

been anything, had it? No huge paradigm shift, no terrible crisis or catharsis. Just a sentence among other ones. It didn't hold any power over her. Her reflection in the glass of the buildings they passed was even more unrecognizable in the harsh contrast of the streetlights. Someone different entirely to the woman she'd always thought she was. The woman that Maharet had shaped her into. She was going to be making herself, now. The green hair was just a start. Edinburgh was just a start. So much left to decide, and discover, and change, and settle into. They were nearly back to the hotel when she said, "Armand?" "Yes?" "I think I'm going to get a tattoo to cover the scars on my ankles where you took the grafts." A beat, and then she added, "Needles just kinda don't seem all that scary, now." He smiled, a tiny quirk at the corner of his mouth. "I like that idea." "I think I'm going to get a sparrow." In his throat. She didn't need to explain; he remembered. Miriam's voice, warm and loving: *Let me take it for you, little sparrow*. He was silent, after that. He must have had a mother at some point. He must have lost her. Jesse wondered if he would ever tell her about it. She touched her cheek, the same place where Miriam's ghost had laid its hand. It was too late to ever know who she would have been if Miriam had been the one to shape her and not Maharet. Unanswerable questions. But Jesse hoped, at least, the woman she was becoming would be someone Miriam could be proud of.

No better time to start being that woman than right now. Armand's eyes were a vibrant tangerine—something lost about them, childish and sad. He looked like he was trying not to cry. How recent it was, that Jesse had thought she had no friends, had never had them, would never have them. She'd honestly believed there was something so broken about her that she could not possibly connect with anyone. But that was stupid,

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firmly towards him. She felt it again—his hypnotic gaze hooking hers in place.

"Can I—" she was nodding before he even finished asking the question, and then there it was, that subtle pressure, nudging her heart to slow its racing, her lungs to draw in deeper breaths, her muscles to relax bit by bit. He spoke while it was happening, a continuous stream of steady words, "She's not here, Jesse. She's very far away, and Rashid is fine, and we are going to keep him that way, do you understand me?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Since that's settled, tell me, what's the second reason?" Armand asked, still in that soothing tempo, wiping a tear from her cheek with a brush of his thumb. He had caught her panic earlier this time; her body hadn't had as much time to flood with adrenaline and shift into fight-or-flight, so the comedown was quicker and easier.

"M-Maharet called it b-boring, once. She said it was a waste of her t-time."

"Well, that's an excellent reason to move there, then. It sounds like she won't be stopping by for a casual vacation any time soon."

Jesse nodded; that had been her line of thought, too. It was easier to breathe, now. She sighed, huge and ragged.

"I'm sorry if it is boring and you move there just to avoid my psycho aunt."

"I've moved worse places for worse reasons," Armand joked. Or maybe it wasn't a joke. She couldn't exactly tell.

She had no idea what metric he used to judge by, but he must have thought she was recovered enough, because he stopped touching her face and took a step back.

"We should return to the hotel," he said, "before Rashid starts worrying about us."

Jesse gave a watery little laugh and fell into pace beside him, making their way back.

It was a few blocks before it occurred to her, with a little jolt, that in her terror and distraction, she'd managed to say it out loud, that Maharet had raped her. She'd expected it to be more momentous, somehow, the first time she spoke the exact words. But it hadn't really

and, just based on what little she had heard about Armand's past, possibly quite sad.

So, instead, she said, "Does he know that?" That half smile blossomed into a full one, but with a hint of bitterness in it.

"You're forgetting about the extensive research." Fuck. She had been. Before she could offer an apology, Armand waded it off. He stepped towards the railing overlooking the river and leaned on it. The sun had sunk below the horizon now and the sky was a gloom orange, punctuated by thin wisps of indigo clouds. Jesse joined him, looking down at the boats moving slowly on the dark water.

"I'd like you to come live with me, Jesse." She turned to look at him, expecting this to be the prelude to some new joke. What else would it be? But Armand's expression was pensive as he gazed out over the water.

"Before you respond, I want to explain my reasoning, if I may." He actually meant it. He was genuinely inviting her to move in with him. Wordlessly, Jesse gestured her permission. It was almost a full minute before he began to speak; once he started, she did not interrupt.

"My motives are partly selfish. Since... my relationship with Louis ended, I have been living alone for the first time in my life. Before Louis, I lived with my coven. Before the coven was the palazzo. Before the palazzo was the brothel. Before that... I cannot recall. I have never been on my own, and I find the experience... intensely disagreeable.

"So, I'll admit that my invitation comes in part from a desire for company. But it is more than just that. If all I wanted was an agreeable space filler, I could easily find one who—forgive me for saying it—would introduce far less danger into my life."

Armand glanced over, checking her reaction. In truth, she was glad he'd said it. Why pretend otherwise? They'd both seen it over and over again; getting close to her was putting a target on his own back.

He faced the water again, the wind blowing a few of his dark curls into his face. He tucked them behind his ear and went on talking.

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"I suppose... I want to help you. It's as simple as that. Practically speaking, you will need a new legal identity and all the fuss and bribery involved with that. You will need a secure place to live, food, medical care, training or education for your new career, since I'm afraid continuing on as an archaeologist would pose far too great a risk of discovery."

Again, he looked at her, assessing her response. His concern was misplaced; Jesse had realized hours ago that she wouldn't be able to stay in her field. It was far too insular for that—someone would recognize her at once. There was no way around it. She would feel something about that, eventually. Right now, she was just numb.

"Obtaining all these things at once, entirely on your own, would be extraordinarily difficult and stressful. I can provide them without any hardship to myself whatsoever. It makes no sense not to assist you. But also—"

He paused, chewing at his lower lip. His eyes had gone an intense, almost glowing orange.

"Beyond practicality, I want—I want to *help*."

He looked as if there were more he wanted to say; so much of it, in fact, that he was incapable of beginning. Jesse waited a while to see if he would, and then said, "I think... yeah. I would like help very, very much."

The truth, that she wasn't going to say out loud, was that she thought she might be able to help him a bit, too. Perhaps that was arrogance, or a lie she had to tell herself to soothe her pride. She didn't care.

Jesse exhaled a half-laugh.

"Yes. My answer is yes, I'll come live with you. Which is a bit crazy, since I don't even know where you live."

"Ah. That is why I wanted to bring you here."

He gestured out at the water with an expansive sweep of his hand.

"I like boats. I like coming to watch them, when my thoughts are... tangled."

Jesse followed his gaze out over the water. She could see the appeal. Sunset was fading into dusk, making the little vessels moving on the water less and less distinct, visible only as suspended clusters of light,

inching their way along. It was peaceful, to watch it from a distance.

“My current residence is a temporary one, meant to last only until Louis and I finished dividing our assets. But—that’s done now. That was why I couldn’t come to London for a few days. Settling up with the lawyers.” She wasn’t sure what to say to that, but fortunately Armand moved on before she was forced to come up with a less awful version of ‘sorry about the divorce’.

“I thought... if you said yes, we might choose together. Someplace to live, I mean. A city of reasonable size would be wisest in terms of discretion. I would like it to be somewhere near water—the ocean, or a sufficiently large river—so I can come and watch the boats when I want to.”

It felt surreal to be doing this. Was that because it was actually all that strange? People resented in new places all the time; surely this sort of conversation was not all that unusual. Perhaps those people generally knew one another better than she and Armand did, but Jesse knew the real reason it felt so wrong.

“Jesse?”

She realized she’d been quiet too long, gave her head a shake.

“Yes. Sorry. I was just thinking, I’ve never...” She exhaled, short and frustrated. Why not say it? He’d been in her head enough; not a lot of dignity left to preserve. “I would always ask her, first. Before making a decision this big.”

Where she applied to college. What she majored in. What internships she took. What digs she joined. What jobs she applied to. Where she lived—the country, the city, the apartment building even. Maharet always had an opinion to give, and her opinion was always the right one. Every single time. How had Jesse never questioned that? It had felt like guidance. The wise, steady, loving hand of guidance laid against the back of her neck, keeping her on the best possible path. Jesse reached up and raked her nails across the back of her neck, hard. Satisfying, the bright hot sting of pain. The reminder that there wasn’t a hand there anymore, metaphorical or otherwise. She did it again, not caring that Armand’s eyes had slid over to watch

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her.

“I would ask—” he began, before pausing to rephrase, “I do not want to live in Delhi, Dubai, or Venice. Paris or San Francisco would be possible, but... difficult, for me.”

“San Francisco is too close to Sonoma, anyway,” Jesse said. She wondered what exactly made each city a bad option. Easy enough to guess, for Venice and Dubai. She was surprised that Rome wasn’t on the list, given what he’d said about Santino. Not something she was going to pry about, at the moment. “There are too many people in New York and London who know me by sight for either one to be safe, I think.”

“Understood.”

“How about... how about Edinburgh?” she asked. Armand looked at her, raising his eyebrows. His eyes did glow, very faintly. She could tell now that dusk had fully slipped into night. “I have no objections, though I’m curious as to your reasoning.”

“Honestly? Two reasons. I—I want to be close enough for Rashid to visit as often as possible. Do you think—I will that be safe?”

“I believe we can make it safe,” Armand said, looking out over the water once more, “I also... would like to be as near to him as possible.”

The plan to frame Director Talbot was solid. Except... what if Maharet blamed Rashid for not protecting Jesse? What if she got some insane idea in her head that he was involved? Or maybe she would want more than one person to punish, whether or not it made any logical sense?

“I don’t want her to hurt him,” Jesse whispered, her voice desolate. Just like that, without warning, it all came rushing back. The choking, desperate, urgent panic, like she was down in that cellar again, racing to put out the lights and hide, because Maharet was coming, she was coming, there was no way to escape. Jesse clutched the railing hard and tried to keep breathing. “God, God, I couldn’t bear it if she hurt him, I couldn’t, I would rather she rape me a hundred more times, I would rather she cut my t-tongue out, I c-can’t let her hurt him, I—”

“Jesse.”

Cold fingers on her face, turning it gently but

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“And so, reliving that memory as me making out with her...”

“Precisely. Hardly traumatic, but more than worthy of a ‘face’.”

He sounded so prim and annoyed that Jesse couldn’t help laughing. There was so very little else about anything that had happened over the last few days that was funny. This, though? This was hilarious, and Jesse was going to hold onto that with both hands.

“Fuck, man. Sorry to put you through that.”

For some reason, it was twice as funny because she had, in fact, put him through rather a lot. Part of her kept forgetting that everything she’d been experiencing, he had, too. They weren’t his memories, it wasn’t his life coming unraveled, but it still had to have an impact. The fact that he seemed so utterly unaffected was, in its own way, quite alarming.

“An excruciating ordeal, but I think I’ll manage to pull through. I am a survivor.”

Hint of wryness in his smile; he was doing just the same thing she was.

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“I suppose, just this once.”

They were by the Thames, now; Armand steered them towards the path that ran alongside the river.

“I don’t know why I assumed it must be Louis’s mom. You’re, like, 500 years old, right? You’ve probably got about a thousand exes.”

The corner of Armand’s small mouth curled up into a smile, his expression soft.

“While I am unaware of the precise year of my birth, I decided some time ago that 1508 was close enough and settled on it, which would make me 514. As for your other estimate, it is a little off.”

“Two thousand exes?”

“If we’re speaking of serious relationships... Rashid is my fourth.”

Jesse stopped in her tracks. She didn’t mean to; it just happened.

“Wait, really?”

“Yes, really.”

She opened her mouth, caught herself just before asking how that could be possible. She had a feeling that the answer was more than likely quite complex

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wasn’t it? A stupid paper-thin lie that kept disintegrating again and again the second Maharet turned her back. It had only been through constant effort that she maintained it.

How simple it was, to bridge that gap. She stepped closer to Armand and looped her arm with his, drawing him in beside her as they walked. It was awkward, initially, with the difference in their heights and lengths of stride. But they both adjusted, wordlessly, and then it wasn’t awkward anymore.

They kept their arms linked through the lobby of the hotel, into the elevator, and all the way to the room. Jesse had one second of lurching panic when they came in and she didn’t see Rashid, until she saw the closed bathroom door, heard the shower running.

“We’re back,” she called. The water turned off, and Rashid called something that was probably a variation on ‘I’ll be out in a second’.

Armand lingered by the door to remove and hang up his coat. Jesse, unable to stop herself, checked the temporary cell phone. Maharet had texted a few more times; Rashid had kept his replies brief, but plausibly warm. The final message from Maharet declared:

I love you, my Jesse.

“Hey, Armand?”

He looked up, listening but still silent. Still with that distant, fragile expression on his face.

“I think I want a new name. Not just for the passports and driver’s license and stuff. I mean... for all the time. I want a name she didn’t give me.”

There was a single moment of stillness, before Armand’s face crumpled and he burst into tears.

She dropped the phone and rushed over, “Oh, oh no, oh I’m sorry—”

Armand seemed almost as taken aback as she was. He kept wiping the tears away as fast as they came, as if he could keep her from noticing them. She wasn’t certain it was the right thing to do, but she pulled him into a hug anyway, getting up on her tiptoes to be able to reach. He sucked in a ragged breath and buried his face against her shoulder.

“I want one, too,” he said, in between uneven

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for not knowing, for allowing it? Jesse didn't blame them; she didn't trust that they would be able to not blame themselves.

How was she supposed to weigh the two pains against one another? The grief over their daughter, murdered halfway around the world, with no chance to say goodbye? The grief over their daughter, living in hiding somewhere they could not know, unable to ever speak to them because it was the only way for her to be safe from the woman who had begun abusing her while she was still in their care? Surely the guilt would be worse.

And besides, it didn't matter. She couldn't tell them; she knew that. A single stray thought around Maharet and the entire thing would come crashing down. Impossible for them to avoid seeing Maharet; if they tried, she would know something was up, and it would be ruined. Impossible for them to see her and not think of Jesse, especially if she told them about the grooming, the manipulation, the rape.

What would Maharet do to them for trying to deceive her? She didn't like being lied to. She would kill them for it. She would torture them first, though, wouldn't she? She would brutalize them, their trail aging bodies, and feel entirely justified in doing it. And then she would come for Jesse.

She wasn't going to tell them.

Maybe it was selfish, maybe it was selfless. Jesse didn't even know anymore. She just couldn't bear the thought of Maharet laying her hands on her parents. At least this way she would only do that to comfort them. Hugs and sympathy, where everyone could see it; always mindful of her duty to the Great Family. A memorial, with speeches from all three. After, in private, a shoulder for Maria to cry on. Sitting on the couch looking through photo albums together, digging up old home videos. Puppet shows in the living room and family trips to the beach and ballet recitals. Maharet watching them, sad little smile, thinking back on the good times. Would they offer her Jesse's room to stay in, after the service? Give Maharet her old bed to sleep in? It wouldn't be the first time.

As she rounded a cluster of ellipticals, it bobbed to the surface of her mind. A buoyant object, buried in the

silt at the bottom of a lake, dislodged and now floating to the top, slimy and half-decomposed. It wasn't a full memory, just the echo of one: a disconnected sensation without context. Her childhood bed, the little distinctive creaks it made. Creak, creak, creak. Maharet's hand fitting snug over her mouth. A low, purring whisper right by her ear. *Shhh now, Jesse. Don't want to wake up your parents.*

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

Jesse had had to crouch down to keep from falling over, hanging onto the elliptical for support. She must look ridiculous; she wasn't even wearing exercise clothes. The boy who had spoken to her couldn't be more than twenty. She hadn't noticed him coming in, with his hotel uniform and his spray bottle and rag. Just trying to get through his day, and now she was some weirdo he had to deal with.

It was the perfect moment for a lie. Something bland and functional and quick. The truth slipped out, instead.

"Not really. I'm having kind of a weird, bad day. But I'll go have it somewhere else and get out of your way so you can do your job, sorry."

"You can have it here," he said, at once. Jesse paused halfway through trying to stand up again. "I can go clean the sauna first. That takes ages. You can have your bad day here."

"Okay," she said, her voice cracking on it. It was such a kind thing for him to offer to a total stranger, "Thank you."

He was gone a moment later. Jesse composed herself enough to move over and perch on the seat of one of the reclining bikes. She drew a deep, shaky breath, and entered the number for Matthew's cell phone on the burner. It couldn't be a phone call. Not with the lie Rashid had told Maharet; Jesse was taking no chances. But she was going to call them again one last time. Hear their voices, tell them she loved them. Not today, but soon. She was going to insist on it.

She texted:

remember who I am, I wanted to say: I'm sorry for treating you like that. You were right. I didn't realize it back then, but I do now. You were totally right and I'm sorry. You were really great and I only hope I didn't hurt you too badly.

At a different moment in her life, sending a text like this would have felt monumental and daunting. Her scale for stakes had shifted so much these last few days. What was a text like this, compared to faking her own murder, knowing that if it didn't work, the consequences would be unimaginable?

She hit send, wished Bel the best in her mind, and moved on.

Jesse had written herself into a trap with her to-do list. Part of her had known that the whole time. Matthew and Maria were going to get hurt: it was only a question of how badly and in what ways.

She spun out the two possible scenarios in her mind.

She faked her death and told them nothing. They believed she was dead and grieved her. The pain would be appalling, and they would be safe, and she would never see them or speak to them again.

She faked her death, but warned them first. They would not be forced to grieve her, because they would know she was still alive out there somewhere. She wouldn't be able to see them or speak to them safely ever again. So, really, they *would* still grieve, wouldn't they? In a different way, they would grieve. Her absence would still be absence. There would still be pain, though perhaps less devastating.

But was that actually true? Because she would have to tell them why she was faking her death, wouldn't she? And she wouldn't be able to lie. Not to them, not about this. And it would all come spilling out. Maharet. The things she'd done to Jesse. How long she'd been doing them. They would know that it had happened, and that it had happened under their roof, and it had happened when she was a child. Would they believe her, if she promised them that it wasn't their fault? Would they ever be able to forgive themselves

He replied at once, an enthusiastic affirmative and an anecdote about buying the record, and they chatted back and forth for a few minutes about music. For a little while, Jesse let herself forget how soon she was going to lose him.

Shortly before sunset, Armand and Jesse went for another walk. Not just around the block, this time: he said he had something he wanted to show her. The rain had finally stopped, leaving the world slick and reflective. They dodged puddles, walking in silence, Jesse half a pace behind Armand. She kept catching glimpses of her reflection in the glass of the buildings and turning to look. The green hair really was striking. London was a huge city, but Jesse had lived there for over a decade now, and they weren't far from her usual stomping grounds. It didn't take long before Armand's shoulder and pointed at the brick-fronted gay bar. "Hey, that's where I made out with that one hot vampire dyke." Armand turned to see and then grimaced. The entire time, though all the unfathomable horror, she had not once seen him look this grossed out.

"Wowwww, seriously? What's with the face, Armand? Compared to the rest of it, that was a fucking awesome memory."

"It's not the memory itself so much as the individual involved." A pause, and he added, "She and I are... acquainted."

Jesse's stomach sank. Oh, fuck. "Bad acquainted?" she asked, her voice suddenly quite small.

Armand glanced over sharply, picking up on her distress. He shook his head, reassuring, "No, no, nothing so—I simply don't like her very much. Can't stand her, in fact. And, well, Her son and I..."

"Was that Louis's mom?"

"No! No, an earlier paramour."

"Oh, Okay, yeah." Jesse nodded, recovering her equilibrium by degrees, "So, what you're saying is... I made out with your ex's mom?"

"Whom I despise, yes."

breaths, "Can I have one, too?" Jesse heard the bathroom door open; she caught Rashid's eyes as he walked out. He took in the scene quickly—the hug, Armand's hitching breaths—and closed the distance quickly. "Of course, you can." Rashid set his hand at the center of Armand's curved back, rubbing just between his shoulder blades. Armand exhaled, shuddery and relieved, the moment Rashid touched him. Armand reached out, grabbing the front of Rashid's sweater and hauling him in close—the most demanding physical gesture Jesse had seen from him this entire time. Rashid put his arms around both of them. It was a little bit of a jumble, a little bit uncomfortable. It was perfect. "We're going to pick new names for ourselves," Jesse informed him. Her own voice seemed to have gone rather tight. "I can't wait to hear them," he said. Jesse couldn't wait, either.

“You knew about his resistance?”

“Of course, I noticed it the very first day he came to work for me.”

“So... why the hell didn't you just tell me all that yesterday when I practically accused you of mind controlling him?”

Rashid did a small but visible double take; Armand clearly had not told him about that. Jesse didn't shift her gaze from Armand. He was looking away from her, those long dark lashes of his lowered.

“It wasn't my secret to tell.”

He stood and pulled his gloves off with a snap, throwing them in the trash and gesturing towards the mirror hanging nearby, in the entryway of the hotel suite. Jesse got up and went to examine the results. It was not perfectly seamless—if she leaned in close and squinted, she could just see the edges of the graft.

“It should blend even more, after a week or two. I can only accelerate the healing so much.”

Jesse reached up to touch the now-blank stretch of skin, hesitated, and thought better. Probably best not to poke at it any more than necessary right away.

“It's all gone? Her blood?” Jesse asked, her voice gone tight.

“Yes, I cut deeper than I perhaps needed to, just to be completely sure.”

The woman in the mirror was still unmistakably Jesse Reeves. But without the long hair framing her face, without the expected punctuation of the tattoos on her neck, she was starting to look like she had the potential to be someone else. Jesse turned her head from side to side, wondering what else she could change. She thought about piercings and then discarded the idea. Jesse Reeves hadn't been a face piercing kind of person, and she didn't think the woman in the mirror was one, either.

Armand had walked away at some point, which Jesse only noticed when he returned, offering her a small plastic case. One of those ones for holding contact lenses.

“They're colored. If you want to try them on and see if you like it.”

Jesse unscrewed one of the caps. Inside, swimming in a little reservoir of clear liquid, a circle of dark

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brown. She looked up at the mirror again. Allowed herself, as she had not before, to meet her own bright green eyes.

It wasn't fair. They were her own eyes. It wasn't fair that now, when she looked at them, she shuddered with revulsion and terror. It was her own body. But removing Maharet's hold on it was going to be much more complicated than cutting off a few tattoos. When would her eyes be her eyes again, and not a sickening reminder of the desecration Graciela had suffered? When would her mouth be her mouth again, and not the thing that had whimpered and pleaded for Maharet to fuck her harder? When would her neck be her neck again, and not a palimpsest of remembered bites, long fangs sinking into her again and again and again. When would she be able to take ownership again of her arms, her legs, her hands, her breasts, her stomach, her cunt? Would it ever really be hers again?

“I don't know how to put them in,” she admitted.

“Would you allow me...?”

Jesse nodded, turning towards him and handing back the plastic case. Armand was quick and precise: he balanced the flimsy little thing on one fingertip, held her lids open with the other hand, and placed it onto the curve of her eyeball. Jesse blinked a few times, adjusting to the sensation. Then she let him do the other one.

The result was much more naturalistic than she had expected. None of the green showed through: her irises were now a brown so dark it was almost black, nearly blending with the pupil. They didn't look like Jesse Reeves at all.

“Perfect,” she said.

A connection clicked into place in her mind, and Jesse looked at Armand, who was cleaning up the blood from her now-healed skin with sterile wipes.

Armand's voice was still clipped with irritation, but its target seemed to have shifted, now, from Rashid himself to the order in general. Honestly, Jesse couldn't argue. If Rashid was resistant to mind control, in addition to being freakishly smart, great at lying, resourceful, and loyal... what the hell were they doing, having him play butler to Armand and Louis for years? In fact, what were they doing having him play chaperone to *her* while she dealt with a handful of ghosts around the British Isles? Weren't there more urgent assignments he could be on? Genuinely dangerous and terrifying vampires, like Maharet, who needed to be monitored?

"Oh, Rashid is being modest. It is an extraordinarily rare and powerful gift, and even rarer for it to be paired with such a fine mind. I've encountered perhaps half a dozen mortals with this ability over the course of my life, and most were resistant in part because they were so astonishingly stupid. Rashid is exceptional. His abilities make him an astonishingly precious resource for your order—one which they have squandered egregiously."

Rashid took a steadying breath, his posture stiff and overly correct, and continued, "He attempted to compel me, but it didn't work. When he realized he couldn't read my thoughts, either, he asked for my contact info, and the next day I was getting the pitch on joining the order. It's, ah...not very common, having a natural resistance."

Rashid looked downright anxious, now. Jesse realized that it wasn't just this random vampire that Armand was angry at, but Rashid, too. If this Sam guy worked for the order, perhaps he was the reason why Rashid was sent to spy on Armand. Using the Talamasca to further some personal grudge? Anyway, it had to be something to do with the undercover stuff.

"History," Armand confirmed, "But not, I believe, in the way you are guessing. It is an extraordinarily long story that is not relevant to our purposes here today, and does not cast a very flattering light on either of us. Please, Rashid. I interrupted."

chapter sixteen
new

Didn't matter now. She knew. She knew it all.
- Queen of the Damned

Soon after, Armand's prayer notification went off; Jesse grabbed both of her phones and said she was going for a walk. Rashid got up to come with her, but she shook her head minutely and he sat down again. She wanted to be alone for this.

She didn't take her coat; she didn't plan on going outside, and she didn't want to get caught up in more memories of fur rugs against her skin. The hotel had a small gym on the ground floor: Jesse let herself in with the key card and found it empty. Perfect. There was something satisfyingly surreal about winding between the silent unmoving machines under the ugly fluorescent lights. She looked through her blocked numbers; Bel's was still there. She weighed it in her mind. Chances were, Bel didn't even remember her. They'd only dated a handful of months over half a decade ago. Was Jesse being conceited, imagining she would care at all?

There were so many loose ends Jesse would never be able to tie up. So many apologies it was too late or too dangerous to deliver. She wasn't going to deny herself an easy one.

She typed out Bel's number on the burner phone and wrote:

Hey, Annabelle. This is Jesse Reeves. You probably don't remember me. We dated for a while in 2015 and then I broke up with you out of nowhere over a movie. I shouted some awful stuff at you and then blocked your number. Don't worry, I'm not trying to reconnect or anything. I know this might not even be your number anymore. But just in case it is and just in case you do

graft in place. Jesse could just barely feel it, that
 and began dabbing it on to heal the wound and seal the
 Earlier, Armand had cut his own hand and bled into
 “—unsavory.”
 away.
 it gently over the place where he’d carved the tattoo
 moved a little patch of skin from Jesse’s ankle and laid
 Armand hesitated. A few moments of silence, as he
 were—”
 pornographic images and videos on his laptop. They
 accessed his personal files, I found homemade
 correct. I will spare you both the details, but when I
 Talbot’s office. I had a hunch. . . well. In any case, I was
 pressure, in the places where he was cutting, but that
 continued, never pausing in his work. Jesse could feel
 “—was to confirm its suitability,” Armand
 about, sir?” Rashid asked.
 “Are you finally going to tell us what that was
 might—”
 yesterday, and the primary purpose of my errand last
 you two for a little while now. It occurred to me
 Maharet’s blood, “I have an idea I’ve wanted to run by
 deftly shaved off the part of Jesse’s skin saturated with
 “Speaking of hair,” Armand said lightly, as he
 hair, because it belonged to her and no one else.
 and she could do whatever the hell she wanted with her
 single word. A future where Jesse was alive, and free,
 Next. A vision of an entire future, contained in a
 “So/so. You can always do pink next.”
 and hiding under a blanket like a little kid.
 about hair dye not fifteen minutes after she’d been mute
 able to imagine it. The bizarre unreality of bantering
 at jokes. Jesse had listened, but she hadn’t really been
 trigonometry tests; she still ate salads; she still laughed
 falling apart. He didn’t just stop. She still had
 she’d explained to Jesse that even when everything was
 had both died when she was still in high school, and
 It was Neda who’d told her about this. Her parents
 debated for a while.”
 “You think I should’ve gone with hot pink? I
 truth than she’d thought.
 surgery kink. Maybe she’d been a little closer to the

strange burning itch she now recognized as the sped-up
 healing that resulted from contact with a vampire’s
 blood. Armand’s silence was heavy; neither she nor
 Rashid said a word.

“There were...children.”

He shifted, reaching down to heal the raw, skinless
 patch on her ankle next.

“Armand...” Rashid began, very softly, but
 Armand didn’t let him finish.

“It occurs to me that we might have the
 opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Or, at
 least, kill one odious bird and be rid of one very
 dangerous stone.”

He gestured for Jesse to get up and sit facing the
 other way. Half done, now.

“We need a credible cause of death for Jesse, who
 is young, healthy, and relatively cautious in her daily
 habits. There are countless mundane scenarios we could
 use, of course, but I think Maharet will more willingly
 believe our story if she feels like she played a
 meaningful role in it. From everything I have seen in
 Jesse’s memories, I believe it would be advantageous to
 convince Maharet that Jesse was murdered and allow
 her to distract herself with vengeance. She will have
 less time for suspicion and, I feel, be more willing to
 accept a story in which she enacts justice, rather than
 merely being the victim.”

“Yes,” Jesse agreed at once. He was right. It would
 align with Maharet’s idea of herself as powerful but
 eternally wronged; she would swallow a gruesome
 murder that she could avenge much more easily than
 she would something that felt random or ordinary—like
 a freak heart attack or car accident.

(How furious Maharet must have been, when
 Miriam was stolen from her so young by something so
 dull and ordinary. What luck, when she discovered that
 the baby had survived...)

“We have access to an ideal recipient for Maharet’s
 wrath, and a great deal of Jesse’s hair with which to
 frame him, plus any other DNA she should choose to
 contribute. Perhaps we would not be able to frame him
 so well that it would hold up in court, but I somehow
 doubt Maharet will let things get that far. We have
 enough to put him on her radar and the rest, I daresay,

will handle itself.”

The second tattoo was gone, now, and Armand was applying the graft.

“I—get the appeal,” Jesse said, hesitantly. She felt a little nauseous, planning an actual death like this, even if it turned out David was a fucking pedophile, “But, Armand, you saw my memories. She’s not an easy woman to deceive. Won’t she just read his mind, see that he didn’t do it, realize he’s being framed, and be a hundred times more suspicious than if we fake a suicide or something?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” Rashid interrupted, “Director Talbot’s like me.”

“Like you?” Jesse repeated, lost.

“Naturally resistant to the Mind Gift.” There was a hint of chagrin on his face. He’d been keeping this from her. Jesse realized, all their months of working together. “Vampires can’t compel me or read my thoughts unless I deliberately project them. You probably couldn’t erase my memories if you tried, right, sir?”

Armand gave one of his little shrugs, “I have no idea, since I’ve never tried, but I suspect I could not.”

“That’s why the Talamasca recruited me in the first place. Back when I was in college, a vampire that does some work for the order tried to compel me. Nothing untoward, Jesse, don’t make that face at me, I was just in the way, he’s not a bad—”

“If Samuel Barlay, or whatever name he is going by now—” Armand interrupted, his voice gone airy and cold, “—is ever unwise enough to cross my path again, whether it’s in ten years or a hundred, I am going to kill him with my bare hands, and I am going to enjoy it very, very much.”

The silence that followed was deafening; Armand never faltered, dabbing his blood onto the second wound on Jesse’s ankle, healing it bit by bit.

“History?” she cut in, trying to break the tension. The atmosphere had become unbearable. Was this someone else who had abused Armand? Or was it Rashid he had hurt? Jesse was not inclined to think very well of vampires who went around compelling random college students and Rashid was, she knew now, far too inclined to downplay his own mistreatment. . . .

and unknown, family and strangers—had deserved better.

Jesse had deserved better.

She was done cowering. What was she even doing, shivering under the covers like a scared kid? Why was she thinking about Maharet hurting Rashid and Armand as *when* and not *if*? Jesse owed it to her mom and all the rest of them not to give up without a fight. How many times in her life had she heard it from Maharet—how stubborn she was? Any time she didn’t immediately yield, didn’t abandon her opinion, didn’t go along quietly. Always the same pronouncement: *you’re so stubborn!*

Jesse was going to show her stubborn, alright.

She threw the sheets off and sat up so fast it made her dizzy. Armand and Rashid were sitting at the table in the kitchen; they both turned sharply to look at her the moment she emerged. She pulled off the headphones and declared:

“I’m not gonna let her win. I fucking refuse.”

She asked Armand to do it right away, while the anger was white-hot inside her. No time for dread, no room for fear when she was full of that perfect incandescent rage.

Shocking, how little time it all took. Armand sat her down in the kitchen and took out the things he’d stolen from the hospital. There was one bad moment, as he pulled on the gloves, when Jesse was back down in the cellar again with Maharet. But then Armand’s voice, crisp and unemotional, broke through, asking where she’d like him to take the grafts from. Better for the purposes of any future disguise that the more visible scars be somewhere other than where her tattoos had been. She told him she didn’t care.

Alcohol wipe to clean the area, a few quick injections of a local numbing agent, and Armand got to work with his scalpel. Rashid was sitting across from her, reading the instructions on the back of the box of green hair dye that Jesse had bought herself the night before. At first, Jesse thought it was probably just an excuse to look away while Armand was slicing bits of her skin off. But his posture was surprisingly relaxed. She remembered her running joke about Armand’s