

good and not hurt anything without meaning to. —thinking about you. Worrying that you might be so 'brainwashed into obedience'—” Maharet sketched out the scare quotes in the air with both her hands —“ that you'd come to me and get her in trouble for giving you *this*.”

Maharet hauled the crumpled little pamphlet from the pocket of her skirt. Jesse closed her eyes against a wave of crushing, unbearable helplessness. Of course, she had found it. Of course, she knew everything. Why had Jesse bothered trying to hide it from her? Aunt Maharet always found out. Jesse knew that. Maharet had always known all her secrets. Even if she never said them aloud, even if she never wrote them down. How could she have been so stupid?

It was such an unimpressive flimsy thing, that pamphlet. Cheap design, cheap materials, cheap printing. Probably made for free with some busted old public library printer with not enough toner. Not the sort of object that should make the difference between someone's life or death.

“Please,” Jesse croaked, “Please don't hurt her, please don't hurt her. It's my fault. She didn't do anything wrong, it was me. Hurt me.”

The pamphlet in Maharet's hand caught fire. She dropped it to the floor where it smoked and curled, quickly burning up to nothing but ash. She walked away without a word; Jesse watched, her heart caught in her throat. Had it worked? Was Maharet going to let Graciela go and punish her instead?

She clearly knew these chambers well enough to navigate them by feel and memory alone; Maharet returned a moment later with the chair from the record room: the one Jesse had sat in while she read the book. “Normally, this isn't my style. It's not without danger, you know, even for the strongest of us, to kill within our household. Investigations are messy, mind control is imperfect, and bribery is such a slippery slope—it doesn't work at all on some people, and the ones it does work on often get greedy and keep demanding more and more. Easier to just kill strangers when possible.”

Maharet picked Graciela up off the ground and sat her in the chair. She'd brought some more of the rope

232

237

You'll be so wet for me that you'll roll on top and whine until I give you what you need.”

And then Maharet was doing it again—the trick where she reached within Jesse's body with her will and pulled at the strings of her pleasure from the inside. Jesse bit down as hard as she could on her lower lip, trying to counteract the onslaught with a burst of pain. But it only made the ache sharper, only deepened the electric shimmery feeling between her legs.

It was not about desire; Jesse knew that. It would have been better, easier, if Maharet simply wanted to fuck her. This was a declaration of authority. Maharet was demonstrating upon Jesse's body that she owned it, that she could do whatever she wanted with it.

Maharet released Jesse's throat and turned her back, walking languidly away.

“You read about our mother's funeral feast, didn't you?”

Maharet crouched down in front of Graciela's corpse and sliced open the front of her shirt. Jesse watched as she dug her fingers deep into the flesh underneath and cracked her open like ripe fruit. The sound of it—her muscle tearing, the ribs splitting apart—was enough to end all thoughts of bravery for Jesse. She knew what was coming. She knew, and broke, and begged.

“No, aunt Maharet, no, please, no, no—”

“I chose to be the one to eat the heart, rather than the brain. Meakare was older than me by a few minutes. Those minutes matter, when you're a twin. She always took the lead, took charge. The bold one, the defiant one. I was much softer, back then. Romantic and shy and quiet, in her shadow. I liked it that way. She protected me, and I gentled her. We fit together so perfectly.”

Maharet worked her fist into Graciela's chest cavity and began to slice, neat and precise, with her sharp thumb nail. Freeing the heart from all that sharp and smeared with gore, trailing ragged lumpy shreds of pericardial fat.

“It was an act of deep respect, you know. Eating the flesh of our kin. We took it inside ourselves so that it would never rot. Decay, putrefaction—these things

233

236

wanted to help people who didn't have the power to help themselves. Maharet had wanted some pretty green eyes to stare at in the mirror. She hadn't just taken Graciela. She'd taken something from her brothers. From her parents. From her classmates. From the people who turned to the women's center where she volunteered. From the people she might have fallen in love with one day. The children she might have had. The countless people she might have helped if she had followed her dream. All so Maharet could have a bauble, after her stressful trip to use her money and power to cover up a few crimes. Crimes that were committed by someone lucky enough to be born into her precious Great Family.

Jesse didn't want to be smart or strategic or selfish. She wanted to be more like Graciela. She wanted to be brave, for once in her life.

She whispered, throaty and breathless, as the first tears began to spill down her cheeks, “I hate you. You're evil. You're a monster and I will never, ever forgive you.”

Maharet was finished; Jesse knew because she heard the snap of the gloves as she peeled them off. Unable to stop herself, Jesse looked up in time to see Maharet toss them onto Graciela's lap. Putting the trash with the trash, all of it to be discarded later. Not a speck of blood on Maharet, as she took down her hair. No sign that a few minutes ago, those vivid green eyes were a part of someone else's body. They belonged to Maharet, now.

Jesse tried to stay brave as Maharet padded towards her. Her lip and chin quivered, but she did not whimper. Not even when Maharet ran her fingers along the column of her throat and then began to squeeze. Lightly, so lightly. Just enough that Jesse knew it as a threat.

“Oh, sweet girl. By tomorrow you won't even remember that there's anything to forgive. You think I would let you walk out of here knowing all these secrets? What if you told someone about Akasha, and that little trick to rid the world of vampires in one fell swoop? No. You won't remember. You'll wake up in bed, warm and snuggled up next to me, and you'll be so happy that I'm home again. You won't be able to wait.

made from her hair draped over her arm and used it to bind the young woman with a studied efficiency that suggested a great deal of practice.

That was what was holding her up, Jesse realized. More of that rope. It bit into her skin. Her hands were going numb. Was she going to have nerve damage? She heard that could happen if you were trying to get into kinky stuff like bondage and weren't careful. Maybe Maharet didn't care. Maybe Maharet wasn't going to leave her alive for long enough for it to matter.

“But I never have been able to resist green eyes, and these ones are exactly the same color mine were.”

Graciela's head kept lolling forward. Her expression was pained but vacant. Jesse suspected she was too concussed to understand what Maharet was saying. She hoped she was. It would be a small mercy, for her not to know it was coming.

Once she got Graciela settled, Maharet pulled her long red hair back into a low, tight bun. An unusual style for her. Jesse didn't understand, until Maharet drew a pair of powder-blue nitrile gloves from her pocket and tugged them on with a snap. She was approaching this not like butchery, but as if it were a surgical procedure.

She must have been listening to Jesse's thoughts, because she laughed, low and rich.

“Oh, yes. In the early days I did it that way. Fingers in the eye sockets, quick pull and twist, nevermind the mess. It works in a pinch, but there is a compromise in quality and durability. I've had plenty of time to refine my methods, since.”

She drew from her pocket what looked like a slim metal pencil case: when she opened it, it contained a scalpel and a very small, very sharp saw no bigger than the palm of her hand.

“I even went to medical school in the 1980s, you know. Became a fully trained ophthalmic surgeon. Learned all the latest terminology and techniques. A bit boring, but extremely worthwhile in the long run. My transplants last five times longer now than they used to—when I have the patience to do it right, that is. For that shade of green? I'm going to take my time.”

It wouldn't help to plead. Jesse knew that. But she still had to try, “Please, Maharet. Please not her. Please,

she's my friend—”

Jesse choked. She opened and closed her mouth, but she could not seem to make a single sound. Maharet had turned to face her, lips pulled back in an ugly snarl. There were those fangs, the ones Jesse could now remember so well. Plunging into her again and again—her thigh, her neck, her breast, her wrist, her ass, that soft little swell of fat just beneath her navel, her ankle, her cunt. With those black empty eye sockets and the long, sharp teeth, Maharet hardly looked human. Because she wasn't. She wasn't human. Jesse had known that since she began reading from the book, but she felt it, now. Really, properly felt it. The thing she was looking at was another species entirely.

“She was going to take you away from me!” Maharet hissed, venomous with rage. “I read it in her thoughts the second I walked in the front door. I saw her plan to make friends with you, to twist your pretty empty head in knots with silly papers telling you to betray your own family, the most important thing in the world! She wanted you to seek shelter amongst—”

amongst *strangers*!”

Maharet was so close, now. Jesse could see her eyelashes, that pale gold fringe around the sunken holes where her eyes should be. Then her eyelids were closing, and she leaned in to kiss Jesse. Cold tongue, pushing between her hips, forcing its way inside. A gloved hand running down her body, a quick proprietary squeeze to her breast, and then Maharet was moving toward Jesse again.

“You belong with your family, Jesse. Not with some charity for unfortunates.”

Without warning or ceremony, Maharet dug the tip of the scalpel into the center of Graciela's forehead, just beneath her hairline. She traced a long circuit around her skull, remaining just a few centimeters below where Maharet twisted her fingers into Graciela's hair and, with a sharp yank, pulled off her scalp in one. Graciela screamed, and screamed. It was a high, strained thing. Maharet must have been holding her still with her powers, because she did not thrash in the chair. “This isn't cruelty for cruelty's sake. It's to preserve the organ as long as possible, before I extract

234

It was all happening so fast, now. Maharet's hands were a blur, switching to the saw and starting to remove a large circle from the back of Graciela's skull. Jesse couldn't look anymore. She hung her head forward and tried, desperately, not to vomit. She didn't know what would happen if she did, when Maharet had her throat closed up like this. Would she choke? Might she die? Would it be quicker, than whatever Maharet had planned for her? Maybe she shouldn't fight it so much. Jesse heard the sound of something hard hitting the dirt floor, saw a round disc of bone rolling towards her feet. She recoiled from it, her breath going fast and shallow with panic. She didn't want it to touch her. She couldn't let it, or something would truly break in her mind.

Sucking, wet noises and irregular splatters. Jesse couldn't look. She shouldn't look. She knew what Maharet was doing. Coming at the eyes from the back—digging out any of the brain matter that she didn't need, so she could reach the intricate network of optic nerves.

Graciela stopped moaning, soon after that. Jesse was glad. She was glad it was over for her, that she was somewhere better, somewhere Maharet could never touch her again.

Jesse stared down at her own feet, bare against the dirt floor. She breathed in and out, in and out, and thought, *If I survive this, I'm going to find her brothers and tell them it was quick. I'm going to tell them it was no humiliation. If I survive this—*

Maharet was humming again. That lilting, simple, happy tune she favored. She sounded cheerful when she spoke. The extraction must be going well.

“It shouldn't be hard, cleaning up the mess. The world changes but the world stays the same. Foreign servant girls, you know? No one cares that much when they disappear. It's just the way of things.”

At some point after Graciela died, Maharet had let go of her hold on Jesse's voice. She'd felt it happen. The smart thing would be to stay quiet. The even smarter thing would be to apologize, to flatter. Graciela had wanted to be a lawyer. She had

235

Graciela; the pamphlet; the door in the library; the descent through the dark; the book; the truth, the awful truth; the coffin; Maharet.

It was Graciela on the floor making those noises. There was so much blood on her face, dust from the ground stuck in it, a paste against her skin. Her arm was broken—the angle was all wrong, and Jesse could see a shard of bone sticking out through the skin. Compound fracture. Last week Graciela had been telling her some stupid plot from her stupid TV show about some stupid fictional character who had a compound fracture, and now she had one. Now she was lying face down in the dirt on the floor of Maharet's evil cellar and it was all Jesse's fault, all her fucking fault, she knew it with swift and inescapable conviction.

“After all that, I was looking forward to coming home to some stress relief with my favorite girl. On the drive up I was so full of ideas about the games we might play, while Mael is out of the house. I was going to have you on every surface of the house.”

Maharet turned to face her, and Jesse sucked in a ragged, high-pitched gasp, looking quickly away. She had forgotten. She had forgotten about Maharet's eyes. Those two awful pits where they should be, sunken, empty, Jesse was going to be sick—

“And what do I find, instead? You missing, and this *interloper*—”

She kicked Graciela, offhanded and savage, directly in the ribs. Graciela groaned and curled up tight, an instinct, trying to protect her organs from any more damage. A pillbug in the dirt. Jesse used to like finding them and poking them very lightly with the tip of her finger to watch how they would curl. She would do it over and over again, until Maria caught her one day and told her to stop. Not because they were dirty, not because girls shouldn't touch bugs. “*They do that when they're scared, Jesse. It's not very nice, scaring them over and over like that. You wouldn't like it if somebody did that to you, would you?*” And Jesse had started to cry, shaking her head, wretched with remorse. Maria had hugged her, told her it was okay, she wasn't bad, she just didn't know. That was why it was good to learn things and always stop to imagine how things felt from the other side—so she would know how to be

231

would never touch them because they were cared for and loved. That was what family was for, what community was for.”

Jesse had been so haughty and superior in her college classes, when her peers would react with open revulsion to discussions of cannibalism. She had, on a number of occasions, muttered the words ‘get over it’.

“Please, please aunt Maharet, please don't make me, anything else, anything, please—”

Maharet kept talking, as if she couldn't even hear Jesse's begging.

“Disrespecting the bodies of the dead was the greatest outrage imaginable for my people. Worse than murder, worse than rape. The corpses of every one of us, no matter how lowly, were given honor and respect in death. We took pride in our ways. The washing, the preparation, the roasting, the feast. It was a meaningful, joyful event. Turning death into the very thing that sustains life.”

Maharet shifted her hold on the heart, cupping it in her two palms. Small flames erupted in a circle around it, licking up from the skin of her hands. In seconds, there was a faint sound of sizzling, as the heart began to cook. Soon, Jesse could *smell* it; she gagged, turning and burying her nose against her shoulder as hard as she could.

“When Akasha had my village slaughtered, they left the bodies lying out in the open, to be polluted by the elements and eaten by wild animals. To us, it was an act of intentional and indescribable evil. Looking back, though, I believe that Enkil and his soldiers were simply too lazy to dig a pit.”

Maharet kept walking closer, step by step. Fluid was dripping from between her palms, now. The juices, running free from the meat. A jagged, hysterical memory bubbled up; Matthew, carving a brisket on the counter in the kitchen. Jesse hovering eagerly nearby, bouncing on the bare balls of her feet. How old? Five, four? So eager to be grown up and helpful. Matthew handing down a plate laden with steaming meat into her small hands, the red juices sloshing around as she wobbled handling it. His voice, cautioning: ‘*Careful not to spill it, Jessebear, that's the best bit.*’ He used to call her that, didn't he? She wanted him to appear from

had ceased. Jesse listened. The smell of Maharet's perfume inside the coffin was so strong she had to fight not to gag.

Did she sleep inside here? Was this why they only ever fucked in Jesse's room, on Jesse's bed? Because Maharet didn't have a bed in her own home? Because she slept here, in this coffin, because she was a vampire? Ridiculous sentence. Impossible sentence. But it was true.

A tidal wave of images and sensations slammed into Jesse: a dozen dozen moments that had been blurred in her mind, crashing into sharp focus. Maharet's lips, wet with Jesse's blood. The taste of copper in her mouth when they kissed. The streaks of red between Maharet's teeth. The feeling of those long fangs pushing into her, the pressure and sting and then the rush of euphoria deep in her body, how had she forgotten? Enough to make her come, sometimes—only that, only the delicious feel of them sliding inside her and the low eager growls that would come from Maharet's throat, like a hungry animal. Jesse remembered bite after bite after bite after bite after bite. She thought of Maharet's fingers—how cold they always were, touching her, until they had soaked up the heat coming from her body. She thought of Maharet never eating, Maharet never changing, Maharet watching her sometimes for much too long without blinking. The way she moved oddly, when she forgot herself or thought Jesse wasn't looking.

Jesse heard the faint noise of footsteps as Maharet made her way around the chamber. Then, a new sound: a wet, throaty, weak moan of pain. It was not Maharet's voice. Jesse knew it was not. It must be coming from the body that had been dragged down the stairs. Not a body, yet. Still alive. The voice cried out sharply, as if its owner had been suddenly hurt. Maharet's voice, then, muttering a few words in a language Jesse didn't know. Disdain dripping from every syllable. Then, once again, the contented humming. Jesse listened to it grow louder and softer as Maharet moved closer or further away.

She just had to be perfectly quiet and maybe it would be alright. Maharet would do whatever she was going to do to the person she'd dragged down the stairs

(oh God, God, Jesse was going to hear Maharet kill them and she was going to lie here covering her mouth like a coward and do nothing about it, the way she'd done nothing about that femur she found. . .) and she would leave. If that happened, Jesse could creep up the staircase and shut the door in the library and pretend she'd never never seen it.

She just had to stay quiet. She just had to—

The lid to the coffin wrenched open violently; Maharet leaned over, backlit by the chamber's dim lamp, looking down at Jesse. Except that she wasn't looking, because she didn't have any eyes.

"Jesse, Jesse. Always forgetting the little details."

Maharet moved too fast for Jesse to see, her hand burying itself in the hair at the top of Jesse's head, using it to haul her up and out of the coffin like she weighed nothing.

"You did a good job hiding. I might not have even smelled you, it's been a long and frustrating day. But... you left the book open, my darling girl."

A rush of vertigo, and then everything went black.

spirits who howled at her from the corners of bodegas and the back of her chemistry classroom. She wished differently, now. Graciela ought to be allowed to claw her eyes right back out of Maharet's head.

But the ghost was not Graciela. It was someone whose face Jesse had only ever seen in pictures, before. She'd been so young when Matthew and Maria put the photo album together for her. She couldn't remember ever not having it. It contained every picture of her birth mother that Matthew and Maria could find, neatly arranged and labeled with all the information they could dig up. There were not so many photos: a little less than three dozen in total. Jesse had memorized every detail of every one.

"Mommy?"

Maharet laughed, but Jesse didn't hear it, didn't see her face. Miriam put herself in between Maharet and Jesse, blocking her view, as opaque as any ghost Jesse had ever encountered. How was she here, exactly when Jesse needed her? Had Graciela brought her, somehow? She must have. Helping people who needed help, right until the bitter end.

"It's gonna be okay, baby girl. I'm here now. Let me do it. Let me in."

It was extremely rare that a ghost ever possessed a living person. According to everything Jesse had read in her time with the order, a very unusual combination of factors was required: an abnormally powerful spirit; an abnormally powerful medium; and, rarest of all, *permission*. A possession had to be mutually agreed upon. Few ghosts were sane enough to consciously want it; few mediums were insane enough to consent. Still, it happened now and then, and Jesse had read first-hand accounts from mediums who had allowed ghosts to possess them. They all experienced a not unpleasant pause in consciousness for however long the ghost was present in their body. Just like going to sleep. Dreamless, quiet, peaceful.

Miriam was touching her cheek. Jesse couldn't feel it, of course, but she saw her hand there, mimicking the gesture. An impulse of tenderness that would never quite connect. She was younger than Jesse; only seventeen when she'd died. Just a kid. An entire life ahead of her.

"I would go with the heart," Graciela said. "If it helps—I say you can. You've got my permission."

It was hard to make out the ghost's shimmery outline through the blur of her tears. Jesse looked where she thought her face had been a moment before and repeated, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"I know. I am, too."

"It's too late for that, Jesse," Maharet tutted, assuming the apology was another plea for mercy, "This is your last chance."

"The heart," Jesse whispered, watching as the last wisps of Graciela dissipated. Leaving this awful place behind for good. Free. At least she was free.

"Hmm," Maharet hummed. She let the noise hang in the air for a few seconds before deliberately opening her hands and allowing the heart to fall between their feet with a soft, wet, slap.

"The hand it is."

It was pointless, of course, but Jesse still tried to get free. She wrenched at the rope around her wrists, twisting and kicking, screaming as loud as she could. She'd never known it before, that she could make a sound so loud. No one to hear it from under the mountain, even if there had been anyone up in the house at the moment. No way in hell Jesse could escape this ancient *thing* that could paralyze her, puppet her, hypnotize her. But she fought and fought. Maharet paid her no mind. She picked up Graciela's arm, gripping it at the wrist. With a single, sharp twist, she ripped it in two. She let the arm fall down again, indifferent and bored.

She approached Jesse with the severed hand, and the world began to move in slow motion. Jesse couldn't take her eyes off it: the small assortment of silvery rings; the slim tapered fingers; the neat unvarnished nails. She didn't want that dead thing inside her.

"Don't worry," Maharet murmured. Hearing her thoughts or merely guessing them? "You know I always make it feel nice for you."

When she saw the faint glow again, she thought Graciela must be back. It had always been such a comfort to Jesse her whole life, knowing that ghosts could not touch the physical world. She'd been glad that they could not hurt her, the lost and confused

thin air and tell her again that the monsters weren't real. She wanted to be small enough that he could cradle her whole curled-up body in the circle of his arms.

"Anything else, anything else, please—"

Maharet stopped, just a few steps away from Jesse.

The smell was overwhelming, now. The flames shrank

and vanished, leaving the heart glistening and steaming

in Maharet's cupped palms.

"A choice, then. Since you are so bold and free

with your opinions, today. Either you honor this girl's

memory and eat every last bit of her heart, or you are

just as unworthy and narrow-minded as Akasha and the

rest of them. And if that is the case, I will need to

punish you. I think..."

She moved her eyes up and down Jesse's quaking,

naked body.

"...if you will not do this, I think I will rip off her

hand and fuck you with it."

Maharet had found a way to make it worse. Now,

whatever happened would no longer be a thing merely

enacted upon Jesse against her will. She would have to

decide. She would have to participate in her own

degradation and in the defilement of Graciela's corpse.

She would be partially responsible for whichever action

she selected.

She prayed, to anyone who might be listening: *Let*

me die now, before this happens. Let me go where

Graciela is. Spare me this one thing.

Without even touching her, Maharet puppeted

Jesse's body, forcing her chin back up. Making her look

directly into Graciela's stolen eyes.

"Choose."

"No, no, I can't, no—"

"Choose."

Jesse shook her head, back and forth, a mute

refusal.

"Choose now, Jessica, or I will make you do both."

There was a figure standing behind Maharet.

Translucent and wavery, emitting a faint glow in the

dim of the chamber. She was staring down at her body:

the ruined mess of her skull, the oozing split-open

cavity of her chest. She turned, then, and looked at

Jesse. Graciela's ghost didn't have braces; Jesse could

see her straight, perfect teeth as she spoke.

"Let me take it for you, little sparrow. I want to."
Jesse shut her eyes and let Miriam in.

"My darling,
The fact is I love you too much."
- Queen of the Damned

chapter fourteen cruelty

Jesse had no idea how long she had been down there reading, when she heard it. After such a stretch of utter silence, a soft, repeated thumping. She froze, listening intently. It was so hard to tell, she wasn't sure—yes, it was. The sound *was* getting louder. Whatever was making it was coming closer. Descending the stairs, she realized with a bolt of fear.

There was no way out apart from the stairs; no doors, no windows. Her only option was to hide.

Jesse darted from room to room as quickly and silently as she could, turning off the lights. Was it too late? Would the illumination have been visible from the stairs? Maybe not—they stretched on for so long, and the bulbs so dim. She could only hope.

She came to the room with the coffins last, tugging at the little chain to extinguish the light and then making her way towards them by feel. The thumping was so much louder in the pitch darkness. A soft susurru was audible now between every thump, and a very faint reverberation of metal underlying it all. In a sudden burst of insight, Jesse knew what the sound was: a body, being dragged down the stairs. The rustle of its clothing and the impact of it being pulled down from step to step to step.

Her fingers felt for the seam around the lid of one of the coffins. It would not open. There was a latch, somewhere. She had to find it, had to get it open, had to be quick. She could hear another noise now, floating above the rest. A melodic, familiar humming. Maharet's humming. She liked to do that, when she was feeling relaxed and at ease. When she braided Jesse's hair. When they were sewing together with the quilt spread out between them. When they walked hand in hand between the redwoods. When they lay in bed together coming down, their limbs still tangled, so much sweat-slick skin pressed together.

Jesse's fingers were aching and clumsy with panic, but she found the latch and worked it open. She clambered in, banging her knee, biting back any noise of pain. She saw a millisecond of light from the antechamber lamp coming on before she had lowered the coffin lid all the way. She covered her mouth and nose with both her hands, trying to muffle all the sound from her quick, hyperventilating breaths. The thumping

so much. "—an awful trip, you have no idea. It astonishes me how each subsequent generation manages to become even more venal and crass than the last. You'd think there would be an upper limit, but it has not yet been reached in my 6000 years on this Earth." Her hands itched. She tried to move them and realized they were bound. Her wrists were tied together high above her head, her arms extended as far as they would go. The rope that was keeping them together was secured to some kind of hook sticking out from the earthen wall her back was pressed to.

She first thought what a strange texture it was, that unfinished wall against her bare skin. Then she realized that her skin was bare—all of it. She was naked, which would explain why she felt so cold. Was this a nightmare?

"It should have only taken an afternoon, perhaps a full day allowing for unavoidable inconveniences. But how do you think this child, this entitled brainless fool, saw fit to celebrate when the charges were dropped? He went to a nightclub, took ecstasy, and got himself

arrested for indecency when he exposed himself in a diner full of off-duty police officers. I'm sure you can imagine the effect that had on the deal I had negotiated with the DA the day before."

Underneath Maharet's ranting, Jesse heard a soft moan of pain. It hadn't come from her. That, finally,

was the motivation Jesse needed to force open her eyes

As soon as she saw the dimly-lit chamber and the

bottom of that spiral staircase, Jesse remembered it all.

noise. Upon reflection, it was possible she was freaking out after all.)

Loose ends. Jesse had been thinking of it as the 'final' memory, what she'd just witnessed. But there were more, of course. Those earlier memories she'd agreed with Armand that they didn't need to touch. Would they stay subtterranean? Or would they work themselves loose with time, as Armand had suggested they might? Jesse didn't know. But even if some of them did, she was never going to be certain if she'd uncovered it all. She would probably never know for sure when was the first time Maharet had touched her. Archaeology was, inherently, a field riddled with uncertainty. So many incomplete stories, competing explanations, unrecoverable information. It used to inspire her, working to settle the debates and fill in the gaps as much as she could. It had always seemed like a goal worth pursuing, trying to make it all neat and complete and certain. Childish, yes, but she'd never liked admitting to herself that it was an unreachable objective; the past could never be completely known, never be *solved*.

Jesse had never thought about herself as unsolvable before. She'd thought by now all the questions were settled: her origins, her identity, her purpose, her life story. No more mysteries, no more surprises. (She felt a hand touching her shoulder, very lightly. Warm, she could tell even through the fabric of the shirt, so it must be Rashid. She curled forward and away from it, breaking the contact, not taking her eyes off the paper. She was definitely freaking out. She didn't know how to not be freaking out, though, so there really wasn't much to be done.)

Rashid had been a surprise. A wonderful surprise. In a way, he'd been the surprise that started all this. She was going to have to thank him, when she figured out how to talk again.

She exhaled slowly and carefully let herself think about it: what might have happened if she'd never met Maharet? What would have worked—by the end of the year she would've left the Talamanca and taken some job at a museum or university or institute. The work would have been engaging. Not quite as fulfilling, of course,

245

Jesse shook her head. Was that cruel? Maybe she should ask him to censor some things for Rashid's sake. But where to draw that line? Jesse didn't know. Armand would figure it out. He wouldn't do anything to hurt Rashid. He'd find a way to relay it that wouldn't do any damage.

She bowed her head low and wrote:

- CONTACT GRACIELA'S FAMILY
- CONTACT JUDITH'S MOM
- CONTACT NEDA'S BROTHER

That first one might take some work, she knew. A decade and a half ago, only a vague location and a first name to work from. But maybe someone at the women's center would know. They might have records of past volunteers. She had to try. *No one cares that much when they disappear*. Jesse wasn't going to let Maharet be right. She was going to really, really try.

More victims than that, of course. Jesse didn't bother adding that woman in the club, Cairo, to the list. Had she been dead, on that stall floor, or merely unconscious? No way to know, now—an unanswerable question. Even if Jesse were certain Maharet had killed her, there were too many other unknown factors. Had Cairo been her legal name? Did she have any family to contact? What if she'd fucking hated them? Jesse shouldn't make assumptions based on no evidence at all.

It was a nice fantasy, imagining herself creeping back on the grounds of the Sonoma compound and finding that femur. Digging thoroughly to see if there were more remains, taking whatever she uncovered off for DNA analysis. There could be more mothers and brothers left never knowing. But it was just that—a fantasy. She knew it was too much of a risk. One more loose end.

(Armand was filling Rashid in telepathically, the same way he had been for the last few days; Jesse had no way of knowing what detail it was, exactly, that made him suck in a sharp horrified breath. There were kind of a lot of options to choose from, weren't there? Jesse bent lower over her paper and covered her ears with her hands, pressing down hard to block out any

244

In the fourth room, larger than all the rest, were three things. On one wall, and electronic display showing a map of the world with points of light scattered all across it. Jesse recognized what it must be at once: a map of the Great Family. Incongruous, the little desk and computer setup at its base, where Maharet must maintain it, keep it updated with migrations and deaths and mergings of branches. It seemed wrong for there to be wires running along the plain earthen floor. An absurd mingling of the modern and the chthonic.

On the opposite wall was carved a massive family tree. A representation of the Great Family's lineage, obviously. But why was it down here? There were versions of this upstairs, in the records that Maharet kept. What made this one different? Jesse found her own name, first. Near the very tips of the branches, where the carving trailed off into blank wall, waiting for more to be added. There, in tiny lettering, JESSE MIRIAM REEVES. Only the women represented, here as in the public record. Jesse traced the vine back from her name. Back, and back, and back. Further than should be possible. All the way along the wall to the single point of origin, in the very corner. That same neat, tiny lettering, MAHARET.

No other Maharets in the entire tree, no matter how Jesse searched. But of course, that made sense. Who would dare to borrow her name without permission? Who would risk crossing her?

How many years were represented in every inch, every generation of women? Thousands upon thousands. That Maharet who was the root of it all must have been born so many millennia ago.

(What had Maharet said, that awful day in the library when she threatened to have Mael and Santino rape Jesse? When she spoke about Mekare? *You dare to mock me? My millennia of searching?* Jesse had not let herself believe it was literal. But some part of her had known, hadn't it? Some part of her had always, always known...)

Between these two walls, in the center of the room, a broad and sturdy desk. On it, a large book. Jesse opened the cover. The opening page declared, simply: 'THE STORY OF THE TWINS'.

224

Jesse sat down and read.

She read about Maharet and Mekare, the witches of the mountain. Their peaceful people, their fertile homeland, their beautiful traditions. She read how the twins learned from their mother how to call on spirits to bring rain, to read dreams, to do many impossible things. How their power had renown far and wide. She read about Amel, an evil spirit who boasted to the twins that he had learned to love the taste of human blood. She read about how the soldiers from Kemet interrupted the funeral feast where the twins were, according to custom, to consume their mother's cooked flesh—the brain for Mekare, the heart for Maharet. She read how all the people were slaughtered, down to the very last child, save for the twins. She read about how they were brought before Akasha and Enkil, queen and king of Kemet. How they angered the monarchs and stirred dissent in the kingdom when they spoke the truth about spirits. How the king and queen had them raped in front of the court, to demonstrate their powerlessness, and sent away in shame. How Maharet gave birth to a daughter and named her Miriam and raised her together with Mekare as if they were both her mothers.

(Miriam: the first name after Maharet's on that carved wall and the last name before Jesse's. Her middle name, as well. Overlapping echoes. Mothers and daughters. Family. Too tangled up; too close, even with thousands of years between them. The branches on a family tree were supposed to spread out and up, not curl back in, back down. A tree wouldn't survive like that. It would be ingrown, sick, ugly. Graciela had thought Maharet was her mother, and Maharet was the first one Jesse told when she was twelve and started to bleed, and Maharet sometimes slipped and said phrases like *how I raised you* that made Jesse want to claw off her own skin, and people on the street in Santa Rosa sometimes thought they were sisters, and Maharet braided Jesse's hair like her sister's and called out her sister's name—)

For a few minutes, Jesse could read no more. She set her forehead down on the desk and just focused on breathing. Graciela's voice in her head, like an audio clip on loop. Just the disjointed phrase: *family*

225

as her work with the order, chasing off poltergeists terrorizing schoolchildren and helping the troubled spirits of old ladies.

And oh, it had a different flavor now, didn't it? How little Maharet had seen the worth of what she did for the Talamasca? Of course, she thought Jesse should 'set her sights higher'; what value did it bring to Maharet or to the Great Family, Jesse giving protection and comfort and aid to strangers? She wasn't getting acclaim, or wealth, or status. Helping people only mattered if they were *family*...

So it would have been another mildly boring decade of loneliness and isolation, with only Maharet there to brighten it. She would have gone on pruning any budding connections—romantic or otherwise—in Jesse's life before they could flourish. No threats to Maharet's exclusive claim on her heart, and mind, and body. Another decade of Maharet doing whatever she liked with Jesse and simply erasing it if the consequences became inconvenient. Manipulating her into blaming herself for every little conflict. Dismissing her questions again and again and again. Letting her think she was intrinsically unlovable. Breaking into her home when she was sleeping and drinking her blood, raping her.

Her hands were still over her ears, but that didn't stop her from remembering the sound it had made when Maharet twisted Graciela's hand from her body. The sharp crack of bone, the wet ripping of tendons and muscle fibers and skin—

She pressed her hands down harder, harder. She needed to focus. She needed to work on her list. The list was very, very important and she had only come up with three bullet points and that was barely anything at all.

(An unexpected movement in her peripheral vision startled her; she caught just a glimpse of Armand's hands retreating and saw that he'd set something on the duvet in front of her. It was his tablet, with the music app open, and a pair of very fancy-looking noise-canceling headphones. The invitation wasn't difficult to understand. Jesse pulled them on and clicked the first album in the alphabetical list—something called *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. Mellow languid piano

- Queen of the Damned

She sat on Jesse's bed and told Jesse not to worry [...] she kissed Jesse and brushed the hair back out of Jesse's face. [...] And who was Miriam? A name on Jesse's birth certificate. Her mother. Jesse told no one what had happened. Yet a comforting warmth enveloped her. She could feel Miriam here, she was sure of it.

When she emerged from the final memory, Jesse didn't freak out, as she had feared she might. She didn't scream, or cry, or throw up, or have a panic attack, or fly into a rage, or try to hurt herself. Maybe some of those things would happen, eventually. Maybe they wouldn't.

She sat up, squeezing Rashid's hand before letting it go. She needed something to write with. The hotel stationery would do as well as anything else; Jesse reached over to the nightstand, snagging the pen and pad of paper before settling herself cross-legged in the center of the bed.

"Jesse? Are you—alright?" Rashid asked, his voice taut with urgent worry.

What possible answer could she give to such a question? *Yes, I am, because it's finally over now and I know the worst of it? No, I am not, and maybe I won't be ever again, depending on how you define 'alright'?* *Yes, I am, but I don't think I deserve to be? No, I am not, because the aunt I thought I loved never existed at all, and it aches like she's died, but even thinking about grieving her feels like spitting on all the people she hurt even worse than me?*

Jesse didn't reply or look at him. She didn't really feel a lot like talking right now. She clicked the pen and wrote, at the top of the paper, in neat small letters: STUFF TO DO. She made a tidy line of bullet points to fill in.

Armand's quiet voice came into her mind: *—Is there anything you'd like me to leave out when I tell him?*

again.

When she finally reached the bottom, it took her more than a minute to be brave enough to let go of the railing. She slid her feet along the floor, wary of pits, of cliffs. Her toe found the wall first, and then she reached out and touched it with her hands. It was an earthen wall, plain and cool. She felt something dangling, brushing against the back of her hand. A pull chain? She tugged it and a dim light flickered on.

It was a cellar carved directly out of the mountain; it had that cool, clammy feeling to the air that you only got deep underground. She was in an antechamber of sorts: there were doorways leading off of it to four rooms. One by one, Jesse entered them.

In the first room she found clay tablets, sheets of papyrus, slabs of carved stone. The light was faint, but she leaned close and squinted down at them, trying to decipher the languages they were covered in. Some she recognized, some she did not. What language could it be? Why had she never come across it before, in her studies? Why did Maharet have these, hidden away, separate from the rest of her artefacts?

In the second room, she found an evocative assortment of items. Jesse instantly recognized the tools and setup required for weaving rope, the way people had done it thousands of years ago. It was not, she realized quickly, a diorama of artefacts: this setup was well-maintained and entirely functional. There was a huge wooden crate as tall as Jesse's chest, filled to the brim with a mass of long curly red hair that glistened gold in the light. Maharet's hair. Jesse would have recognized it anywhere. It wasn't possible. How was there so much of it? The smell of Maharet's perfume lingered on it, unmistakable. It turned Jesse's stomach and set off a little involuntary pulse of heat between her legs. She found a pair of metal hair-cutting scissors settled on a little stool next to that crate. Jesse had been with Maharet when she bought those, on their last trip to Santa Rosa to pick some things up from the drug store. The rest of the room was taken up by coils and coils and coils of neatly-spun rope: red, with glints of gold throughout. Rope made from Maharet's hair.

In the third room she found nothing, save for a matching pair of coffins carved from redwood.

Situations where there's incest, over and over and over. Why did she have to say that? Did she know what she had done, saying that to Jesse?

She made herself sit up and keep going.

She read how, many years later, the twins were brought back to Kemet. They learned that Amel had come to dwell inside the body of Akasha, making her skin and godlike powers. She had shared her blood with Enki and now they were the same, driven half mad by their thirst. Once more, Mekaré and Maharet angered the monarchs by telling them the truth—that they were not gods, but monsters, and the only way to be rid of the thirst was suicide. The monarchs had Mekaré's tongue cut out for suggesting it, and Maharet's eyes for looking at them and seeing evil. She read how the monarchs used their house steward to test their ability to transmit the curse. How he, betrayed, freed the twins and shared the blood with Mekaré, who forced it upon Maharet. She read how the twins were shut into stone coffins which were set adrift on rafts on different seas. Separated. Torn from one another's arms.

The story of the twins became the story of Maharet, searching for her sister. Jesse's head was spinning, and she began to skim. Maharet searched; she reconnected with her family and began to chart their genealogy over the ages; she made more beings like herself. She learned to take the eyes from the humans whose blood she drank. She tracked down Akasha and Enki, who had been califfed into statues by the passage of time. They were hidden in Antioch, in the house of a Roman named Marius, who put them in a shrine and called them 'Those Who Must Be Kept'.

(For a split second, the memory slipped and shuddered, the way it had before when Armand's own memories began to intrude. This time, though, there was no overlay. The scene resettled itself with only the one, small earthquake.)

Maharet longed to kill Akasha, but discovered that to do so would mean the deaths of every other vampire—she was using that word, now—in the world. They could not continue to live, if Akasha died. It would mean killing Mekaré; the one fate that Maharet would not, could not, endure.

She didn't look at Graciela as she walked by, or go to the library. She would quiet to sit for a while, something to turn her mind away from impossible things. The library. She would "I have to go," Jesse heard her own voice say. She But she had.) Jesse heard her own voice say. She quiet to sit for a while, something to turn her mind away from impossible things. The library. She would go to the library. She didn't look at Graciela as she walked by, or

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If Maharet caught Armand and Rashid trying to help her escape the way she'd caught Graciela, what would she do to them? Armand was a vampire, but vampires could be killed. He'd talked about a vampire he knew dying in a fire; Maharet could make fire with her hands. Would she burn Armand up? Leave him a little pile of ash on the ground, like that pamphlet? Would she take his eyes, first? Did it only work with human eyes, or could she do a transplant from another vampire? Armand's eyes were so striking. Surely Maharet would be tempted to have them. She liked having pretty things all to herself.

Jesse's hand was shaking so badly now that she had to steady it with the other one just to keep from dropping the pen. It took ages, for her to scratch the words out one line at a time, her handwriting gone childishly uneven and wobbly:

- DON'T GET ANYBODY ELSE HURT

Easy enough to picture it: Maharet's face, with Armand's eyes. The orange would look so interesting with her hair. Maybe she wouldn't even kill him. Maybe she would just take them and leave him alive—he could survive without them, couldn't he? Jesse's brain skidded from one image to the next without her permission. Maharet with Armand's eyes. Armand without eyes, with only two black pits, like Maharet in the cellar. Eyeless and making the same sounds he'd made after that memory of the bath, the little gasping whimpers as if he were a child. That had been Jesse's fault. This would be Jesse's fault, too.

Whatever Maharet did to Rashid would be her fault, too. What games would she come up with, to punish Jesse for yet another infraction? *This isn't cruelty for cruelty's sake*, Maharet had said as if she believed it, but she'd also said *I think I will rip off her hand and fuck you with it*, so it was possible that her definition of cruelty was different to Jesse's. What would she do to Rashid, when she caught them all? Beat him, rape him, mutilate him, eat him, make Jesse eat him, make Jesse rape him—

If she could talk, or even project her thoughts coherently, she would ask Armand if it felt better when

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and from family situations where there's incest—? Jesse was on her feet. She hadn't really made the decision to stand up; her body had done it for her without any input. But it was good she was standing, because she had to leave, *now*. She couldn't keep listening to Graciela. If she did—if she did— "Wait, Jesse, just wait. Take this, okay? Take it and —and hide it somewhere she won't see it, just in case you ever decide you want to read it." Graciela was pressing the crumpled bit of paper into her hands. A flimsy little pamphlet. Jesse looked down at it. The cover was plain: an acronym, a phone number, a stock photo of a hand outstretched, as if in offer of help. She opened the cover, saw the words 'rape' and 'incest' in rapid succession, and closed it again. She didn't want to read it. She didn't even want to touch it. But if she threw it away, someone might find it. She would have to hide it, like Graciela suggested. Not to keep it—just to make sure no one stumbled across it and got the wrong idea. That was the only reason.

(But the other night, the other night, in her bed, Maharet's cheek had been pressed to the top of Jesse's thigh, still twitching with aftershocks from her orgasm. It had been her fourth that night, and Jesse had been light-headed with it, just trying to catch her breath. Maharet had petted her fingers from the crease of Jesse's thigh, across her mound, to the other crease. Idle touches that had pulled shivers from her. Maharet, so distracted, perhaps not even realizing that she was speaking aloud, "So much more hair, now.")

It wasn't too late. She could still shut the door and pretend she did not see it. Even if it stayed visible there, in the corner of her vision. Jesse knew that she could make her eyes slide past it. It would be simple. She had plenty of practice. It would just be one more unasked question in the pantheon. *'Why couldn't I see that door?'* taking its rightful place beside *'What do you mean, now?'*

Jesse thought of Bluebeard's seventh wife, and Pandora, and Psyche. Had they hesitated? Had they known it in their bones, before they made their choices? How would those stories have gone, if they'd left the forbidden door unopened? The box sealed up tight? The lover's face unseen?

Was it a happier story, for the wife to continue on in loving ignorance, kissing her husband while

Ammand and Rashid thought they were being careful, with the burner phone and the texts and the espionage act. But Graciela had tried to be careful, too, hadn't she? She'd waited until Maharet was out of the house. She'd convinced Jesse to hide the pamphlet. She'd done every single thing right, and a few hours later, Maharet had been tossing handfuls of her gray matter onto the ground like slop.

- DYE MY HAIR: -
- GET RID OF THE TATTOOS -
- SAY THANK YOU TO RASHID AND ARMAND -

Did Maharet already have a plan for what to say to Mathew and Maria, when that decade came to an end and she brought Jesse back to Sonoma to turn her into a vampire? Was she waiting to come up with her cover story later—couldn't plan too far in advance or it might require re-writes? Or would she have chosen a different strategy and simply disposed of them, if they were still alive? Cut the last ties linking Jesse to her fellow humanity? Maybe she would've even left it until the last moment. That would be expedient, wouldn't it? Invite Jesse into her arms while the grief was fresh? Would she have accepted Maharet's offer? Would it even have been an offer? Or would Maharet have simply held her down?

and floaty sustained notes from some instrument she couldn't identify. It had the slightly fuzzy sound quality of older recordings. Released in 1978, the app said. She wondered if Mathew had ever listened to it. He liked weird music.) Her hands were free again, so Jesse picked up the pen. She was shaking pretty badly, but if she braced the heel of her palm against the pad she could still write:

could figure out how to survive, after what Akasha had done to them? Slaughtered their people, destroyed their home, raped them by proxy as a public display of her power? Or had it started earlier? Had their mother abused them? Jesse wasn't an expert, but she'd heard that was common—cycles repeating from generation to generation. That was probably true 6000 years ago, too. Generation to generation. Maharet didn't talk about Miriam often, but she'd been in her life. Jesse had always known that. That was how Maharet had been able to find her in the hospital as a newborn when no one else did: she was the only connection in the world that Miriam had. Her only connection. Maharet didn't talk about Miriam much because it made her too sad. She always seemed devastated by her loss. Like she'd loved her very, very much. And then, in that club bathroom, Maharet's voice dripping venom: *She was a slut, and now you're a slut*. That nauseating mixture of possessiveness and love and entitlement and scorn. Jesse knew that mixture. Of course. Maharet had done things to her, too, hadn't she? Jesse knew it was true the moment she thought it. Was it psychic intuition, or a hundred tiny details she'd never questioned clicking into place all at once? Maharet did like do-overs. When she messed something up, she simply started fresh and tried again. And she'd known what she was doing, hadn't she, the entire time? The letters had started before Jesse could even read. It had all been so smoothly done: the post office box, the gifts, the flattery, their little games of secrecy, the stream of subtle hints that she was the only one Jesse could trust. So many little wedges she'd driven between Jesse and her adoptive parents. What would their relationship have been like, without Maharet there to shape and edit it at every turn? All so smooth: like she had plenty of practice. And still, in spite of that, Miriam had come when Jesse needed her. For the very worst of it, she'd come to protect her. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. Miriam had deserved better. Graciela had deserved better. All the other people Maharet had hurt—known

pretending not to notice the stench of the rotting corpses seeping out from underneath the door? Would Pandora really have been better off, forever carting around a jar full of all the world's evils, never understanding what it was that weighed her down? Was Psyche supposed to be content in her lightless room, opening her legs without curiosity or complaint and letting some unknown, unseen *thing* fuck her? She stepped through the door and closed it behind her. There was a row of dim little lights along the wall that flickered on once the door was closed, like the night-light Jesse had in her room when she was a little girl: some kind of sensor on them, to register when it was dark enough that they were needed. The corridor was cool and bare and empty. Jesse walked along it, until she reached the end. Nothing there, except for an iron spiral staircase sunk into the floor, curling down down down into nothingness. Jesse's hand shook as she gripped the railing and stood on the top step. It swayed faintly beneath her weight as she began to make her way down. All hint of light from the corridor above was gone in a few turns, and she was left in utter darkness. She opened her eyes, against her eye; she was utterly, completely blind. She gripped the railing hard and made her way down with agonizing care. Step after step. Feeling them out, sliding her foot along until the heel of her leather boot caught the edge of the step, lowering her weight down unceasingly. What if a step was missing? What if the stairwell was incomplete, ending far above the floor of whatever chamber she was descending to? What if it never ended? What if it went down and down and down, right to the core of the world? Soon her hands were slick with sweat, her heart hammering away in her chest. She'd lost all sense of how far she'd come, of how many turns she'd taken around that spiral. Once or twice, she leaned too far to one side and the whole thing swayed beneath her feet. When that happened, she had to bend her knees and grip tight, breathing in harsh, tiny gasps, waiting to plummet. But she never did. The staircase would steady and, trembling, terrified, she would begin her descent

disconnect between Graciela's affect and the mundane details she was repeating. Why did she look like she was afraid she was going to be caught at any moment? She kept glancing around. She was crumpling whatever that paper in her hands was. "I think...you need help, don't you, Jesse?" Jesse froze. Time seemed to slow down around her, syrupy and thick. She couldn't move, but her heart began to beat fast. A cornered rabbit. "Your aunt. She's abusing you, isn't she?" Jesse opened her mouth to say 'no'. It wouldn't come out. She thought of the dead phone line. She thought of scrubbing her vomit off the floor. She thought of Maharet threatening to cut out her tongue. She thought of Mael's eyes on her while Maharet was on top of her. "I don't know," she whispered, her voice small. She should know, shouldn't she? It didn't seem like the sort of thing someone ought to be confused about. It was always so simple, in movies and on TV. A big shouting evil man, a small cowering innocent woman; drunken unfounded jealousy, broken glass, makeup on top of bruises. Recognizable shortcuts that meant abuse. Could it still be abuse, if Maharet was the one who was sober and Jesse was the one who was drunk? Could it still be abuse, if there were no holes in the wall? No raised voices, no fists? Could it still be abuse, when last night Jesse had whispered into the phone that she missed the taste of Maharet's cunt? No one had made her say that. She'd done it all on her own. Could it still be abuse if she'd wanted to come here, had chosen it, had looked forward to it? Could it still be abuse if she loved her aunt more than anybody in the world? Graciela was talking again. Jesse tried to focus on her words. "—volunteer on the weekends at the women's center in Petaluma. They have a program just for people like you, who need help planning how they're going to get out of a bad situation. They mostly deal with domestic violence, but it's not only that. They also work with people who have been sex trafficked, and—