

Jesse glanced over at him, perplexed. She knew the Talamasca had a file on her, of course. They'd been compiling it since she was seven years old and had shown it to her when she was recruited. (She'd read every word of it in a blind panic, but there was no mention of Maharet, besides a single footnote about her financial benefactor.) She knew, too, that many other agents had doubtless read her file. The fact that Director Talbot was specifically requiring agents to read it before working with her, though... that was new information.

She waited for Rashid to keep talking, to come to whatever point he was trying to make, but he remained silent. He kept it up far longer than most people would manage. Usually, people filled the silence one way or another, nervous chatter or bland conversation about the weather. Rashid merely kept pace with her, his face unreadable, and said nothing.

"Any particular reason you're telling me this?" she asked at last. Was he trying to start trouble? Make her angry with the Director? What was his game? Rashid shrugged. There was a dusting of gray scattered in his black hair, but upon closer inspection, Jesse didn't think he could be more than a year or two older than she was. "It would feel wrong not to mention it. Besides, I've just spent the last four years lying all day, every day. I'm tired of it."

There was, in those last few words, a bitterness that surprised Jesse. She wondered how Rashid's long-term undercover assignment had come to an end. What had he been doing? From the sound of it, he was happy that it was finally over.

"You're not supposed to talk to me about it, right?" Jesse appreciated that Rashid didn't waste her time pretending he didn't know what she was referring to. He shook his head.

"All of it is need-to-know, unfortunately."

She should leave it there, Jesse knew. She'd only just met the man. It was time to move on to different topics: how he was adjusting to being back in London, how had he joined the order in the first place, what was his area of expertise.

Instead, she blurted, "I'm sorry, that's just... that's kind of unfair, isn't it? The last—you said four years?"

before Jesse lowered the phone from her face, looking around and wondering why the hell she was sitting on the floor.

A week later, she met Rashid.

He stood out right away—hard not to, when the vast majority of Talamasca agents were white men in their 50s and 60s. Jesse glimpsed him around the Motherhouse a few times before their first assignment together, but she didn't approach him. There was gossip, naturally. He was freshly back from a long-term undercover gig. Quite long-term, considering he'd left for it before Jesse even joined the order. Whatever it was, it must have been dangerous, considering the way people talked about it. Hushed voices, excitement, their chatter going quiet if Rashid happened to walk by.

Then, one day, Jesse was asked to go deal with a ghost that was haunting a Sainsbury's, of all places. Talamasca policy was that any psychic agent being sent into the field had to be accompanied by one who was not. Good to have someone there as backup, in case things went wrong.

Jesse was fairly certain she'd been partnered with just about every member of the order stationed in London by that point. Tagging along with her on field work was, without anyone ever acknowledging it aloud, a universally dreaded task. Jesse tried not to take it personally. Most agents simply didn't like ghosts. Either they were frightened for their safety (ludicrous) or they didn't enjoy the reminder of their own mortality. She tried her best to sympathize. She'd never had the luxury of forgetting about her own for more than a few days at a time.

Rashid was, evidently, not psychic. He was waiting for her just inside the front door of the Motherhouse, a folder tucked neatly into the crook of his arm. By way of introduction, he joked, "I have to say, a haunted grocery store is a new one for me. I'm just surprised it's not an Aldi's. Also, I'm Rashid."

"Jesse."

Together they made their way out onto the street. Before Jesse could begin the usual script of bland professional niceties, Rashid said, "Director Talbot insisted I read your entire file before this outing."

people to love you, and she had been born without the ability to naturally produce it. No supplements to replace it, no treatments to stimulate its release into her body.

She was broken, and that was never, never, never going to change.

In addition to all that, there was the fact that her correspondence with Maharet had become somewhat strained since the start of the year. Maharet did not approve of Jesse joining the Talamasca. She'd been kind about it—she was always so kind about everything—but her feelings had been clear right from the start. Jesse would have preferred anger. So much more excruciating, the gentleness of her aunt's disappointment. Telling her that she respected her decision and loved her no matter what choices that she made. Expressing her hope that, eventually, Jesse would re-evaluate and realize that she could set her sights so much higher than the Talamasca.

What agony it had been, reading that letter. How many times had Jesse gone over it and wept until she thought she might vomit? How many unsent resignation notices had she composed in the middle of the night, nudged over her laptop in bed? How her hands had shaken, as she'd written out her response to Maharet's letter. Writing and re-writing, scratching out whole paragraphs, copying her progress over onto paper free from tear-stains, trying to get it just right. In the end, so many apologies. So many promises she would not reveal anything to the order. So many reassurances that her loyalty was to Maharet, always Maharet, only Maharet.

Things had stabilized for a few years after the initial rockiness. Later, however, it seemed like Maharet thought it was past time for 'eventually' to come around. She kept bringing up other career opportunities. Prestigious fellowships, positions at museums and institutes she knew Jesse admired, archaeological digs around the world in need of an extra set of skilled hands. All meant kindly, of course. Maharet wanted what was best for Jesse, and she believed Jesse was wasting her talents. Talents that Maharet had cultivated so carefully, with her money and her time and her attention, since Jesse was too

young even to appreciate the service that was being done for her. Talents that, when viewed from a certain angle, belonged more to Maharet than to Jesse herself.

Jesse was still pretending not to notice these hints; she knew it couldn't go on forever. Maharet was probably right, after all. When had she ever led Jesse astray? She always knew best. Jesse was simply being self-indulgent, allowing this little phase with the Talamasca to go on so long. She thought she could make it to the end of the year, maybe a little less, before she yielded and took one of the exits her aunt was offering her.

But in the meantime, she'd begun sharing less and less about her work with Maharet. Since there was nothing really to Jesse's life outside of the order, talking less about the Talamasca meant simply talking less.

On the morning of Maharet's birthday, Jesse realized with a pang of guilt that it had been almost two weeks since she'd last called. Should she apologize first and then wish her happy birthday, or vice versa? What could she find to talk about, so that the gesture of the phone call did not seem merely dutiful (did not become, she thought with a further twist of guilt, like one of the far more infrequent phone calls she made to Matthew and Maria). The novel she was halfway through was a re-read, something she'd already discussed with Maharet at length. She had not seen any new films, listened to any new albums, attended any notable events...

Perhaps she could talk about her love life? Maharet liked keeping up-to-date on any romantic developments, infrequent and short-lived as such things often were for Jesse. Last weekend she'd gone out with a schoolteacher she met on a dating app—but she could leave that part out. Maharet thought dating apps were pathetic, and wasn't Jesse already disappointing her enough? She and the schoolteacher had met up at an Ethiopian restaurant. They'd eaten, and talked, and Jesse had followed her back to her flat and ridden her until her thighs felt like jello, and it had been the first time in months that she felt halfway human—but of course, she should leave that out, too, shouldn't she? She could at least tell Maharet about the unfortunate

it shouldn't have been a revelation but it was. She'd looked like she was in her mid-40s when Jesse first met her in person, near the end of her third year at Columbia. That was a decade and a half ago, now, so she must be at the very least in her early 60s. How old did a person need to be, before you started worrying about dementia? These things could be early onset, couldn't they? Could happen to someone Jesse's age. And what was Maharet's age? Why couldn't she remember? She ought to know. Her beloved aunt, her confidante, her best friend... Jesse should know how old she was.

And yet she had no idea. Couldn't even do the math, because she didn't know what year Maharet had been born in.

"Jesse? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know when you were born," Jesse's voice was quivering and small. She pressed the phone hard against the side of her face, "I—don't know *where* you were born. I don't know where you grew up. I don't—I don't know if you went to college. I don't know so much. Why don't I know?"

The room was starting to spin. Jesse sat down on the floor. That helped, a little.

"Why don't I know what color your eyes are? Why can I remember them being different colors?"

"Jesse, listen to me:" Something had shifted in Maharet's voice. It had become like a tug on a thread knotted tight around Jesse's sternum. Not just a metaphor; she *felt* it in her body, an insistent pressure, pulling her clear out of herself.

"Are you listening?"

"Uh huh," Jesse's voice said.

"You called to wish me a happy birthday. I said thank you and told you what a nice girl you are, remembering to call. We both said how bad we feel for not talking more."

"Yeah," Jesse's voice agreed, because it was true. "I said I was very busy and you said that wasn't a problem. You promised to write me a nice long letter the next time you had a chance, and I told you I love you, and you said you love me, too."

"I love you," Jesse's voice agreed again.

Soft click of the call ending. It was a few moments

—the last four years of your life, and you're not allowed to talk about any of it? Not even to other full members of the order? Why? I mean, that sucks. How're you even supposed to make conversation? *'What've you been up to lately, Rashid?'* *'You don't have the clearance to know that.'* *'Well, I guess nevermind.'* I mean, so much for a 'guiding principle of honesty and truth'."

It was a calculated risk, this little half-joking half-serious rant. Possible that she'd misread him, extrapolated too much based on a tone of voice and his decision to be open about Director Talbot's little maneuver with her file. He might be one of those fanatically devoted members of the order who got huffy at any internal criticism, no matter how correct.

But when she glanced over, there was a wry little smile tucked into one corner of Rashid's mouth.

"It has been...frustrating, since I got back. Lots of people trying to weasel information out of me, even though they know it's against policy. Lots of awkward silences. As for why..."

Rashid trailed off, going silent. Considering how much he wanted to say, maybe.

"There were...perhaps some poorly thought-out decisions made by upper level management which led to the abrupt end of my assignment. The insistence on absolute secrecy is, I think, more out of embarrassment than anything truly sinister."

They had reached their station and descended to the platform together. Jesse wondered if she would be so understanding if she were in Rashid's position. Reading between the lines of his tact, there had been some colossal fuck-up by a senior member of the order and now the whole thing was getting buried. Who knew how much valuable information was being kept hidden, just to save face...

"Do you wish you could talk about it?"

Judging by Rashid's surprised look, no one had thought to ask him that, yet.

"Yes. *Very* much." His posture was alarmingly straight as the two of them waited for the train. She wondered if he was former military; a few years back, she'd gone on a few dates with a woman who'd been a marine, and she had stood like that. All formal and at

conclusion. She'd had a vision while still sprawled in the schoolteacher's bed. It had been just a single image—but it had been distressing enough that Jesse had not been able to conceal her reaction, and the damage was done. No second date in her future.

A few rings, then Maharet picked up.

"Hello, my darling one."

Something that had been clenched tight in Jesse's chest loosened just at the sound of her voice. The low rich timbre of it, the old endearment. God, she was silly! Why had she been worrying? It was just aunt Maharet. Easier to talk to than anyone on Earth. Feeling suddenly boisterous after her needless anxiety, Jesse decided to be funny.

"Hey, aunt Maharet! It's so strange, I just got this sudden totally random impulse to call you today of all days. Weird, right?"

"I've been missing you, too, Jesse. It's been much too long since we spoke. I'm afraid I'm rather busy at the moment, but that's hardly an excuse for my negligence. How are you?"

Wrong-footed by this response, Jesse did not answer right away. Her delivery had been understated, yes, but she'd assumed Maharet would still pick up on the joke and make some equally light-hearted reference to her birthday.

She tried again.

"I—I just feel like there's something I ought to be telling you today. Something important. Got any clue?"

Maharet's reply was distracted but earnest, "Not the slightest, but you know you can always tell me anything."

Jesse's confusion shifted into worry.

"Do you know the date today?" she asked.

"June 29th, Jesse, are you feeling alright?"

"Are you?" When her question was met with only silence, she said, "It's your birthday, aunt Maharet."

"Oh. Is it?" No sarcasm in the response; she sounded genuinely surprised, genuinely unsure if it was true or not.

"Yes, it is."

"All of a sudden, Jesse couldn't breathe. It was Maharet's birthday. Maharet was getting older, *aging*—

also suspected, deep down, that they were not the whole of it.

There was simply something about her, the very essence of her, that did not belong. People could sense it. Jesse doubted they were even aware of it, this intuition that kept them from allowing her too close. It came from some deep, instinctual part of their brains, as unconscious as a reflex. But it was there in everyone she met. No matter how she dressed, no matter how she spoke. No matter her artistic and intellectual accomplishments. She could be confident, funny, smart, hot, flirty, independent, sophisticated; she could put on the perfect show of normalcy; still, somehow, people sensed it. People knew. People said good morning, smiled politely, and forgot to send her invitation.

Jesse knew she shouldn't complain. Her life had been one of exceptional privilege, access, and luxury. She'd seen and done things that other people only dreamed of. She did her best to be grateful and have perspective. There was so much tragedy in the world; so many people survived on so little, and she had had so much handed to her right from the very start.

It was just that she didn't have any friends.

In theory, Jesse had long since accepted loneliness as an inescapable part of her life. In practice, 2022 had been unusually difficult for her.

Perhaps it was because of the pandemic. For a few years there, isolation had come into fashion. Suddenly, she wasn't the only one disconnected, and the ironic result was that she felt more connected than ever. She was a part of something. So many other people were going through the exact same thing as she was. Since when had that ever been true?

It had been, in a shameful way she would never admit out loud, lovely.

So when the world began to return to normal and her own isolation remained unaltered, Jesse felt it all the more keenly. No amount of lecturing herself and trying not to feel it could dispel her bitterness, her disappointment. She could not escape the heightened awareness that she was alone because of some fundamental lack deep down at the core of her. It was as if there were some secret enzyme that allowed other

and relieve all of it.

She hadn't set out to get drunk, but her throat was sore from speaking for hours, and she did not have any willpower left in her to obey the little voice in the back of her head—the one that sounded just like her aunt—telling her to make good choices and conduct herself in a way that would make her family proud.

So: she got drunk, and Rashid did not stop her or make any comment on it.

What must it have looked like to him, standing nearby as Jesse soothed that old woman's ghost? Seeing and hearing only one side to the conversation? How many times had he witnessed it, now? He had been the only one to accompany her on all her field assignments, ever since his return to London. Why didn't it ever seem to bother him, the way it bothered all the others, watching her speak to thin air? Being around her?

Any other day, she would've tucked the question away inside, along with all the other unanswered ones. But she was drunk and sad and they'd been working together for almost half a year now. So she asked him, "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

"Why *would* I be afraid of you?"

For a moment, Jesse wondered if he was mocking her. But she knew the sound of Rashid's dry, understated humor by now. This was different. He truly, genuinely meant it.

"Because everyone is."

Didn't he know that? Hadn't he seen the way she frightened people? Bystanders, police officers, strangers on the bus. Even if she didn't do anything out of the ordinary in front of them. They just knew. They just stood a little further away from her.

"Well. Not me."

They lapsed into silence for a few moments, but Rashid was frowning, picking at his unfinished chips. Jesse resisted the urge to poke at the deep crease that had formed between his brows. He was holding something back, she could tell. Deciding whether or not to speak.

"Do you really think everyone's afraid of you, Jesse? Even your friends?"

Jesse shrugged, rotating her half-empty glass on its

chapter two paradise

It was one of a hundred fragments of memory which she could never afterwards fit into a whole. But it no longer mattered, what she could or could not remember of that dreamy lost summer:

- *Queen of the Damned*

It was nearly half a year later when Jesse asked Rashid, "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

They were in a booth at a little pub near Highgate Cemetery, recuperating. It had been a tough haunting. After a lifetime of tormented spirits, Jesse's tolerance was high, but this one got to her. She'd been expecting something deliciously Victorian, given the setting. Instead, it was the ghost of an old woman who'd died barely a month before. She wore a stained nightgown and her skin was wrinkled and thin as crêpe paper. She must have had dementia when she was still alive, because she didn't realize she was a ghost, didn't understand what was happening to her, didn't even know who she was. Rashid had researched on his phone while Jesse comforted her and found out she'd been hit by a car just outside the cemetery gates after she wandered out of her son's flat. Evidently, her spirit had been adrift here ever since.

Jesse had had to talk to her for hours, sitting with her, holding one of her cold insubstantial hands between her own warm living ones. Shushing her when she sobbed and wailed like a child, explaining over and over what was going on, why she felt like this, how to make it stop.

By the time Jesse finally got through and watched her dissolve into a hazy mist, the sun had sunk below the horizon and she had a splitting headache. Rashid wordlessly offered her aspirin, a bottle of water, and a protein bar. Jesse wanted to make a joke about him mothering her, but she didn't trust herself to speak without bursting into tears. She ate, drank, took her medicine, let Rashid nudge her in the direction of this pub. Jesse was silently grateful; she didn't want to return to the Motherhouse just yet to make her report

chapter one rashid

Ah, fifteen years ago, simply the happiest summer of her life. All her wonderful adventures afterwards, ghost hunting for the Talamasca, had been nothing to that magical and unforgettable time [...] There had been a slow confusion, a delicious suspension of ordinary reality, as if the papyrus covered with a writing she could not classify belonged more truly to dream.

- *Queen of the Damned*

In the three years since she'd been recruited by the Talamasca in 2019, Jesse Reeves had not made a single friend. It was not for lack of trying. Joining the order was like a dream come true for her; she thought she'd finally found her community, a place to belong, people who would accept her. She did try. But all her overtures and efforts failed to take root. The other members of the order were cordial to her, in a genial and distant way, but utterly unwilling to go beyond pleasantries and closed-mouth smiles while passing in the halls of the Motherhouse.

Then again, hadn't it always been that way? Not just with the Talamasca. It was the same when she was working for the British Museum, when she was bouncing between archaeological digs, when she was in college, when she was growing up. Not just friendships, either. That invisible barrier stood between her and her lovers and family, too. It was why she'd never dated anyone for longer than three months. Why—in spite of their kindness—she had never really been close with Matthew and Maria, her adoptive parents.

What was responsible for it, this gap between herself and the rest of humanity that she could never seem to cross? Sometimes, Jesse laid the blame at the feet of external factors.

The traumatic circumstances of her entry into the world, for instance: birthed premature from the dead womb of a raped teenager into the smoking wreckage of a car crash, wailing pitifully to herself amidst the afterbirth until an ambulance arrived. After that, weeks

alone in the hospital, moved from machine to machine, namesless and unclaimed until Maharet finally found her. Hardly the most auspicious start to a life. Perhaps in those first days she had missed some crucial window for developing the ability to connect with others. (At least, almost entirely missed it. That would explain why Maharet was the only one on Earth who had ever truly understood her, the only one who had ever been able to love her. She'd arrived at the last possible moment before the opportunity was lost for good.)

Other days, Jesse blamed her psychic gifts. Since she was a child, ghosts and visions had been a thread in the fabric of Jesse's everyday life. When she was small, the ghosts she saw were indistinct and passive, her mentions of them easily dismissed by the adults around her as the workings of an active imagination. Her visions, too, were relegated to the realm of daydreams: all completely healthy and normal for a girl of her age. As she matured, the situation changed. The ghosts became more tangible, the visions became more vivid, and her emotional responses to both became more intense and more difficult to conceal. At the same time, it grew less and less socially acceptable for her to react to things no one else could see. But what was Jesse to do? She could not make herself ignore what seemed so very real to her.

And so, as her powers grew, so too did her alienation. After all, who would want to be friends with the girl who broke down sobbing during her orchestra rehearsal, cringing away from nothing at all, as if she thought the very air would attack her? Who would want to date a fellow archaeologist known for sometimes going blank mid-conversation, her eyes glassy and vacant—not a seizure, nothing *medical* that could be incorporated into a neat narrative. Just something wrong with her. Everyone knew it.

(Maharet was the only one who had ever believed her. Instantly, unquestioningly. Without her belief, her support, Jesse might not have survived those awful adolescent years before she learned not to bother looking for understanding from anyone other than her aunt.)

Jesse blamed these things for her isolation. But she

attention.

Rashid spoke up again, voice low to keep from being overheard by anyone around them, "Some of it was quite... well. It has also occurred to me that punishments may also be in play. Plenty of the senior members of the order are older, and conservative. They might not want the juicier details associated with the Talamanca name."

"Now, that's just cruel. You're cruel, Rashid! You can't tell me it's all top secret, hyper confidential and then admit there are juicy details!"

Hours later—after the ghost was dealt with, after they parted ways, after both their reports were completed and submitted—Jesse was still thinking about the way Rashid had laughed when she said that. An almost silent laugh, more visible than audible, showing in the crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the shaking of his shoulders.

She had made him laugh.

The next time she was called away from her work in the archives to deal with a restless spirit, it was Rashid waiting for her by the door again. That same crisp posture, the same neat way of holding his file folder. But this time, he smiled when he saw her.

coaster. Watched the tiny bubbles sliding up along the sides for a few moments before she decided, why the fuck not?

"I don't have friends."

Had she ever said it out loud before? So simply, too: no euphemisms or hedging, no *at times it feels like* or *I worry that maybe*. Just the fact of it, naked and direct.

"I'm your friend," Rashid replied at once. Like it was nothing eventful to say it. Like it was *true*.

Was it?

"But you're—I—we work together."

"Yes, and as we both know, no one has ever become friends with a colleague before in history," Rashid said.

There was that dry sarcasm she'd come to know so well by now. Jesse felt a flicker of doubt when she realized just how familiar it was. How well she'd come to know him—not just the surface details, but more. But she couldn't let herself believe it. Couldn't let herself hope. It would only result in more pain in the end when she turned out to be mistaken.

"Come on. We both know it's a punishment, Director Talbot sticking you with me, because of whatever big mysterious thing went so wrong in Dubai that you can't talk about."

(Rashid had not told her much. Even if the reasons justifying it were ridiculous, Rashid was not one to go against a direct demand for secrecy. But he had allowed a few details to slip through. A correction about laws in the UAE had led to him admitting he'd spent those four years in Dubai. A passing comment about his body language brought on the revelation that his cover story had been some kind of modern-day butler. And, most recently, he had told Jesse that the creatures he was pretending to serve were telepathic. Nothing substantial, nothing dangerous. Just tantalizing hints.)

"What? No. Is that what you...?" Rashid's frown deepened. He leaned in across the table, hands outstretched, palms up. "I volunteered to be your permanent partner for field work. I thought you knew that?"

"...Oh."

Jesse couldn't imagine what she must have looked

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from. Technically speaking, members of the Talamasca could tell their romantic partners about the order, but in practice, very few did. Then, of course, there was the fact that Rashid was not out to his family or at work. She remembered how quietly he had confessed it, after she casually mentioned a one-night stand with a woman. Looking back, she realized it was the first time she'd ever seen him afraid. Malevolent spirits, monsters, witches—these things seemed to hold no terror for him. But his voice had shaken when he leaned in, in the back of the cab they were sharing, and whispered: *Nobody knows, but... I'm gay, too.*

Jesse felt a little bad, for continuing to press for details. Not too bad, though, because Rashid had not shut her out completely, as she was sure he would if he truly had no interest in sharing. He could transform from a man into a brick wall in seconds: she had witnessed it happening. Instead, he kept clearing his throat, stirring his tonic water, all restless energy and uncertainty.

"Well, for one thing he's..." Rashid hesitated for a long, long moment. Jesse tried not to smile too much as she waited him out. "...older."

"Oh, is he?" Jesse asked, elated. Then, an awful thought burst into her mind, fully-formed and mightmarish, and she blurted, "Fuck, Rashid, it's not the Director is it?"

"What?!"

Rashid's outrage was loud enough that a few heads turned in the direction of their booth. He offered them all a chagrined smile and a raised hand of apology. Then he turned back towards Jesse, leaning far across the table. When he spoke next, his voice was a low, furtive hiss:

"No, Jesse, I am not sleeping with *David fucking Talbot*, our disgusting boss who compares me to the contents of a spice rack and tries to corner me and cop a feel any time he has a little too much to drink."

"Good—wait, he *what*?"

Jesse's instincts were correct earlier: Rashid had only been a little shy and hesitant to discuss the object of his affection. Now, she can tell, he's *actually* uncomfortable. It's there in the set of his jaw, in the square of his shoulders, in the clenching and

to like weird and off-putting."

An expression flickered across his face—a private, bashful smile, there and then gone a moment later. Not meant for her, she realized. Her words must have reminded him of someone else. Someone who made him smile like that, like a reflex, before he could catch himself.

She set her elbow on the table and pointed directly at Rashid's face, accusatory and gleeful, "Who is he?"

Now it was Rashid's turn to be flustered and cornered. In fact, Jesse was fairly sure she'd never seen him so discomposed. Not even when a toddler with telekinetic powers had launched a terrarium at him two weeks ago. He had merely ducked, blithe and unflappable as ever. But he looked well and truly flapped, at present.

"I don't know what you're talking about." A lesser man would have squirmed, but Rashid went perfectly still, his posture immaculate and his expression utterly neutral. But Jesse knew that trick; it wasn't going to work on her.

"Nice try. You were thinking about someone, right then. Some other weird and off-putting person. Someone you *like*."

"Like? What are you, twelve years old?"

"Don't deflect just because I'm right."

Rashid glared, but Jesse wasn't about to be deterred so easily. Rashid was her *friend*. She felt giddy and light; this was what friends did. They teased one another. They coaxed one another into admitting their attraction to ill-advised people and then encouraged or commiserated depending on the situation. "Come on. I haven't been on a date in ages. Let a girl live vicariously, here."

After a minute or so of silence, Rashid caved, "There's nothing to tell. Yes, I did think of someone. But he's not—we're not—there isn't anything between us." When Jesse raised her eyebrows, he amended, "Alright, there is something, but it's undefined and unimaginably complicated."

"I have a great imagination."

Rashid shifted his weight in his seat. Jesse waited, perching her chin delicately on her hands. She had some guesses where all that complication might come

A SLOW



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like, when that information hit. Rashid slid his half-finished plate across the table to her and didn't say another word. Jesse picked up a chip and ate it just to give her hands and mouth something to do while her brain was catching up.

She ate four more of the chips before she plucked up the courage to ask, "We're friends?"

"I've been under that impression for the last few months, yes. Unless you don't want to be?"

Jesse didn't respond. She wanted it so badly that she couldn't speak. She managed to nod, and that was enough for Rashid to understand. Because Rashid understood her. Because Rashid was her friend.

Her heart was beating hard, and there was a knot of panic in her stomach telling her that this wasn't real. That the rug would be pulled out from under her at any second.

"You don't find me...?" she trailed off. Rashid's face was hard to read at the best of times, but even more so in the dim light of the pub, while she was drunk and exhausted.

"What?"

"Weird and off-putting?"

Jesse regretted the words as soon as she said them. Pathetic. He would think that she was fishing for reassurance, because she was, and he would cave to the social pressure and give it to her without meaning a word of it, and she would be able to tell he was lying, and the fragile spark of their possible friendship would be extinguished. Never more than a maybe-thing, and almost-happened.

"Oh, you absolutely are."

She'd chosen a poor time to take a sip of her drink. Jesse managed not to spit it out, but she did choke and spluttering loudly. She hadn't known what Rashid would say, but the last thing she was expecting was for him to *agree*.

He waited until she had her breath back before lifting his own glass again, giving one of those one-not-going-to-pretend-it's-not. But the thing is, I happen

unclenching of his fists on the table.

"Rashid, you never told—"

"I do not. Want. To talk about it."

Jesse opened her mouth to protest, thought better of it, closed it again. She was not about to let this go permanently, but she at least had the good sense to know it was a subject probably best discussed when she was sober. And, perhaps, after she'd done a little research about the Talamasca's policies on workplace harassment.

"Okay, fine, I'm dropping it. But... *is* he someone in the order? Your mysterious older man?"

Rashid shook his head. "No, and for... certain reasons, it's imperative that the order not find out about him. So, can you please do me a favor? Just for now, can you let it go, Jesse? Forget this ever happened?"

Jesse froze. A sudden, inexplicable paralysis. Her pulse roared in her ears, a dull and enveloping roar.

Forget this ever happened.

The command reverberated in her skull, over and over and over, like a struck gong. Who had said that? When had she heard it? Why couldn't she place the voice speaking those words? She *knew* that voice. Her body knew it, down to the roots of her teeth, deep in her guts. The name was there, just out of reach, like a word perched at the very tip of her tongue. She knew that voice intimately, she was sure, but every time she reached for recognition, her mind went utterly, terrifyingly blank.

You will forget.

Why did those words make her feel like she was going to vomit? Was it even a real memory at all? Could it be something that happened in a dream? Or was it a line from a movie she'd seen, that got stuck in her head and all mixed up with reality?

You will forget this. You will remember nothing.

But no, it couldn't be from a movie. Fragments of other senses were tangled up with the sounds. The smell of beeswax candles. The ticklish drag of someone's long hair trailing across her bare stomach. And the more she focused on it, the more she could recall a second voice punctuating the steady, thrumming repetition of that command to forget. It was her own voice, she realized. Her voice, begging *no no*

I have some good news, I've made a friend! His name's Rashid. He's been working with me a lot the last few months, since he's not as afraid of spirits as most people. He actually asked to partner with me! That blew my mind when I found out. I'm too used to being the

must include:
There was one detail, though, that she knew she

should conceal about her work. Information she should reveal and how much she walking the now-familiar tightrope of how much aunt's texts. Jesse composed her reply one-handed, ready for work. As she brushed her teeth, she read her With that, she hauled herself out of bed to get

just let me know if you ever change your mind about that.

She wasn't sure she believed that, but she had no evidence to the contrary. She wasn't about to interfere just yet, but she certainly wasn't about to forget it.

I'm handling it, Jesse.

And you're sure you don't want to talk about the David thing?

Jesse was glad she'd chosen to have this conversation remotely. It meant she could let herself get a little weepy about it, without anyone being the wiser.

No regrets.

She should've known that she would scare Rashid off sooner or later. Hadn't she learned by now that there was only one person who would ever understand her? Ever be able to accept her as she really was? Just as she was about to close the thread with Rashid and go back to those unread messages from her aunt, his reply came through. Immediate, this time. No hesitation or re-writes.

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time before the reply came through. Rashid always chose his words carefully, even via text.

You said that it wasn't a vision.

Jesse had not been expecting that. Was he questioning her? She felt a prickle of annoyance.

Yeah, it wasn't. Visions are different. This was just me getting confused, thinking I remembered something, before I realized it wasn't real. I promise that kind of thing happens to me all the time.

There was quite a long pause before Rashid began typing his reply this time.

You're saying this has happened to you before? Having memories you can't place?

Oh yeah, all the time. I mean, I usually just don't mention it, but it's totally normal. They're not REAL. It's just a side-effect of my powers I guess.

Rashid started typing, stopped. Started, stopped. Started, continued for a long time, stopped. When his text came through, it only contained five words.

Thank you for letting me know.

Jesse swallowed around a sudden lump in her throat, reading and re-reading the message. What had he been typing for so long that he had erased? What wasn't he saying to her? Why had he settled on this formal, distant reply?

You having second thoughts about befriending the weirdo yet?

She hated herself for how desperate it sounded.

