard this was to him. The invitation was proof his time had come at last.

This was how his end started. If so, he wanted to go unhindered, and burning all the letters to his dead sibling seemed the best way to get rid of any burden. Those letters were the only thing he still cared about. He had to burn them.

Roman picked up the first one. His memories didn't weigh as much as he thought. His eyes followed the paper as it flew into the fire. It talked of his betrayal. Just like Cain, murderer and betrayer of his own brother, only one thing he feared for almost half of a millennium: dying. He chuckled at the irony.

With the letter, pain, guilt, and neglect went up into smoke. All those emotions, caught in paper, twirled in a gray cloud over the fire that called him by his name. All those stories gone and,

with them, that infant left in front of a church, the drunkard father, and his lonely death—stabbed, suffocated in his own filth—such a relief.

One letter gone, many others still to burn. A long process he savored. The pain of taking out that tooth had left him with the pleasant feeling that his suffering, his real suffering, was behind him. A second letter flew into the fire, and again, Roman felt the same pain.

If a new world, even a better one, had to come, it must do so through screams and pain. No birth arrived without pain and blood, and the memory of the sea of blood in the prince's eyes was Roman's last memory of him.

The first time Roman met the prince, it was amid a crowded party in Paris. The old man, the prince, could go through it unnoticed. His gray hair, small body, and face, one out of many, were built to be forgotten. Roman met him as the prince came down the stairs of his palace. "Old friend" the prince had called him, and to this day, Roman still didn't know why he had received such a salute.

He had lost himself searching in those icy eyes, as he had seen something behind them. The eyes of someone else who had died alone many times. Someone old who had escaped the world many years before. Those eyes called him *old friend*, but whose eyes were they? Those of the man who stood in front of him or those of a monster who stared at him without a shred of light?

He would die because of that man. He had seen the sea of blood in which the monster was swimming. Roman would spend years swimming in there himself.

Now that invitation.

The wolf quivered within his guts—everywhere within him—chained for so long that it yearned for the day it would be free to drown in its fury. Nothing mattered anymore. And yet, fear

took hold of him. Dread that the prince might be a monster far worse than he was himself.

Roman closed his eyes and reached for the flame where his letters were burning, and the fire, driven by a higher intelligence, tried to reach him. And perhaps, who knew, the best end would have been to burn by the fire. The wolf winced. For the beast, no time would ever be a good time to die.

He threw another letter into the fire.

His centuries whispered into his ears, talking of nasty and mysterious things, of caverns and wars, worlds above and below, philosophy and magic. A rant of fire and smoke of which, after so many years, he could barely hear the words but not understand the meaning. They talked of arcane knowledge, worlds beyond this world, keys and doors, rituals, sacrifices, and monsters from before his own long story.

“Enough,” he said, gripping the armrest.

The fireplace stood in front of him, silent now, just barely crackling. No words or whispers.

The pile of letters almost gone, he threw the final paper into the fire and stood to look at the last words on it burning. A name, one he had chosen, Azurine. And with it vanished, he was finally ready.

The fire had gone out, but Roman stood there watching its cinders. He took the phone and called the only number saved in it. “I’m ready, sir. It is all done.”

“We are in luck,” said a hoarse voice. “We spotted the target in Paris.”

Roman’s fists clenched so much his knuckles whitened. Despite the centuries he had spent in the order, Roman had never met the high priest in person and knew only his hoarse voice, his

face always hidden behind the shade of a confessional or the handset of a phone. Even so, the high priest had been a father to him, much more than his real one had ever been. It was the high priest who had given him a mission, a target, and with it, purpose.

“Listen,” the voice kept going, “help with the search. I want you to catch the target before the party starts. The others will take over from where you leave off, but we can’t let that man have it.”

“I will make sure it won’t happen,” Roman said, his teeth grinding against each other.

“Then, all the best, brother Roman. Stay under God’s wings.”

“Always under God’s wings.”

Evidence J-0006 to the investigation I-7242

Extract from Arnaud Demeure’s journal

13 July 1258

Hurt, scared, and hungry, this is no place for me. If only Father were here, in this cold, ugly house, he would teach them how to treat a noble of France. But he is not here, and the day will come when I won’t need a father to give them a lesson.

The old cassette’s noise had filled the room. Finding one of those old players had been harder than Hermann thought, but at the end, he was there, in an old motel with carpets the same color as rats that smelled a bit of rat too. The warm tobacco flavor that lingered in the air was a sweet distraction from that reek.

Valentine, his sire, had demanded a swift job, but the tapes meant more to Hermann than they did to her. It had never been

easy to understand her intentions, and this cleaning job, as she had called it, was even stranger than usual. Valentine had been stranger than usual herself since the moment she had received that letter from Paris. She hadn't let him read it, but her face when she saw it was that of someone uncertain about which direction to take. A face Hermann had never seen on her.

As he spent his time sticking newspaper to the windows, an old man's voice and that of a young boy took turns speaking out of the cassette.

"Nice to meet you, Hermann," said the old man's voice. "Your mom and I talked about you at length. She is proud of you. She said you are a bright student. How is life at school? Are you making lots of friends?"

"No more, no less than the others, I guess," said a youthful voice. "Most of my friends are on my softball team. All good, anyway."

"Softball, that sounds interesting! And you have a team, you say?"

"Yeah, I'm the captain," said the young boy with pride in his voice. "First in the league but going up and down from second. We might win this time."

Both voices disappeared, replaced by the striding noise of the tape moving in fast-forward.

Hermann pushed play.

"Dr. R.J. Millard, 27 August 1978," said the same old voice as before. "This was my first visit with Hermann Walker. These are the notes at the end of my session. Hermann is a polite kid, studies hard, and his mother describes him as having a normal ability to interact with others and make friends. Hermann has been through therapy before, one or two sessions after his father's death.

"According to his mother, he is one of the best students in his class. She says he is a well-mannered and methodical kid. After having met him today, I can't say I disagree. There is

something that bothers me, though. I'm not sure if it is the way he speaks, the way he moves as he talks, but there is something, for lack of a better term, unnatural, about this kid. The whole time I sensed he was hiding something.

"His own mother sent him to me for this very reason. I wasn't sure of what to think of a mother that brings a fourteen-year-old boy to me without a clear motivation, but now, I admit, the whole thing is fascinating. But I'm an old man who is too easy a prey to his curiosity."

"Same dream again?" Millard asked.

"Yeah . . ."

A creaking noise came out of the tape. Doctor Millard leaned on his armchair every time Hermann talked about his dreams. "Would you mind telling me about it again? Anything new you noticed?"

"Nothing too different from the other times, Doctor. I'm bouncing up and down in slow motion. Beneath me is a man. I have no idea who he is. And behind him is a woman. I know her, or at least myself in the dream knows her. She floats behind him, naked and surrounded by light. She brushes her hair as it falls on her back. She turns and smiles at me. Then nothing; it's dark and something shrieks. I always wake up at this point."

"And what do you feel when you wake up?"

"Nothing too special. Nostalgia, I guess."

The time was passing fast as Hermann listened to the tapes. He found some entertainment in listening to them. His entire story danced in the motel's putrid air, while outside of his window a

man was puking his stomach out and another shouted at the traffic.

“You are quiet, boy,” said Doctor Millard from the tape. “Did you miss some sleep?”

“Yeah. I keep having the same dream and that stupid nightmare.”

“What kind of nightmare?”

“I don’t know, people shouting. Light shines behind a glass, a window. I don’t know, a fairy or something? A sphere of light traveling at a crazy speed and nothing after. It bumps against the glass, and there is a crash. After, it’s just yelling and a lot of red all over. I guess they are shouting a name. I’m not sure who they are calling. All around is a white light that wraps me, and I shine all over.”

“And?”

“Nothing, Doctor. Nothing. I wake up after that.”

“I see,” Millard said, his scribbling so furious it came through the cassette. “What name are those people calling? Your father’s name?”

Hermann stood on his feet that day, he remembered. Not that he didn’t want to talk about his father, but Millard just could not stop with it. “What does my father have to do with all this?”

“Hermann, your father died in a car accident. Do you still hold a grudge?”

“I think he should have stuck around just a little more, but no, I wouldn’t say so. I’ve managed.”

The tape shrieked again as he pushed fast-forward.

“Is it already time? Are you sure about it?”

“Yes, Hermann,” said Doctor Millard. “We spent at least one hour today trying to carve out something from you, but despite

the time, I don't think you want to trust me. It's been ten years, and you still can't open up to me."

"I don't get the point, Doctor."

"Okay, let's try again. Can you explain to me why you need to spend your days with your nose in books? Why do you need to win every game you play? Why at all costs?"

"What's wrong with it? I mean, that's what she . . . I mean, what my mother always wanted. Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Hermann, we are done for the day. I'm tired. You are frustrated. Let's move this discussion to another time, okay?"

"Doctor R.J. Millard, 27 August 1989. Last session with Hermann Walker. This day, eleven years ago, a fourteen-year-boy entered my office for the first time. Today, a twenty-five-year-old man came out instead. A man who has spent the last eleven years in therapy. He is like a son to me, and the biggest mystery of my career. I can't stop being obsessed with his way of speaking and the way he moves. There is something in the way he sees things, and perceives the world around him, such a level of depth and speed that I can't follow.

"He has built a character and a plan for his life I can't understand, or maybe he just doesn't want me to understand. As if something or someone bigger than him talks from the shadows, and he puts effort into hiding it as much as he can. But he can't hide the thirst and hunger he has for the world. Such hunger that he might swallow it whole. His mother's death has worsened this further, and as she disappeared from his life, another woman entered it. He talks of her as one would talk of an old friend who came back from a lifelong travel.

"In a short time, she has gained more and more of a grip on him. I am not sure if this is a healthy relationship for someone

like Hermann. From him, no real attachment toward a partner. She is more like a mother figure; an attraction toward opportunities he can't describe. On her side as well, from the way he talks of her, the pushes are toxic. He might not understand it, but she has a plan for him, I am sure of it. Maybe the surprise of receiving his call tonight and his desire to cancel every other appointment biases me. He is following her to New Orleans. This burns like a failure.

"There is something broken, but I can't put my finger on it. Any colleague would laugh at me for keeping him in therapy for so many years without a diagnosis. But an aura permeates from him. I sense it, I can't get it out, and now, my pity, I might not be the one to fix it."

It had been weird for Hermann to listen to the whole summary of his own therapy. Even more to discover the notes and comments of the doctor that had followed him. How little he had understood. But Valentine had asked him to close his ties. She never said to listen to the cassettes, and he suspected she would not like it, but so it was. He was certain she would discover it somehow. She had always been able to.

It was night again, though, and as he threw everything he had collected in a garbage bag in his trunk, some dull misery took hold of his heart.

The drive from Houma to New Orleans had been fast. Faster than he had thought. He sighed. It might have been worth enjoying the breeze of the night, refreshing, for once, in a place always so muggy. There was music in the air that night, for sure. Something important was coming.

Why did she send him on this mission?

It could even be something Doctor Millard knew or the recordings in the garbage bag. He wouldn't ask. Valentine would never give him a straight answer, anyhow.

She had bossed him around for the good part of two decades. Scared of a danger that never arrived. New Orleans, the old city, was safer than Houma. Safer from what, he didn't know. Hermann sighed. One day, if this kept going as it was, they would have to move somewhere else.

When he arrived in New Orleans, he took the bag from his trunk and threw it on the side of the street. He then took a tank of gasoline from the trunk and poured half of the liquid on the bag, and with the rest, he created a path running from the bag to a point a few meters away and went back to leave the tank, still one-third full, near the bag.

Hermann took out his lighter. It was a good lighter, one of those that keep the flame when left open. He sighed again and threw it on the gasoline path. Everything was done according to the instructions he had received.

Now, he could drive to her without interruptions, hoping Valentine had something less burdensome for him to do this time.

Hermann had been away just for a few days, but now, the periodic flashes of the streetlamps as he drove into town played the rhythm of his welcome song. He was home.

The excitement had been enough to awaken the wolf and his sharpened senses. His foot pushed on the accelerator more than he would have wanted.

He was hungry.

It hadn't taken Hermann too much time to accept that the wolf that lived within him needed an offer from time to time. In

fact, it wasn't much of a price to pay for his immortality and the benefits that derived from it. At first, by the way Valentine kept referring to it, he thought she had turned him into some sort of werewolf, but then he realized how much less literal this whole wolf thing was.

At the same time, the wolf was him and was something else. It was like carrying a silent passenger within him. A bundle of instincts that communicated in growls and winces. An exaggerated caricature of himself, furious when he was angry, frightened when he was scared, voracious when he was hungry. It was no more humiliating than eating or defecating.

Mortals had become disgusting to his eyes in most ways, and he could not stop the thought of their nasty habits from crossing his mind. His stomach twitched as he pictured their hands grabbing food and bringing it to their mouths, hands dirtied by the grease of the food they ingurgitated every day while humors drooled out of their lips.

Their flat teeth crunched and melted everything, reducing it to what they themselves, disgusted, would have called vomit had it moved in the opposite direction. Their guts contorted in the desperate attempt to compress, squeeze, and extract something good out of that mire. The idea of how all of that would end horrified him: the vilest act, when naked, vulnerable, and bent on themselves, they would expel the result of their intestines' work between sighs and grunts.

It was nauseating.

His sight clouded at the idea, and he slowed down just to speed up again a moment later. He had to stop for dinner as soon as he arrived in town. This was the deal. He would feed blood and meat to the wolf, and this would give him enough time to reach his wildest dreams. He had signed the contract long before.

It was an easy protocol. He just needed to find some cheap drinks and someone stupid enough that his car could

mesmerize them. At that point, he would take out enough blood to keep going for one night, perhaps avoiding killing his victim, shower them in whatever bad alcohol he had at the back of his trunk, and drop them near a dumpster. Wolf fed and mission accomplished.

Yes, once again, mission accomplished.

Hermann entertained the idea of not going to Valentine right away, but he had to talk with her about his little adventure out of town, and either he would go to her, or Valentine would find him, anyhow.

She had made the little theater in Vieux Carré her own, perhaps because the buildings with their old European style and the French café at the corner fed the longing for her old life in Paris. Walking through the Creole areas of town to land in the French district, Herman tried to imagine Valentine's life in Paris.

He smiled, thinking the red walls of Vieux Carré and its red brick roads were hints that the woman had left for him. Her Old-World origins gave her the freedom to take on an entire district without turning up anyone's nose. Vieux Carré was Valentine Duchamp's domain, and every nightcrawler in New Orleans acknowledged it.

She lived there, straight in his brain, as he walked around those old streets, and the thoughts of Valentine walked with him until he reached the theater.

It was late at night and the streets around the theater were deserted. The building was closed at that hour, but Valentine loved spending time there in activities that reminded him she might be a bit mad. The theater would have been empty and the stage silent if it were not for the dirge that kept repeating itself. It would have been hard for a mortal to move around in that

darkness, but Hermann's eyes allowed him to walk around using only the faint light filtering through the windows.

Someone dear to him sang the dirge, a failed lullaby, in honor of a teddy bear left on the ground. Since the first time he saw Valentine, she had struck him, not much for her beauty because, to be clear, she had never been beautiful, but because her innocent blue eyes trapped between voluminous scarves and blonde locks made her somehow attractive.

Those eyes looked at the world in awe, unaware of what to expect from the future and trusting everybody. Those eyes were her biggest lie, her most dangerous hoax as they hid her true nature.

Hermann came close to the woman, and running a hand through his hair, he reached into the inner pocket of his coat to take out a cigarette. He looked at her for a while, but as soon as he was about to raise his hand to greet her, Valentine stopped singing and stared at him with motionless eyes, her head tilted, and a curious smile on her face.

"Hermann, my dear, welcome home. You have mail," she said without standing from the ground where she sat. She then took an envelope from under her bulky sweater and threw it at him. "Read!"

No sender and not opened yet. On the envelope, only the recipient's name: Valentine Duchamp. "For me, all right," he said.

"You need to leave tonight," she said, her eyes still fixed on him.

He glanced at the letter again. And her name wasn't on the envelope anymore. Instead, it read Hermann Walker.

The man took another puff of his cigarette, the best thing to calm his nerves. "I imagined I'd spend some time in New Orleans."

She glanced again at the teddy bear and grasped it to rock it like a child. "I need you in Paris."

“You do? Stop acting like a child then!” he said and bit his lip.

He expected anger, but Valentine smiled. “You chose to see me like this. Of all the ways you can choose to see me, you keep picking this one. It’s kind of inappropriate if you ask me, but what kind of comfort are you seeking, my dear?” she asked, tilting her head to catch his eyes.

“I . . . How much time before I go?” Hermann asked. It would be useless to debate her if she had decided already.

“Mr. Walker,” said the voice of one of her servants from behind the stage. The man emerged from the shadows. “I’ve organized everything according to the instructions. Nobody will annoy you during your trip, sir.”

Hermann didn’t want to listen to him. Did she have to send him over like this? On a whim? Hermann took another whiff, flipping the envelope around with his fingers while he followed the servant. But before he could turn to say goodbye, Valentine wrapped him in a hug behind his back. She was warm, and her hair tickled his neck.

“Be careful, please,” she whispered.

When he turned, the theater was empty. Nobody was there beyond him, the servant, and a teddy bear on the floor. An old radio sat on the stage playing a lullaby. Hermann could not resist a smile. He needed to be in Paris.

Evidence J-0074 to the investigation I-7242

Extract from Arnaud Demeure’s journal

5 August 1259

“Who is she?” I asked the others who, like me, watched the schoolmistresses chasing a blonde girl away from the courtyard of the orphanage. She was one or two years older than me.

“A gypsy,” one said. “She comes along now and then to sell

her junk, but really, she comes to kidnap the little ones. She lives with a witch out of town, and I bet they eat babies for breakfast.”

The others laughed.

“Does she not already look a bit like a witch herself?” another asked.

I didn't know about them, but she was, to me, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.