

to the sound of their footsteps moving away, waited until they were out of earshot entirely, before she dared to stand up and look for something to clean it with. Graciela was in the laundry room when Jesse stumbled in. Jesse explained what happened, what she needed. Graciela offered to handle it; she told Jesse to go to her room and lay down, she looked terrible, so pale. But Jesse wouldn't let her. She shook her head, stuttering and frantic, insisting again and again, "No. No, aunt Maharet told me to clean it up. I have to be the one to do it. I have to do what she says. I have to do what she says, please. Please." She was crying again; she couldn't seem to make herself stop. "Okay. Okay, sweetie. Let me at least carry the mop up for you, okay? We'll go together." In yet another memory, Jesse happened to glance at the calendar soon after her breakfast and realized with a jurching feeling as if she had missed a step on the stairs that it was July 20th. The day after Maria's birthday. She'd missed it. Jesse went to the small study near the front door that had the nearest landline. No cell service out here in the woods, after all. She was still on the phone, sitting perched on the big oak desk with her legs dangling when Maharet came in the room. Jesse apologized for the dozenth time for missing her birthday. She told Maria how much she loved her, how much she missed her. She said yes, she was having a wonderful time. Yes, aunt Maharet was, too. Yes, she would tell her all about it soon, she promised. She'd barely set the phone back down in its cradle before Maharet had pushed her back, flat on top of the desk. She spread Jesse's legs and slotted herself neatly between them, urgent and possessive. Jesse opened her mouth to Maharet's tongue and tried to communicate herself it had nothing to do with the phone call. Maharet wasn't claiming what was hers, exclusively. She wasn't trying to replace Maria. It was just—wrong timing. A coincidence. Maharet probably would be appalled to even hear it might have come across like that. It was getting harder every day to believe her own lies. When Jesse tried to make a call two days later, the

one. It is a human femur and we need to contact the authorities and report it so they can investigate."

Santino looked, for some reason, as if Christmas had come early. He sat back in his chair, beaming and glancing between the two of them, like he was about to get a show. Jesse bit the inside of her cheek; she would not shrink or apologize. She respected her aunt immensely. She didn't enjoy it, backtalking her like this. But at this exact moment, Jesse was the one who had the knowledge and who knew the correct procedures.

Maharet got to her feet slowly, each deliberate movement radiating anger. Jesse would have quailed, if she had been able to move. Her body had gone unresponsive. She couldn't open her mouth. She couldn't step away. She couldn't twitch a single muscle.

"You," Maharet pronounced carefully, "Are an insolent child who knows *nothing*."

She tilted her head, looking Jesse up and down. As if she were evaluating her. As if she were making a decision. Maharet's lips pursed, and Jesse's stomach churned with sudden, overwhelming nausea. All at once she could move her body again, and it was a good thing, too. She fell to her hands and knees and was violently sick, coughing and retching, vomiting until nothing came up but acid. Still, her body seized up, trying to expel more, more. Her throat burned and her abdomen ached from the force of it. She could barely breathe; her vision was blurry with tears.

Maharet gave a little wave of her hand, and Jesse finally stopped retching. She gulped for air, her whole body shaking as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She hoped Santino had not seen her with trails of saliva hanging from her lips. She kept her eyes down, because she didn't want to know if he was still smiling, now that she'd gotten her punishment.

"Clean it up," Maharet said, coldly, "And never speak to me like that in front of company again."

Jesse nodded; she didn't know if either of them saw it. She kept her eyes down, her head bowed. Small, repentant. No need for further correction. She listened

her to always, always be there, so everything would be frictionless and easy and dreamlike. She didn't even notice that Maharet's eyes weren't gray anymore, when she climbed up on the bed and breathed with wonder. "Look at you. Did you get *that* without me, little one? Poor thing...let me help..." Those memories were harder to stomach even than the ones where Maharet was all over her, insistent and voracious, massaging Jesse's excuses and evasions into glazed acceptance. It would have been so much simpler, if she'd always been tricked, been pinned down, been forced. But there were times when she begged for it—no coercion, no mind control. Those were the memories that left Jesse mute and disgusted, unable to do anything but roll on her side and curl up around where her hand and Rashid's were linked. Armand seemed like he wanted to say something a few times when it happened, but whatever it was, he didn't succeed in the end. She hated that it wasn't entirely a lie, that mantra Maharet had implanted when she took all these memories away. *That summer in Sonoma was the happiest of my life*. Jesse had been happy, a lot of the time. Happy, and very young, and very drunk, and very, very isolated. In one memory, Jesse accidentally started one of the women who came in from Santa Rosa every day to clean, and cook, and tend to the house. Jesse apologized profusely and they ended up laughing together about giant spooky mansions. They chatted after that. Her name was Graciela and she was nineteen; a year younger than Jesse. She had braces and the brightest green eyes Jesse had ever seen on another person in real life. She asked if Jesse was having a nice summer visiting her mother. (This, too, was common—tiny moments when her bubble of happiness burst and Jesse plunged deep into panic and self-loathing and shame. "She's not my mother," she said to Graciela, too quick, too vehement, "She's not my mother.") Graciela explained that Jesse had only been able to creep up on her like that because she was listening to the newest album by the Arctic Monkeys; she was

appalled when Jesse confessed to never having heard a song by them. So they'd ended up shoulder to shoulder, sharing earbuds, sharing grins, bobbing their heads in careful sync so the earbuds didn't get yanked loose.

When Graciela finally said she should get back to her work before she got in trouble, and Jesse went on her way, she realized it had been a while since she'd spoken to anyone but Maharet. How long, exactly? Idle curiosity propelled her to check. She had to look at the calendar—time was such a blur in this place. Jesse's stomach dropped when she realized it had been more than two weeks since she'd spoken to anyone apart from her aunt.

There were a few infrequent interruptions to their isolation; in one memory, Mael returned after a few days' absence and brought visitors to the house. One of them had curly black hair and a striking widow's peak. He spoke with a rather thick Italian accent, giving his name as simply 'Santino'. He kissed the back of Jesse's hand; she shivered and cracked a joke about how cold his mouth was, which made everyone in the room smile for some reason. He was delighted when Jesse—at Maharet's urging—demonstrated that she could converse with him in fluent Italian. He complimented her warmly, but kept glancing at Maharet as he did it. As though Jesse were an animal Maharet had trained, and her success was Maharet's, too. Jesse didn't like that very much.

When Jesse asked how Santino knew her aunt, he laughed and said they were old friends. The exact same non-answer that Mael had given. Santino reached into a little pocket in his jacket and pulled out a ring with an outrageously large emerald on it. Jesse wondered why he just had that with him, but he was already sliding it onto her finger. Touching her more than he had to, as he did it. His hands were as icy as his mouth had been, his nails strangely glassy and sharp. Like Maharet's. Mael's, too, come to think of it...

Once the memory ended and they were back in the hotel room, Armand laughed. A harsh, brittle sound. He was smiling that awful, gut-wrenching smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Of course," he said, shaking his head, "Of course, your aunt is friends with Santino."

waves of her orgasm, raked her fingernails through the sheets and shredded them in her ecstasy? How many times had Maharet reassured her that it didn't matter if Jesse grew up calling her *unt* because there was no blood between them, or only *very* distant. So it was alright, if Maharet touched her, if Maharet fucked her. Permitted on a technicality. But Jesse didn't think there was any loophole on Earth big enough to allow Maharet calling out her twin sister's name in that high, shuddery voice. And if one thing Maharet did was wrong...how many more things might be? Could it have been wrong, those secret gifts she used to send Jesse? Could it have been wrong, the things she taught Jesse, when she was younger, when she was actually so young, really, now that she let herself think about it... "I said your name," Maharet panted. Like she could read Jesse's thoughts, "It was your name." "It was my name," Jesse lied, knowing it wasn't. Maharet was too fogged with pleasure to notice the lack of blankness in her voice, the lack of haziness in her eyes. She patted Jesse's cheek, patronizing and fond. "I think I want another," she said, and sank back down.

In a different memory, Jesse dropped her house key in the clearing near the creek and found a human femur poking up out of the ground. She cleared the dirt away from it carefully—no tools, but it was damp soil and easy to move. Jesse was cautious. She only uncovered it as much as she needed to. Once she was sure, she returned to the house and told Maharet right away. "It's alright, I know what to do in this kind of situation, we just need to—" "It's an animal bone," Maharet told her. She was in the middle of a game of chess with Santino and had barely looked up as Jesse delivered the news. "A bear or a deer. Nothing to worry about. Just leave it be." From nowhere, there came a stabbing pain in Jesse's head, near her temple. She winced, but ignored it.

"Aunt Maharet," she said, projecting as much authority and resolve in her voice as she could. "I'm a trained archaeologist. I know how to accurately identify human remains in much worse states of decay than this

line was dead.

"It's getting worse," Jesse said to Rashid and Armand, during a break. She had a glass of water clutched in her hands; Rashid had insisted she wasn't allowed to continue until she drank it all. She'd stuck out her tongue at him, but she was doing it. "As the summer goes on. I think...I think she must not have liked having me underfoot very much. She invited me there because she thought it would be nice, seeing me every day. But then I was—" Jesse swallowed, redirected the sentence from the truth to something that sounded better, "—it was too much."

"Jesse," Rashid cut in, smooth and no-nonsense, "if you say one more word implying the way she treated you is your fault, so help me..."

Jesse drew her bottom lip between her teeth and looked at the duvet through the water and the glass. Its ugly pattern all distorted and unrecognizable.

She didn't say any more out loud. But...well, it was a little bit her fault, wasn't it? Easy for Rashid to make sweeping dismissals like that, but that didn't mean he was right, or that Jesse could bring herself to believe it even if he were.

"There's not much left," Armand murmured. If he'd heard any of Jesse's internal self-recrimination, he at least had the decency not to tattle on her to Rashid. "Only three more memories from Sonoma. I—am afraid they may be rather unpleasant. I had to clear away the rest to get at them. They were buried the deepest."

Jesse knew better than to underestimate Armand's idea of 'unpleasant' by this point. She drank the rest of the water, steady and dutiful, and handed Rashid the glass to set aside.

"Once more unto the breach."

Rashid's attention sharpened as soon as he heard the name, his hand tightening convulsively around Jesse's. He didn't say anything, but she could tell his entire focus was on Armand. Braced for something. "You know him?" Jesse guessed.

Armand smoothed his hands over his thighs, fudging at the small creases in the fabric of his slacks. Eventually, he said, simply, "We have a history." "He's a vampire, too?" Jesse asked, "They all were?"

It was so obvious to her, now that she was not struggling uphill against a landslide of Charadornay and brainwashing.

"Yes," Armand confirmed. Jesse nodded, gnawing at her lower lip. She thought of herself back then: one human girl in a den of monsters. How had Maharet explained Jesse's presence to them? What had she said to Santino, to make him look at her like she was an impressively exotic pet and Maharet was showing off: something colorful and endangered?

As Armand began to unravel memories from later in the summer, it became clear that the situation in Sonoma was untenable. Jesse's bubble of blissful ignorance began bursting more and more often. In one memory, Maharet gasped out Mekare's name as she came, grinding down against Jesse's face. How delighted Jesse had been just moments before! She had not been very good at this when the summer began. Maharet had had to teach her how to do it right. She'd been so pleased with her improvement, with every hitched moan and clench of Maharet's thighs she earned. And then she said *that*, and Jesse's stomach turned.

Why couldn't it have been any other name? Even if it wasn't her name, she would've been alright. A little dejected, a little sensitive maybe, but that kind of thing happened between adult lovers, didn't it? People like Maharet who had had past affairs. A slip of the tongue. It wouldn't have happened to Jesse, of course, but then there had only ever been Maharet for her. Only ever Maharet.

But Mekare? Her twin sister's name, as her cunt spasmed around Jesse's tongue, as she rode out the

fail: *There is no door there*. After that, Jesse's eyes would slide past it—for a day or two. Then she would notice it again and the whole process would repeat.

The first time they came across a memory of that door, they had to pause for longer than usual afterwards; Jesse ran to the bathroom on wobbly legs, sure that she would vomit. She didn't, in the end, but her nausea was as overwhelming as it was inexplicable. It was just a door in a house, and yet the mere sight of it had her shaking, had her *sweating*. She suddenly understood the frantic instinct that had driven Armand to wedge himself underneath the bed.

When she came back, Jesse said, "I think...I think something bad happened there. I don't remember what, but..."

She looked apologetically at Armand. Whatever it was, when they found it, he would have to live through it, too. He met her eyes, undaunted.

And yet, for the most part, Jesse's memories of Sonoma were happy. She swam in the pond; she studied her family history; she let Maharet dress her up in all kinds of beautiful outfits and then take her out of them again. They fucked constantly, and Maharet wasn't always the one who initiated it. On occasion, especially if Maharet had been particularly distracted or quiet for a day or two, Jesse would be the one who straddled her lap and pouted until she got a kiss, and more.

In one memory, Maharet slid out of Jesse's bed, promising to be back in an hour. When an hour and a half had passed without any sign of her, Jesse became sullen. It was harder not to think, all by herself in the echoing silence of the house. So she started to touch herself, making up a little game in her head where she wasn't allowed to stop or to come until Maharet returned. Nothing to keep it going and enforce the rules, apart from her own stubbornness.

But Jesse could be very stubborn when she put her mind to it.

By the time Maharet slipped in the door another forty minutes later, Jesse was desperate. She came with a broken, frantic whimper at just the sight of her—the unspeakable relief of finally having her back. Things only made sense when Maharet was there; Jesse needed

and he became very still. Two signs that Jesse had learned were not terribly good. Very deliberately, very carefully, he began to gather up all the strewn scraps of black cloth.

"He was a little under 1500 years old when I knew him. He would be closer to 2000, now, had he survived the fire."

"Ah.

"Sorry," she said, feeling bad for stepping on an unseen wound. It occurred to her that maybe it was even harder for a vampire, losing a loved one like that—violently, unexpectedly—since aging was off the table. There was no background framework of 'one of us' would've died sooner or later, anyway' to soften the blow.

And was separation harder, too? If Maharet had been searching for her lost sister not for twenty years, but for two hundred? For a thousand? Would time dull the ache, or would it only grow worse and worse?

"In that case... why doesn't Maharet just use telepathy to contact her? I mean, you guys can do that, right?"

"We can." The question seemed to revive Armand some: to bring him back to the present. "Perhaps Mekaré is your aunt's maker—the person who gave her the Dark Gift and turned her. Vampires can no longer share their thoughts with those that they sire." Jesse had around a million questions about *that*, but this time she forced herself to stay focused.

"So do you think that's why?"

Armand gave a loose shrug.

"It's one possibility. Another is that Mekaré *has* died in the intervening years. I believe your aunt must be at least my age, if not older, and the majority of our kind commit suicide before they even reach 300."

A fairly grim statistic, but Jesse did not have time to linger on it, because Armand was still talking.

"The other theory which crossed my mind," he said, "is that Mekaré is trying very hard not to let Maharet find her."

Drily, Jesse said, "Can't imagine why."

Which got a tiny snort of laughter from Rashid, and Armand replied pertly, "Mmm. Precisely."

Except that Jesse felt a twinge of guilt, deep in her

laughter. Jesse closed her book, no longer even pretending to read. She stared into the fire and emptied her glass once again.

It took a quarter of an hour for Maharet to finish with the braids. She tied them off neatly, then trailed the pads of her fingers down the now-exposed back of Jesse's neck. She repeated the motion, then once again; little downward strokes, petting the downy soft hair there. Goosebumps broke out all down Jesse's arms, a delicious little tisson.

She closed her eyes. It was so tedious, this unhappiness. So unwelcome. She was supposed to be having the time of her life here in Sonoma with Maharet. She was supposed to be in paradise.

She had almost managed to banish the feeling entirely when Maharet spoke once more.

"You even have her ears." Maharet's touch migrated, her fingertips trailing along the shell of Jesse's ear, pausing to give a fond pinch to the lobe. Jesse shuddered; she was so sensitive, there. Did Maharet remember that? Had she thought to herself: *Jesse's ears are so sensitive, so easy to make her shiver, so fun to play with her like this? Or had she thought these are my twin sister's ears, my twin who is gone, my twin who I love beyond anyone else?*

Too much wine, too many times when she had not said anything in the past. Pieces of straw on the camel's back, more and more of them, and she hadn't felt them building up until the instant it broke.

"You always do that."

She squirmed away from Maharet's touch, lurching unsteadily to her feet. It was a mistake, that third glass of wine. She hadn't eaten since noon and she was drunk now. Hadn't even noticed it until she stood.

"Do what?" Maharet smiling up at her, those crinkles at the corners of her eyes. They were pale, pale blue. Hadn't they been brown before? Jesse's stomach twisted at that realization, no, no, she couldn't think about that, mustn't notice that. She turned away, walking with deliberate steadiness over to one of the bookcases. Her vision began to blur with tears, but at least Maharet wouldn't be able to see them.

"You're always comparing me to her."

She brought a hand up to feel the braids. She

rest, held up her empty glass for a refill.

Maharet hummed to herself, melodic and utterly without self-consciousness, as she began to separate Jesse's hair out into neat sections. Jesse stopped reading as Maharet started weaving her hair into that loose crown of braids, the one that reminded her of—

"You're not wearing the necklace," Maharet said.

The necklace that Maharet had given her all those years ago; the one with the choker and the dangling pearl. The one in the same style that Mekaré used to wear. Maharet had told her over the phone when she was packing her suitcase not to forget it.

Jesse had spent almost an hour at the beauty store in Santa Rosa that morning, picking out new eyeshadow, mascara, liner. She didn't know how much longer it had been, in front of the bathroom mirror, getting her smoky eye look just right. It had taken multiple tries; never an easy or comfortable thing for her, putting on makeup. Never mundane or simple the way it seemed to be for other women. But she'd been so proud of the end result. It was just like in the magazines. She'd stared at her own reflection, turning her face from side to side to see it from different angles. She looked so mature, so stylish, so pleasantly unlike herself.

Stupid, how many times she had zoned out as she read, daydreaming about what Maharet would say when she saw her. Hoping for surprise, pleasure, praise. Hoping for soft touches to her cheek or chin, a close examination, approval in Maharet's face and her voice as she called her beautiful.

But she hadn't seemed to even notice. All she saw was that Jesse wasn't wearing the necklace she gave her.

Maharet's hands were nimble and quick, twisting Jesse's hair into braid after braid. Doing it up in the same style that Mekaré used to wear. The one that Maharet so liked to see her in...

Jesse tried to blink away the sudden hot prickling in her eyes. She went to take another drink of wine and realized her glass was empty again. She lifted it; Maharet paused her braiding to refill it. The taste didn't bother her so much anymore.

From the other room drifted the muffled sound of

chest. Even after everything she'd learned, it still felt wrong to make light of Mekaré's disappearance. To mock her aunt Maharet's pain. Would that get easier with time? Or would she always feel a little bit like a traitor, any time she said something bad about her? Even if they were true things, real things, terrible things that had been done to her without her consent?

"Let's keep going."

They settled into a pattern. Five memories, a short break, another five memories, rinse and repeat. Many of them were mercifully mundane: Maharet holding forth about the 'Great Family' while Jesse listened in eager awe; reading curled up in the library together; talking for hours about history and art; pouring over Maharet's collection of antiquities; sewing a quilt together while the radio played; walking through the redwoods just before dawn or after sunset; eating meals together—though, of course, Maharet never touched a bite.

Jesse might have noticed that, and a variety of other worrying details, if she'd been thinking clearly. But it had been wine and wine and wine since her very first afternoon at the compound. Before that summer, Jesse could count the number of times she'd been drunk on one hand. Maria and Matthew were teetotalers, and Jesse didn't exactly have friends in high school to sneak an illegal beer with like teenagers did in the movies. Once she left for Columbia, she was too focused on her studies and too embarrassed at her relative inexperience with alcohol. Besides—she still didn't have any friends.

Maharet didn't mind when she got drunk. Why, in every other memory she seemed to be refilling Jesse's glass. And she always smiled so fondly, when Jesse would tumble loose-limbed into her lap, giggly and flushed in the face.

"Sonoma is wine country," Maharet told her, one morning when Jesse asked if she should maybe wait a few hours, maybe have some coffee instead, "Famous for it all over the world. You're immersing yourself."

So she immersed herself.

(It helped to be drunk. It made it easier not to think so much about what people might say if they found out

It began like so many of her other memories of Sonoma: tucked away in the library, curled up on the couch and reading by the light of the fire. She'd gone to Santa Rosa that morning to buy some necessities and had, as a treat, picked out a new novel for herself. It was a frivolous historical romance, all ballrooms and secret letters and longing that was much too tidy and selfless to feel real. Jesse was halfway through it when Maharet emerged for the evening to join her. She had a bottle of wine and two glasses in one hand and a hairbrush in the other. Jesse knew the routine by then. She waited for Maharet to sit in her favorite leather chair and then settled down on the rug in front of her, leaning back against her shins. Maharet poured her a glass of wine—she forgot to fill her own, again, but Jesse didn't bother pointing it out this time—and began to brush Jesse's hair. Jesse went back to reading, enjoying the rhythmic pull and glide of the brushing, her aunt's cold fingers occasionally running over her scalp or teasing out little tangles. The wine didn't taste very good, but Jesse knew that was just because she wasn't sophisticated enough to actually like it, yet. She drank, and pretended she did.

She heard the sound of muffled voices from a few rooms over, low and indecipherable. She recognized Mael, but who was the other? "Santino's visiting again," Maharet answered. As if she had known, just at that moment, what Jesse was wondering. As if she'd plucked the question directly from her thoughts. But of course, that was ridiculous. She couldn't have. She couldn't.

Jesse shifted her weight, trying to ignore the odd sense of vertigo welling up inside her. It must be the wine going to her head. Making her silly. She drank the

"I made no decision really. I knew only that all our lives we had been the same, twins and mirror images of each other, two bodies it seemed and one soul."

- Queen of the Damned

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wanted to unwind them. She wanted, with sudden vehement clarity, to find a pair of scissors and cut all of it off. She wanted to go and wash off the mascara that was making her eyes feel tacky. She wanted to sob.

"Of course I do, darling. You're—"

"—the universe's gift, bringing you back a piece of her", right? Yeah, I know."

Jesse wanted to say: *Why can't I be good enough on my own? Why won't you look at me and see me? Do you even love me at all? Or are you only ever reaching for her through my body?*

Instead, she said, "I'm kind of getting sick of it. I mean, I'm not her. You look at me and it's always 'Mekare this' and 'Mekare that'. It's been forever since she went missing, right? When are you, like, gonna get over it?"

Bitter, envious, spiteful words. The moment they fell from her lips, Jesse longed to snatch them back.

She did try. Her voice was small and apologetic as it broke the terrible silence that had fallen, "I'm sorry, that came out wrong, I didn't mean that."

Jesse turned around, wanting to see how badly she'd upset her aunt. But Maharet wasn't sitting in her favorite chair any longer. She was standing right behind Jesse, close, so close, crowding her against the bookcase. When had she moved? Why hadn't Jesse heard it, seen it? She should've been able to, out of the corner of her eye. Why were Maharet's eyes so blue when they should be brown, no, that wasn't right, not brown either. Wasn't it green? Why didn't she know?

Maharet grabbed her chin, her fingers cold, hard, *wrong*. Had they always felt that wrong? How hadn't she noticed before, the texture of her aunt's skin. A little too stiff, a little too slippery, somewhere halfway between flesh and marble.

"You're right, Jessica. You are not her."

She hadn't made aunt Maharet sad, Jesse realized, her sluggish intoxicated brain struggling to catch up. She had made her *angry*. Angrier than Jesse had ever seen her.

"You are a vapid, spoiled, disrespectful child. As trivial and weak as everyone else born in this time. You know nothing of duty or hardship. You've been given everything directly into your hands. When have you

about her and Maharet. It let her not feel so bad for not answering the phone when her parents called, because what would she say? What if she said the wrong thing? What if it all came pouring out? Wine made it easier for her to get to sleep, and then, after a while, she found she had to have some to sleep at all. It helped her ignore Mael's eyes on her. It stopped her from asking so many questions that Maharet didn't like. It saturated the whole world into a soft watercolor all around her. (Edgeless and unreal.)

During one of their short breaks, Armand admitted very quietly, "I drank too much. In Venice, when I was human. When... things were asked of me that..."

He trailed off and did not fill in the gaps. Jesse didn't need to know the details. She recognized the outline of pain in how carefully Armand stepped around them. "It helped," he concluded.

It was not only intoxication to blame for her obliviousness, however. Again and again, whenever Jesse would notice something strange, Maharet would tell her she was not worried about it, and the worry would evaporate from inside her. Reality itself seemed to warp around Maharet's soft, unreturning words. Even if Jesse could still feel the deep sting, still see the blood on her aunt's lips, if she hisped around those long, sharp teeth, *it's just a love bite. I didn't even break the skin* Jesse would nod her throbbing, dizzy head and agree. But Maharet's compulsion power was not unlimited. Jesse began to spot its boundaries as they unearthed memory after memory. Jesse was able to occasionally resist Maharet's commands, depending on certain factors—if she was closer to sober, if contradictory evidence was right in front of her, if she was in distress. When this happened, Maharet would repeat herself, and Jesse would not withstand it a second time. But it was *something*. Proof that she did not always submit instantly, docile as a lamb.

Jesse also realized that Maharet's trickery faded with time. Over and over, in her memories of that gorgeous library, Jesse would notice a door. It was there, tucked between two built-in book-cases—large and imposing, its lumber clearly taken from a fallen redwood. Whenever Jesse's eyes fell on it, or whenever she asked where it led, Maharet would reply without

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"Shit, is this—?"

Armand smiled, small but warm, "Don't worry. I am very old and fed very recently. You've caused neither temptation nor distress."

He continued, his voice echoing directly into her mind.

—Some distress, to Rashid. He's very frightened, now, that you might harm yourself worse the next time you're alone.

Jesse wanted to scoff the idea away. Wave it off as an accident, call his fears ridiculous, tell him that there was no way in hell she'd ever hurt herself deliberately.

But she wasn't entirely sure it would be true.

So she merely nodded, dropping her gaze away from Armand. She took a seat and let Rashid clean the abraded spots with little stinging wipes and then bandage them. He had to use three band-aids, in the end.

"Thank you," Jesse said sheepishly. Now that her torrent of anger had passed, she felt embarrassed by its intensity and her inability to control it. Was this who she was, now? Someone volatile, destructive? Rashid was hovering nearby, and Jesse couldn't honestly blame him.

She sat up straighter, determined to show she had a hold of herself again and wasn't going to start throwing things or screaming or self-harming.

"I've been thinking. Mekare must be a vampire, too. Right? If Maharet thinks there's a chance she's still alive? Otherwise, she would've died of old age, like, hundreds of years ago."

"Possibly even a thousand. And yes, it seems likely."

Jesse digested that thought. With her education and training she knew with far more specificity than most how drastically different the world had been in 1022. Could Maharet really be that old? It was unimaginable. But then, Armand was at least 500, wasn't he? That painting in the Talamasca vault was from the early 1500s.

"How old is the oldest vampire you know?" she asked. She had no idea what kind of timeline was plausible.

Immediately, Armand's eyes slid away from hers

sobbed and tried to writhe away, wailing. Maharet, standing just out of reach, arms folded over her chest, watching it happen.

When the image burst and Jesse could see again, Maharet was smiling. Her canines were so long they stuck down over her bottom lip.

And Jesse couldn't be silent anymore. She couldn't. She babbled, pleaded, her voice coming out snotty and wet between gulping sobs, "No nonono, p-please, please no, aunt Maharet, I'm sorry, please don't, I'm sorry—"

"Or maybe I should give the privilege to Santino, don't you think? He's a guest in my home. It's only polite."

Another disorienting lurch, as the scene was forced into her head. This time, Maharet was even closer, pimming her wrists down while Santino tucked her over from Santino, ugly laughter from Mael as he rubbed himself through the front of his pants. A twist of the knife: Maharet copied her real pleading—as exact as a recording—and transposed it into the false scene.

It went on longer, this time. On and on, so vivid that Jesse began to lose all sense of what was happening, was it real, how was she outside her own body, when would it end, would it never end—

When the vision finally released her, Jesse was shaking from head to foot. She had no more words with which to beg. She could do nothing but cry, and cry, and tremble like a leaf.

Maharet slid her nail free and released Jesse's chin. She brought her hand up to her own mouth and licked the blood from her thumb, slow and relishing, her tongue dipping into the crevice behind that too-sharp nail.

"No, I don't think I will do that. It would be such a crass punishment, after all, and it might give them the wrong idea about who you belong to."

Jesse hitched a huge sob of relief. It was so hard to make the right sounds come out, but she did. She repeated, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you."

She would have gone on, would have never stopped, if Maharet had not made her. She darted her

down her chin, her neck, a thin line of wet heat along her skin. There were tears, too, rolling down her cheeks, hot and unchecked.

"She didn't make a single sound, when they had us raped in front of the court. The whole time. She didn't shed one tear or make one sound."

Maharet leaned in close enough that Jesse could feel her breath against her skin, and she tried hard to be quiet. If she could only be so quiet, like Mekare had, then maybe her aunt wouldn't get any angrier with her. Maybe she wouldn't hurt her any more. The pain from her nail was startlingly intense, given the small size of the puncture. Jesse remembered, out of nowhere, that anatomy class she'd taken a few years ago, back when she thought she might try med school. What was the name of that specific nerve? She couldn't recall. She could picture the brand of notecards she'd written out all the facial nerves on, she still knew her color-coded highlighting system—so overcomplicated, always doing too much, overachiever, trying to make Maharet proud...

The tip of Maharet's nose bumped against her tear-streaked cheek as she whispered, "And how well would you do, little one, if that happened to you? Maybe we should find out. Test your mettle, hmm?"

Jesse's heart stuttered; she tried to shake her head, but Maharet was holding too tight for her to move at all.

"I should haul you out there right now and tell Mael to take you. He wants to, you know. If he thought he could get away with it without me finding out, he would have you bent over like a whore and stuck on his cock faster than you could blink."

Then, an intrusion in her mind, sudden and stomach-turning. A series of images and sounds, so vivid they overtook all awareness of what was around her: no more pleasant leather-and-old-book smell of library, no more warm shifting orange glow of the firelight, no more aunt Maharet's beloved face a breath away from hers. Instead, she saw Maharet, dragging her out of the library by her braids. Maharet, tossing her onto the floor of the dining room. Herself, on her back, her jeans around her ankles. Mael on top of her. Holding legs open and fucking her brutally as she

kissing her or whatever. She actually seemed to sort of like it, as far as Jesse could tell. So she laid her cheek back against her pillow, adjusted the positioning of her legs to make it easier for Maharet to do what she liked, and she let herself slip back to sleep.

A sound woke her. Not one of the expected ones. A weird, gulping, wet sort of sound. Jesse listened, and another one came, and another. Maharet was crying, she realized. Her arms were tight around Jesse, her head tucked beneath Jesse's chin and her face pressed to Jesse's chest. She was shaking with the force of her sobs. Jesse's pajama top was hot and damp from Maharet's tears, clinging to her skin.

"Aunt Maharet?" she mumbled, blurry but alarmed, "What's wrong?"

Maharet only cried harder, clinging to Jesse and sobbing. It was actually a little uncomfortable, how tight her hold was, but Jesse was much too worried to care about that right now. She'd never heard Maharet cry before. How many times had Jesse called her in tears—when someone at school said something mean, or when she didn't get picked after an audition, or when she was stressing about college applications? It had always been her crying and Maharet listening, comforting, giving advice.

"Shh, shh, it's okay," Jesse said, clumsy with sleep as she rubbed a hand up and down Maharet's heaving back, "Whatever it is, it's gonna be okay, aunt Maharet. I promise."

The words came out wet with spit when Maharet finally gasped, "Where is she? Where? Why won't she come back to me?"

Jesse's heart broke; it was Mekare, she realized. Maharet's twin sister who went missing when they were around Jesse's age. Maharet was missing her, crying over her even after all these years. Jesse kissed the top of Maharet's head and kept rubbing her back. She didn't know what to say. The answer to Maharet's questions seemed pretty obvious to Jesse—somebody who had been missing for decades without a single sign of her was probably dead, right? Hopefully it had been quick and nothing too horrible. But she couldn't say that to Maharet. She couldn't crush her aunt's indomitable hope that her sister would return to her.

She made more shushing sounds, instead, kissing the top of Maharet's head again and feeling her own eyes getting hot in sympathetic response.

"I want her back."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I wish I could find her for you. I wish I could make it hurt less. I'm sorry, aunt Maharet."

Jesse held her and held her, stroking her hair away from her face and murmuring whatever comfort she could. Eventually, Maharet's breathing evened out and she stopped squeezing Jesse so tightly. She rolled over onto her side and Jesse fitted herself against Maharet's back, an arm around her chest and their legs tucked together neatly. Jesse fell asleep like that, wrapped protective and warm against her aunt's back.

Maharet was gone when she woke up. Jesse rolled out of bed and shuffled around the room, her head pounding with a hangover. She wanted to check on Maharet, but she definitely needed a shower and some painkillers first. Jesse did a small double-take as she passed by the mirror: she could've sworn she'd put on her cream-colored pajama top, last night. But she was wearing the royal blue one, now. How drunk had she been, anyway?

Then, as she peeled it off, she saw the twin bands of bruising on her torso from where Maharet had clung to her. Jesse had to start eating more iron or something, because that was just ridiculous. It couldn't be a good sign, bruising this easily...

Back in the hotel suite, Jesse was on her feet before Armand had even finished sitting up. She didn't know where she was going, only that she had to move. She could not remain still when she was this full of anger. It roiled in her, nauseating and hot. She stalked to the kitchen and began to pace, clenching and unclenching her fists at her sides, not caring how stupid she looked.

How could she? How dare Maharet crawl into Jesse's bed looking for comfort and weep in her arms like a lost child? How dare she sniffle and shake while Jesse stroked her back as if *she* were the one who had been hurt? How dare she not be a soulless incomprehensible monster who did evil things for no reason whatsoever, but a person, a real person with thoughts, and feelings, and hidden pain? A real person,

who had a choice, and yet still treated Jesse like a

thing?

She reached up to pull at her hair, an unthinking

gesture frustrated by the fact that there wasn't enough

of it left to pull. She raked her nails across her scalp

instead, scratched long lines of heat down the back of

her neck, over the twin tattoos behind her ears. It

helped, a little. Like a pressure release, allowing a tiny

bit of the molten rage inside her to come out. She did it

again, harder. It wasn't enough. She wanted to claw her

skin off.

When she next turned around to repeat the circuit

she was pacing around the suite, Armand was standing

in front of her. He had a shirt in his hand—black, long-

sleeved, generic. Undoubtedly it was obscenely

expensive, given the rest of his wardrobe.

He held it out and said, "I've always hated this

shirt. The neckline is too high and the fabric itches. I

only ever wore it because Louis loved looking at me in

it."

She understood perfectly.

Jesse snatched it from his hands; he'd helpfully

already nicked the collar with his fingernail. It was

wonderfully satisfying to rip. So rewarding, the sound

of the fabric shearing apart. The feel of it resisting. She

tightened her grip, twisted when she needed to. She tore

it open, tore it into two pieces, into three, into ten.

Wrenching at the fabric, her mind gloriously empty for

a few moments apart from the savage task of reducing

the thing to shreds.

When she had finally torn it into so many tiny

pieces that she couldn't tear anymore, Jesse was

breathing hard, but she didn't feel like pacing or

scratching at herself anymore.

"I don't want to fucking feel bad for her," she said.

"I know."

"I don't want her to be... fucking *pathetic* and sad."

"I know."

Jesse hadn't noticed Rashid going into the

bathroom, but she saw him emerge from it. He had a

little box of band-aids in his hands. She reached up to

touch her neck: her fingertips came back red. She had

scratched herself harder than she'd realized. Jesse

looked back to Armand, her eyes wide with concern.

hand into Jesse's open mouth and pinched her tongue between thumb and forefinger, pulling it forward as far as it would go. Jesse could not hold back her choked sound of alarm, but she tried to remain still, not to react, not to make it worse.

"It would be much more fitting to cut it out, after all. Make you more like her in that way."

Her knees would have given out from fear, if Maharet had not picked that exact moment to slot her leg neatly between Jesse's, pinning her back against the bookcase. Jesse felt it: the soft rock of her aunt's hips, grinding against her. The heat between Maharet's legs, even through all that fabric. She was turned on. She was getting herself off, in little pulsing thrusts, against Jesse's shaking thigh.

She couldn't speak, so she desperately thought:

—Please don't cut out my tongue, aunt Maharet, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said it, please don't be mad, please, I'm sorry I was bad, I'll be better, I promise I'll be better, I'm sorry...

Maharet moved against her more roughly, laughing soft and low, as if she could hear Jesse's pleas. As if she liked the sound of them. Her breathing was shallow and quick when she said, "Well. Perhaps I will overlook it, just this once. It is such a pretty little tongue after all."

Jesse tried to nod, but she couldn't move much, with the vice grip Maharet had on her tongue. All she managed to do was dislodge a few more tears.

Maharet released her tongue, wiping the saliva from her fingers against the collar of Jesse's shirt.

"If you really want to keep it that badly, you'd best find something better to do with it than whining." A hint of amusement in Maharet's voice, finally, on top of the anger. "Quickly."

Jesse wanted to keep her tongue badly; she was very, very quick.

—Armand. Jesse thought, as soon she opened her eyes.

—Yes, Jesse?

—Could you... please not tell Rashid about that last part? Anything before is fine, just not—

She couldn't finish the sentence, even in her mind, but she didn't have to. He understood.

But all Jesse's reaction did was make Maharet *anything at all*.
Up until that very moment, Jesse would have predicted that that would be the end of it. Maharet had never hurt her before. Not once, not unintentionally, never. She had never even lost her temper like this. She knew, down to her marrow, that Maharet was patient and gentle. How often had this one truth been reinforced, that Maharet was safe, so safe. The only one who was safe. Hadn't Maharet said to her, her whole life, all of her letters and all of her calls, *you can trust me, you can turn to me, you can tell me anything*,
Her grip was like iron.
"You are nothing like my sister. What do you know of pain? Whimpering like an animal over a little *cunt*?" Maharet twisted her thumb, widening the hole she had dug into Jesse's flesh. Jesse felt the blood trickling

When Armand was finished cropping her hair as short as he could without clippers, he and Rashid left to let Jesse shower away all the stray hairs clinging to her skin. It felt good, running her hands through it, scraping her nails hard over her scalp, feeling how there was barely even enough hair to bunch between her fingers. She hadn't expected how different it would feel—the shocking absence of the weight that had been there her entire life. She was going to dye it, she decided. Some lurid unnatural color. Like she might have as a teenager, if she hadn't been busy being groomed by her aunt. That was the word, wasn't it? The word that people used for this kind of thing. Jesse only had a vague sense of its definition. Did it still apply to her, given the vampirism and mind control of it all? She was pretty sure they didn't have a word for someone who erased so much of your memory that you hardly knew who you were anymore.

(They did have a word for someone who fucked you when you didn't want them to—when you were asleep or a kid or crying and begging them to stop. A precise, concise, appalling word. But she wasn't ready to use that one yet. Not even in her head.)

As she turned off the water, she looked at the lower tap meant for filling the tub, and realized:

Baths are going to be hard now.

No great loss: she'd never been a luxuriate-in-a-bubble-bath kind of woman. Then again, maybe this was why. Had it been an innate preference, or had some part of her body remembered? How many of her likes and dislikes—inconsequential and intimate alike—had been informed by things Maharet had done to her,

Of course, Jesse had been drinking. In fact, Jesse drank too much the entire time she was there. And no one seemed to notice. Now and then they went out and danced in the clearing under the moon. It was not an organized dancing. They would move singly, in circles, gazing up at the sky.

chapter ten
sonoma

without her even realizing it?

Then she thought: *Necklaces are going to be hard now.*

She'd never worn much jewelry. Innate, or a response? If Maharet had never done those things, would Jesse own dozens of different sets of earrings and necklaces and rings? How would she style herself? Who would she be?

She grabbed her towel from the rack and realized: *Sex is going to be hard now.*

That was enough thinking about the future for now, she decided.

"You want to keep going?"

For once, Jesse did not automatically answer 'yes'. She took her time and considered it. What was she likely to gain, in terms of useful information or closure? What might the toll be on herself? On Armand? On Rashid?

"I want to at least try with the summer in Sonoma. That's what started all this. What would make her need to erase an entire summer? Everything else was just... a few hours here, a few hours there. Besides, she specifically ordered me not to tell the Talamasca about it. That makes me think maybe it's not just—personal motivations, this time."

Armand accepted all this with a nod; neither he nor Rashid seemed surprised by her response.

"I believe we can tackle it safely, now. I will bring us up for air every five memories, or—or if we come across something particularly..."

"Yeah," Jesse agreed, "Sounds good."

So they began.

Jesse was not prepared for how beautiful the first memory was. The giant old redwoods; the soft carpet of dew-flecked ferns beneath them; the sound of the little creek that ran through the clearing; the fresh damp loveliness of growing things in the air. She wasn't prepared for how thrilled she felt, as Maharet crowded her back against one of those massive tree trunks and kissed her hard.

In the memory, the kissing was no surprise at all. They'd been doing this ever since the day that Maharet's friend Mael had picked her up from the

was no standard social formula for any of this; how exactly was she supposed she ask: *So, earlier, when you said that you had a history with Santino, did you maybe mean to say that he raped you?*

"I'll be sure to pass along that note, the next time she calls. Aunt Maharet's always open to constructive criticism."

Which, stupidly, was the moment that she burst into tears.

Rashid looked very serious and very sad. None of that dry wit that Jesse had come to like so much in their months of working together. She couldn't really blame them, though.

"She said... 'millennia' of searching. That means more than one, right? So...so she's 2000 years old, at least."

"It would seem so," Armand said.

"And older means strong for vampires, right? So... so she must be really, really powerful."

Armand's ringing silence was all the answer that Jesse needed. Four times his age, at least. Did that mean she was four times more powerful than him?

Jesse couldn't think of a time in her life when she'd been less hungry, but picking up tiny clumps of rice with the tips of her chopsticks was at least something to do with her eyes and her hands and some part of her concentration. It was meditative, actually. Could she pick up just five grains at a time? Two grains?

After a few minutes of Rashid and Jesse silently eating, Armand cleared his throat.

"Well, there's one thing I *can* tell you about your aunt."

Jesse looked up, surprised. Had she revealed some detail, in that tirade, that helped Armand identify some element of her origins?

"She's certainly never fucked Santino."

...or not.

"Huh?"

"That nasty little performance she staged in your head. It was all wrong. He doesn't sound like that when he—" Armand stopped mid-sentence, all momentum lost. He dropped his gaze to the table, staring at his hands and worrying at a cuticle with the point of a nail. His jaw worked, but he did not finish the sentence. Rashid had gone tense again, the way he first did when Armand mentioned Santino. A tightness in his back and shoulders so pronounced that it must be painful. He was hanging on every syllable, every breath. Wary and alert.

Eventually, Armand repeated, "Well. He doesn't sound like that."

Jesse didn't know what to even say to that. There

