

When the day finally came, Jesse got to the hotel first. Twenty minutes later, Rashid texted to say that the

Quietly, Jesse said, "I can't wait to meet him."

"Not many people in my life have ever looked at me like that. The opposite, really. And I know I'm somewhere between a rebound and a pet to him, given all the circumstances, but I still... I like feeling like the version of me that he sees."

Rashid dropped his gaze down to the floor of the train car, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I know he can do all that. Which means I... I know how careful he is with me. How gentle he's being, whenever he touches me. Compared to him, any human is... unimaginably soft, and fragile, and helpless." Jesse could practically feel the heat coming off Rashid's face from how hard he was blushing. She knew better than to crack a joke or even prompt him to say more. This was a gift, she knew. Shy and reserved as he was, Rashid was letting her see right into his heart.

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Jesse fell silent; she really *had* said something deal to him." "Love her that much?"—he *tries*, and it matters a great can. Obviously, consuming blood is haram, so it's not perfect, but—"That smile again. Would anyone ever

"How is that a factor?"

"The order was involved. *I* was involved, as a part of my assignment. Not the cause, but... a catalyst, undoubtedly. It's honestly a miracle he didn't kill me when he found out. I'm not sure I would've blamed him if he had. I... did some things I'm really not proud of."

Rashid looked queasy; Jesse didn't ask for details, even though her head was spinning with questions. What on Earth had the order asked him to do? Why would the Talamasca want to deliberately sabotage some random vampire's relationship? Was there a grander scheme behind it, or was it something small and petty and spiteful? A personal vendetta that someone was using the machinery of the order to carry out?

A change of subject was in order, regardless.

"It's possible this is going to come out sounding ignorant, so just remember that I'm your well-intentioned friend, Jesse, who only found out vampires are real a few days ago. Is it not... scary? Being around him? Aren't you ever afraid he's going to get hungry and realize you're full of tasty, tasty blood?"

Rashid shook his head.

"Not with him, no. A vampire's hunger becomes more manageable as they mature, and he's what they call an ancient. He only feeds a few times a month, sometimes less. You don't need to worry about his appetite getting away with him. You'll be—"

Rashid caught himself, but not quickly enough to avoid making it clear how he'd been about to finish the sentence. Unspoken in the air, the shape of the word 'safe'. He must have noticed that, since their picnic, hearing it made her tense up, because he'd been avoiding saying it. Jesse had spotted the circumlocutions. She didn't know how to tell him thank you. How to convey her humiliated gratitude that he would care about her comfort so much.

"—just fine. Besides, he has specific rules he follows when it comes to how he eats, which would preclude any danger to either of us."

"Rules?" she scoffed, "What, like, he's got a type? Only feeds on blondes under 25 or something?"

"Nothing like that, no. He adapts religious dietary

Jesse saw the corner of Rashid's mouth twitch as because they thought you had COVID or something." five minutes, and then everyone at the cafe glared at us you choked on your own spit and coughed for about pitch for an A24 horror film and you laughed so hard readers being married to each other sounding like the saying that, because I made a joke about two mind-were a couple? In fact, I *definitely* remember you

"I thought the telepaths you were playing butler for several minutes. kept his eyes down, but he hadn't flipped the page in "Him," Rashid said again. Not a yes, not a no. He hard to bury all the evidence it ever happened." supposed to be done and the senior members are trying someone you're observing, but even worse if the job's undecipherable stuff. Bad enough to get involved with the gay thing or the vampire thing. He's a part of the order finds out you're still in contact, right? It's not just "And that's why it's so important that no one in the and inattentive if he weren't."

wouldn't be putting on such a show of being neutral book. He was listening, though; Jesse could tell. He "Him?" Rashid hummed, not looking up from his than she'd expected. was wrong inside her head was proving more difficult afternoon. Waiting patiently while knowing something good, confronting a mystery she could solve in an know just yet. Jesse was glad for the distraction. It felt an attention-seeking human looking to go viral. Hard to being terrorized by a poltergeist or being terrorized by out to a primary school in the suburbs. It was either morning they were tucked away on the train, headed Motherhouse where they might be overheard, but that both been careful to discuss nothing in the

Dubai, didn't you?" Jesse asked later that week. They'd "You met him while you were on assignment in undead

the idea that Rashid's mystery man was, in fact, Tuesday. Nine days out. Not so long to wait, all things vampire could make it to London was the following Apparently, the earliest date when Rashid's again, she reasoned, he might be aiming to impress. didn't seem to care all that much about luxury. Then

he denied himself a smile. It was fun, retelling a silly anecdote with him (she hadn't yet realized, when it happened, that they were friends), playing it up, making his composure crack. But in another way—in a way she hoped she was hiding sufficiently—it felt desperately serious. She was reassuring herself: *See how I remember this? See in what detail I can recall it? See how certain I am? It's not all quicksand and panic. There are solid memories, complete memories. Not all quicksand.*

"Didn't you say they were a couple?"

"They... were."

Jesse did not miss his emphasis on the past tense, and oh, it was so past time for her to hear those juicy details.

"Rashid, be honest with me: are you a homewrecker? Did you steal somebody's man?"

Rashid gave up any pretense of paying attention to his book, setting it down and leveling an exasperated patient glare in her direction. Jesse beamed, all innocence and delight.

"You really think I'm the type?" he asked.

"I mean, that's a trick question. There isn't actually a type when it comes to that sort of thing, is there? Not in the real world."

Rashid glanced around, as if to confirm that the train car around them was still totally empty. Jesse had never met someone so fanatical in his aversion to being eavesdropped upon. Then again, he'd lived a dangerous lie under intense scrutiny for four years. Old habits, and all that.

He looked at her again and sighed. He must have come to some conclusion—perhaps he realized that it was only a matter of time until she got the details, one way or another—because when he spoke next, his usual evasiveness was absent.

"We've been involved for a little over a year, now, but it was never a secret. They had an open relationship and his partner didn't care." Bitterly, he added, "After all, he was only fucking the help. That's practically a requirement once you reach a certain tax bracket."

Jesse wondered who exactly was responsible for assigning undercover operations. Who crafted the fake identities and decided on the roles that people like

And, well. It might not be the best idea, given that you're a member of the order."

And he's devastated over it. I've been trying to help as much as I can, but he's not dealing with it very well. leaving him. They were together for almost 80 years actually here, please don't joke about his partner. It's fine when it's just the two of us, but... when he's. Jesse. His amusement, however, was short-lived. "Jesse, remotely compare to it. feeling in the world, making him laugh. Nothing could head, Jesse wondered if it would always be the best Rashid laughed in spite of himself, shaking his That's the complete package!"

"So, you're saying he's an undead bloodsucking monster, freshly divorced, and a stone-cold hottie? Besides, she would find out for herself soon enough. the Motherhouse. Then again, probably not even that. move theatres, tashed away in his sock drawer back at polaroid, like those ones from the booths they have at doesn't have one on his phone. Maybe there was a little see a picture, if she weren't sure already that Rashid Jesse raised her eyebrows; she would demand to understand."

days, you're going to take one look at him and happy. And—well, I don't know why I'm even make its appearance. I just liked making him about-him smile. Jesse had wondered when it would Ah, there it was at last. That bashful, thinking- job easier actually mattered to him. And..."

I mentioned it to him, he would fix it. Like making my he always listened to me. Any time an issue came up, if that it wasn't happening. I wasn't going anywhere. And years of having my requests for a transfer turned down "Excuse me, I was clear after a few "Lonely?"

was..."

a place like Dubai, that's never really been my thing. I Couldn't really get close with any of the other friends. No real opportunity to meet anyone, either.

flight had been delayed and it would be another hour at least until they could make it.

Jesse had brought her work laptop with her for this express purpose; nothing settled her mind quite like repetitive, predictable organizational work. In between her field assignments and translation work, her primary task at the moment was creating a digital database of the extensive collection of artifacts down in the vaults beneath the Motherhouse. It was a relatively new project: there had been considerable resistance against it. Usually, only senior members of the order were granted access to the vaults and their contents. Jesse didn't see why it was such a big deal, making an exception. She wasn't sure if it was resistance to any change whatsoever, or due to her comparatively young age, or just good old-fashioned sexism.

In the end necessity had won out over bias. Simply put, she was the only one stationed in London who had significant archaeological expertise and didn't have to call her grandkids to teach her for the tenth time how to edit a PDF.

Jesse loved it. She loved the vaults, silent apart from the hum of the humidity and temperature controls. She loved exploring the treasure trove of old ship manifests and clay tablets covered in spiky cuneiform and Renaissance paintings and camcorder tapes. It felt good, cataloguing these disparate relics, arranging all the information associated with them into a uniform, searchable, neat system.

(It occurred to her, that afternoon in the hotel, that there might be a deeper reason why she was so drawn to it. Making order out of the fragments of the past. Arranging them into their proper places, contextualized and understood and safe.)

Her heart sank when she heard another buzz from her phone. More delays? Would they have to postpone until another day? Rashid had mentioned something about dinner reservations after they were done; Jesse didn't want to wait, but she didn't want to derail Rashid's plans either.

But Jesse's dread vanished when she looked at the phone and saw the text wasn't from Rashid, at all. It was from Maharet.

Things had been particularly good between them

Rashid would be living and breathing for years at a time? And how many of the other guys in the order got stuck playing servant? Not a lot, she expected. She nudged her knee against his, a wordless apology for poking a bruise. He nudged back.

"Bet you were an awesome fucking butler." "Oh, I was phenomenal. You should see how quietly I can put down a plate. I'm one of the best." There was something awful about the mundanity of Rashid shared it. Jesse had refused to believe Maharet's hints that she was wasting her talents with the Talamasca. But now she couldn't help thinking: hadn't the Talamasca been wasting Rashid's talents leaving him to languish in Dubai?

"I guess, if I'm honest, it does surprise me you crossed that line. You're not an impulsive guy. It must've been a pretty serious risk to your cover, right?" Rashid nodded softly, turning away from her and looking off into the middle distance. For a while she thought he wasn't going to say anything more. Maybe he was ashamed of it and she'd hurt his feelings. His voice was grave when he did speak, all traces of levity gone, "I resisted it for a long time. He made I turned him down. I thought it would be so easy, keeping things professional. But it wasn't." Jesse's stomach squirmed with unease. She didn't like the sound of that one bit. "He kept pestering you?" What a nightmare, to be in the position of hoping Rashid would say that the vampire wore him down, that it wasn't anything worse...

"What? No, no, nothing like that. He only—propositioned me the one time. After I said no, he never brought it up again." Well, that was a relief, at least. It was daunting enough, having the director of the Talamasca on her shittier for harassing Rashid. She didn't really need to be adding an ancient vampire to the mix. "It was hard because he was so considerate to me. I know that sounds trivial, but... it wasn't. I wasn't allowed to have any contact with home while I was on that assignment. Talamasca policy. It was three years without a single call to my parents or text to my

be...intrusive. Not anatomically, but psychologically. I will need to search through your mind to find the alteration, and I will see the contents of any memories I uncover. A certain amount of embarrassment on your part is, in all likelihood, unavoidable."

Jesse hesitated. It was a big decision. In the past, whenever she had a big decision to make, she always did the exact same thing: she called Maharet. It felt wrong not to ask her. To make the call all on her own. Shouldn't she let Maharet know, first? Shouldn't she get permission?

But what if Rashid was right? What if Maharet was compromised, too? What if someone had threatened her, coerced her, *hurt* her, and she needed Jesse to be the strong one for once? What if it put them all in danger, telling her what was going on, all because Jesse was incapable of making big decisions without guidance?

Besides, just this morning she had been annoyed at Maharet for speaking down to her as if she were a child. She was not a child. She shouldn't act like one.

She already knew what she wanted.

"I'm alright with embarrassment. And if the information puts me in danger, I'm willing to accept that. I would very much like you to undo it, please."

"Then it's settled. Would you hand me back to Rashid, please?"

Rashid handled the arrangements. Jesse let him; he enjoyed that sort of thing, unfathomable as it was to her. She kept him company while he worked, so he could explain his decision-making to her, and they both enjoyed that.

Apparently, the process of unburying Jesse's memories could take anywhere from twenty minutes to a few hours. They would need somewhere private to do it; preferably quiet, preferably relatively comfortable. A hotel was the obvious choice, Rashid explained. It met all the criteria and came with a ready-made cover story in case anyone from the order got a little too nosy about where the two of them had gone.

So he booked them a suite at a nice hotel—a lot nicer than she would've expected, honestly. Jesse wouldn't have called Rashid *austere*, exactly, but he

seemed to see in shampoo ads and old paintings. And she had seen them in an old painting. She'd seen those curls, that nose, the shape of those eyelids, those cheekbones, that jaw, that small pursed mouth. It was an exact match—as she stared at him, she noticed the little differences—but the resemblance was nonetheless unmistakable.

“Where,” the vampire said very, very blandly, “did you hear that name?”

She'd made a mistake; Jesse knew it the moment that he spoke. Rashid looked petrified, and it occurred to Jesse that she hadn't actually asked him why he'd so scrupulously avoided telling her the vampire's name. She'd assumed it was garden-variety paranoia about the order, but looking back, he'd never actually said that, had he? She had just guessed. Maybe it was nothing of the sort. Maybe it was something ugly and complicated and deeply personal.

“I—I didn't hear it. I was—sorry, fuck, here.”

She fumbled for her work laptop, still sitting open on the little table. A quick search, and she turned it so that both men could see the screen. An entry in the database: one half of the screen occupied by an image, the other half with information about it. At the top of the page, a little larger than the rest of the text, the title: “THE TEMPTATION OF AMADEO” by MARIUS DE ROMANUS. In the center of the image, kneeling and surrounded by angels with black-feathered wings, was the man standing in front of her. Not exactly him: a little younger, a little plumper, a little paler. But the rest all matched.

“Rashid refused to tell me your name but you're in his phone as 'A' and I know you're, like, ancient, and I thought this looked a lot like you, so I was—I was guessing, and in hindsight maybe I shouldn't have done that, I'm sorry.”

The vampire took the laptop from her hands, holding it and staring at the screen for some time. The biggest difference between the painting and the real thing was, of course, the eyes. They were the same shape, the same size and positioning on his face, but the irises were a different color entirely. In the painting they were a brown so dark it was nearly black; illuminated by the laptop screen, the vampire's eyes

proving to be so unworthy of them.

And Maharet had comforted her the way only Maharet ever could. Tender words, reassurances of unconditional love, encouragement that came from a seemingly bottomless well of empathy and forgiveness.

Jesse felt better, having told her all of it. All, of course, except for the part about her memories. She had not forgotten Rashid's speculation that Maharet herself might have been tampered with, or that she had been threatened. Awful to imagine either, but it was going to be okay. Jesse was going to fix it. She would get to the bottom of it, for both of them. She was going to solve the mystery and Maharet was going to be so, so proud.

They didn't talk about anything weighty: books and fashion trends and the latest political sex scandal that had been on the news that week. It wasn't until she heard the soft electronic beep from the card reader at the door that Jesse realized just how much time had passed. She tapped out a quick goodbye and turned her phone completely off.

All her calm deserted her as she got to her feet to greet Rashid and his vampire. She should've spent some of that time bracing herself for everything that was about to happen—meeting a vampire for the first time, letting a stranger mess around in her head, discovering the reason someone had meddled with her memories. She'd been caught off-guard, though, and now her heart raced with a mix of panic and excitement.

Jesse knew the importance of making a good first impression. The stakes of it were no doubt doubled when the person you were meeting was: A) an unfathomably powerful immortal creature; B) involved with your best/only friend in a nebulous romantic way; and C) about to provide you with literally irreplaceable assistance. Simply put, she could not afford to fuck this up.

The instant Jesse saw the man's face clearly for the first time, her mouth opened itself up and said the words, “Oh! You're Amadeo.”

Rashid froze. The vampire froze.

Rashid had not been exaggerating about his beauty. The vampire was tall, elegant and long-limbed, with flawless brown skin and the kind of curls you only ever

Rashid looked at her, clearly taking it in. He did not offer any comment, but his voice was softer when he spoke next.

“Yes, easily. General mind control is extremely common among... the creatures I'm thinking of, if my theory is right. It's long-term memory alteration that's rare. I've only ever heard of one individual capable of it, but I'm sure he's not the only one.”

Rashid's eyes widened, then, as if in sudden inspiration. He pulled out his phone again and began typing furiously.

“Who are you texting?!” Jesse felt a surge of panic. “Rashid, I told you I don't want anyone in the order to —”

“It's not someone from the order. It's my... it's the guy I told you about yesterday at the pub.”

Rashid paused in his texting, his fingers hovering over the screen. He stared at Jesse, assessing and silent. Whatever he saw must have satisfied him, because he nodded to himself and then added, “It's him. He's the individual. The one who can alter memories. I'm asking if he knows of anyone with similar powers.”

Jesse was silent for a few moments as Rashid typed. It was kind of him to help her. Extremely kind, to enlist his extremely top secret crush (and now the puzzle pieces on *that* situation were falling into place very nicely, weren't they?) to help as well. She really should not interrupt him, given how generous he was being, how understanding he'd been with her.

But it had been such a hard two days, and impulse control had never really been Jesse's strong suit.

Airily, casually, laughter barely kept in check, Jesse asked, “So, um... your mystery guy. Is a creature?”

Rashid's head shot up, his eyebrows raised and his eyes wide in a look that just dared her to keep talking. Jesse bit her lips to hold back as much of her smile as she could, raising her hands in surrender and admission of guilt.

“Do you want to have that conversation with me right now, or do you want to work on solving your fucked-up memory situation? Because I've got time for only one of those things this afternoon, and it's your choice.”

He wasn't really offended, Jesse could tell. It was a teasing mock anger. There was a looseness in his affect just then that he never allowed himself back at the Motherhouse, while he was playing the role of dutiful, stoic, reserved, conservative, straight Talamasca agent. The kind of guy who would never get involved with a person who might not, by the strictest definitions, be considered a human being.

Even now, in the very way that he spoke, choosing to be vulnerable with her. Letting her see the real him, in spite of the risk.

(She was so glad she had not listened to Maharet. It had been the right choice to trust him.)

“You know what? You're so right. Let's stick with the memory thing.”

Rashid gave a pert nod, a glint of amusement in his eyes, and went back to typing. Jesse felt lighter; she had needed that moment of levity.

While Rashid was still texting, his phone began to ring with an incoming call. And there it was again: that private little smile, a flash of warmth and softness on Rashid's usually somber face.

“That's him?” Jesse guessed.

“He prefers voice calls,” Rashid said as he hit the button to accept.

Jesse, unable to help herself, craned her neck to catch a glimpse at the screen before Rashid raised the phone to his ear. No photo for the contact, and the name was just a single ‘A’. She listened intently to the side of the conversation she could hear, trying to extrapolate the rest.

“Hello—yes, we're at the park, I can talk freely. Yes, she's right here with me. What? No, this did not happen before 1794. She's a human, remember? No, I don't know, let me ask.”

Rashid tucked the phone against his shoulder, “What year was it, that summer?”

“2007 and—and will you just—will you thank him for me?”

“She says 2007, and thank you for helping her.”

There was a long silence from Rashid's end as he listened. His face did not give away what the man on the other end might be telling him. Jesse waited,

this last week and a half. Better than they had been for months, actually. The day after the picnic, Maharet had sent a long and heartfelt apology for her snap judgment of Rashid. She'd explained—not making any excuses for herself, just giving context—why she had responded so negatively to the news. It had been about Miriam, Jesse's mother. Jesse's specific choices of phrasing, along with her obvious enthusiasm, had reminded Maharet powerfully of when Miriam had first met the man who would eventually rape her and make her pregnant with Jesse. The sort of thing they called a trigger these days, Maharet explained. Not Jesse's fault, no, don't apologize, she couldn't have possibly known. These kinds of things happened, nobody was to blame. It was okay. Of course, Maharet forgave her. How guilty Jesse had felt when she realized her mistake! She'd thought back on her harsh assumptions about her aunt—that she liked Jesse better isolated, that she didn't respect Jesse's judgment, that she was being unconsciously racist—and was ashamed of herself. She tried to have compassion in all her dealings: with ghosts, with frightened bystanders, with members of the order that annoyed her, even in her archaeological work and perspective on people long dead and gone. Where had that compassion been for the one person who'd always been there for her?

It had cracked a wall inside Jesse that she hadn't even noticed herself building up, this reminder that her aunt was only human. She was so wise, so calm, so wonderful that Jesse let herself forget sometimes. But that was childish, wasn't it? Maharet had traits and flaws like anyone else. It wasn't enough just to love her: Jesse needed to be more careful with her.

So she'd poured her heart out, explaining in a rush why her letters and texts and calls had been so sparse all year. She had confessed everything: her awareness that Maharet wanted her to move on from the Talamasca; her sense of guilt for not being ready to do so just yet; her reluctance to talk about her work knowing that Maharet did not approve; her shame that this left her with little else to talk about since she had no friends, no partner, no children; her general feeling of inadequacy and her fear that Maharet would realize all her efforts had been wasted on someone who was

were a bright, almost glowing orange.

Different colored eyes. He had *different colored eyes*. Why did that thought stick in her head? Why did it make her feel suddenly nauseous?

He offered the laptop back and she took it with numb hands, swallowing against a wave of sourceless terror.

"It is me in the painting. But I don't go by that name anymore."

Which, of course, raised even more questions than it answered. Why didn't he go by it any longer? Why had they both reacted so badly to hearing that name aloud? Was he, in fact, the reason that the Talamasca had that painting in the vault? Just how old was he?

"Got it. I'm really sorry."

The vampire waved off her apology, walking smoothly past her.

"It's Armand, by the way. Rashid's abundance of discretion is, I think, less a necessity than an overcompensation for years spent spying on me and reporting back all my secrets to your precious order."

Out of the corner of her eye, Jesse saw Rashid flinch. But the vampire—Armand—was smiling as he said it. He slid off his long coat, pulling a hanger from the closet to hang it up.

"Which I have forgiven him for. Repeatedly. I do hope that, perhaps, someday he will believe me."

Rashid opened his mouth as if he was about to say something, then closed it again. Jesse had the uncomfortable sense of being caught in the middle of a retreat of an old argument. Fortunately, neither Armand nor Rashid seemed interested in hashing it out again right then.

"In any case, I can see no reason to avoid using my name."

Jesse seized on that opportunity to steer things back on course, "It's nice to meet you, Armand. Thank you for being willing to come all this way and—and help me out. I don't know if there's anything I can do to pay you back—"

Once again, that languid, rather limp-wristed gesture of dismissal.

"Satisfying my own curiosity is payment enough. I've not encountered another vampire with the ability to

bouncing one knee nervously, trying to be patient. Gradually, a crease began to form between Rashid's brows. After some time, he held out the phone towards Jesse without a word.

Uncertain, she took it and held it to her ear. A melodic voice with an Received Pronunciation accent came through, "This is not an offer I ever imagined making to a mortal, but you have been kind to Rashid, and I like Rashid. So, I am going to make it to you." A pause, just long enough for Jesse to second-guess if she ought to be saying "thank you" again, "Would you like me to undo it for you?"

"You can do that?" she asked.

"I can't make promises until I have a look, of course, but if another vampire has erased your memories, I'm fairly confident I should be able to reverse the process. That doesn't guarantee the memories in question will be complete or accurate, of course. They will merely be returned to the state they were in before the interference."

"Another vampire". He'd said "another vampire", hadn't he? Which, by necessary inference, meant that he was one. She was on the phone with an actual vampire.

"Sure, that makes sense," she said, even though nothing much made sense to her at that moment.

"So... would you like me to do it? You may not end up liking what you find. It could be that whatever information you uncover will expose you to untold amounts of danger. I want you to consider that carefully, before you give your answer."

Jesse didn't want to consider. She wanted to shout *yes, can you do it over the phone, can you do it right away?* But he was right and she knew it.

The man (*vampire*, her brain amended, and she was going to have to unpack that later) waited patiently in silence as she thought. Hesitantly, she asked, "Are there any health risks to the process? Could you, I don't know, give me brain damage if something goes wrong?"

A soft, wordless sound of deliberation from the other end of the line. "Anything is possible, of course, but I would say it is astronomically unlikely. However, I should perhaps have mentioned that the process will

mid-sentence, only realizing after the fact what she'd said. Rashid looked at her, uncomprehending.

"What? What is it?"

There it was again. That slippery, tilting feeling in her head as she tried to seize hold of certainty in her own thoughts. Jesse's breathing grew faster, because it was happening again, it was wrong, it was *wrong*.

"Aunt Maharet didn't tell me to keep her a secret. That's wrong. I offered on my own. I thought... I offered? Didn't I?"

From nowhere, a shard of vivid memory. The warmth of the phone pressed against her ear, as if she had been talking for a long while. Maharet's voice coming through, low and rich and rhythmic:

They can't know about me. You will not tell the order anything of the Great Family or of Sonoma. You mustn't ever speak my name to another member of the order. You must never describe me, even in passing. Don't breathe a word about me, my darling. If you love me, you'll do that for me. Can I count on that? Will you be good for me?

Jesse heard her own voice, small and lost, as if it was coming from someone else, "No. I was right the first time. She... did tell me. She ordered me. Why would she do that?"

"Well... maybe whoever erased your memories got to her, too. Put it in her head that she had to tell you to keep it a secret. Or they just threatened to hurt you, if she didn't say that. We really don't know."

The thought of anyone actually trying to intimidate Maharet was so absurd that Jesse laughed, a small and strangled thing. Then again, as ridiculous as it sounded, it was still vastly more plausible than Maharet being involved voluntarily. And if someone had compelled her to do that...

Jesse chewed her lower lip, grateful she had not had the chance to eat any of the takeaway sitting forgotten on the blanket beside them. If there were anything in her stomach at that moment, she was fairly certain she would be fighting not to throw up.

"Whoever is responsible, could they—could they have made my aunt send me away, all those years ago?"

Impossible to hide the raw hurt in the question.

It only took around twenty seconds for him to recoil, dropping her hands, those bright eyes of his round with horror. Distressing, to see such stark emotion on his face after all that impassivity. "What?" Jesse asked, "What is it?" Armand waved the question off, leaning far forward, bracing one hand on her knee and using the other hand to cup the back of her head as if he were trying to actually *feel* its contents more closely. Jesse's pulse raced. Had he accidentally stumbled across something medical? A brain tumor, a blood clot, a rare disease that might kill her at any second? What could have prompted that look of alarm? "This is... I've never seen anything like this." Awe and revulsion in his voice in equal measure. Jesse was trying very, very hard not to panic, but it was difficult when Armand himself was so clearly growing agitated. She broke eye contact, glancing over to Rashid, who looked every bit as terrified as she felt. "What are you seeing, sir?" he prompted. Jesse was too scared to even clock the honorific. Armand merely hummed in response, vague and distracted. Jesse felt him continuing to survey her mind. Faster, now, less careful. Taking in the breadth of it. Jesse willed herself to sit still, curling her hands into fists atop her thighs. However bad the news, it was still better to know about it than to continue on in ignorance. "Whatever this is, it's not what you believed, Rashid. This is not just one summer, erased to undo some discovery." She forced herself to keep breathing. In, out. In, out. "When a memory is altered, it leaves a kind of seam. Like a scar. I found that summer: 2007. The place where it should be." In spite of everything, Jesse felt a distant relief at the confirmation. So it was true, then. She wasn't simply going crazy; something had been done to her, and it had left the kind of evidence that an expert could recognize. Someone had done this. "But there are more seams than that. There are so many. They're everywhere. Spread out across your entire life. This is..."

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familiar and steady presence. What on Earth had she ever done to deserve that quiet, steadfast loyalty?

—*A question I ask myself regularly.*

Armand's voice, directly in her mind. More warmth in it than she had heard at any point as he spoke aloud. Jesse was grateful she had encountered telepaths before, in her work with the order. Speaking directly mind to mind was, at least, not totally unprecedented to her.

When Jesse was feeling particularly stressed, her impulse control tended to vanish. And so she thought, deliberately:

—*He's got a smile for you, you know. A smile that he only ever smiles when he's thinking about you. I can recognize it every time.*

Maybe it was meddling and none of her business; it still felt good to see that information hit. Armand's unsettling eyes widened, his lips parting in a tiny inhaled of surprise. What was it that Rashid had called himself? "Somewhere between a rebound and a pet"? Jesse wasn't so sure she bought that, now. Not given that reaction from Armand.

With that, she offered her hands, palms up, and Armand took them. Jesse had expected his skin to be icy and unyielding—clearly and distinctly monstrous. But it wasn't. He merely felt a little cool. A young man with circulation issues, or who naturally ran a bit cold, like her aunt did.

"Ready?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. Fuck it, let's do this."

It was an odd sensation, feeling him enter her mind and begin his examination. Far more tangible than she had anticipated, but Jesse guessed that that was intentional on Armand's part. He could probably do this without her being aware of it at all. He was stepping with a heavier tread, metaphorically speaking, as a courtesy to her.

Jesse forced her body to relax in stages: her neck, then her shoulders, then her core. Armand's thumbs stroked her cupped palms in firm and rhythmic circles. Strange, feeling his fingers against her hand and feeling some psychic equivalent to them in her mind at the same time, sliding over the surface of her memories, feeling for cracks.

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happened that summer in Sonoma, what code would you use?" Jesse had memorized all the different codes—different ones for spirits, for unexplained natural phenomena, for witches, for various creatures—in her first weeks with the order. Was this some kind of surprise aptitude test? Because if so, it was going to be insultingly easy. "I mean, obviously it—" She stopped. Rashid's gaze on her was unblinking. Why did he look so worried? "It would be—" She didn't know. Why couldn't she choose a code? Her mind was blank, blank, blank. A slick steep surface that sent her careening away the moment she tried to get purchase. It was not the codes that were missing, but the summer. But that had no sense. It had been a magical time, an unforgettable time! Jesse closed her eyes, grasping for a memory she could hold onto. Disjointed fragments presented themselves. No context, no narrative, just sensory input linked with seemingly random emotions. Rose petals—pink, white, yellow—caught in a spill of long red hair. Just, fear. The soft rasp of redwood bark against her bare back and buttocks, scraping her skin with every rhythmic movement. Just, exhilaration, fear. Waking up with the aftertaste of wine in her mouth, unfamiliar and sour: pain, nausea, disorientation, fear. A dim corridor and an iron spiral staircase leading down into utter darkness: fear, fear, fear, fear, fear, fear— "What was happening? None of it made any sense. Those impressions, those feelings, whatever they were, they hadn't happened? Why did her face feel wet? She wanted to ask Rashid what was going on, but the words came out, "It was paradise. That summer in Sonoma was the happiest of my life. I—" Her voice cracked. Rashid came closer, tugged her up and against him in an awkward kneeling hug. She didn't realize it until he was holding her that her entire body was shaking. "I was so—I was—" "When had she started crying? Whatever for? Why did it all feel so awful?" "I was so s-s-sate."

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chapter three vampire

Jesse kept a diary of the memories that came back to her. She wrote down dreams, fragments she saw in flashes. But she did not mention any of this in her letters to Maharet.

— *Queen of the Damned*

Once she finally managed to stop crying, Rashid made a phone call. A rather unconvincing lie about food poisoning and an apology later, both of their schedules were cleared for the rest of the day. Jesse was grateful for it; she'd been having strange episodes like this on occasion for most of her adult life, but two in as many days was unprecedented. She felt wrung out.

"Thank you."

"You shouldn't thank me yet. I'm afraid you might've been right earlier." He grimaced as he put his phone away. "There are definitely going to be some rumors that the two of us are sneaking off for an afternoon, ah. Rendezvous."

Jesse shrugged. "I'm alright with that. Not like I have anyone to get jealous about it, and you already said your man isn't in the order, so he's not going to overhear any office gossip."

She scrubbed her face with her hands, exhaling a shaky breath. It wasn't enough to thank him. Not after what she'd put him through these last few days.

"I'm—I'm really sorry, Rashid. I don't know what the fuck's been happening lately. I think there's something wrong with my head. Maybe, I don't know, maybe I've got a brain tumor or something."

She laughed, uneven and hiccupping, hints of her earlier sobbing audible in it.

"Sorry for—getting confused and freaking out and saying stuff that doesn't make sense like a crazy person." Jesse looked down at her hands in her lap, her skull pounding with the kind of headache that only comes after crying your eyes out. Wasn't that supposed to purge all the negative emotions? So why did she still feel miserable? Quietly, hollowly, she asked, "I'm... a crazy person, aren't I?"

"Jesse. Look at me." Rashid's voice was firm,

authoritative. Jesse met his gaze; there was no anger in his face. Just that same worry she'd been seeing on and off all day.

"You're not crazy. I wasn't going to bring it up until I had some proof, but I've seen this before, gotten in all right? I think someone's *done* this to you. Gotten in your head and erased your memories of that summer, made you forget in order to keep something hidden." Jesse stared. It was ironic, perhaps, given her abilities, but her first reaction was one of deep skepticism. "What, like... induced amnesia? Is that even possible?"

"Like I said, I've seen it. *Recently*. This exact same thing. There are... creatures that can bury memories, and this is what it looks like when they do it. Right down to the creepy speech papering over the gap so you don't notice it."

Jesse sat for a moment or two and let herself process that. "Recently" made her think Rashid must have encountered these creatures in Dubai, which was probably why he wasn't providing specifics. A petulant part of her wanted to ask for details anyway. She was baring it all, wasn't she? Didn't that earn her a little trust? But the sander, more mature part of her mind knew that request would be unreasonable.

"Okay. But... why would anyone want to mess with my memories from when I was 20? I wasn't even working for the Talamasca back then. I wasn't *important*."

"I don't know yet. You must've seen something at your aunt's house you shouldn't have. Something that somebody wanted to stay hidden pretty badly, *especially* from the Talamasca. Which is very intriguing."

Jesse wasn't exactly thrilled with how *excited* about all this Rashid was starting to sound. But then again, could she really blame him? Wouldn't she be exactly the same, if not worse, if their roles were reversed? It was the one common theme that had united every single member of the Talamasca she'd met so far: they were all much too nosy for their own good.

"No, but wait, hang on, it was my aunt who told me never to tell the Talamasca about her or the Sonoma compound, so are you saying that—" Jesse faltered

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Great Family—that's our nickname for our extended family—or, you know, about the summer I stayed with her in Sonoma."

Rashid had stopped eating at some point as she spoke. He smiled at her in bewilderment. "I'm lost again. Why would the Talamasca care about you spending a summer with your rich aunt in California?"

"Oh! Well..." She hadn't thought about that before, but the answer came so readily to her lips. She didn't have to pause and think about it, not even for an instant. "It was paradise. That summer in Sonoma was the happiest of my life. I remember reading in the library, and going down to the creek, and walking through the redwoods. I was so safe and happy there."

She grinned at Rashid. It was actually lovely, talking to him about these things. How had she never realized what she was missing all those years, not having any friends? It was great!

It took a few moments for Jesse to notice that Rashid was not smiling anymore. Was, in fact, staring at her with quite an odd expression on his face.

"Jesse," Rashid's voice was very calm, very neutral, "Did you...hear what you just said to me?"

"Huh?"

"Did you hear yourself?"

Why on Earth did he sound so *careful*? That was the voice Rashid used when they encountered a panicky member of the public who had just gotten their first glimpse of the supernatural. It was his calm-down-a-frightened-animal voice. Why was he using it on her?

"Of course, I heard it. I said it." She crossed her arms over her chest, unease beginning to squirm in her stomach.

"What question did I ask you?"

Surely there was a point to this tedious exercise. Rashid wasn't one for elaborate, drawn-out jokes. Sighing, trying her best to ignore her mounting irritation, Jesse indulged him. "You asked me why Talamasca would be interested in that summer."

"Right, yes, I did."

Rashid scooted closer to her on the blanket. Watching her intently, his voice scrupulously calm, "I guess I'm just wondering. Purely as a thought experiment...if you were going to file a report on what

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edit memories in centuries. I want to know who's done this and why, for my own sake. Besides, this gives me the opportunity to confirm my ability to reverse the process. So, when it comes down to it, there will be mutual benefit. No need for gratitude."

He delivered this explanation with a brusque indifference that settled Jesse's nerves. She found it much easier to stomach than she would have sympathetically, but her first reaction was one of deep benevolence, altruism. He was getting something out of this, she was getting something out of this. An equal exchange.

"So. Shall we get underway?" Armand suggested. Jesse nodded, looking anxiously around the room. Now that the moment had actually arrived, the thought of someone digging around in her head—*changing* things—was more daunting than she wanted to admit. As nonchalantly as she could manage, she asked, "Where, um, do you want me?"

Armand tilted his head slightly to one side, regarding her. Was it just her imagination, or were his eyes closer to brown than they had been earlier? No, it had to be a change in the lighting. It had to be. Eyes did not change color. She knew that. Why couldn't she breathe?

"Jesse?" She must have looked pretty bad, for Rashid to sound so worried. "We don't actually have to do this today, if you've changed your mind. Armand and I can go to dinner and it's no big deal."

"No," she answered at once, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. She just had to get herself under control. It wasn't just about curiosity, for her. She had to do this. Not only for herself, but for aunt Maharet. She could be brave, for aunt Maharet. "No, I want to."

Rashid still looked skeptical, but Armand's expression remained as impassive as ever.

"It will be easiest if we sit near one another and maintain some form of physical contact," Armand explained, answering her earlier question as if the interruption had not occurred.

Jesse nodded, making her way to one of the chairs arranged around the little table in the suite's kitchen area. Armand followed her, occupying another, their knees almost touching. Rashid hovered close by, and Jesse was grateful to have him in her line of sight, a

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Armand, seeming to realize only then how far into Jesse's space he had gotten, let go of her head and sat back in his chair. She felt him withdraw from her mind at the same time. He looked her over—assessing the outside of her, now that he'd gotten a glimpse of what was in her head. His expression was both fascinated and disturbed. Before, he had shown very little interest in her as a person; now he was staring at her with an intense, unnerving focus.

"This is...comprehensive. This is *sick*. Your mind has been mutilated."

"Oh."

What else could she say? A numb feeling of unreality had taken the place of her panic. Not pleasant, by any measure, but sustainable. *Mutilated*. Not a word she'd ever expected to hear applied to herself. She didn't feel mutilated. Wasn't that the sort of thing a person ought to be aware of, if it happened to them?

"Can you still fix it?" She didn't quite manage to keep the tremble from her voice, "Please?"

Armand nodded to himself, slow and preoccupied.

"Rashid, would you mind calling to cancel our reservations, please? And perhaps it would be a good idea to order something delivered for the both of you. This is going to take considerably longer than anticipated."

There were more things she wished she could say. As she walked, more and more comebacks and accusations bubbled up in her mind. *Why do you always do this? Can't you just be happy for me? I wouldn't be wasting time with the Talamasca if you'd let me come back to Sonoma to see you. I wouldn't be drinking and laughing with Rashid if you would only let me be by your side, drinking and laughing with you. It's not fair to abandon me and then scold me for finding a place where I am actually wanted and a person who actually wants to be around me.*

She saw Maharet begin to write her response, but silenced her phone and tucked it away before it could arrive. She simmered with anger all through the morning. She picked at a translation she was working on, but her mind kept drifting back to the brief conversation with her aunt. She hated it, how the slightest hint of disapproval from Maharet sent her spiraling, made her revert to an insecure teenage version of herself.

She'd accomplished almost nothing by the time noon rolled around. A quiet cough pulled her from her thoughts, and Jesse was surprised to see Rashid standing a few feet away from her desk, takeaway in one hand and a picnic blanket draped over his arm. "It's nice out, let's eat in the park?"

"The Motherhouse before asking, 'So are you intentionally trying to set me up as your bear, or what?' Cause if that's the goal, I'm absolutely down, but a heads-up would be nice."

Rashid threw his head back and laughed, and the sound of it loosened the sick knot of tension that had been sitting heavy in Jesse's gut since that morning. They put down the blanket on a patch of grass; while Rashid divided up the containers of food, Jesse

I know you're trying to look out for me, and I'm really grateful, but it's not necessary. I'm a grown woman and I know how dangerous the world can be. Besides, Rashid is gay.

snuck a glance at her phone. Ten missed texts from Maharet. It buzzed while in her hands. An eleventh. "I'm going to ask something rude now," Rashid announced brightly.

Jesse looked up, "Are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, I suppose I can't stop you."

"You said you don't have other friends, and I know you're not dating anyone. So...who keeps texting you?"

Heat flooded Jesse's face, a sudden and explosive flush that would ruin any attempt she might make at a nonchalant deflection. It wasn't fair, how her body always betrayed her like this. Unfathomable, that Rashid had spent more than four years undercover, operating under the constant scrutiny of mind-readers; Jesse wouldn't have lasted an hour.

The phone buzzed in her hand again. Twelve texts. Jesse opened the text thread, scrolling, her eyes catching stray phrases as she went: *my darling* and *love you too much* and *what's best for you* and *hope for your sake* and *my unconditional love forever* and *my child* and *darling* and *love you*. She exhaled shakily, and put her phone away again.

She'd never broken her word to Maharet before. Never once in her life.

Rashid's quiet voice broke through the static in her head, all its humor gone as he reassured, "Hey, it's okay, you don't actually have to tell me. That was—I shouldn't have asked. Sorry."

And wasn't that just like Rashid? Giving her an out, as soon as he saw her distress. Because he was her friend. Because he cared more about upsetting her than he did satisfying his curiosity.

"It depends on who is asking." Her voice was soft, soft. Like if she whispered quietly enough, it wouldn't be a betrayal anymore.

"Hmm?"

"Is it Rashid, my coworker, faithful agent of the Talamasca, whose duty it is to report honestly on anything he observes? Or is it...my friend, Rashid?"

Jesse's heart was beating much too fast, she was *sweating*, could feel it unpleasant and damp under her arms, at the small of her back, beneath her breasts. A

get on with addressing her own. "We should get this over with," she declared. They settled on a different configuration, this time, since it was likely to take several hours. Armand suggested that Jesse lay on the bed, and Armand pulled up one of the chairs so he could lean over and press their foreheads together.

"Won't you get sore, bent over like that for so long?"

For some reason, this question prompted Armand to smirk and shoot a look at Rashid. Rashid, who blushed, and swallowed, and promptly looked away. "Your concern is touching, but I assure you, I'm very familiar with maintaining much more difficult and uncomfortable positions than this for long stretches at a time."

Rashid was practically squirming with embarrassment, which was all the confirmation Jesse needed that Armand was referencing their sex life. Hard to pinpoint exactly what kink he was referring to from only that, but she got the gist. It really was always the quiet ones, wasn't it?

Well, good for him. Good for both of them. Jesse shut her eyes, feeling the cool pressure of Armand's forehead coming to rest against her own. "I'm going to look for something easy, to begin. I can tell from the size of the men how much time is missing. I'll find one that is very short, by comparison—ah, yes, here. This."

Jesse sucked in a quick breath, the sensation of Armand's presence in her mind had changed. She could feel it sharpen, a little hooked blade caught on something that resisted, poised to slice through. "Ready?"

Jesse did not know whether Armand would be able to see it, lodged in her head as he was. But she didn't particularly care at the moment. If he wanted to think her childish, well, so be it. She closed her eyes and pictured her aunt's face. Pictured her smiling, that soft encouraging smile that made Jesse's stomach flip, and saying, "Go on, now. Be brave."

Armand tore the scar open.

ghosts, as well."

Judging by the look on his face, Rashid had not known this previously. Jesse didn't know why it took her by surprise. She'd already known that Armand was a human before he was turned. Why not a human like her, with psychic powers?

"Not nearly as frequently as you do, from the sound of it, but...from time to time they seek me out."

They both waited, but Armand seemed uninterested in sharing anything further, and so the conversation moved on. Armand remained silent once more, until Jesse mentioned the Talamasca archives in passing.

"That painting you showed me," Armand cut in, "I didn't realize it had survived. It surprised me. I thought I had tracked down all the remaining examples of his work in the world. There are only a handful."

Beside her, Rashid had gone tense all over. His face was stony and impenetrable; what was it about this painting that had him so upset?

"You mean Marius de Romanus?"

The name didn't ring any bells; her own areas of academic interest lay far away from Renaissance art. Maybe she had come across it a few times in the archives, but nothing stuck out in her mind. Curious, the way Armand just said 'his'. Like no other referent was necessary.

"Mmm. Yes. Is it being properly cared for?"

Rashid got to his feet and began tidying away the remnants of their meal. Jesse risked a glance and saw a muscle in his jaw jumping.

"Yes, the preservation standards in the archives are very high. I would never have joined the Talamasca if they weren't serious about that kind of thing."

Armand's hands were moving restlessly in his lap—notable only because the rest of him was always so still.

"Good. Good, I'm glad."

Jesse wanted so badly to slam a hand on the table and demand that they stop being so damn mysterious and just tell her what the deal was with the painting and the name change and their weird silences. Which was, she thought, a good sign that she'd settled enough to proceed. If she had the space in her thoughts for speculation about other people's problems, she ought to

The memory began without images or sounds, only bodily sensations. Air circulating over skin that had been covered a moment before. Pleasant feeling of her sluggish heavy limbs being moved around. At the inside of her thigh, a brief stinging pinch, followed by a rush of thrumming buzzing warmth. An awareness of something wet on her skin, something apart from the slick familiar wetness between her legs. Inside, a feeling of pressure, friction.

Jesse might have slipped back to sleep and some pleasant, arousal-fogged dream if it weren't for the sound of a siren passing by on the street beneath her open window. The dissonant wail jarred her, woke her up just enough to realize she was not alone in her bed.

There was something there, a low figure that she couldn't parse in the dim light of the streetlamp filtering in. She thought maybe it was only a shadow in between her open legs, until it moved, and the terror hit her. Something there in the bed with her, a shape that was only *mostly* human. An awful mockery of humanity, because no one bent like that, moved like that.

The nothuman had its face latched onto her naked thigh. Where had her pajamas gone? Why did she feel so cold, so dizzy? What was that tug in her veins? That aching tension low in her stomach? What was making that soft, wet, repeated sound?

"Shhh, shhh."

A familiar voice, as the thing detached from her and lifted its head, and it was her aunt Maharet. She was hardly recognizable in this light: something opaque and reflective about her eyes, something not entirely right. The bottom half of her face was smeared with a dark fluid, viscous and almost black, from her chin up to the tip of her nose.

"Just go back to sleep, my darling."

It didn't line up; her aunt's deep soothing voice coming out of a smiling mouth that had blood—it was *blood*—stuck between its teeth. Her canines were too long. They hung down obscenely and dented her bottom lip. Not right. Not *right*.

Movement caught Jesse's eye, drew her gaze away. Maharet's hand was between her legs. Three fingers

chapter four dreaming

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- Queen of the Damned

Suddenly it was ten o'clock, and she'd just awakened and Maharet was standing at the foot of her bed. Maharet had come to her and kissed her. Such a lovely warm kiss: it had sent a low throbbing sensation through her.

They did not begin right away. Rashid insisted that they wait until after dinner; he tried to make it sound as if he was being purely selfish, but Jesse saw right through him. He wanted to give her a break, a little time to calm down and process what Armand had told her, before they began the lengthy and arduous process of undoing it.

As they ate, Rashid kept up a steady stream of conversation. Jesse quickly picked up on the fact that he was avoiding discussing his time in Dubai. Probably too hard to steer clear of bringing up Armand's ex, not to mention whatever underhanded things he'd been ordered to do during his time there. Instead, he regaled Armand with stories about their joint adventures—the ghosts and telekinetic children and hoaxes and poltergeists. Jesse had never seen him so talkative before. Some of it was probably to make up for her uncharacteristic quiet, but she suspected it was also thanks to Armand's presence.

After three consecutive stories in which he egregiously downplayed his own bravery and helpfulness, she began interjecting with small corrections and little things he'd conveniently left out. Armand listened, silent but attentive. Not eating anything, of course, although Jesse had offered. He did eventually join in, when Rashid joked about getting possessed by a ghost.

"I keep telling you," Jesse corrected, "that possession's not possible if you don't agree to it, and anyway you'd need to be a medium like me—" "—that must be what I am," Armand interrupted, quite casually. When Rashid and Jesse both stopped talking to look at him, he shrugged, "A medium. I see

I'm glad to hear you've found someone you work well with. But you should be careful around him, my darling. There are plenty of men out there who have no qualms about using friendship as a pretext just to get women to let their guards down. It's a dangerous world. I hope for your sake these worries are superfluous, but please remember that Rashid may not be what he seems.

Jesse stopped in her tracks and stared at the text. A numbness began to spread through her body. Her first reaction, stomach-churning in its intensity: *She doesn't approve. She's upset. I've disappointed her. I've let her down, and now—and now—*

But her initial panic gave way to something different, something unexpected. *Anger.*

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been actually angry with Maharet. Usually they got along effortlessly. None of the conflict and frustration that other people described when talking about their families. Maharet was always so patient with her. How many times had Jesse thought, silently, *I am so very, very lucky?*

So how could the same person who was always fair and open-minded towards her jump to a wild assumption like that? Hard not to wonder if it might be a race thing. All Jesse had said was that she had a new friend who was courageous and serious (and surely Maharet could not have any objections with that!) and that his name was Rashid. Would Maharet have still given that little word of warning, if his name had been Chris or Mike or Robert?

She should confront Maharet about it directly. Call out her bias and force her to acknowledge it. It would be the right thing to do, the brave thing. She started typing a few attempts and then deleted them. During their next phone call, she decided, so Maharet wouldn't misinterpret her tone. For now, she settled on:

few times a month she stared down howling violent ghosts without even batting an eye, but even the thought of going against Maharet's wishes had her hurtling towards a panic attack.

"It's your friend Rashid asking."

"Could she trust it? Could she trust him? Had Maharet been prescient, to urge caution? Or had she been deliberately trying to drive a wedge? Make it impossible for Jesse to trust Rashid, before she ever properly gave him a chance?"

"It's my aunt."

She looked up, anxiously monitoring his face for his response. Rashid tilted his head, clearly searching his memory for any information on Jesse and aunts. Months since he'd read her file, but his power of recall was impressive—even, it would seem, for incidental footnotes.

"Is that... Margaret? The one who funded your archaeology digs?"

And for her college. And her car, her flat, her vacations abroad, her hobbies. Her life. Her whole life. "It's Maharet, actually, and yes." Jesse dropped her gaze, plucking up a blade of grass and spinning it between thumb and forefinger. "We've never lived near to one another, but we're really close. And it's not just... I mean, yeah, she paid for my school, and a bunch of other stuff, but it's more than that. She's been my best friend ever since I was a kid. She was just... always there for me, you know? I could tell her anything. Go to her with any problem and she'd listen."

"That sounds wonderful. I can't imagine having that kind of relationship with my family. I mean, I love them, but..." he trailed off with a shrug.

Jesse nodded. She understood; Rashid had not shared a great deal about his family, but what he had affectionate upbringing.

"That's wonderful," Rashid repeated, but there was a note of confusion in his voice, now. "Sorry, um. I feel like I must have missed something. Why... couldn't you tell any of that to coworker Rashid?"

"Well, the Talamasca don't know about aunt Maharet, and I promised her when I joined that I wouldn't tell them anything about her, or about the

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